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CORRESPONDENTE

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION: NIHILISM AND LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S
FICTION

POR

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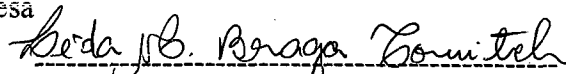
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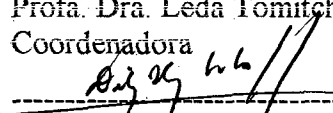
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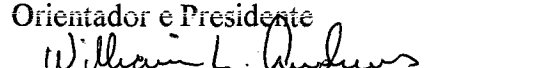
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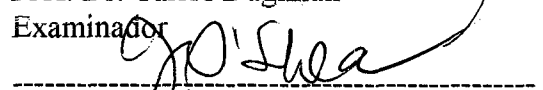



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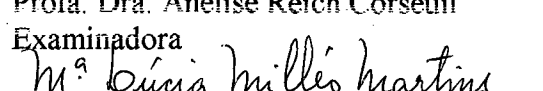

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For Mara Lúcia Pinsegher,
my beloved wife,
who patiently and supportingly
accompanied me through
the heart of blackness.

For Sheila Bárbara Martins,
my beloved daughter,
who is a source of
inspiration in my life.

For my parents (in memoriam)
Elvira and João
who are now able to signify
upon the angels.

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ABSTRACT

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION: FROM NIHILISM TO LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

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The study *A Politics of Conversion: Nihilism and Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction* starts with the idea that African American Literature is characterized by a sense of self-reflexiveness and hybridity, by means of which autobiography dialogues with novel, the spiritual interweaves with the political. From this general dialogical characteristic a political self-reflexiveness between nihilism and love is established. In its politics of conversion, the study analyzes the way individual black women, or groups of them, manage to move from slavery to freedom, from individuality to collectivity, or from nihilism to love. Structurally, the study includes seven chapters. The first discusses the dialogic features that make spiritual narratives interweave with slave narratives and novels, and spirituality with politics. The second examines the dialogical approximation between Lee's individual conversion, public preaching, and community formation, in her spiritual narrative *Religious Experience and Journal*. It

suggests that Lee's affirmation of soul and humanity opens a profound space for women's reclamation of civil rights. The third deals with the dialogues between slave narrative and novel inside the political conversion. These dialogues deal with nihilism and love in Jacobs's *Incidents* and Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*. For the analysis of nihilism and love both the individual and communal values are considered from five different aspects: the antagonizing setting and agent, the supporting agent, the character's purpose and the outcome. Visible in the study is the support that individual women receive from communities of women, which help them to counteract their oppressors. The support does not always guarantee these women's overcoming of nihilism and therefore, temporary defeat occurs before they are reintegrated into their groups, directly like Linda Brent is. The fourth examines the weaknesses and strengths of the politics of conversion in Sethe Suggs's community of House 124 and her reintegration. The fifth demonstrates how Sula Peace's community in the Bottom attempts to control her individuality and how a smaller community of women led by Nel Wrights succeeds in rescuing her independent spirit. The sixth shows how the politics of conversion of women in Lorain is unable to guarantee Pecola Breedlove's sanity, but manages to open a more consistent role for itself. In the seventh, the conclusion examines the dialectic relationships between nihilism and love or self-love, in the individuals' and the groups' experiences. It suggests that in *Incidents* Linda Brent's search for freedom from slavery involves both self-destructive and self-empowering effects. Likewise, it concludes that in *Beloved* Sethe Suggs's love for her children kills her daughter in its wish to protect her from slavery. Similarly, in *Sula*, Sula Peace's sense of individuality both limits

and expands her group's experiences towards emancipation. Finally, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's quest for love and beauty reflects both self-hate and self-appreciation of the entire community.

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RESUMO

O estudo *Uma Política de Conversão: Nihilismo e Amor na Ficção de Toni Morrison* começa com a idéia de que a Literatura Afro-Americana apresenta um sentido de auto-reflexividade e hibridismo, através do qual autobiografia dialoga com romance, o espiritual se funde com o político. A partir deste traço dialógico a auto-reflexividade é politicamente estabelecida entre nihilismo e amor. Na política de conversão, o estudo analisa as formas como mulheres negras, individualmente ou em grupo, fogem da escravidão para a liberdade, avançam da individualidade para a coletividade, ou substituem nihilismo por amor. Metodologicamente o estudo apresenta sete capítulos. O primeiro discute os aspectos dialógicos que ilustram as conexões entre narrativas espirituais, de escravos e ficção, entre espiritualidade e política. O segundo examina o diálogo entre a conversão, pregação pública e formação da comunidade em *Diário e Experiências Religiosas* de Lee. O capítulo sugere que ao afirmar espiritualidade e humanidade a narradora abre profundo espaço para a mulher negra reclamar direitos civis. O terceiro discute o diálogo no interior da política de conversão entre narrativa de escravos e ficção. Este diálogo lida com nihilismo e amor em *Incidentes* de Jacobs e *Amada, Sula* e *O Olho Mais Azul* de Morrison. Para a análise de nihilismo e amor valores individuais e coletivos são considerados em relação a cinco aspectos: ambiente e agente antagonistas, agente de apoio, propósito da personagem e resultado alcançado. É visível, no estudo, o apoio que certas mulheres recebem de suas comunidades para contra-atacar antagonistas. O apoio nem sempre resulta na superação do nihilismo e, por isso, derrota temporária pode ocorrer antes que elas sejam reintegradas à comunidade, como acontece com

Linda Brent. O quarto capítulo examina as fraquezas e as energias da política da conversão e a reintegração de Sethe Suggs à comunidade de Bluestone Road. O quinto avalia como a comunidade de Bottom tenta controlar a individualidade de Sula Peace e como um grupo de mulheres lideradas por Nel Wrights consegue resgatar o espírito de independência da heroína. O sexto mostra como a política da conversão das mulheres de Lorain é incapaz de garantir a saúde mental de Pecola Breedlove, mas consegue criar um papel mais consistente para o grupo. No sétimo, a conclusão examina da relação dialética entre niilismo e amor ou auto-amor nas experiências dos indivíduos e dos grupos. O estudo sugere que em *Incidentes* a busca de Linda Brent por liberdade envolve elementos de autodestruição e de autoempoderamento. Da mesma maneira, o estudo conclui que em *Amada* o amor que Sethe Suggs tem para as suas crianças mata a própria filha, enfatizando, assim, o desejo de livrá-la da escravidão. Igualmente em *Sula*, a individualidade de Sula Peace não apenas limita, mas também expande as experiências do grupo, levando-o à emancipação. Finalmente, em *O Olho Mais Azul* a luta de Pecola Breedlove por amor e beleza reflete auto-ódio ao mesmo tempo em que reconstrói a auto-apreciação de toda a comunidade.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

A MOVE THROUGH CONVERSION

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)," but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity.

Mae G. Henderson (2000, 349)

Self-Reflexiveness

Henderson's (2000) words identify, in the writing of black women, a wish to reject self-isolation by relating itself with something else, thus dialoguing externally and internally. By pointing out the "interlocutory, or dialogic, character" (349) of black women's writing, Henderson alludes, on the one hand, to its "relationship with the 'other(s),'" (349) represented by both the white and black male tradition. On the other hand, Henderson calls attention to an interior dialogue, suggesting that, internally, black women's writing is attuned to their common experiences, which speak of "the plural aspects of self that constitute the nature of black female subjectivity" (349). Marked by a dialogic hybridity, black women's writing characterizes itself as a self-reflexive mode of writing.

Actually, self-reflexiveness goes beyond the realm of black women's writing to become a major aspect in African-American literature as a whole. Self-reflexiveness suggests mutual links among black texts. This chapter deals with the idea of a certain movement from the literary to the spiritual to the political. The literary indicates a textual progression from autobiography to novel. The spiritual and the political are content-based aspects, implying a movement from spirituality to politics. The spiritual deals with an individual's move from selfhood to community because of a conversion. The political manifests itself in the individual and group progression from nihilism to love. Though the central idea here is the progression involving the literary, the spiritual and the political, when it comes to the political, the shift from nihilism to love does not always occur. In some cases, there exists a hybridization of nihilism and love because the first intermingles with the second. In short, self-reflexiveness is understood as the interdependence that accounts for the process through which the autobiography reappears in the novel, in the same way the spiritual conversion is present in political conversion and as nihilism is also visible in love.

Autobiography

Self-reflexiveness fuels African-American literature through the presence of autobiography. According to Andrews (1993), "autobiography holds a position of priority" (1) over other forms of black narratives. Autobiography starts African-American literary tradition and equips it with a process of self-reflexiveness. In African American literary expression, autobiographical self-reflexiveness influences

form and content both externally and internally. External self-reflexiveness concerns the interdependent relationships between African-American and European-American autobiography. Internal self-reflexiveness suggests that similar interdependence occur within the African-American literary tradition, between spiritual and slave autobiography and the novel. African Americanists and literary historians acknowledge external and internal self-reflexiveness and critically analyze the intertextual ties interweaving black and white American autobiography. Gates (1993) recognizes the mutually influential aspects of these two traditions, remarking that the black autobiographer makes “the [white] written text ‘speak’ with a [black] voice” (12). The act of merging a black voice – an experience in slavery – inside a white form – written autobiography – is in itself a revolutionary literary attitude. Black autobiography, thus, revolutionizes white autobiography through the way it imitates and revises the previous text.

Black American autobiography, then, enables literary whiteness and blackness to co-exist and integrate and harmonize differences. In its hybridity, black autobiography has become a major form of black American literary expression since the second half of the eighteenth century and, as such, has attracted the attention of slaves and former slaves who wish to express selfhood by writing about their personal experiences. Constructing black selfhood is intrinsically tied to the earliest African-American narrator’s search for knowledge (literacy) and freedom. Gates (1993) notes that the slaves’ search for freedom and literacy “became the trope that revises that of the text that speaks in the literature of the slave” (9). Andrews (1993) sees in the black narrator’s struggle to possess literacy and freedom the authentication of selfhood. For him, in working as the authentication of black

selfhood, autobiography testifies “to the ceaseless commitment of people of color to realize the promise of their American birthright and to articulate their achievements as individuals and persons of African descent” (1). These achievements – conquest of literacy and freedom – present a dual aspect, one spiritual, another secular. The spiritual achievement is what Andrews (1986) calls the freedom from “the slavery of sin” (1). The secular conquest is what he calls the freedom from “the sin of slavery” (1). Both freedom from sin and freedom from slavery not only highlight the complexities of the black autobiographer’s selfhood but also indicate the subtleties of autobiography in its earliest forms of spiritual and slave narratives.

Spiritual Narrative

The spiritual narrative portrays the spiritual achievements of the African-American autobiographer who believes that her or his freedom from “the slavery of sin” (1) is an experience worth telling. It also presents the construction of black selfhood as empowered by the spiritual narrator’s acquisition of knowledge and conquest of freedom. The knowledge is a divine gift predicated on God’s calling, which requires the narrator’s response, that is, the narrator’s public preaching. Freedom is her or his liberation from sin, resulting from a personal quest and God’s blessing. Both knowledge and freedom authorize the spiritual autobiographer’s selfhood by means of the word in its written form, that is, the autobiographical texts. This saving knowledge is essentially spiritual and, deriving directly from God, sponsors the spiritual narrator’s freedom from “the slavery of sin” (1). As for Andrews, the direct ties of the spiritual narrator with God provide “the necessary

intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen for eternal salvation as whites” (1). In other words, the ability to write – that is, the possession of Logos - authenticates the long denied soul and humanity of the narrator, as Jarena Lee’s (1849) *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* may suggest. The writing of Lee’s spiritual narrative, Andrews adds, displays “an argument for women’s spiritual authority that plainly challenged traditional female roles (...) committed herself to her ministry and wrote of it as a supremely fulfilling experience” (2). Fortunately, Lee is not alone in these black American women’s spiritual enterprises. Though she epitomizes the high quality reached in black female spiritual narrative, there are other spiritual narrators, such as Zilpha Elaw, Julia A. Foote, and others.

Slave Narrative

As the second form of African-American autobiography, the slavery narrative depicts primarily the secular achievements of the slave narrators. For Gates (1987) these achievements reflect the slaves’ overcoming of “the severe conditions of their bondage” (ix). Interconnections between spiritual and slave narratives suggest that the overcoming of “bondage” results in the slave’s possession of civil rights, as much as the overcoming of sin guarantees possession of soul and humanity. As spiritual and political empowerment occur simultaneously, the spiritual narrator is able to celebrate soul and freedom from sin in spiritual narratives, as much as the slave narrator is now able to praise freedom from slavery. The narrator not only deserves soul, humanity and freedom but also struggles for them. Thus, as Andrews

(1986) accentuates, empowered by the soul restored in the spiritual writing of preceding brothers and sisters, the black narrator can “hope for success in restoring political and economic freedom to American blacks” (1). In establishing “the priority of the spiritual autobiography to the slave narrative,” (2) and their mutual interdependence, Andrews reinforces the idea of internal self-reflexiveness that is an essentially black literary feature. He thus anticipates Gates’s (1987) idea that “these narratives came to resemble each other, both in their content and formal shape” (x). For him, resemblance in content and form between spiritual and slave narrative derives from his view that “when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading, the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them” (x). In concrete terms internal self-reflexiveness as it is highlighted by Andrews and Gates links Harriet Jacobs to Jarena Lee, although we do not know whether Jacobs read *Religious Experiences* before writing her *Incidents*. This conscious or unconscious reading may explain the way these two black narrators challenge the roles imposed upon black women. Like Lee who, during her autonomous public preaching does not surrender to traditional social roles prescribed for women, Jacobs, through her character Linda Brent, also challenges the values of traditional womanhood to guarantee escape from her slaveholder’s sexual abuse, and concentrates on her quest for freedom from slavery.

Black Novel

Being the privileged mark of African-American spiritual and slave narratives, internal self-reflexiveness also interconnects black American autobiography to the

novel. Internal self-reflexiveness makes spiritual and slave narratives construct a mutual conversation, while allowing a similar conversation to exist between these types of narratives and the black novel. Many Afro-Americanists have acknowledged that, in its spiritual or secular version, autobiography has influenced the novel. Among them, for instance, Bontemps (1966) recognizes the literary ties connecting black narrative autobiography and black novel writing: “from the narrative came the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective prose writing by black American writers from William Wells Brown to Charles W. Chesnutt, from W.E.B. Dubois to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin” (Gates, x). In contemporary black American literature, along with Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, other novelists can be included in Bontemps’s list of those who solidify “the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective writing by black American writers” (Gates, x). Certainly among them is Morrison who continues “this process of imitation and repetition,” (x) to use Gates’s (1987) phrase, that makes African-American literary tradition so genuine. Like Bontemps and Gates, Smith (1987) not only acknowledges but also articulates “the influence of the slave narratives on later black writing” (2). She addresses her explanation of the phenomenon of self-reflexiveness to black literacy and notes that the acquisition of reading and writing is crucial for the African-American narrators’ affirmation of autonomy and selfhood. She calls attention to “the variety or ways in which the idea of literacy is used within the tradition of African American letters” (2). She also observes that “slave narrators and protagonist-narrators of certain twentieth-century novels by African American writers affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the stories of their own lives” (2).

Andrews (1992) similarly contributes to the understanding of the process of repetition and revision that ties earlier and recent black American narrative. His discussion of Bakhtin's (1981) notion of "novelization," though brief, is useful here. Using "novelization," Andrews argues that "all narrative forms since the rise of the novel have been undergoing repeated revolutions, or 'novelization'" (85). It is this capacity to "novelize," Andrews observes, that allows the novel to revolutionize "the form and content of other narrative types [...] closely allied to it" (85). He observes that "under the influence of 'novelization', traditions and generic standards of narrative form undergo constant revision" (85). Andrews (1993) later expands his acknowledgement of Gates's notion of signifying – literary repetition and revision among African American texts - in practical rather than theoretical terms. He establishes the connections between black autobiography and novel and notes that the first African-American novel – Brown's (1853) *Clotel: a Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* – pays tribute to autobiography in its title, specifically to one of its subgenres, the slave narrative. He remarks that autobiography, or the slaves' "first-person accounts of their lives," (1) antedates and influences Brown's novel, as the author himself was "a fugitive slave autobiographer" (1) before becoming a novelist. "Ever since", Andrews writes, "the history of African-American narrative has been informed by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel" (1).

Conversion

The first achievement of African-American literature resides in the writer's inclination to favor an internal vitality, fusing the elements of prior texts into new texts. In its formal and thematic features, internal self-reflexiveness, understood as a process of intertextual relationships and novelization, interweaves spiritual and slave autobiography with the novel and becomes a major characteristic of African-American narrative. As self-reflexive genres, spiritual and slave narrative and novel converse and interweave shared black experiences. The second achievement is an essentially content-centered perspective dealing with conversion. As a theme, black woman's conversion also mirrors an instance of the novelization – imitation and revision – that is present in black American literary tradition, from the eighteenth-century autobiography to the twentieth-century novel. Being the theme of novelization – or self-reflexiveness – conversion seems to cover a long period in black American narrative. One concrete instance is visualized in the way conversion, on the one hand, unites different black women writers like Lee, Jacobs, and Morrison and, on the other, relates spiritual and slave narratives to novels. In other words, starting from Lee's (1849) *Religious Experiences* it reaches Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents*, advancing to Morrison's novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. In its movement from one narrator to another, or from one genre to another, conversion moves from a religious to a secular arena, or from spirituality to politics, without losing its prior focus. In other words, though Lee's struggle against sin deals explicitly with her spiritual conversion, the reader may also uncover implicit political aspects of conversion that she decides not to emphasize. Similarly, in its political

commitment to freedom from slavery Jacobs's slave narrative keeps its spiritual aspects implicit so that the political implications are made overt. Finally, in the novels, even the implicit spiritual aspects of conversion that Jacobs's Linda Brent accepts are mixed and become less visible in the political experiences of Morrison's female characters. In sum, from Lee to Jacobs to Morrison the progress from spirituality to politics corresponds to an ongoing substitution of a religious for a secular morality. Broadly speaking, Lee's spiritual religiosity is replaced by a more political activism in *Baby Suggs*, *Nel Wright*, and *Peccola Breedlove* for many reasons, some of the authors' choosing.

Spiritual Conversion

Black woman's spiritual conversion is a major issue in black woman's spiritual narrative. For its literary achievements Lee's (1849) autobiography *Religious Experiences* is judged to portray a highly qualified depiction of black woman's spiritual narration and, as such, epitomizes a nineteenth-century black woman's spiritual conversion. Like Lee, the black female narrator, as a rule, divides the telling of her conversion and spiritual journey out of "the slavery of sin" (1) into two specific narrative moments: conversion and preaching. Conversion is the moment in which the spiritual teller describes how she is saved; preaching is the moment in which she exposes how God saves sinners through her public ministry. In its dual aspect of conversion and preaching, the black woman's spiritual journey partakes of the Christian tradition of conversion which, in both white European and American spiritual autobiography, Andrews (1986) suggests, "addresses the central question of

the fate of the individual soul” (10). In conversing with the white experience of conversion, the black spiritual narrator chronicles her move from “damnation to salvation,” (10) together with the construction of her “true place and destiny in the divine scheme of things” (10-11). These two levels are inseparable, the first demanding the second. In other words, after salvation is assured, the converted black woman struggles to guarantee a “true place and destiny” for herself in the community, often through public ministry.

Black woman’s conversion, or salvation, is a dramatic experience, informed by her personal trials, weaknesses, and doubts. It reflects the black woman’s struggle against sin and consequent quest for sanctification. Black woman’s spiritual narratives of conversion follow Wesleyan Methodism, which includes three levels: repentance, justification, and sanctification. Andrews (1986) details them: “first, repentance as result of the conviction of one’s sinfulness; second, justification from the guilt of sin by Christ’s atonement and forgiveness; and third, sanctification, or a ‘new birth’ free from the power of sin by virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit” (15). Together these three levels of spiritual achievement represent a movement toward a perfect Christian life that, Andrews adds, is compatible with the convert’s seeking “greater growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God”(15). The convert’s acceptance of and response to divine grace, knowledge, and love at the same time evince her “total harmony with the will of God” (15) and reflect her “being perfectly pure in intention and action” (15). Andrews observes that, as a result of conversion, “the sanctified Christian enjoys the inner peace that comes of being convinced that, having been liberated from sin, one is now completely identified with God in thought, word, and deed” (15). However, nothing is free from

problems or mistakes in the experience of conversion. More often than not, despite her spiritual connection with God, the black female convert's journey from sin to sanctification is challenged by trials, temptation, weakness, ignorance, doubts, and attempt to commit suicide. Satan's trials, the convert's weakness, and her ignorance of God's word trouble her mind and expose her doubts about whether she is saved or not, or whether she deserves salvation or not. The insecurity ends when the black spiritual narrator assures herself that she has been favored with Christian salvation, which only happens when she explicitly requests, as Lee (1849) does: "Lord, *sanctify* my soul for Christ's sake" (10). From this moment on, she feels saved, but still incomplete. That is, though spiritually empowered, and sanctified, the black female narrator's salvation and call do not seem to be enough, as Lee discovers. Andrews notes, "conversion alone would not magically solve the problems inherent in [her life]" (12). Because conversion is a dynamic process, personal and public at the same time, Andrews argues, the black female convert has "to come to terms with the world outside and the self within" (12). As result, her search for "the world outside" (12) is the response for the call to which her self decides to attend and subscribe.

"The self within" (12) conquered, the black narrator can address "the world outside" (12). In other words, with conversion assured public preaching is the next step required. Thus, preaching becomes the response to her call. The integration of conversion and preaching is necessary because, as Andrews (1986) suggests, "Christian tradition granted women spiritual gifts such as the power of prophecy and charismatic preaching" (13). Preaching becomes inevitably both a requirement and a guarantee generated by the level of sanctification. If conversion is the first blessing, public preaching is taken as the second blessing. The public ministry presents two

levels: exhorting and preaching. As an exhorter the black female convert is allowed to conduct religious classes and prayers or to speak in church when invited by the minister presiding over the service. Exercised under strict control, exhorting is a lower level of public ministry and, as such, is commonly allowed for the sanctified narrator to assume. Exhorting offers the converted black woman a sense of evangelical achievement, which is restrictive in many aspects because it maintains, Andrews (1986) notes, the black female exhorter “dependent on the male leadership of the Church for access to the ears of a congregation and to the Bible itself” (14). Commonly she resists to be frozen at this level and struggles for the higher level of preaching, a wish frequently denied her. However, when it occurs, the achievement of preaching results from a radical attitude on the part of the spiritual narrator. In so radically acting, Andrews argues, the convert replaces “the pastoral authority of many male ministers in favor of the primacy of [her] individual perceptions of God’s will” (14).

Public preaching is frequently a conquest, not a reward, resulting from struggle for it. As such, it grants the black female convert to progress from selfhood to community as she moves from “the self within” (12) to “the world outside” (12) and, likewise, mirrors her capacity to spread God’s word while saving those who need salvation. As black woman’s preaching turns into a spiritual experience, informed by a radical individualism that challenges religious institutionalized laws and male authorities, her success is intrinsically connected with her ability to construct a community of converted women and spiritual sisters. This spiritual community of women in a sense compensates for the other family that she leaves behind in the name of her “individual sense of mission” (17) and “religious

activism” (19). Thus, in partaking of partnership and mutual empowerment with other black women, her itinerant preaching and public spiritual work take “precedence over” (19) familial demands. For Andrews (1986), the community of women that she builds inspires the preacher “with a sense of [her] potential and worth” (20) and, additionally, sustains her “in tribulations brought on usually by condescending or overbearing men” (20). Informed by “spontaneous, egalitarian community of the Spirit,” (21) this collectivity of women challenges “everything in the church that tended to order and regulate people,” (21) while favoring “genuine spiritual inspiration,” (21) and “unselfconscious genuineness of response to the Spirit,” (21) of women, especially, black sisters.

In the female communion of the Spirit, the itinerant preacher not only delivers Christian salvation through the gospel, but also she has to resist sexist persecution, especially from male religious authorities, to empower other black people, while enduring stress, sickness, family separation, and inclement weather. As Andrews points out, her freedom from institutional constraints is not complete until she feels “obliged to cite from the Bible some precedent or verse that would authorize [her] convention-shattering views of behavior.” (16)

Political Conversion

The black spiritual narrator’s merging of “the self-within” (12) and “the world-outside” (12) reappears in the black woman’s political conversion. That is, the fusion of the individual and the group is, at the same time, a spiritual and a political experience among black women. Thus, the political becomes an expansion of the

spiritual. As an expansion of black woman's spiritual achievement, the third move informs the political outcome resulting from her experience of nihilism and love. Here again black American literary self-reflexiveness plays a relevant role as it informs the intertextual conversation of both spiritual and political conversion, and this indicates that a woman's spiritual achievement is prior to her political gain. Having been denied a soul, the converted black woman is led to recover it and to restore her human condition. The possession of a soul and humanity fortifies and validates her public reclamation of political identity and selfhood. Aware of the interdependence between a black woman's reclamation of a soul and the female slave narrator's demand for freedom, Andrews (1987) states:

Before the fugitive slave narrator could hope for success in restoring political and economic freedom to American blacks, the black spiritual autobiographer had to lay the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites. Without the black spiritual autobiography's reclamation of the Afro-American's spiritual birthright, the fugitive slave narrative could not have made such a cogent case for black civil rights in the crisis years between 1830 and 1865. (1-2)

In giving the spiritual narrator a soul, spiritual conversion gives the black woman a selfhood whose communion with God dares to request political emancipation by means of the political conversion that takes place in the slave narrative. In her pursuit of spiritual salvation, the spiritual convert encompasses a double commitment. Through conversion she elaborates a profound commitment to herself, and during

her public preaching, she develops an expanding commitment to other black folks, most of them women slaves.

In her reclamation of political freedom and civil rights for her now-restored soul and humanity, the female slave narrator develops a double commitment, to herself and other slaves. Linda Brent, in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents*, epitomizes the ideal achievements of all female slave narrators' political conversion. But she is not the only black woman to pursue political emancipation for her and other slaves. As full citizenship is not automatically granted – but results from permanent struggle against social constraints and limitations – many African-American women, though mirroring their slave foremothers' pursuit of social emancipation, are even today invited to come to terms with some degree of political conversion. Incontestable instances of black women's struggle for complete citizenship are Morrison's Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace and Pecola Breedlove. Morrison's black woman, like Linda Brent and unlike Jarena Lee whose quest is spiritual, activates a double search – for herself and for others – which reveals a secular conversion profoundly political, as it continues expanding the desire to possess full citizenship. In her struggle, she does not seem to be dismissing spirituality but subordinating it to politics.

Aware of political conversion as empowerment in action in black America, West (1994) refers to the phenomenon as a politics of conversion. In *Race Matters*, he highlights the vitality and usefulness that black political conversion has to reverse the psychological damage that is still devastating today's black Americans. He believes that “the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people,” (30) suggesting that in the confrontation, the politics of conversion activates self-love through which black people reverse or

destroy the nihilistic, “destructive and inhumane actions” they eventually perpetrate against themselves. For him, black American’s self-destruction – physical or psychological – derives from a feeling of worthlessness that inundates black life. Being “a disease of the soul,” (29) worthlessness sickens the black soul. As a disease of the black soul, “Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (23). Political conversion is, thus, a black struggle for the kind of racial empowerment that is strong enough to defeat meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness of black soul. Because of the magnitude of the disease, the task of curing and healing the black soul cannot be a solitary enterprise but demands the participation of the community. Success depends on the conjunction between the individual’s self-love and the love of others.

West (1994) traces his discussion of black American’s politics of conversion back to slavery as he judges slavery the initial social setting for the confrontation of black nihilism and love. In being responsible for the psychological, social, political and economic context of black American’s nihilism, slavery also provides her or him the counter-practice of love and self-love. He explains:

Nihilism is not new in black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither

oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat – that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. (23)

Denouncing slavery in America as the nihilistic setting that positions itself against their humanity and integrity, enslaved black Americans counter-attack their “loss of hope and absence of meaning” (23) with the strength of the black soul, which finds support in mutual and reciprocal love, and self-love.

West’s (1994) hybridization of the black American’s initial experiences of nihilism and love and their contextualization in slavery fit Andrews’s (1997) dichotomy of slaveholder’s inhumanity and the slave’s humanity. In opposing white inhumanity to black humanity, Andrews argues that in slavery the two are incompatible because slavery opposes “the inhumanity of the slave system” (667) to “the incontestable evidence of the humanity of the African-American” (667). As a result, “the inhumanity of the slave system” confers on the slave an animal status and works as the generator of black American’s nihilistic experiences. The slave counteracts by appealing to mutual black love, together with the reclamation and affirmation of her or his humanity and soul, as the spiritual female narrator does in her spiritual text. Both Andrews and West seem to address similar concerns. In slavery, Andrews notes, white inhumanity and black humanity are incompatible. So are nihilism and love, West argues.

As Andrews (1997) points out that the slave’s humanity struggles to defeat slavery’s inhumanity, West (1994) argues that black love and self-love fight to beat black nihilistic experiences, both in slavery and contemporary black America. In today’s America, a politics of conversion is vital so that the black soul can confront

two nihilistic and damaging forces that have adversely affected their life: “too much poverty and too little self-love” (93). West believes that black existence is disenfranchised, in countless situations, by “the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people” (30) attacking their own physical and emotional integrity. Though he argues that the presence of poverty and the absence of self-love are responsible for the conditions in black communities, he does not believe that the politics of conversion can be used to beat poverty. He admits that the politics of conversion is rather addressed to attack the lack of self-love or nihilism. The presence of a strong nihilistic feeling inundating black America, the nihilism whose source lies in a number of negative feelings and terrifying experiences has been threatening black people for years with despair, fear, meaninglessness, and personal devaluation. West sees hope for despair, arguing that nihilism can be defeated by personal and collective love and self-love, the major ingredients of a politics of conversion.

West's (1994) analysis of black nihilism non only deals with contemporary issues concerning black America but also calls for solutions. He observes that the debate of African-American problems has been conducted for years from two major perspectives: the structural and the behavioral. Structuralists and behaviorists identify different causes and solutions for black American's nihilistic experiences. For instance, structuralists position the historical and sociological source of black people's problems in their long and devastating exposure to slavery, segregation, job and housing discrimination, unfair unemployment rates, inadequate medical coverage, and poor education. Behaviorists emphasize that the obstacles which tend to prevent black people from ascending mobility are due especially to the weakening

of the Protestant work ethic, work, delayed rewards, frugality, and personal responsibility. Considering both the structural and behavioral views, West (1994) also discusses the structuralist and behaviorist tools for the eradication of black nihilism. Initially, he mentions that structuralists agree that the extirpation of nihilism will depend on a number of measures, such as programs for full employment, medical insurance, child education and assistance, and an end to job and housing discrimination. However, he also emphasizes that behaviorists believe that the problem will disappear if they promote programs encouraging personal initiatives, the expansion of black enterprises, affirmative action, and free market strategies. In short, the behaviorists defend strengthening the Protestant ethic in black America.

Although West (1994) recognizes the relevance of both proposals, he does not seem totally satisfied with either structuralist or behaviorist solutions because, for him, “structures and behaviours are inseparable and institutions and values go hand in hand” (18). He states that “how people act and live are shaped – though in no way dictated or determined – by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves. These circumstances can be changed, their limits attenuated, by positive actions to elevate living conditions” (19). As a matter of fact, West believes that the analysis of black nihilism cannot be reduced to, but rather goes beyond, the economic and political structural or cultural behaviors encountered in black America. For him, black nihilism lies in something subtler and deeper than what structuralists and behaviorists are willing to confront to. This has to do with the Negro’s loss of hope, with the fear of street violence, the collapse of meaningful lives, and the tremendous carelessness toward black people, and their property. Nihilism is not recent, and the

fight against it has started with a struggle against the degradation and devaluation of the slave's life. However important, money, jobs, health care and decent housing cannot by themselves defeat nihilism. Its defeat requires something spiritual. Black literature exemplifies this struggle. For instance, the spiritual narrator Lee finds it in the spiritual strength or grace of conversion that prepares her or him for public service. Linda Brent recovers from despair with her quest for virtue just as Sethe Suggs keeps nihilism at bay by fighting for her children's safety. Sula Peace defeats nihilism with an uncontested affirmation of individuality, and Pecola Breedlove's demand of love results in an evidence of communal sanity. All these women fight with black cultural values rather than with structuralist and behaviorist social programs. The fuel for such a fight, West (1994) notes, has always come from black culture, which has developed over centuries "ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (24). However necessary, these black cultural forces have not been enough to maintain people's fighting spirit against their social and personal degradation so, today, market forces and consumerism have made black nihilism worse. For West, the expansion and intensification of pleasure caused by the market of comfort, commodification of sexism, femininity, violence, and sexuality have seduced black America and, thus, have eliminated traditional black values.

Despite the immense difficulties of black experiences in America, West (1994) does not lose hope. On the contrary, he believes that nihilism can be defeated by a new and more energetic form of empowerment through a politics of conversion. He argues that black people's politics of conversion seems to be "the strategy for holding the nihilistic threat at bay" (27) as it "is a direct attack in the sense of

worthlessness and self-loathing” (27). He also argues that a politics of conversion requires love and care because nihilism is a “disease of the soul,” (29) it cannot be destroyed by arguments or analyses. “Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth – an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion,” (29) he says. And he suggests that a love ethic “is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people” (29). Like the spirituality of conversion, the politics of conversion demands the merging of “the self-within” (12) with “the world-outside” (12), that is, the individual and the group.

Finally, West does not entirely dissociate his politics of conversion from both liberal structuralist and conservative behaviorist agendas. On the contrary, he admits that structuralists, behaviorists, and defenders of a politics of conversion share common ground, though a limited one. He explains:

Like liberal structuralists, the advocates of a politics of conversion never lose sight of the structural conditions that shape the sufferings and lives of people. Yet, unlike liberal structuralism, the politics of conversion meets the nihilistic threat head-on. Like conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people. Unlike conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion situates these actions within inhumane circumstances (but does not thereby exonerate them).
(30-31)

In fact, one point becomes clear: according to West (1994) the turning of one's soul or the defeat of nihilism cannot be an individual's isolated experience, but

requires both individual and collective action. In uniting the individual black convert and the converted black community, West's political conversion converges and converses with spiritual conversion, as the spiritual level of conversion likewise establishes a spiritual communion between the sanctified preacher and the sanctified group of black women who support a ministry of love.

Methodological Framework

This study, *A Politics of Conversion: Nihilism and Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction*, makes two claims: one suggesting that black American literature moves from spiritual narrative to slave narrative to novel; another claiming that black women protagonists advance from spiritual conversion to political conversion. Thus, the literary texts mirror, in form and content, the interchangeability of both spirituality and politics in black women's struggle to free themselves from sin and slavery. In the interchangeability, political conversion looks back at spiritual conversion and takes spiritual recovery of soul as the groundwork for black woman's reclamation of secular, social, and political commitment.

In this study the proposal that black woman's quest for spiritual conversion is simultaneous with her activation of political conversion requires a methodology that applies the inter-connections of the two types of conversion. This methodology includes (1) the analysis of a spirituality of conversion and (2) the discussion of a politics of conversion. The analysis of a spirituality of conversion is done in Jarena Lee's (1849) *Religious Experience*. The discussion of a politics of conversion is, initially, portrayed in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* and, later, in Morrison's novels

Beloved, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. The politics of conversion in the slave narrative prepares for the event of the politics of conversion in the novels as much as the spiritual convert antedates the possibilities of the slave narrator.

Self-reflexiveness involves both the slave narrator's political conversion and the raising of the female protagonist's consciousness in the novels. Self-reflexiveness is discussed in relation to Gates's (1988) 'signifying' and includes three moments in the analysis of the novels: the first deals with the intertextual conversation between *Beloved* and *Incidents*, showing how the politics of conversion of Sethe Suggs's black community echoes and distances itself from the politics of conversion of Linda Brent's black group. The second covers the intertextual conversation between *Sula* and *Beloved*, portraying how the politics of conversion of Sula Peace's black community repeats and revises the politics of conversion of Sethe Suggs's black neighborhood. The last involves the intertextual conversation between *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*, depicting how the politics of conversion of Pecola Breedlove's black community mirrors and dissociates itself from the politics of conversion of Sula Peace's black group and Sethe Suggs's black community.

A Spirituality of Conversion

A spirituality of conversion, however important, has a secondary relevance for this study, as spiritual conversion works as the point of departure for the analysis of the politics of conversion, which is present in chapters three to six. A spirituality of conversion deals with black woman's spiritual conversion in Jarena Lee's (1849) spiritual narrative *Religious Experience*. Because black woman's spiritual

conversion is seen as the preparation for her political reclamation of civil rights, spirituality of conversion is examined from the spiritual perspective of conversion only, without spiritual conversion being scrutinized through the framework used for the analysis of the politics of conversion. In other words, the narrative is functional as far as it suggests the contours of black female experience of conversion. In Lee's spiritual conversion, the autobiographer's conversion and preaching are the major aspects. Her conversion shows how she frees herself from sin. Her preaching shows how she frees other sinners from sin.

A Politics of Conversion

A spirituality of conversion in black woman's reclamation of soul and humanity opens the possibility for a politics of conversion. A politics of conversion, then, examines the data related to the political conversion in Jacobs's (1861) slave narrative and Morrison's novels. The analysis of the politics of conversion shows how Jacobs and Morrison involve their women in extraordinary instances of politics of conversion in the communities where they live. In their works, the politics of conversion result from the harmonious or conflicting relationships between the individual woman and her community. Both the individual and the community function as the grounds upon which the quality and the outcome of the politics of conversion can be measured and judged. Thus, the framework for the politics of conversion presents these two features, values and elements. The politics of conversion supports itself upon two sets of values, the values brought by the community and those articulated by the individual. Sometimes these sets of values

coincide, but not always. The elements put the values into action or prevent them from working.

Community Values

Community values are important for two reasons. First, they reflect the collective racial identity of the black community. The collective racial identity shared by the whole community is seen as the community's love ethic. In West's (1994) view, the love ethic "is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people" (29). As the love ethic includes self-love and love of others, these elements are referred to by West as "modes towards increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community" (29). These values are service, sacrifice, love, care, discipline, and excellence. Second, it is in relation to the community values and the group's racial identity that the individual member of the community constructs her individual and personal form of identity. The individual member's racial identity is self-valuation.

The communal love ethic and individual self-valuation operate on two different bases. On one hand, the love ethic fuses with self-valuation, generating harmony and stability between the individual and the community. On the other, we have the disruption between love ethic and self-valuation, thus producing conflict and instability between the individual and the group.

values, identity, or love ethic. In either case, the politics of conversion is the collective experience of the black community, which is clearly and concretely generated by the individual member's interests, values, identity, or self-valuation. As a catalytic element, the individual member's performance as a political convert rests on both the community's prescriptive rules and guidelines for a collective identity and on personal responses (harmony or conflict) to them. Collective interests and individual desires share common grounds in the concrete performance of the political convert.

The activation of the community's love ethic, together with the individual member's self-valuation in the politics of conversion, calls for these five elements: an antagonizing setting, an antagonizing agent, a supporting agent, a purpose, and an outcome. Both the antagonizing setting and agent work together, position themselves against the individual member's self-valuation and, therefore, are the generators of the nihilistic threat. The supporting agent and the individual member's purpose function as the counterbalance to the antagonizers, favor the self-valuation of the individual member and, therefore, behave as the producers of love and self-love. The fifth element, outcome, refers to the kind of result the politics of conversion achieves.

A Politics of Conversion in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*

Jarena Lee's reclamation of soul and humanity provides moral and racial support for Linda Brent's struggle for civil rights. Linda Brent's quest for freedom involves her black community's love ethic, a sense of self-valuation and self-worth,

Individual Values

In the process of constructing personal values, the individual member of the community shows two logics when dealing with the group's love ethic. These logics, or attitudes, are influenced by self-love and love of the others. They, in West's words, increase self-valuation and encourage "political resistance in one's community" (29). Thus, the individual may either conform or not to the racial identity proposed by the community. If conformity occurs, then the individual shows the logic of adaptation, which reveals her integration and fusion with the racial and tribal interests, wills, and expectations of the community. Morrison (1984) explains the harmony between the individual and the community, saying that when the individual harmonizes with the group she becomes a genuine "representative of the tribe and in it" (339) and reflects "a tribal or a racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). If nonconformity takes place it is because the individual woman evinces logic of construction, that is, she privileges her individual interests and, therefore, she remains in constant conflict with the community's racial desires and wills. Morrison acknowledges the conflict as necessary "because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects," (339) public and private life.

Five Elements of a Politics of Conversion

The analysis of a politics of conversion is done in association with the conformity or nonconformity of the individual member to the community's interests,

and the five elements. In this analysis, I demonstrate how the five elements fit in the development of the politics of conversion. First, I discuss the ways through which the antagonizing setting of slavery plots its devastating values of wealth, property and slaveholding Christianity against Linda Brent and black community. Then, I show how the antagonizing agent Dr Flint's devastating sexual assaults against Linda Brent's virtue. I also demonstrate how the supporting agent Aunt Marthy activates the black community values of service, sacrifice, love, care, discipline and excellence, which generate family stability, love, protection, solidarity, and companionship to counter-attack the attitudes of both the slave system and its agent. I then examine how Linda Brent's purpose and self-valuation help her both resist sexual violence and function as the catalyst who generates the black community's politics of conversion and contributes enormously to its outcome. Finally, I discuss how Linda Brent's freedom from slavery and arrival at the North are the outcomes achieved.

A Politics of Conversion in Morrison's Novels

The discussion of Linda Brent's political conversion antedates the political conversion of Morrison's female protagonists. Self-reflexiveness occurs between Jacobs's slave narrative and Morrison's novels through the intertextual conversation that is established between the works. I employ Gates's (1988) signification – an intertextual conversation between two or more black texts – to show how the politics of conversion present in *Beloved* rearranges the one in *Incidents*. I then demonstrate how the politics of conversion displayed by Sula Peace and her black

community in *Sula* relates to the one in *Beloved*. Finally, I examine how the politics of conversion started by Pecola Breedlove and her black community in *The Bluest Eye* keeps connections and differences with those activated in *Beloved* and *Sula*.

A Politics of Conversion in *Beloved*

I use Gates's (1988) concept of signifying to demonstrate how Sethe Suggs's and her black community's politics of conversion repeats and revises Linda Brent's and her black community's politics of conversion. First, I show how slavery aims its devastating values of wealth and property against Sethe Suggs's black community. I also show how the antagonizing agent, Schoolteacher, inflicts on Sethe Suggs and her black community the cruel and devastating assaults Dr Flint plots against Linda Brent and her black community. Later, I demonstrate how the supporting agent Baby Suggs keeps and rearticulates within the black community the same values that Aunt Marthy personifies in Linda Brent's experience. I then examine how Sethe Suggs's wish to protect her children maintains and reevaluates Linda Brent's purpose and self-valuation and, therefore, like Linda Brent, functions as the catalyst that generates the black community's politics of conversion and its outcome. Finally, I demonstrate how the outcome of the politics of conversion at 124 Bluestone Road repeats and reorganizes Linda Brent's black community's outcome, thus promoting Sethe Suggs's freedom from slavery, and saving her from *Beloved* as a guarantee of her integration with the house's community.

A Politics of Conversion in *Sula*

Guided by Gates's (1988) concept of signifying, I show how Sula Peace's and her black community's politics of conversion mirrors and changes both Sethe Suggs's and black community's politics of conversion. First, I demonstrate how the black community of the Bottom antagonizes through its values Sula Peace's individuality and thus repeats and revises the role slavery plays in Sethe Suggs's black community's politics of conversion. In addition, I discuss how Eva Peace's agency embodies community values and, in so doing, challenges Sula Peace's autonomous self and affirmation, somehow mirroring and distancing itself from Schoolteacher's presence in Sethe Suggs's life. I also demonstrate how Nel Wright applies, in favor of Sula Peace, many of the black community values that Baby Suggs uses to support Sethe Suggs's experience. I also show how Sula Peace's struggle to be consistent with herself echoes and differs from Sethe Suggs's purpose and self-valuation, helping her function as the catalyst who generates the black community's politics of conversion and its outcome. Finally, I examine how the politics of conversion of the black community of the Bottom repeats and revises the kind of the politics of conversion that prevails in Sethe Suggs's community, by exorcising Sula Peace's evil as well as establishing communal love.

A Politics of Conversion in *The Bluest Eye*

Taking Gates's concept of signifying into account, I demonstrate how Pecola Breedlove's and her black community's politics of conversion repeats and changes

the politics of conversion activated by both Sethe Suggs's and Sula Peace's black communities. First, I show how the community of Lorain works as the antagonist. I point out that by adopting the external values of white beauty represented by blue eyes, it keeps and changes the roles of slavery in Linda Brent's and Sethe Suggs's experiences, and of the community of the Bottom in Sula Peace's life. In addition, I examine how the antagonizing mother, Maureen Peel and Geraldine aim against Pecola Breedlove's life the threats that Dr. Flint, Schoolteacher and Eva Peace articulate against Linda Brent's individuation, Sethe Suggs's self-valuation, and Sula Peace's individuality. Then, I demonstrate how the supporting Macteers, especially Claudia and Frieda, maintain and reshape in relation to Pecola Breedlove the communal values that Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs and Nel Wright personify in the black communities of Dr Flint's plantation, 124 Bluestone Road, and the Bottom respectively. I also examine Pecola Breedlove's purpose, self-valuation, and wish to be loved and demonstrate how the girl keeps and reshapes Linda Brent's, Sethe Suggs's, and Sula Peace's purposes and self-valuations. I show how Pecola Breedlove functions as the catalyst that generates the black community's politics of conversion and its outcome. Finally, I study the outcome of the politics of conversion and demonstrate how the black community of Lorain mirrors and rearticulates the outcome achieved by Linda Brent's, Sethe Suggs's and Sula Peace's black communities. In reevaluating its participation in, and contribution to, Pecola Breedlove's madness, the group achieves a peculiar level of communal love and solidarity.

Structure of the study

Considering the community's love ethic, the individual member's self-valuation and the five elements, seven chapters are developed. In the first chapter, I have discussed general theoretical notions related to autobiography, spiritual and slave narrative, a spirituality of conversion, and a politics of conversion. In the second, I introduce the characterization of spiritual conversion as it is narrated in Jarena Lee's *Religious Experiences*. In the third, I examine the politics of conversion depicted by Linda Brent and her black community in Jacobs's *Incidents*. In the fourth, I develop the analysis of the politics of conversion portrayed by Sethe Suggs and black community in Morrison's *Beloved*. Applying Gates's signifying or intertextual conversation between two or more black texts, I demonstrate how the second instance of a politics of conversion repeats and revises the first. In the fifth, I argue that the politics of conversion displayed by Sula Peace and her black community in *Sula*, signifies upon the one in *Beloved*. In the sixth, I carry out the analysis of the politics of conversion demonstrated by Pecola Breedlove and her black community in *The Bluest Eye*. I measure, through signifying, how this instance of a politics of conversion rearranges those activated in Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*. In the seventh chapter, I present the concluding remarks.

Something must be said concerning the selection of Morrison's novels and their use in the study. I do not follow the chronological order of publication of the novels – 1970, 1973 and 1987 – but a sequence that considers the historical moments during which both the stories are narrated and the various politics of conversion are constructed. The sequence *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye* makes sense from the

historical perspective of the events narrated. The first novel deals with facts that occurred in 1873; the second, between the 1940s and 1960s; and the third, in the 1960s. An additional justification for the sequence takes scapegoating and communal protection into account. I suggest that while the scapegoating of black women increases as the community advances to its highest level of organization, the group protection of the victimized members goes down to its lowest level. As a result, Sethe Suggs and Pecola Breedlove face the most damaging kind of scapegoating when compared with Sula Peace who stays in the middle. As to the group protection of the women, Bluestone Road and Lorain are at the extremities, with the Bottomites in the middle.

TWO

A SPIRITUALITY OF CONVERSION IN JARENA LEE'S *RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND JOURNAL*

If one could move "from sinner to saint," she/he could also move from "from slave to free," "from bondage to freedom." Thus conversion functions in early black women's literature both as an event and a process for the revisioning of community.

Katerine C. Bassard (1999, 23)

Bassard's (1999) quote associates two types of conversion: the spiritual, accomplished by the move "from sinner to saint," (23) and the political, or the move "from bondage to freedom" (23). The interconnection existing between spirituality and politics makes the interdependence between spiritual and political conversion a characteristic of "early black women's literature," (23) especially in the spiritual narrative because this mode deals with conversion "both as an event and a process for the revisioning of community" (23). The female convert manages to expand the self into a group by turning personal conversion into community construction. ✕

As discussed in the first chapter, a chain of achievement is established in African American literature. The chain is marked by the idea of conversion, as it mirrors black women's movement within conversion, that is, their moving from spiritual to political conversion. Their conversional dislocation from the spiritual to the political arena affirms the interdependence that exists between freedom from sin

and freedom from slavery for black women. Andrews (1986) acknowledges black women's advance from spirituality to politics when he posits spiritual conversion as the basis from which she can request political emancipation. He argues that the spiritual narrator's statement "that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites" validates her "success in restoring political and economic freedom to American blacks" (1). His words seem to suggest that freedom from sin and freedom from slavery are simultaneous experiences of black women, of which Jarena Lee's and Linda Brent's lives have become exemplifications. That is, the spiritual and the political more or less coexist in their narratives. ✍

Believing that she is "chosen by God for eternal salvation" (1), Lee (1849) writes *Religious Experience* to describe her spiritual conversion or spirituality of conversion. In so doing, she lays "the necessary intellectual groundwork" (1) for other black women and men to attempt "restoring political and economic freedom" (1). In her spiritual narrative, Lee's spiritual conversion touches two central points of black woman's conversion: the individual and the group. Andrews (1986) remarks that Lee deals, on the one hand, with "the central question of the fate of the individual soul" and, on the other, with her "true place and destiny in the divine scheme of things" (10-11). These two elements, "the self within" and "the world outside" are inseparable in Lee's narrative and stand for two other aspects, the individual's self-valuation and the group's love ethic, referred to above in the analysis of West's politics of conversion. The aspects that relate "the self within" to self-valuation and that associate "the world outside" with the love ethic interweave spiritual and political conversion. They also illustrate self-reflexiveness in the African-American narrative and illuminate the notion of conversion as a spiritual

phenomenon which precedes and prepares for the political aspects of conversion that are the focus in Jacobs's *Incidents* and in Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. Spiritual and political conversions present themselves as interdependent phenomena in black women's lives. As such, spiritual experience and political agency illustrate the movement from the former to the latter in Nineteenth-Century African-American literature and later dominate the three novels of Toni Morrison mentioned above.

While internal self-reflexiveness is visible inside African-American literature when spiritual and political conversion are considered in relation to spiritual and slave narratives and novels, external self-reflexiveness is also detected when the sources of black spiritual narrative are scrutinized. African-Americanists believe that the telling of black women's spiritual progress from sin to sanctification has an external source, which is neither black nor female. They argue that the spiritual elements of black women's conversion place their spiritual narrative inside an autobiographical tradition, derived primarily from a European- American male model. From this perspective, African-American women's spiritual autobiography establishes intertextual signifying ties with European and American versions of autobiographical texts. In special forms of intertextual repetition and revision, the black woman autobiographer repeats the autobiographical features present in, for example, Saint Augustine's, Teresa of Avila's, and Jonathan Edwards's spiritual writings. Because of mutual interdependence, European, American, and African-American autobiographers' spiritual narratives cover a common area in their spatial, temporal, and religious particularities: a movement from sin to sanctity that is exercised through meditation, soliloquy, prayer, and communication with God.

However, a mere repetition of the model is avoided by the black female narrator because her spiritual narrative revises the European and American models by adding evangelical and prozelytizing components to the contemplative and monastic features of the previous autobiographers. However, despite the differences, what is “at the core of both mystical traditions, Houchins (1988) observes, “is the belief in the profound union of God and humanity” (xxxv). In so reflecting “the profound union of God with humanity,” Houchins continues, the African-American women spiritual narrators supplement the solitary and individual experiences of conversion, or “the self within”, with their “vocation to preach, teach, pray publicly, and testify” (xxx) in “the world outside.” Houchins details her view of the mixing of conversion and preaching, i.e., the interweaving of the private and the social, in black women’s spiritual writing:

It retained the orality of both their homiletic exhortations, lively confluences of biblical texts with personal accounts of how God’s grace infused their spirits and worked in their lives to effect an “ontological transformation”, and their prayers, the “consecration of words,” that “ontological necessity” which is the “act of purification” by the making of one’s life and oblation to God. (xxx)

The double aspect of the spiritual and the political in black women’s religious or spiritual conversion is additionally pictured by Houchins as “an individual’s recognition or consciousness of her union with the Divine and through the Divine with all creation” (xxxiii). In associating the spiritual with the secular, conversion brings together religious experience and social struggle because the black woman’s “union with the Divine,” during slavery, calls for the association of freedom from sin

with the freedom from bondage. Similarly the fusion of spirituality and secularity or the merging of “the self within” and “the world outside” that is unveiled by Andrews and Houchins is also reinforced by Bassard (1999). Like Andrews and Houchins, Bassard understands that black women’s Christianization not only introduces the female narrator to American spirituality but also provides her with a discourse of self-expression. She argues that black women’s spiritual texts appropriate and transform Protestantism in order to accommodate her own previous African religious experiences. In so doing, Bassard (1999) suggests, the black woman narrator struggles “for empowerment, agency, and subjectivity within a cultural and communal frame of reference,” (21) which is provided by the encounter of her own black religiosity with the white religious discourses of the moment. The encounter of two different religious discourses offers Lee, and other spiritual autobiographers as well, the language that allows her to express selfhood, to communicate with other blacks, and to help them accept God’s grace as she herself did. Bassard acknowledges the union of spiritual and political agency in the conversion of the black female autobiographer. She remarks that, in the itinerant search for the other blacks still living in sin or separated from God’s Gospel, the convert’s journey “operates as an important dialectical movement, calling forth, as it does, both the continuity of salvation and the transformation of radical change” (23). Religiously, both conversion and Christian salvation reveal the slave’s moving from sin to virtue; politically they reveal advance from slavery to freedom, thus resulting in the ties between black women’s experience of conversion and the idea of the black community. Bassard (1999) remarks that the narration of conversion clearly expresses the narrator’s “desire for community and communal longing” (27). Thus,

both spiritual conversion and its expansion by means of itinerant preaching of the Gospel are at the center of community formation and preservation. Bassard observes that, in nineteenth-century spiritual narratives, conversion works “both as an event and as a process for the revision of community” (23) and displays the existence of a “larger project of African American community formation” (27). Similarly, Andrews (1986) recognizes the presence of a community of women behind the spiritual narrator’s itinerant preaching and unveils its challenging aspects. He suggests that the profound spiritual communion linking the black woman preacher to her largely black female audience make them “sisters of the spirit” (21). As a result, he believes, this public identifies the preacher with “an inchoate community of the spirit that transcends normal social distinctions in the name of a radical egalitarianism” (20) and opens space for “the intuitive and emotive character of the Spirit” (21).

Lee’s Conversion

Religious Experiences uses the discourse of conversion to express selfhood and conversation with God and to communicate with other black people by means of the preaching of the Gospel. Lee’s autobiography and spirituality of conversion basically present these two elements: conversion and preaching. In the narrative, while conversion pertains to the private sphere and, therefore, establishes the experience of the self in the isolation of retirement and silence, preaching unveils the converted Lee’s attitudes toward black people. The spirituality of conversion tries to clarify how Lee’s religious and spiritual experiences associate the individual’s self-assurance with the group’s commitment to spirituality. Thus, in Lee’s religious

experience, individual embodiment of the Gospel necessarily requires its expansion to the collectivity of other black people who are willing to experience God's blessings.

Lee's conversion and preaching are discussed in this section. Conversion concerns "the profound union of God with" Lee's humanity. It informs "the self within," or individuality and spirituality. Lee's spiritual quest reveals three levels: conversion, conviction, and sanctification. Preaching concerns Lee's "desire for community and communal longing." It deals with "the world outside" or the communal setting. It shows other constitutive features: sexist opposition, physical illness and bodily debilitation, conversion of whites and slaves, and the biblical text. In fact, in Lee's autobiography, individual conversion and public preaching can't be easily separated as they make a single whole. Similarly, a spirituality of conversion makes evident that the preaching completes the conversion as much as the conversion demands the preaching and continues during the preaching. Thus, the interdependence of conversion and preaching, in Lee's autobiography, places the values of the individual woman and the wishes of the community together in the African-American literary tradition.

Lee's autobiography makes both conversion and preaching very distinct but integrated aspects. A divine calling demands a response, and so Lee's conversion demanded that she preach. Similarly, Lee's spirituality of conversion, visible in the narrative, is not complete if her private conversion itself is devoid of the public communication with those who live in sin but are in search of salvation. As Andrews (1986) points out, if "the self within" and "the world outside" are kept separated, the spirituality of conversion does not hold as a spiritual whole. Lee's integration of call

and response, and of conversion and preaching, positions herself as a “poor colored instrument” (37), a self-positioning that, Bassard (1999) affirms, “refuses a split dividing the social, the historical, and the political from the spiritual call from God” (93). Moody (2001) seems to echo Bassard’s views, saying that Lee makes “the spiritual autobiography a form amenable to the reconstruction of African American women’s particular experiences, both sacred and secular” (53).

Lee’s conversion and acceptance of Christianity and move from sin to sanctity cover three stages: conversion, conviction, and sanctification. Andrews (1986) notes that, in going through these stages, Lee’s soul recognizes its sinfulness, asks for God’s forgiveness, and frees itself from sin. Lee herself explicitly refers to these stages: “I have now passed through the account of my conviction, and also of my conversion to God; and shall next speak of the blessings of my sanctification” (8). Scholars of Lee’s autobiography enumerate three characteristics that place her inside the spiritual autobiographical tradition. Bassard (1999) observes that Lee follows “the narrative line of traditional Christian morphologies of conversion” (92) which include “conviction of sin, justification from sin through belief in Jesus Christ, and, finally, sanctification, the state in which one’s entire will is conformed to the will of God” (92). In other words, many African-Americanists suggest that a sinner progresses from darkness to light: conversion implies a search for light, conviction indicates a struggle against temptation, and sanctification evinces the living experience of the Lord’s blessings. Houchins (1988), for example, describes these stages:

First, during a period of purification, the individual recalls her past life, reviews her autobiographical data – so to speak – attains profound self-knowledge, and is overcome with remorse. Second, along the mystic way, God enlightens her, reveals to her esoteric theological truths, sometimes bestows a gift of deeply erotic visions, which symbolize the depth of their shared mystical love, and promises her eternal salvation. And third, the mystic is profoundly affected and permanently transformed [sanctified] by the experience. (xxxiii-xxxiv)

Lee's conversion or quest for salvation exposes two feelings: one expressing the awareness that she is a sinner; another urging her to run away from sin. The battle between these feelings generates a sense of spiritual deprivation she sometimes feels unable to deal with. As result, to express her angst she writes that her spiritual illness is accompanied by suicidal thoughts derived from "the weight of my sins, and sinful nature" (4). Lee's suicidal ideation is associated with an awareness of her sinful past life and remorse for being a sinner. She reports that eventually she is saved from harming herself "by the unseen arm of God" (4). This struggle against death results in a long illness, caused by "the labor of my spirit and the fearful oppression of the judgment to come" (4). In her quest for spiritual conversion, she tries different denominations, Presbyterianism, Catholicism, and Episcopalianism, but finding herself uncomfortable with them, she accepts the Methodism of Reverend Richard Allen. She identifies with Allen's religious work: "during the labors of this man that afternoon, I had come to the conclusion, that this is the people to which my heart unites [...] and my soul was gloriously converted to God" (5). Her conversion to God is described through an erotic discourse, God

covering her as a lover would do. “That moment,” she says, “it appeared to me as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers’ ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow from my sight – when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead” (5).

In Houchins’s (1988) words, conviction follows conversion, so the previous “period of purification [...] profound self-knowledge [...] remorse,” (xxxiii) and mystical-erotic insights are complemented by enlightenment, or the revelation of “esoteric theological truths,” “erotic visions,” “mystical love” and the promise of “eternal salvation” (xxxiii-xxxiv). However, despite this deep spiritual awakening, Lee’s salvation is threatened by the dangers surrounding her life, represented by “Satan’s power over me” (5). She feels his power so inescapably and intensely that she believes “I had better be dead than alive” (6). This feeling of weakness to face Satan’s power, manifested itself in her wish of drowning or hanging herself, is later counterbalanced by her alliance with God who “saved me from the violence of my own hands, from the malice of Satan, and from eternal death” (6). Lee’s sense of being saved, however, does not last long because Satan’s interference is constant, even when she prays, a danger she believes to be “the Bible account of a hell of fire” (6). In these moments of temptation, her state of mind is so touched that “I could not refrain from weeping and crying aloud,” not knowing “what ailed me” (7). Additionally, Lee reports that Satan’s pursuit of her soul also happens as a result of her religious ignorance, as she does not know “that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the second person in the adorable Trinity. I knew not him in the pardon of my sins [...] but I knew the Lord’s prayer” (7). Later, the revelation of these “theological truths” brings comfort to her soul because she compensates for her lack of

theological knowledge with fervent prayer. Eventually, she becomes sick and retires “to places where prayer and supplication was stately (sic) made for such as me” (8). Finally, under the spiritual orientation of a Methodist congregation and a quest for spiritual selfhood, she becomes able “to comprehend the spiritual meaning of the text” (8), is baptized, and feels saved and prepared to preach the Gospel.

Sanctification follows conviction in Lee’s autobiography, and this stage starts in a happy mood, with Lee relating that “day and night my joy was full, no temptation was permitted to molest me” (8). The two preceding stages of conversion and conviction illuminate Lee’s struggle against sin and are marked by uncertainty. Although she fights against sin, repents, and obtains forgiveness, the chance of succumbing under the weight of sin and the power of Satan is always still there. The third level, however, assures Lee’s victory over sin and the guarantee of salvation. Sanctification is implemented by theological knowledge. She is, then, instructed by William Scott, a friend who, by means of conversation, teaches her about “the progress of the soul from a state of darkness” (9). She is taught that her conversion must complete three levels: “first, conviction for sin. Second, justification from sin. Third, the entire sanctification of the soul to God” (9). Lee’s sanctification occurs with her decision to free herself from her sins, her wish “to know more of the right way of the Lord” (9). Again, as happens during her conviction, prayer is the instrument she uses to reaffirm sanctification. “I prayed almost incessantly” (9) to liberate her soul from “the roots of bitterness [...] the root of pride, anger, self-will” (9). After a period of three months of solitary and silent prayer, she reports that she heard a voice telling her to “ask for sanctification” (9) and to “pray for sanctification” (10), to which she responds, “Lord *sanctify* my soul for Christ’s sake”

(10). She then describes how she feels: “a new rush of the same ecstasy came upon me, and caused me to feel as if I were in an ocean of light and bliss” (10). Immersed “in an ocean of light and bliss,” sanctification leads Lee to conform her “entire” will “to the will of God.”

Lee’s Preaching

The conformity of Lee’s “entire” will “to the will of God” can also be read as the association of her “self within” with “the world outside,” or it can be taken as the fulfillment of conversion through preaching. Therefore, after conversion, preaching is the next step toward the spirituality of conversion affirmed in Lee’s narrative. Conversion defines Lee’s selfhood and identity, while preaching expresses her sense of community and collectivity. Considering these two moments from the Wesleyan Methodist perspective, Andrews (1986) writes that “Wesley stresses that in addition to the blessing of inner peace, sanctification brings an increased sense of power to a Christian,” (15) power over sin, power to worship and to find glory, honor, and immortality. That is, Lee’s selfhood is built upon “the blessing of inner peace” (15) as she becomes able to free herself from sin in her individual quest for sanctification. Her sense of community is shaped by the dynamics of the spiritual interactions she maintains with those she reaches in the work as an itinerant preacher. Thus, conversion asks for the distribution of its effects and consequences to others needing conversion, which may be reached by means of preaching. Bassard (1999) captures this mingling of black female individuality and collectivity toward black communal experience in Lee’s preaching when she situates it in a certain type of black religious

experience. She writes that Lee “is writing, as well, at the beginning of the formation of African American community consciousness” (93), a period during which “the African American church was the primary institutional vehicle to register this collective consciousness in formation” (93). Thus, working like a center of religious and secular activism, the church, Bassard continues, plays two roles: on the one hand, it works as “a spiritual center” (93); on the other, it behaves as both a “place for political gatherings” and for “the community’s ‘insurance’ agency” (93). In associating herself with such a hybrid black church, Lee’s hybridized “self within” and “world outside” highlight her membership in both a black church and a community. That is, in connecting two elements, private spiritual conversion with public preaching, Lee’s spirituality of conversion reflects the association of the spiritual life with the political agency that has transformed the nineteenth-century black religious community. Bassard adds, “Lee’s ‘call’ and her (textual) ‘response’ must be read within this context, a context that restores community as the mediating level of interaction and serves as the basis for Lee’s ‘theorizing’ about the relationship between spiritual experience and social identity” (93). She, then, concludes that community becomes “an integral part of salvation, wholeness, and self-discovery” (93) in the spirituality of conversion of Lee’s narrative. To this Andrews (1986) remarks that Lee’s preaching clarifies “the guiding ‘spirit’ of that community” and helps “to bring it into being by exemplifying its ethos” (20) with her spiritual life.

Her quest for community is at the same time a collective expansion of her individual conversion. Lee’s preaching is reaffirmed by God’s repeated command, “Go preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies

to become your friends” (10). Inspired by the divine, Lee’s preaching is certified by God’s command, and her knowledge is God’s knowledge. Lee’s initial doubts about whether she should preach or not are later dispelled by two events. The first is the vision “of a pulpit, with a Bible lying thereon” (10), and the other, a dream during which “I thought there stood before me a great multitude, while I expounded to them the things of religion. So violent were my exertions and so loud were my exclamations, that I awoke from the sound of my own voice” (10-11). In both her vision and dream, four elements are mentioned: the pulpit, the Bible, the multitude, and the exhortation. These four elements build the morphologies of her itinerant religious and secular mission and determine the result of her ministry of love (or “love ethic”, to use West’s phrase.) Wherever she goes, in her itinerant preaching, she exhorts from a pulpit so that a multitude of avid sinners has access to God’s word in the Bible. She is, then, convinced that she will preach the Gospel, and her journey all over the country, or the secular manifestation of her spiritual journey, becomes, as Houchins (1988) puts it, “the quest for a locus of freedom” (xli). In fact, the locus of freedom privileged by Lee is a multilayered shared community: religious, African-American, and female. As Moody (2001) writes, Lee refuses to be apart “from other members of the religious community, the African American community, and the women’s community to which she belongs, to assert instead a collective identity” (54).

In this scenario, the group reflects individual agency, and the individual certifies the group dynamic. Thus, Lee’s preaching and quest for a community that expresses the complexity of a collective identity are analyzed here from four

different aspects: white and black sexist opposition to Lee's preaching, her physical hardships, the conversion of slaves, and the biblical text.

Sexist Opposition to Lee's Preaching

Lee's preaching and entering "the world outside" affirm her love ethic toward the formation of a community that, in being both religious and secular, favors the construction of a hybrid collective identity. The communal hybridity not only welcomes religious and political activism, but also contemplates multiracial and multigendered participation, contributions and alliances. Though she, as Andrews (1986) notes, elaborates her identification with "an inchoate community of the spirit" (20), fueled and bred in social equality, resistance to her missionary project is everywhere. It involves racial and gender aspects and is as common in the congregation as it is among the religious leaders. From the very beginning, Lee's quest for public preaching deals with gendered constraints and limitations. She faces resistance to women's preaching among the Methodists, as Reverend Richard Allen tries to convince her, saying "that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it – that it did not call for women preachers" (11). Being a religious leader and a black man, Allen's resistance becomes even more restrictive, as it involves religious, institutional, and racial aspects. Moody (2001) denounces Allen's opposition and calls attention to the ambiguity of his position as well: "initially, even Allen opposed Lee's preaching, permitting her only to exhort sinners to conversion" (57). Exhortation was both a limitation and an exit to Lee's mission. Although it limited the female preacher's actions, it also opened a way out for the

preaching, however restrictive. Andrews (1986) explains the status of the exhorter this way: “exhorters occupied the lowest position in the church’s preaching hierarchy and had to have permission before addressing individual congregations” (14). Although Lee seems to understand the reasons of “church government and discipline” (11) to deny a black woman a broader access to what is viewed as an essentially male role, she judges the permission to exhort an incentive to proceed and pursue her goal. She then accepts the challenge of becoming an exhorter who goes beyond the permitted task. She is determined not to accept this as a barrier: “and why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as for the man” (11). After conjectures about the reasons the black Methodists may have for her not to preach and the reasons she has for her preaching, she writes: “as for me, I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labor to what I have received, in his vineyard” (12).

Lee’s self-assurance and quest for preaching mark her insubordination to the values of womanhood as validated by nineteenth-century culture and Allen’s Methodist church. According to Johnson (1998) the “cult of true womanhood” is expressed through women who become “gentle, innocent, pure, pious, domestic, submissive, and somewhat helpless. The stories and sermons of this period stress the duties of obedient, submissive wives and mothers” (18). Though this code of behavior is especially addressed to monitor white women’s behavior, slave women’s humanity is not even accepted, free black women are sometimes judged in accordance with this sexist ideology and, therefore, are expected to accept inferior and devalued status. Moody (2001) voices this deprecatory judgment of Lee’s

challenging and self-affirming behavior as she resists imposed passivity and inferiority: “as she traveled, Lee was often attacked as indecent and unnatural” (57). However, Lee defies both the sexist values and the accusation of her radical attitudes. Her challenge, Andrews (1986) notes, testifies to her “desire to authorize, through her own example, an alternative role for women within communities of the spirit founded on an egalitarian ideal” (17). Lee’s decision to proceed with the itinerant preaching is an incontestable manifestation that she resists two of the values prescribed for women, domesticity and submissiveness. Regarding domesticity, she abandons her house and leaves the son with relatives to embrace the itinerant preaching, which makes her absent from home for months at a time. As far as submissiveness is concerned, Lee resists Allen’s prohibition and goes on preaching wherever and whenever she is invited to.

Lee explicitly denounces the kind of condemnation her delivery of the Gospel creates during her itinerant preaching. The resistance takes many forms, manifesting itself verbally or by means of religious leaders’ and lay people’s behaviors, both blacks and whites, inside and outside the Methodist Church. Despite its levels of variation, the crucial type of opposition arises from sexism. That is, most of the condemnation of her preaching is associated with her gender, as the detractors verbally show that they are “averse to women preaching” (23). Other criticisms manifest themselves in the way the detractors keep the church locked so that she cannot preach, or when they insist on examining her credentials for preaching before a magistrate. A man decided to write her superiors and beg them “to stop me, although I had my licence from the Bishop” (55). Though much of the resistance to her preaching comes from white men it is also present among the black men. The

white opposition not only resists a woman's preaching but, almost invariably, Lee writes, intends "to destroy my character, the principles of the Work that God saw good to make me instrumental of doing in his name" (54). Although both sexist and racist, white prejudice did not differ much from black men's resistance, which was based on gender. Reverend James Ward, for example, manifested prejudice against Lee's preaching "by saying no woman should stand in his pulpit" (44). Black opposition, like its white counterpart, aimed at denying Lee's ministry of love a place to express itself.

Lee's resistance to the domesticity and submissiveness prescribed by the cult of true womanhood fortified her decision to confront sexist and racist opposition to her preaching. Besides, her affirmative position toward public preaching reinforced her stature as the woman preacher who believed that "the Lord supported the 'woman preacher' and my soul was cheered" (33). A counterbalance to the various forms of opposition was the support that was offered to her. Lee's preaching gained support from the testimonies of people who came to hear her "illegal" sermons. They tell her that "they had not for several years been to a meeting, and yet, while listening to hear what God would say by this poor female instrument, have believed with trembling – tears rolling down their cheeks, the signs of contrition and repentance towards God" (12). Communal certification and authentication of her preaching overcome forms of resistance to her love ethic and energizes Lee to proceed. This community, in fact, a community of women, Andrews (1986) suggests, is informed by "the Spirit" (20).

Lee's Physical Hardships

Though informed by “the Spirit” and supported by “the self-within,” Lee’s struggle for preaching in “the world outside” does not become an unchallenged task. Along with sexism, another constraint to Lee’s public ministry of love is illness and physical hardship. Lee’s preaching is often impeded by psychological and physical problems. The weariness and inclement weather of her long trips compound the psychological pain from sexist persecution.

Both Houchins (1988) and Moody (2001) acknowledge Lee’s pain in the autobiography. While for Houchins “images of the body abound” (xxvii), this body, for Moody, “is frequently dis-eased” (66), and as a result, this “unwell body invariably signals a dis-eased spiritual condition” (66). One aspect of Lee’s “dis-eased” body is spiritual and physical suffering. Spiritual suffering occurs during her conversion and derives from her decision to fight her “sinful nature” which results in illness. She writes that “I was reduced to as one extreme ill” (4). Lee’s endurance of physical illness is reported, again during the conversion period when “I had become feverish and sickly through the violence of my feelings” (8).

During Lee’s exhaustive itinerant preaching, her autobiography intensifies the narrative of her physical maladies. In her text, we can find out that her physical debility and illness derive from many sources: weather, exhaustion, long trips, malnutrition, and sleep deprivations. Reporting her endurance of pain she writes that sometimes “my heart was sore and pained me in my body” (24). She also names the type of disease she contracts as when she writes that she “returned again to W – where I was taken sick with typhus fever, and was in the doctor’s hands for some

days” (28). Sometimes illness and weakness alternate in Lee’s ministry of love. She reports that her “health was much destroyed by speaking so often and laboring so very hard” (58). She also adds she “was arrested by a heavy fever” (58) and worried that “my health was poor” (59) or about “my debilitation of body” (61), all these events making her “unable to labor and preach for some months” (61). There is a moment, in the very end of her narrative when she writes that “my health being very impaired” (96), she believes God is calling her, but God spares her and she “commenced travelling again” (97). Though limiting and constraining, illness is not enough to interrupt Lee’s preaching. On the contrary, she feels a renewed spiritual vitality arising from suffering. She truly believes that her survival from illness is God’s wish because her mission is not completed yet. She reports that “the Lord spared me for some other purpose, and upon my recovery I commenced travelling again, feeling better to wear out than to rust out” (97). Dismissing illness, pain, and suffering, she asserts that she will preach “until death ends the struggle” (97). She has comforting feelings toward death, saying, “if I lose my life for Christ’s sake, I shall find it again” (97). Moody (2001) echoes Lee’s physical and spiritual strength, observing that “despite imaging herself as a sufferer of frequent illness, or perhaps through her depiction of her endurance of them, Lee emerges as a woman of exceptional moral and spiritual strength in her narrative” (69). Like Moody, Andrews (1986) also calls attention to the black female preacher who feels “empowered, indeed authorized by God, to listen to and act upon [her] intuitions, [her] long-suppressed ambitions, [her] idealized self-images” (16).

Lee's Conversion of Others

Male opposition to and devaluation of her public preaching and her physical debilitation do not lead Lee to give up her itinerant ministry of love. Actually, other people's opposition and personal illness only cause her momentary interruptions or force her to find alternatives, because she finds comfort among "the sisters of the spirit" (Andrews, 20) and in God, who is there to support her and provide solutions. When resistance to women's preaching is used to show her that she is not wanted, God's support and intervention manifest themselves clearly in favor of Lee's spiritual fervor. Andrews (1986) notes that God's interference testifies to "providential support, care for an independent black woman in a racist as well and sexist society" (3). God's intervention, Andrews adds, evinces His "selection of a black woman to be his spokesperson to the unsaved and the spiritually recalcitrant of the white as well as the black race" (3). Aware of her selection by God, she repeatedly acknowledges the divine work through her. "The lord supported the 'woman preacher' and my soul was cheered," (33) she writes. Moody (2001), like Andrews, subscribes to that divine participation by arguing that Lee's "opponents, usually men, simply reverse their opinions after hearing her preach. She has absolute faith that God will not tolerate those who oppress her" (58). God's direct intervening participation is constant and is specially acknowledged by Lee when physical debility or severe illness seems to be too hard for her to continue preaching. She recognizes the favor, reporting: "I was taken sick with typhus fever, and was in the doctor's hands for some days – but the Lord rebuked the disease, gave me my usual health again, and I returned back to Philadelphia" (28).

Lee's preaching is neither a solitary nor a uniethnic enterprise, nor even a unidenominational one, but rather illustrates, as Moody (2001) points out, "her commitment to a multiethnic religious community" (54) and her rejoicing "in the integration of sects and races" (54). In her multiethnic and multidenominational religious community, though Lee celebrates God's Gospel with blacks, whites, and Indians of Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, and other sects, she remains faithful to Reverend Richard Allen's African Methodists. Reverend Allen shows ambiguous behavior toward Lee's public preaching. Though he invites her to embrace the African Methodist Church, he initially positions himself against women preachers but, later, publicly defends her preaching because, Lee writes, "he now as much believed that I was called to that work" (17). Moody (2001) explains that Allen's change toward Lee derives from the excellence of her preaching: "after she demonstrated her ability, however, by speaking extemporaneously and taking over for an uninspired minister, Allen publicly acknowledges and honors her calling, thereby rendering Lee the first female minister of that faith" (57). With such a public and institutional recognition, Lee's itinerant preaching delivers God's Gospel with human, institutional, and divine support and is able to build a community of converts. As for God's intervening contribution she has His own words after her sanctification: "preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends" (10).

Two kinds of constraints to Lee's public preaching have already been analyzed: individual male as well as institutional opposition and physical hardships. Counterbalancing these limitations is the public reception of her ministry of love. The warm reception her preaching sometimes received is exemplified by means of

those who decided to leave a sinful life, embrace the Gospel, and be converted. The quality of her preaching to convert others includes three basic elements: singing, reading, and preaching. The text, that is, the Bible, is crucial as she basically intends “to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and accompany it too with power to the sinner’s heart” (12). She reads the Bible, sings and preaches the word of God, and people open themselves to let her words enter their hearts. Her multiethnic and multid denominational preaching is based on love, not only because she feels “love for the people” (25) but especially because she believes that “religion is love – God’s love” (25). With such sentiments she proceeds in her preaching even when opposition and illness seem to be stronger than what she can endure.

Lee’s narrative makes it clear that conversion results from God’s intervention in the sinner’s heart by means of her preaching. She reports the testimonies of people moving from sin to salvation: “they told me that sinners were converted, backsliders reclaimed, mourners comforted, and believers built up in the most holy faith” (39). And she adds “some said they came as sinners before God, but went away as new creatures in Christ; and they could not be disputed” (39). Together with others’ affirmation of collective conversion, Lee herself witnesses verbally the power of God that “arrested a person who started to run, but fell in the flight, and begged for mercy and obtained it” (39). As reinforcement that “various are the operations of the Spirit of God on the human family,” (39) Lee’s spiritual narrative clarifies that, by means of her preaching, “the Lord converted poor mourners, convicted sinners, and strengthened believers in the most holy faith” (41).

Lee's itinerant preaching is addressed to a multiethnic audience of American Indian, white and black listeners, in mixed meetings or in separate encounters. While preaching to the Indians, Lee reports that they react positively to the Gospel, sing beautifully, and "are endowed with the Christian spirit" (51), though they are not Christianized. Later, she visits other Indians and "speaks to them in English" (59). Besides the Native American Christians, Lee also addresses mixed groups of white and black people to whom she preaches and feels moved because "Jesus was in our midst – and we gave glory to God" (27). In Rahway, for instance, she again is among friends, "both colored and white, of different orders, without distinction" (64). In Fort George, she preaches "to a white and colored congregation" (67) with such a great result that, during the religious event "some shouted, some mourned, others sought for mercy, and I felt the Holy Ghost upon me, glory, glory, glory to God" (67).

Among white people, despite some opposition and resistance, Lee's preaching results in conversion, friendship, and support as the testimony of a white lady, a Methodist "of great distinction," shows: "she told me that at the same schoolhouse ten years before, under my preaching, the Lord first awakened her. She rejoined much to see me, and invited me home with her, where I staid till the next day. This was bread cast upon the water, seen after many days" (20). Near Baltimore, her preaching causes "one visible sign of the manifestation of the Spirit of God" (78) in an aged lady, and her prayers comfort a wicked slaveholder in his dying moment.

Lee's preaching to the blacks, though she confronts demonstrations of opposition and resistance, finds much support as, for instance, in Christine where she "was well treated by some of my colored friends" (25). She also preaches at Cap-

teen, “a settlement of colored people,” (53) which she describes as an “industrious” community with its own church. And stressing the event of the collective spiritual change, she adds “many were convicted, and converted, and many added to the old Methodist Church” (54). In her preaching to blacks, Lee associates black spiritual conversion with social emancipation through education. She makes them aware that “without the advantages of education they never would be a moral people” (69). Her advice succeeds, and soon they have “their own preachers, exhorters and class-leaders” (70), all blacks. Lee also gets involved in an antislavery society and learns about “the rights of the oppressed” (72) and “the cruelty of the slave-holder” (72). In uniting spiritual conversion and social activism, Lee adds politics to spirituality. Spiritually and politically involved, she participates at the New York American Anti-Slavery Society convention (1840), reporting that her “heart responded with this instruction” (90) and she “felt it my duty to unite with this Society” (90). Lee’s concerns with slavery and slaves are crucial, as her preaching mixes religious and political agency. Moody points out that, with her political involvement, “Lee illustrates her commitment to improving slaves’ welfare” (62) and “her sense of duty to her people” (63). West (1994), like Lee, denounces slavery as “a distinctive form of the Absurd,” of “degradation and devaluation” of “nihilism,” that causes black people’s “loss of hope and absence of meaning” (23). Politically aware, Lee denounces slavery as “that wretched system that emanated (sic) from the bottomless pit, is one of the greatest curse to any Nation” (63). Slavery is a curse because, as Moody (2001) points out, it dispossesses the slave “of cultural – and thus, political guidance” (62), which prevents him or her “to function as a member of the state” (62). Lee’s preaching, then, seems to reverse the slaves’ precarious condition, to

empower them through God's word, and make them participants in the religious community. Lee's own words clarify the presence of spiritual and political behaviors in her itinerant preaching. She reports: "doubtless the cause is good, and I pray God to (sic) forward on the work of abolition until it fills the world, and then the gospel (sic) will have free course to every nation, and in every clime" (90). As a result, her itinerant preaching and activism make freedom from "the slavery of sin" and freedom from "the sin of slavery" communicate in her community of converted people.

The Biblical Text in Lee's Preaching

Lee's multiethnic, multidenominational, and multifocused itinerant preaching spreads God's Gospel among different ethnic groups, and religious denominations while balancing spiritual and social concerns in many different parts of the country. Despite the hardships, her enterprise lasted years, faced unbearable climates, covered thousands of miles and delivered thousands of sermons. All the restrictive elements contributed to the characterization of Lee's spiritual strength and consequent revision of the nineteenth-century cult of womanhood, which sees women as weak and fragile creatures. For Moody (2001), Lee's self-portrayal "of the physically frail woman paradoxically repudiates the stereotype of the nineteenth-century weak woman by demonstrating Lee's capacity for wellness and endurance" (69).

Lee's spiritual strength and political energy are associated with the Bible, that is, the text that she carries in the public preaching, as she notes "it now occurred to me to take a text" (18). Bassard (1999) argues that, in fact, Lee interconnects call,

biblical text, and pulpit in her public preaching and, in so doing, redefines them as indications of power, domination, and resistance while guaranteeing autonomous agency. Bassard clarifies:

(1) “taking a text” as the figure for gendered prohibitions against preaching from the Bible, the foundational text of Western cultural and literary expression; (2) “the pulpit”, which serves for Lee as the metaphorical space for centralized power and agency; and (3) “the call” from God, which both represents a divinely sanctioned claim to access to ministerial vocations and also occasions the writing of her textual “response.” (88)

Initially negated but later recovered by autonomous agency, the pulpit and the text become emphatic emblems of Lee’s call to the public ministry of love and her quest for a religious community that pursues multiethnicity and multidenominationalism. Thus, Bassard adds, “Lee reinvents the traditional Anglo-American morphology of conversion by representing her conversion story as a search for religious community, culturally inscribed, even as the representations of the search for religious community transgress these narrative boundaries” (95). From the pulpit, with the text, Lee embodies Andrews’s (1986) view that “disobedience of external authorities in the name of spiritual individualism” (17) is the guarantee of hers and other converts’ spiritual and social achievements. In the pulpit, Lee covers the psalms, the books of prophecy, and Acts of the Apostles for the best purpose and effect of her preaching: the sinner’s abandonment of sin and conversion to God, and the empowerment of the oppressed. Isaiah 43.1 fits this purpose: “Cry aloud, spare not; lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgressions, and the

house of Jacob their sins” (30). To refute those who criticize women’s preaching, she uses the text in Washington, D.C. (1830), where an elder opposes her ministry: “Behold, I sent you as Sheep among Wolves, be not afraid: - Lo! I am with you always; - even unto the end of the world” (60). Likewise, when disease affects her preaching, when a sick person calls for her assistance or dies, it is the text that brings comfort to people. Conversion of people is also associated with the use of the biblical text by Lee, as when the text used is the fifth verse of “Peters’ Epistles,” (79) and “the word preached had its effect. Three persons were arrested under the power of God and felled to the floor at once” (79). Through preaching, the words in the text lead to good effect and Lee herself acknowledges that “the deadness began to remove, and life, light and immortality was come to pass through the preaching” (81).

Conclusion

Three important aspects are covered in this chapter. First, African-American autobiography’s insertion into a literary tradition is discussed along with the inclusion of Lee’s autobiographical text in that tradition. Then, Lee’s conversion which reveals a personal struggle for the self associated with her spiritual unity with God. Finally, Lee’s preaching of social awareness toward other people’s spiritual and social empowerment is related to the building of a collective community “of the spirit” (20). The first aspect, black literary tradition, suggests that black autobiography is part of a literary tradition that is not only external and internal but also racially based. From the external, largely European American source, Lee’s

spiritual narrative borrows the form: a type of personal narrative that, fed by Wesleyan Methodism's double request of "inner peace" and "power," reveals itself extremely important for the black woman's manifestation of soul and testifying of humanity in the New World. From the internal African American experience Lee uses the denial of soul and humanity and struggles to turn them into a racial affirmation of values, by means of spiritual and secular agencies fueled by the mastery of literacy, the knowledge of God's word, and its public dispersion.

Lee's knowledge of God's word and personal conversion display her quest for communicating with God. Her search for salvation is a personal and individual enterprise, in which anxiety, fear, and weakness are mixed with hope, trust, and strength. Lee's conviction, justification, and sanctification result from these conflicting experiences, and her "spiritual perfection" reflects a spiritual victory over the split that separates sin from conversion in her "self within."

Lee's personal empowerment, finally, requires her public preaching and is exercised in "the world outside." Preaching, thus, symbolizes Lee's ministry of love toward those other black women who are in need of conversion. In possessing the spirit of holiness, she becomes the instrument of salvation for others. "The world outside," then, represents her quest for community after selfhood is recovered.

Lee's spiritual enterprise reflects the literary application of the European-American tradition to the African-American experience. Thus, she affirms the black American woman's achievement of soul and humanity, of selfhood and collectivity. As a result, her spiritual narrative opens itself to a broader achievement in black women's slave narratives and novels, that is, black women's political emancipation in

Harriet Jacobs's freedom from slavery and Morrison's multiple forms of empowerment of women characters in her novels.

THREE

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION IN HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL WRITTEN BY HERSELF*

For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive.

Cornel West (1994, 23)

West's (1994) words introduce the ingredients of the African American's experience in society: oppression, hope, and the preservation of meaning. Since slavery began, oppression has been the threatening reality that hope and meaning struggle to reverse. Hope and preservation of meaning are manifestations of the African American's humanity. In this conflict, West notes, the overcoming of oppression becomes a concrete possibility if African Americans are able to preserve crucial cultural, social, and/or moral attributes. In black American history, overcoming oppression is imperative by the articulation of hope and a quest for meaning, at both the individual and collective levels. In the politics of conversion, individual and collective management of hope and meaning produces love and self-love, the two ingredients that will defeat nihilism commonly generated by any kind of oppression.

Black hope and meaning also dwell in a spirituality of conversion and are equally central aspects in Lee's spiritual struggle against the oppression of sin. The previous chapter discussed the spirituality of conversion in Lee's spiritual narrative

and claimed that the black spiritual narrator's conversion affirms the restoration of black woman's soul and humanity, at the individual and collective levels. Andrews (1986) acknowledges this spiritual achievement, evaluating the black spiritual narrator's reclamation of soul and humanity. He argues that in her spiritual quest she both establishes "the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation" (1-2), and assures the conquest of "the Afro-American's spiritual birthright" (1-2). With such an empowerment, black women's illustration of spirituality antedates their quest for political achievement in the slave narrative, where, Andrews suggests, the fugitive slave narrator successfully restores "political and economic freedom to American blacks" (1-2) and makes "such a cogent case for black civil rights" (1-2). Thus, the interdependence between freedom from "the slavery of sin" and freedom from "the sin of slavery" reflects the interconnection of black women's spiritual and political experiences of conversion. The kind of self-reflexiveness between spiritual and political experiences informs Harriet Jacobs's debt to Jarena Lee. Because of the mutual interdependence between spiritual and slave narratives, or between spirituality and the politics of conversion, Jacobs's freedom from slavery realigns her to Lee's spiritual salvation in the restoration of soul and humanity for black women – which Jacobs reaffirms in her political conversion. In other words, Lee's preservation of hope and meaning in order to overcome the "oppression" of sin is evidenced in Jacobs's and Linda Brent's overcoming of slavery and its inhumanity. Jacobs's politics of conversion is clearly shown by her wish to materialize, in a text, her black hope and preservation of meaning in the abominable circumstances of slavery. She writes, in the preface: "I was born and raised in Slavery, and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years"

(1). Then she adds her “desire to arouse the women in the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (1). She concludes with the reasons to write her story: “only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations” (2). In her words, the narrative reflecting on how a slave woman overcame the oppressive “abominations” of slavery resulted from her struggle to preserve hope and meaning. Jacobs’s (1861) *Incidents* depicts Linda Brent’s politics of conversion – her defeat of oppression, or nihilism, through hope, or love – a defeat orchestrated by the voice of a woman slave narrator in her quest for liberating herself from the oppression of slavery. In such a struggle for self-liberation, Jacobs’s black voice anticipates Cooper’s (1892) claim thirty years later that the reproduction of “the exact voice of the Black woman” (1-2) is the black woman writer’s task. Jacobs’s wish “to add my testimony to that of abler pens” (2) who, like her, interrogate “the condition of two millions of women at the South” (1), projects future concerns about all black women’s experiences. Thus, her pursuit of a personal black female voice adjusts itself to Washington’s (1975) claim that “the main preoccupation of the Black woman writer has been the black woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity” (x).

While Lee represents the black woman’s spiritual struggle, Jacobs symbolizes the black woman’s emancipating dreams in the political reign. She encompasses “the Black woman herself” through the concern about her own personal experience. Thus, Jacobs’s (1861) *Incidents* becomes a slave narrative whose center is occupied by a slave girl – herself under the name of Linda Brent – who wishes to testify to both the

soul and the humanity of the black woman during her struggle against slavery. Jacobs's narrated testimony opposes her humanity to the inhumanity of the slave system. The genre of slave narrative is described by Andrews (1997) as a black text which, on the one hand, denounces "the inhumanity of the slave system" (667) and, on the other, highlights the "incontestable evidence of the humanity of the African American" (667). *Incidents* portrays Linda Brent's humanity in the ways she manages the "values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (24) that West's (1994) sees in the community. These values are primarily collective aspirations aiming to empower the individual slave to fight "the inhumanity of the slave system" (Andrews 1997, 667). Both Andrews and West have similar views of black women's experiences in America since slavery. On the one hand, "the inhumanity of the slave system" that Andrews denounces corresponds to the nihilism – a despairing and meaningless existence – that West condemns. On the other, the "incontestable evidence of the humanity of the African American" that Andrews praises reflects the black love ethic that West welcomes. Andrews's conflict of inhumanity and humanity seems to be limited to the realm of the slave system, but West's antagonism between nihilism and love covers a longer dimension, connecting themselves to both slavery and contemporary African American experiences. Contemporary evidence of the dueling relationship between nihilism and love in black America is reported by West: "a major contemporary strategy for holding the nihilistic at bay is a direct attack on the sense of worthlessness and self-loathing in black America" (27). Like West, bell hooks (2001) acknowledges the nihilistic threat in black America today and prescribes a love ethic for keeping it "at bay." She states "as a people we are losing heart. Our

collective crisis is as much an emotional one as a material one. It cannot be healed simply by money” (4). She then prescribes a love ethic as a remedy, like West: “to heal our wounded community, which is diverse and multilayered, we must return to a love ethic, one that is exemplified by the combined forces of care, respect, knowledge and responsibility” (4-5). Although black humanity and love are meant by these commentators to oppose themselves to slavery’s inhumanity and nihilism, in Linda Brent’s quest for freedom, it is actually a simultaneity or hybrid coexistence between them that determines the quality of her experiences in slavery and after it. In slavery, both the slaveholder’s inhumanity and Linda Brent’s humanity sometimes blurs the boundaries between nihilism and self-love. Her sexual relationship with Mr. Sands in order to escape from Dr. Flint’s lustful advances is one example. Resulting from despair, her deliberate pregnancy reaffirms her will, determination, and independence, thus blurring the borders between nihilism and self-love. Her act helps her resist, and overcome, a worse degradation than her submission to her master would represent. For West (1994) this ambivalence of nihilism and self-love, visible in Linda Brent’s existence, explains the absurdity that Africans have encountered and endured since their first contact with slaveholders in the New World. West denounces the absurdities that slavery has brought to the Africans in America since then :

The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America

has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat – that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. (23)

Linda Brent's dramatic experience in *Incidents* exemplifies the extraordinary instance of a slave woman's encounter with the absurdity of slavery and her "struggle against nihilism" (23). In Jacobs's (1861) slave narrative, among others, Linda Brent is the character who struggles against the slave's physical, psychological, spiritual and sexual degradation and devaluation. Johnson (1998) notes that Linda Brent's "goals are simply freedom and a home for her children" (14). In fact, Linda Brent wants more than freedom and a home. As contradictory as it may be, Linda Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands affirms her wish to preserve chastity and moral integrity. In addressing the slave woman's tragic experience, Genovese (1990) explains Linda Brent's troubles with her master's sexual advances by saying that she "grows up in the shadow of her master's determination to possess her sexually. She claims to fend off his advances as an affront to her chastity" (189). By fending off Dr. Flint, Linda Brent fights against the "loss of hope and absence of meaning" (23) that her master brings to her life. Thus, in her struggle and fight against the nihilistic threat, she concretely and effectively restores hope and meaning by fusing self-valuation and the black community's love ethic and, therefore, establishes the logic of conformity to group values. Functioning as a catalyst in her community like Lee does among her "sisters of the spirit," (21) Linda Brent exemplifies Morrison's (1984) artist who embodies "a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). Morrison clarifies the artist's duties to the community and commitment to herself, saying:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or a racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. (339)

Exemplifying the tribal/racial artist or leader in a black community, Linda Brent activates the forces and tactics of black empowerment and resistance to the nihilistic dangers represented by Dr. Flint's cruelty and sexual harassment. In so behaving, she symbolizes an extraordinary instance of black empowerment under a cruel and unjust slave system. Thus, her individual manifestation of the "tribal or racial sensibility" of the group characterizes an instance of a slave community's politics of conversion, a conversion that energizes its foundations with both the community values, love ethic, and collective racial identity, along with the individual values, self-valuation and racial identity.

The examination of the slave's politics of conversion on Dr. Flint's plantation involves five elements. Firstly, an analysis of the antagonizing setting examines how slavery manipulates values like wealth, property, and religion to interrupt Linda Brent's struggle for chastity and freedom. Secondly, the depiction of the antagonizing agent scrutinizes the strategies and values that Dr. Flint activates against Linda Brent's wish for chastity and freedom. Thirdly, a study of the supporting agent portrays Aunt Marthy's support to Linda Brent's struggle against Dr. Flint's assaults. Fourthly, the discussion of Linda Brent's purpose refers to her decision to resist, save her children, and achieve freedom. Finally, the analysis of the

outcome of the slave's politics of conversion displays the community's contribution to guaranteeing Linda Brent's escape from Dr Flint's persecution and protecting her children in the North.

The Antagonizing Setting: Slavery on Dr. Flint's Plantation

Slavery is the antagonizing setting in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* because it encapsulates the cruelty and, thus, threatens the slaves' hope and ability to preserve meaning in their lives. Linda Brent knows well the dangers of slavery and denounces them: "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (77). She recognizes the damaging oppression of slaves and like West (1994), believes that "as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive" (23). Her story is evidence of two major aspects in the life of African Americans today: nihilism and love. While she denounces the nihilistic threat of slavery, she likewise highlights her self-love and her love for the other slaves. Thus, the telling of her own struggle against nihilism is an evidence of that preservation of hope and meaning that West speaks of and is the condition for her, Yellin (1987) notes, "to assert her womanhood" (xiv), a womanhood that is under constant disenfranchisement in the slave system. Aware, like Linda Brent, of the disenfranchising forces of slavery against the slave, Andrews (1997) condemns it "as the condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth" (668). This "hell on earth" has the potential to cause "the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people" (30) which, according to West (1994), only a politics of conversion is capable to confront openly and reverse.

Actually, the slaves' open confrontation of slavery, West advises, is only possible "as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved" (23) by the individual and the slave community.

In *Incidents*, slavery's disenfranchisement addresses itself particularly toward women because it attacks the mother's hope and meaning and, therefore, builds an antagonizing setting that is often marked by a haunting death wish. Linda Brent tells of the slave mother's desire for her own and her children's death: "she sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns" (16). Linda Brent recounts that her mother "had been weaned at three months old, so that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (7), and that her grandmother "was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel" (5). In generating death and separation inside the family, slavery limits the space for maternity. Levander (1999) acknowledges this limitation and notes that "Linda learns that her condition as a slave woman precedes and so preempts maternal authority" (31). She argues that, within such a limiting situation, Linda Brent "represents the dehumanizing impact of slavery on female identity by carefully delineating" the slave system which, "on the one hand, demands that slave women reproduce, but, on the other hand, denies them maternal rights" (31). Because of such social constraints, women's value, if any, resides in their reproductive capacity "to increase their owner's stock" (49), Linda Brent remarks.

These constraints on motherhood, on one hand, attempt to neutralize Linda Brent's self-valuation and, on the other, to weaken the black community's love ethic. Slavery activates its damaging forces against women and submits them to the

patriarchal authority of the master who, in Andrews's (1988) words, "presided necessarily and benevolently over three interlocking domesticities: the blood family, the slave families, and the larger family of the entire plantation community" (243). As for the slave family, the master's power is fueled by the physical exploitation and body depredation that he causes to the slave in general and the slave woman in particular. It attacks both motherhood and sexuality, adding to slavery the status of "a haven, indeed, a harem of interracial libidinousness" (243). For Andrews (1988) "the 'absolute power' of the unholy patriarch [is] combined with the male's supposedly innate 'lust of dominion' to produce the lurid image of the 'Erotic South'" (243),

Slavery exerts control over the female slave and wishes to control Linda Brent's womanhood as well. In its struggle against Linda Brent's self-valuation and the community's love ethic, slavery attacks the narrator, her family, and other slaves. The slave system utilizes Linda Brent and the other women slaves as wealth and property and, thus, denies their humanity by reducing them to commodified and discardable items, sexually exploited, often in the name of religion and Christianity. In so doing, slavery denies Linda Brent any access to Lee's restoration of black soul and humanity. In her discussion of slave women's roles, Scott (1995) states: "under slavery they were obliged both to take on the role of 'surrogate men' and to become 'breeders'. Exploited to produce children who were themselves commodity items, the women found their traditional roles of mothers, daughters and wives/lovers were perverted" (814). Hooks (1981) adds to this commodification of the slave woman the fact that "as the market values of the black female slave increased, larger numbers were stolen or purchased by white slave traders" (16).

The slave system in operation on Dr. Flint's farm debases the slave woman's roles in order to generate wealth by trading in slaves. Thus, being transformed into commodity items, Linda Brent and her family are expected to make Dr. Flint even richer, wealthier and more prosperous. Linda Brent seems to be very conscious of her own and her parents' material and economic value since her childhood: "and though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (5). Not only is motherhood commodified, commodification also reaches the children. Smith (1990) explains Linda Brent's children's destiny as commodified items, writing: "Indeed the system of slavery, conflating as it does the categories of property and sexuality, ensures that her posterity will become his [Dr. Flint's] material possessions" (220). Being marked as "a piece of merchandise" or as "material possessions," the slave family is never safe but in constant danger because the system has given itself and its agents the right to commodify the slave family by separating its members in order to make them even more profitable. Here, Scott (1995) subscribes to Smith's words, stating that "irresponsibility on the part of the plantation master could overnight, wrench loved ones from each other. Thus slave families' security depended always on the master's whims" (814). As a result of the material and economic value attached to the slaves, children were frequently separated from their parents, and husbands were parted from their wives. Linda Brent describes an instance in which a black family is separated and all the members are sold: "on one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man

in her own town (16). Linda Brent personally experienced family disruption when grandmother—Aunt—Marthy—was—sold—at—auction and bought by a white woman (actually a friend who gives Aunty Marthy freedom.)

Though essential, wealth is not the only value that harms or destroys the slave's humanity and wishes to develop individual self-valuation and collective love ethic. Property, another value, denies the slave's humanity and soul by making him or her a possession that the slaveholder manages for personal interests and economic reasons. Ignoring Lee's restoration of black people's soul and humanity through union with God, the slave system uses adult and young slaves, men and women, Linda Brent writes, "as property, as marketable pigs on the plantation" (36). And Scott (1995) remarks that "slave women were, in fact, commercial items, the "inventory" which, along with horses, cows, chickens, and pigs constituted the slave holder's net worth" (814). However, Linda Brent's grandmother challenges the Southern law that "a slave, being property, can hold no property" (6). Indeed, she has a house, some money, and an expertise of her own: she bakes and sells cookies.

Dr. Flint, the major representative of the slave system in Linda Brent's autobiography, clearly and explicitly considers Linda Brent his property. His continuing sexual abuse indicates her status as property. He repeatedly warns her of both her economic value and her owing him total obedience: "Do you know that I have the right to do as I like with you – that I can kill you, if I please?" (39). And later willing to punish her disobedience and to prevent her from marrying a free black man, Dr. Flint sends her to his plantation, advising her: "I'll teach you a lesson about marriage and free niggers" (40). His denial of her marriage reflects a wish to control her sexuality. His attitude seems to be evidencing the aspect that, in slavery,

economic power and sexual terror go together. Andrews (1988) acknowledges slavery's sexual terror transforming the South into an "Erotic South" due to the slaveholders' libidinousness and sexual violence against slave women. Scott (1995) weighs sexual violence against black women and states that "young adolescent and teenage girls were routinely abused by their masters and by other white men who had access to them" (814).

Along with wealth and property, religion is another value cherished by the slave system. Linda Brent condemns its Christianity. In the name of slavery's religious beliefs, the slaveholders guiltlessly inflict the most devastating cruelty against their slaves, and as Linda Brent suggests, "they seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves" (44). Linda Brent's views on Christianity in slavery radically contrast with Lee's perspective. Christianity for Lee allows her awareness of her human condition and acceptance by God. In her story, Christianity becomes the generator of religious, spiritual, and social emancipation for black women. In Linda Brent's narrative, however, Christianity is the source of oppression. Therefore, Linda Brent has to challenge the slaveholders' dehumanizing religious thought in order to reclaim her soul and humanity. She claims her religious faith, and believes, like Lee, that God is the only father of all human beings, both masters and slaves. Thus, she denounces what Andrews (1997) characterizes as "the spiritual emptiness and the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion" (627). As Johnson (1998) explains, Linda Brent "carefully distinguishes between what she believes to be 'true' Christianity and the religion practiced by the slaveholders" (34). Her faith in the slave's soul and humanity exemplifies, according to Andrews, black religious experiences. He observes that

“Christian African American literary characters also judge their own standards of appropriate behavior as ‘true’ children of God who know that God is good, requires absolute obedience, rewards the faithful who do good and punishes evil doers” (627). By denying the slave’s humanity, the slaveholders’ religion allows its ministers to teach the slaves prayers that both order them to behave obediently to their masters and warn them that their offense to the master is an offense to God. Linda Brent attacks this hypocritical religious behavior by criticizing the teaching of a prayer that reads: “obey your old master and your young master – your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master” (69).

This interconnection between religion and slave commodification becomes even clearer in Linda Brent’s description of a Methodist meeting she attends. She portrays the leader, indeed the town constable, who associates religion with trade and abuse, as “a man who bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethen and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office any where (sic)for fifty cents” (70). Linda Brent’s description of Methodism contradicts Lee’s portrayal of it. Not only does Lee embrace Methodism but also, more often than not, displays a positive picture of its ministers and members. For example, Lee portrays Reverend Allen as a religious mentor with whom she identifies herself.

Against slavery and its values aimed against the humanity of slaves, Linda Brent explodes: “O, the serpent of Slavery has many and poisonous fangs” (62). One of its “poisonous fangs” is Dr. Flint’s lustful advances, which are discussed in the next section.

The Antagonizing Agent: Dr. Flint Slaveholder

The antagonizing agent is the slaveholder whose attitudes are represented by the narrator as depicting “varying levels of cruelty” against the slave women. In *Incidents*, Dr. Flint, Linda Brent's master, personifies the slave system and is in charge of aiming the three values – wealth, property, and religion – against his servant's humanity, virtue, and physical integrity. However, he is not the only one. African Americanists also denounce white women's antagonism toward Linda Brent's struggle. Carby (1993), for instance, remarks that “many of the relationships portrayed between Linda Brent and white women involve cruelty and betrayal” (68). Mrs. Flint fits this view by degrading her servant. Her persecution of Linda Brent derives from her jealousy. Johnson (1998) states that Mrs. Flint's “jealousy made her perversely cruel, an enraged monster” (38). Linda Brent herself denounces her mistress's monstrosity, both passive and aggressive: “her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood tricked from every stroke of the lash” (12). Linda Brent also describes how the noise of her new shoes caused her mistress's cruel reaction against her:

When I walked through Mrs Flint's room (...) their [the shoes] creaking grated harshly on her refined nerves. She called me to her, and asked what I had about me that made such a horrid noise. I told her it was my new shoes. “Take them off”, said she; “and if you put them on again, I'll throw them into the fire.” I took them off, and my stocking also. She then sent me a long distance, on an errand. As I went through the snow, my bare feet tingled. (19)

Like his wife, Dr. Flint chooses Linda Brent as the favorite target of his constant persecution. Different from his wife's cruelty of imposing a long barefooted walk in the snow, Dr. Flint's assaults encapsulate sexual exploitation. Linda Brent presents an overall view of his persecutory attitudes: "my master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there" (28). Dr. Flint personifies sexual harassment and lustful assaults. Carby (1993) remarks that Linda Brent characterizes him "as the epitome of corrupt white male power" (73). Embodying "the evil of licentiousness," Carby continues, he represents "the ultimate threat to virtue and purity" (73). Thus, Dr. Flint becomes the antagonizing agent who wishes to prevent Linda Brent from activating her self-valuation. In so doing, he personifies the nihilistic threat and, therefore, brings meaninglessness, lovelessness, and hopelessness to Linda Brent and her community. Besides, he transforms the slave's existence into that terrifying deprecation, which West (1994) denounces as "the first African encounter with the New World" (23), "an encounter with a distinct form of the Absurd" (23). "The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World," he writes, "was, in part, a struggle against nihilism" (23), as symbolized by Dr. Flint's attitudes.

In threatening Linda Brent's self-valuation, Dr. Flint adheres to the "cult of true womanhood," which, Johnson (1998) notes, asks a woman to be "gentle, innocent, pure, pious, domestic, submissive and somewhat helpless" (18). Though

Linda Brent does not seem to fit the model for being a slave who defies, he wants to make her submissive. To accomplish this he utilizes the three values that legitimate the slave system. He sees her as his own wealth and property and, along with this utilitarian religious beliefs, struggles to dehumanize, brutalize, and degrade his servant. By acting thus he legitimizes the devastating forms of degradation, dehumanization, and brutalization that the slave system has always inflicted upon its victims. Indeed, Dr. Flint specifically degrades, brutalizes, and dehumanizes Linda Brent by sexual harassment because he believes that he has the right to exert control over her life and destiny. However, before acting like the dangerous seducer that he would become later, he behaves paternally toward his servant and promises to protect her in exchange for her submission and sexual favors. Carefully and persistently, he alternates his stormy assaults with gentleness. Linda Brent writes "he was a crafty man, he resorted to many means to accomplish his purpose. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue" (27). These two forms of sexual terror, oscillating between cruelty and kindness, are exerted against Linda Brent very early. In fact, Dr. Flint's lustful assaults against his prey start when she is fifteen years old, initially through whispered "foul words," then through "stormy, terrific ways" and, finally, through feigned gentleness. Linda Brent summarizes the succession of his repeated attacks against her virtue and good character by saying: "he tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images" (27). Anchoring himself in the system's accepted view of his slaves' inhumanity, he later intensified his attacks to break Linda Brent's resistance and make her surrender. Linda Brent explains the

dangerous and threatening situation in which she felt entrapped: "but he was my master (...). He told me I was his property, that I must be subject to his will in all things" (27). Hers is an oscillation between obedience and resistance to the master's orders.

In his firm wish to degrade his servant, morally and spiritually, in order to obtain her sexual favors, Dr. Flint refuses to sell Linda Brent to a slave-trader who wants to purchase her, saying, "she don't (sic) belong to me. She is my daughter's property and I have no right to sell her" (80). Actually, he wants to keep Linda under his eyes, under close surveillance and within reach. He threatens to sell her children instead and advises her: "your boy shall be put to work, and he shall be sold; and your girl shall be raised for the purpose of selling well" (85). Added to these menaces are physical blows by Dr. Flint when he discovers her wish to marry a free black man. He screams against her: "if I ever know of your speaking to him, I will cowhide you both; and if I catch him lurking about my premises, I will shoot him as soon as I would a dog" (40). After denying her wish to marry he not only signals that she belongs to him and to nobody else, but also, as Carby (1993) remarks, denies "her the experience of romance, preventing her from marrying her first true love" (73). Carby emphasizes the oppositions in character that differentiate the respectful black man from the white master, writing that the black lover opposed the white seducer as "honor was posed against dishonor, respect for Linda's virtue against disrespect and insult" (73). Between the love and the rape that they represent, although she has no option being a slave woman, Linda Brent chooses "the honorable addresses of a respectable colored man" (40) instead of "the base proposals of a white man" (40). However, contradictorily, in rejecting Dr. Flint's

proposal she is risking being raped as Dr. Flint's retaliation. "Rape," bell hooks (1981) observes, "was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females" (18).

Unexpectedly, rape and brutalization are not the expedients utilized by Dr. Flint. As his dramatic assaults make Linda Brent even more resistant, Dr. Flint changes his tactics. He leaves verbal threats behind and utilizes bribes. He sends her letters after finding out that she can read and write. In these letters, Dr. Flint secretly propositions her and asks her to destroy the letters after reading them. African Americanists highlight the role of letters in the relationships involving slaveholders and slave women. Andrews (1988), for instance, explains:

Women prostitute themselves for men in this way, Jacobs suggests, because of their misplaced allegiance to the supposedly feminine virtue of discreetness. The bearing of male secrets may render a woman honorably discreet in male-dominated society, but it will leave her pathetically discrete from women's community. (256)

The letters, as Andrews suggests, function as entrapments. They can entrap Linda Brent because "the supposedly feminine virtue of discreetness" becomes a dangerous separation from her community. Smith (1990) also stresses Dr. Flint's new attitude, in the secret letters: "Her master for some reason reluctant to have her to submit sexually, caresses, pleads with, and tries to bribe her into capitulating" (219). And Scott (1995) points out the slaveholders' common practice of bribing to make pretty slave women capitulate: "young slave girls were approached with bribes

of clothing, money, and other gifts to solicit their sexual favors" (815). However, the letters and the bribes do not seem to work with Linda Brent. He even builds her a cottage, but she surprises him when she announces that she is expecting a baby. Although she does not tell Dr. Flint who the father is, the reader is later informed that her lover is the white and wealthy Mr. Sands. Mr. Sands and Dr. Flint are described as two different white men – one a slave-trader, the other not. Linda Brent's sexual relationship with Mr. Sands results from her attempt to escape from Dr. Flint's persecution. Smith (1987) remarks that "the brutality of neighboring masters, the indifference of the legal system, and her own master's harassment have forced her to take a white man as her lover" (42). After he finds out about Mr. Sands, Dr. Flint's harassment of Linda Brent becomes even more subtly seductive. He even promises to forgive her, saying: "you must henceforth have no communication of any kind with the father of your child. I will take care of you and your child" (58). However, he also threatens to sell Linda Brent's child in order to get her to submit. Later, when he is told that she is expecting Mr. Sands's second baby, Linda Brent describes his violent reaction: "he cut every hair close to my head (...) struck me (...) pitched me down the stairs in a fit of passion" (77).

Besides wealth and property, Dr. Flint also uses religion in order to humble, degrade, brutalize, and dehumanize Linda Brent's humanity, virtue, and good character. Hypocritically, he joins the Episcopalian church and accepts confirmation and communion. He justifies his joining the church and his using it to attain his goals: "it was proper for me to do so. I am getting in years, and my position in Society requires it, and it puts an end to all the damned slang" (74). As his religious involvement displays fake spirituality, not based on real faith but rather on financial

and personal interests, his cruelty intensifies, as Linda Brent reveals: “the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant” (74). In fact, religion does not lead Dr. Flint to renounce “the devil and all his works,” (74) but on the contrary, makes him even more subtly seducing, at least temporarily. He invites Linda Brent to join the church, and since she signals that she would be happy if she could be a Christian too, he insists, saying, “you can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife” (75). He believes his offer will be appealing to Linda Brent’s religiosity and spirituality. However when she quotes the Bible to refuse and counter his indecent proposal and commodified view on spirituality, he bursts into anger: “I am your master, and you shall obey me” (75).

At last, since wealth, property, and religion – either as a threat or as a bribe – not seem to humble Linda Brent's firm resolve, Dr. Flint makes her an offer which he thinks she will not refuse. He promises to give her freedom and a cottage in which she can live with her children. Nevertheless, Linda Brent remains firm in her refusal, so he sends her to work in one of his plantations. From that time on, he no longer sees her, though he repeatedly tries. She finally manages to run away from the plantation with the help from her black and white friends and finds freedom in the North. Actually, her self-valuation and the love ethic of the community to which she belongs are the basis of her freedom. Aunt Marthy is the slave woman who best embodies the slave group’s love ethic. Her supportive attitudes toward Linda Brent’s self-valuation will be the focus of the next section.

The Supporting Agent: The Grandmother

As we have seen, the slave system and its agent, Dr. Flint, raise innumerable obstacles against Linda Brent's self-valuation. The slave system stipulates values that provide her the status of a commodity by denying her soul and humanity. The master raises obstacles against Linda Brent's self-valuation by putting into action expedients intended to degrade, dehumanize, and brutalize the humanity and good character of his beautiful light-skinned servant. Supported by slavery's values, the master sexually harrasses her, threatens to sell her children, and abuses her physically and emotionally employing threats, bribes, and feigned piety. However, Linda Brent finds in her grandmother the supporting agent who can maintain a balance in relation to the antagonizing setting and agent (slavery and Dr. Flint). Aunt Marthy behaves as the grandmother who stands for family stability in Linda Brent's experiences in slavery. Having lived part of her life in her grandmother's house, Linda Brent finds there the needed support for full expression of self-valuation, and consistent resistance to Dr. Flint's persecution and bribes, as the house becomes a stable black family where survival and loyalty are supportive values. A supportive family and community are empowering features among slaves. Denard (1997) remarks that "during slavery and immediately after emancipation, family survival and loyalty" (266) are associated with "race survival and loyalty" (266). In Linda Brent's devastating experiences, both family and race survival and loyalty depend on the empowering figure of Aunt Marthy, who plays the role of the slave mother. Frazier (1944) values slave motherhood, suggesting that "the slave mother held a strategic position and played a dominant role in the family groupings" (204) due to

the ties of racial affection and feelings that she established between herself and her children. Smith (1990) acknowledges Linda Brent's fortune of having such an invigorating family, saying that she

was fortunate enough to have been born into a stable family at once nuclear and extended. Although both parents died young, she nurtures vivid, pleasant memories of them. However she remains close to her grandmother, an emancipated, self-supporting, property-owning black woman, and to her uncles and aunts, until she escapes to the North. (219)

It is this grandmother that raises the black community's love ethic to ensure Linda Brent's emotional and economic safety. Johnson (1998) concurs that Aunt Marthy represents Linda Brent's economic safety because the grandmother "earned what she had only through perseverance and hard work. The grandmother became the town's baker while still a slave, and was able to keep part of the profits" (33). Awiakta (1995) also recognizes the relevant role of the grandmother among the African Americans, writing that "in both family and community, she has revealed status as a preserver of her extended family and the race, a communicator of heritage, lore, and wisdom, and a source of spiritual strength" (363). Aunt Marthy fits the characterization that Awiakta traces for this representative of racial values and racial stature in the slave family and community. Like Awiakta, Carby (1993) emphasizes Aunt Marthy's "spiritual strength," stressing that she is a "protective shelter," possesses "genuine sensitivity," and depicts "natural warmth." She is a woman in whom "the act of nurturing gave rise to sustained feelings of intimacy" (72). The grandmother, Carby adds, is "represented as being pure and pious, a

fountainhead of physical and spiritual sustenance for Linda, her whole family, and the wider black community” (72).

Anchored in economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual sustenance, Aunt Marthy becomes capable of supporting her granddaughter. She activates spiritual strength to counterbalance the strategies that both the slave system and the cruel Dr. Flint enact against Linda Brent. Together with Linda Brent’s resistance to Dr. Flint’s assaults, Aunt Marthy’s empowering presence in the group is the certainty that Harriet Jacobs’s concerns will be addressed. Johnson (1998) notes that Aunt Marty “served as her [Linda Brent’s] source of strength and to whom she [Linda Brent] refers as her ‘great treasure.’ The loving relationship she shared with her grandmother gave her the strength to ensure her confinement” (40). Washington (1975) remarks that black women build mutual supportive relationships to solve common problems. Washington’s view is that this mutuality, involving the black woman writer and the common black woman, requires that the former be involved in the latter’s life. Washington writes that “the main preoccupation of the Black woman writer has been the Black woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationships to her men and her children, her creativity” (x). In their concerns with black women, both Jacobs as the writer and Linda Brent as the narrator of *Incidents* fit Washington’s description. So does Aunt Marthy. She works as the leader of the group of slaves who live on Dr. Flint’s plantations. She can also be associated with West’s (1994) concept of black leadership that is able to make black people move from nihilism to love:

It comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold

talented and gifted persons. Without a vibrant tradition of resistance passed on to new generations, there can be no nurturing of a collective and critical consciousness – only professional consciousness survives. Where there is no vital community to hold up precious ethical and religious ideals, there can be no coming to moral commitment – only personal accomplishment is applauded. (56-57)

Indeed, Linda Brent's grandmother is a "talented and gifted" woman whose leadership embraces "collective and critical consciousness" together with "ethical and religious ideals" and "moral commitment" (56-57). She joins self-consciousness to social awareness and, thus, approaches Lee's union of "the self-within" to "the world-outside" (12). Aunt Marthy's leadership and strength derive from a number of black values: service, sacrifice, love, care, discipline, and excellence, which generate family stability, mutual protection and love, solidarity, and companionship. These values are the fertile and emotional grounds upon which the black community establishes its tactics of collective resistance and empowerment. Actually, the grandmother not only proposes these black values for the empowerment of a black woman in danger but also embodies them herself and gives them full and concrete visibility in her maternal attitudes toward herself, her own family, and other slave families.

Aunt Marthy's spiritual strength and communal stature are exercised in her home, which to Linda Brent represents the place where she finds love and protection. Andrews (1988) notes: "from her early childhood, Jacobs [Linda Brent] longed for a home like her grandmother's, not just because there she found hope, sympathy and

'sweet balsam for her troubles' but because within that sphere of maternal protection she could feel safe and inviolable" (240). Besides, Andrews suggests that "grandmother Martha's home lays on the margins of the power wielded by the white patriarchy of the South" (240) where her independence is "the quality that gave this psychosocial space its social significance and value" (240). In sum, Aunt Marthy's home is the place where safety and freedom are available to Linda Brent so that she is able to escape "from the prerogative of men to insult her" (240).

Linda Brent recognizes Aunt Marthy's communal stature and emotional vitality. She describes her grandmother as a remarkable and extraordinary free black woman: "I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many aspects" (5). Some of these aspects are her intelligence, dedication, and faithfulness, which managed to attract the good will of slaves and some white persons as well. With all these qualities, Aunt Marthy is, initially, associated with family stability. In fact, because of the damaging material and psychological conditions to which a black slave family is exposed, family stability is more a wish than a concrete fact, but she manages to transform her home into an inviting place for Linda and her brother William. Using her expertise as a baker, she organizes a profitable business, which helps her purchase some of her children and adds financial safety to emotional stability. Linda Brent feels pride for her grandmother's achievements: "she was much praised for her cooking" [...] and "her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them;" [...] "after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children" [...] so that "the business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to

purchase her children” (6). The grandmother’s expertise exceeds the qualities of an ordinary slave because it associates economic acumen, familial responsibility, and emotional integrity.

In the politics of conversion in which Linda Brent functions as the catalyst, Aunt Marthy personifies the human and racial support for Linda Brent's self-valuation and struggle to escape from Dr. Flint's harassment and cruelty. After Linda Brent's mother and father die, she spends most of her time in her grandmother's house, especially when she looks for protection against Dr. Flint's sexual and sexist assaults and other personal problems. At these moments, the grandmother invariably comforts her. For example, when Linda Brent feels desolate from her father's death, she writes how her grandmother comforts her: "my heart rebelled against God, who had taken from me mother, father, mistress, and friend. The good grandmother tried to comfort me. 'Who knows the ways of God?' said she. 'Perhaps they have been kindly taken from the evil days to come'" (10). Additionally, it is the grandmother's intelligence, hard work, expertise, good character, and values that provide Linda Brent, her brother William, and her uncle Benjamin with emotional and temporal support. Linda Brent explains that the grandmother "was so loving, so sympathizing! She always met us with a smile, and listened with patience to all our sorrows" (17). In these moments, Aunt Marthy performs the duties of the womanist grandmother who loves her granddaughter. Embodying the racial concerns of Walker's (1983) womanist, Aunt Marthy represents a black woman who, in Marsh-Lockett's (1997) view, "loves women, womanhood, and women's culture" (784) and "moreover, values salient characteristics of the African American experience in general, of African American womanhood in particular, and loves herself" (785). For example,

Aunt Marthy's womanist features are more clearly visible in a specific situation related to her son. When Benjamin is imprisoned for six months and then is sold to a slave-trader, Aunt Marthy starts "her work of love" in order to buy her son's freedom. When Benjamin is finally free, she raises her hand and exclaims: "God be praised! Let us thank him" (26). Her prayer reminds us of Lee's spirituality, a convert who, like Aunt Marthy, cannot imagine a Christian life without the intense intervention of God's love.

Aunt Marthy's good character and dedication to her family protects Linda Brent from Dr. Flint's sexual harassment. Dr. Flint is very cautious about the grandmother's reaction. Linda Brent reveals that "though she had been a slave, Dr. Flint was afraid of her. He dreaded her scorching rebukes" (39). In many situations, given her unsubmitiveness, Aunt Marthy argues with Dr. Flint to make him stop persecuting Linda Brent. "My grandmother had already had high words with my master about me. She had told him pretty plainly what she thought of his character" (53). The grandmother's challenge of Dr. Flint's attempts to harass the granddaughter is also explained by her status among blacks and whites. Yellin (1987) remarks that Aunt Marthy has acquired an "unusual status as a free woman with powerful white friends" (xxvii), which "provides important protection for Linda Brent" (xxvii). Yellin also affirms that Linda Brent recognizes the social status of the grandmother's to whom "she positions herself as 'grandmother's child' not only in relation to the white townspeople but also in relation to the community of the slaves and free blacks" (xxviii).

The grandmother's protection allows Linda Brent to resist Dr. Flint's advances. This alliance reveals the grandmother's commitment to black sisterhood, especially

to the kind of sisterhood that, as Singley (1995) notes, "describes the lines of affection, association and influence that exist among women" (808). However, Singley adds that "while sisterhood implies mutuality, it also admits of differences and sometimes conflicts" (808). Conflicts also exist between the grandmother and the granddaughter because sometimes, the grandmother's good character also rebukes Linda Brent's shortcomings. For instance, she refuses initially to accept her granddaughter's pregnancy and relationship with Mr. Sands and criticizes her: "O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather seen you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother" (56). Later, Aunt Marthy relents. Andrews (1988) explains that Aunt Marthy's role in her granddaughter's life is a "complex part in Jacobs's memory as both protector and censurer, defender and judge" (249). Though the grandmother criticizes her pregnancy and relationship with Mr. Sands, Linda Brent contradictorily considers them as preferable to her master's designs. Smith (1990) expresses concerns about Linda Brent's contradiction and about the difficulty of her decision: "forbidden to marry the freedman she loves, she knows that by becoming Sands's mistress she will compromise her virtue and reputation" (214).

Despite the conflict that troubles their relationship, Aunt Marthy continues supporting the granddaughter. When Linda Brent is sent to the plantation for rejecting Dr. Flint, her grandmother asks a white woman to help Linda Brent escape. The woman hides Linda Brent in her house until she is taken to her grandmother's house and is hidden in the loophole of retreat for many years. Linda Brent writes about her new hiding place: "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to

move my limbs, for nearly seven years" (148). The grandmother eventually helps Linda Brent escape North. In her status as the spiritual founder and emotional center of the black community, Aunt Marthy contradictorily shows at least one moment during which, Smith (1988) notes, she "urges her family to content themselves with their lot as slaves" (xxix). Linda Brent's account of this moment of conformity is very understanding, saying that "most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment" (17). Though compromising, this desire to hold her family together does not seem to diminish the grandmother's stature in front of the granddaughter and community. Indeed, her desire to hold her family together is, paradoxically, quite in keeping with black community values. Thus, she fits Morrison's (1984) characterization of ancestors who are the "sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and thus provide a certain wisdom" (343). Aunt Marthy's communal role repeats Lee's role in her community "of the spirit." Like the spiritual narrator, Aunt Marthy reaffirms the slave's possession of soul and humanity by struggling for the political and economic rights of slaves. Being "benevolent, instructive and protective" to her granddaughter, Aunt Marthy allows Linda Brent to articulate her self-valuation effectively, the topic of the next section.

Linda Brent's Purposes: Protecting Chastity and Fighting for Freedom

Much of Lee's spiritual quest for selfhood and sense of community is visible in Aunt Marthy's political search for individual and communal empowerment.

Likewise, much of Aunt Marthy's political and social stature is present in Linda Brent's personal self-valuation. Like her grandmother, Linda Brent also exemplifies the slave who struggles for moral and social survival but, unlike Aunt Marthy, Linda Brent joins a desire for freedom with the maintenance of virtue. Scholars subscribe to this double quest. Yellin (1987), for instance, states that she "articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new kind of female hero" (xiv), who aspires for "freedom and home" (xxxix). Smith (1987), on the other hand, remarks that Linda Brent "aspired to chastity and piety as consummate feminine virtues and hoped that marriage and family would be her earthly reward" (36). Linda Brent recounts her emotional involvement with a black lover: "there was in the neighborhood a young colored carpenter; a free born man. We had been well acquainted in childhood, and frequently met afterwards. We became mutually attached, and he proposed to marry me. I loved him with all the ardor of a young girl's first love" (37). However, her aspirations for the "sexual autonomy" symbolized in the love for the "free black man" are dangerous as Dr. Flint himself makes it clear, threatening the life of her black lover: "I will shoot him as soon as I would a dog" (40). The danger in her quest for a kind of love that is independent of her master's rules is also acknowledged by Carby (1993), who notes that "if a slave woman attempted to preserve her sexual autonomy, the economic system of slavery was threatened" (71). Linda Brent herself denounces the constraints imposed by the slaveholders on the sexual independence of a slave woman: "She is not allowed", Linda Brent tells, "to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to be virtuous" (31). Actually, her struggle for the maintenance of "sexual autonomy" and virtue develops a spirit of defiance in which, Carby notes, "conventional feminine

qualities of submission and passivity were replaced by an active resistance" (72). Her defiance and resistance are activated to counter Dr. Flint's repeated attacks against her moral integrity and physical safety.

Linda Brent's pursuit of moral integrity and physical safety validates her self-valuation. Like Aunt Marthy's self-assurance, her self-valuation echoes the black community values of service, sacrifice, love, care, discipline, and excellence which generate family stability, mutual protection and love, solidarity, and companionship – values personified in her grandmother's attitudes, behaviors, actions, and beliefs toward the black community. The values band Linda Brent together with her family and other slaves and, especially with her grandmother Aunt Marthy, against Dr. Flint, who personifies the nihilistic evil that needs to be beaten from their lives. In West's (1994) terms, in the battle against Dr. Flint's cruelty, Linda Brent and the community fight together to hold "the nihilistic threat at bay," by "generating a sense of agency among" themselves and by developing "modes towards increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance" (29) in the community. Thus, the fusion of Linda Brent's self-valuation and the community's love ethic echoes the merging of the artist's artistry and the tribal sensibility mentioned by Toni Morrison (1984) in traditional black communities. Morrison explains this merger of black individuality and collectivity: "there must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). Here, a parallelism binds Lee and Linda Brent together because the two black women seem to have orchestrated in their lives this fusion of the individual artist with the entire community.

Linda Brent's purpose is to protect her integrity, to escape from slavery, and to achieve her and her children's freedom. However, this is not an easy quest because of her master's persecution. Johnson (1998) notices that Linda Brent "recounts her master's numerous attempts to either seduce her or coerce her sexually" (13), which implies that her quest for freedom is both a personal and collective struggle against the slave woman's characterization as a commodity or as wealth, property, and sexual victim. Smith (1988) remarks that Linda Brent "underscores her reliance on other people and in so doing reveals that the story of slavery and escape" (xxix) results from the participation of the entire community. Initially, like Lee, who finds inspiration in God, Linda Brent relies on her spirituality. Religion, spirituality, and personal union with God, then, help her in this pursuit. Praying and singing like other slaves at religious meetings, Linda Brent obtains the necessary energy for personal empowerment: "precious are such moments to the poor slaves. If you were to hear them in such times, you might think they were happy" (71). Said among friends, these prayers and songs give her a sense of fortitude for the struggle. Johnson acknowledges Linda Brent's spirituality but notes that hers "does not reflect that of the cult of true womanhood" (22). "Although Brent despises the hypocritical Christianity by slaveholders," Johnson adds, "and her voice also depicts what she calls 'religion' her spirituality offered" (22) a personal and challenging moral code.

Linda Brent's spirituality favors innocence. For example, she tells of Fred, an old black man, "whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness" (72). Together with innocence, solidarity is another quality of her spirituality. Linda Brent teaches Fred to read and write so that he can understand the Bible. Johnson (1998) affirms Linda Brent's spirituality, like that of her grandmother's, is a source

of courage and God's gift. She suggests that "the simple Christianity and child-like faith of both Linda Brent and her grandmother, Aunt Marthy, serves to assure them that God is on their side and supplies the courage that Brent needs to sustain her in her long confinement and escape to the North" (36).

Linda Brent's struggle for freedom is generated by her need to resist Dr. Flint's sexual harassment and persecution, two dangers she decides to face in order to become more independent and empowered. Dr. Flint's sexual assaults operate as devastating ingredients in the nihilistic situation in which Linda Brent finds herself and from which she will only escape with the help of other slaves. Her struggle evidences the energies and dimensions of the self-valuation, interests, and individual racial identity that greatly support her decisive steps toward eventual liberation. Johnson argues that "she presents herself as a moral person in the midst of an immoral system" (22). And Linda Brent herself reports "I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave" (56).

Linda Brent's self-valuation is profoundly associated with her grandmother's communal stature. Aunt Marthy provides her granddaughter with family stability, "race survival and loyalty" and "spiritual strength." Therefore, in their racial vitality, the two women reflect, Washington (1975) suggests, the idea that a black woman's "aspirations, her conflicts, her relationships to her men and her children – her creativity" (x) are the concerns of the black woman writer, and of Jacobs as well. Thus, both granddaughter and grandmother play the role of Walker's (1983) womanist who, Marsh-Lockett (1997) says, "loves women, womanhood and women's culture" (784) and "moreover, values salient characteristics of the African American experience in general, of African American womanhood in particular, and

loves herself' (785). As womanists, these two women not only love but also portray the intense struggle for the womanist agenda proposed by Walker and reinforced by Marsh-Lockett. Actually, their behaviors are supported by black women's experience of sisterhood, which, in Singley's (1995) words, "describes the lines of affection, association that exist among women" (808).

Thus, the self-valuation articulated by Linda Brent coincides with black community values especially as embodied in her grandmother's moral and spiritual fortitude. This emotional fusion of individual expression and tribal sensibility, of self-valuation and love ethic, determines her resistance to Dr. Flint's assaults and her abomination of slavery (especially towards women). Linda Brent explains: "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications, peculiarly their own" (77). Her wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications, according to Yellin (1997), include: "her master's renewed threat of concubinage, her fear that he will make her children plantation slaves, and her decision to run away in hopes that, in her absence, he will sell the children and that their father will buy and free them" (394). All these constraints and family separations reflect the slave woman's fragmentation. Omolade (2000) sees the slave woman as slavery's fragmented commodity. Commodified and fragmented by Dr. Flint's lust, Linda Brent fits Omolade's description of a slave woman: "her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina" (124).

As a commodified and fragmented woman who is made the favorite target of her master's sexual persecution, Linda Brent is conscious of the wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications that constitute the peculiar burdens of her resistance to Dr. Flint's

inhumanity. She resists as a way to defy fragmentation and succeeds because she manages to associate resisting strategies with community values, which strengthen her with family stability, protection, love, solidarity, and companionship, along with service, sacrifice, care, discipline, and excellence. She finds all these values in her grandmother's house – in her emotional stature and sympathy. "She was always kind, always ready to sympathize with my troubles" (83), Linda Brent writes about her grandmother's nurturing. This comment places the grandmother very close to Morrison's (1984) concept of the ancestor, who is "benevolent, instructive and protective" (343).

To Aunt Marthy's kindness and sympathy, to the solidarity and love ethic of the community, Linda Brent adds her own sometimes ambivalent personal and emotional energies. Johnson (1998) associates Linda Brent's contradictions with her acceptance and challenge of "the attributes of 'true womanhood'" (18). Linda Brent reclaims purity but, at the same time, rejects her master by taking a lover. Johnson writes that Linda Brent "attempts to place a man of her own choosing between herself and Dr. Flint in the hope that her action might help her gain freedom or at least a kinder master for herself and her children" (19). Genovese (1990) sees her contradictions as an affirmation of will, saying, "In some sense Jacobs attempts to present her resistance to her master as a defense of her virtue, even though that defense leads her into a loss of 'virtue' by another route" (190). Linda Brent recounts that she initially confronts Dr. Flint verbally after being beaten by him: "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (39). Later, the confrontation is expressed in a deliberate and free use of her sexuality. Linda Brent opts for a relationship with wealthy Mr. Sands and gets pregnant two times by him.

Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands are two morally different men. Unlike Dr. Flint, who is disrespectful, Mr. Sands is trustworthy. Linda Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands is practical and strategic and takes into consideration her personal survival as a mother. Carby (1993) explains: "Linda's reasoning was shown to be motivated by consideration not only for her own welfare but also for improving the chances of survival for any children she might bear" (73). Similarly, her relationship with Mr. Sands results from despair and nihilism, as Linda Brent herself recognizes: "the crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate (...). With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dread, I made a headlong plunge" (55). However, despite despair, her pregnancies, though dictated by despair, are a conscious decision, a sexual defiance, or a "deliberate calculation," which Linda Brent justifies, saying: "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (55). Johnson (1998) acknowledges defiance in Linda Brent's extreme decision, explaining that "in her assertion of the right to choose a lover based on an affectionate relationship, Jacobs's voice once again subverts societal notions of purity and submissiveness for women" (28). Johnson notes that "motherhood, although addressed with mixed feelings, gave Brent a reason to struggle against her master, a reason to live" (39). However, her decision, which becomes a "reason to live," is also marked by the presence of death, or as Levander (1999) notes, a wish for infanticide. The birth of her son Ben brings with it a wish for his death. Levander states that "infanticide is the one way for slave mothers to express their desire to exert maternal control over their children" (34). Linda Brent

speaks about her conflicting desire: “my darling became very ill. The bright eyes grew dull, and the little feet and hands were so icy cold that I thought death had already touched them. I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life. Death is better than slavery” (62). Later, she also has a similar infanticidal desire toward her daughter Ellen: “had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death, though I had lived only nineteen years” (78). Linda Brent’s despair and morbid feelings are similar to Lee’s, who had to reject suicide owing to “the weight of my sins and sinful nature” (4).

Though it raises conflictual feelings, Linda Brent’s sexual defiance has to be viewed as evidence of self-love and love for her children. Carby (1993) espouses the same view when she states that Linda Brent’s sexual defiance, “rather than being presented as the fruits of her shame, were her links to life and the motivating force of an additional determination to be free” (75). Similarly, Smith (1987) observes that Linda Brent’s sexual alliance with Mr. Sands mixes vulnerability and power because, on one hand, she compromises “her virtue and reputation” (32), but on the other, she convinces Mr. Sands to purchase “her children and her brother from Flint” (33) and free them. Smith notes that “even at the moments when she seems most vulnerable she exercises some degree of control” (33). Seen from this perspective, Linda Brent’s attitudes find support in Marsh-Lockeet’s (1983) views that the womanist offers “resistance to sexist dogma and racist oppression.” Besides, her challenging behavior can also be explained by Walker’s view of the womanist who activates “outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior” (xi) in order to escape

from any kind of oppression. However, more contradictorily, Linda Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands reveals hybridity in the way nihilism and self-love present themselves in her life.

Linda Brent's next fight takes place on one of Dr. Flint's plantations where she is sent as punishment for her defiance of her master's sexual advances. She expresses her readiness for the new battle and reveals self-valuation by saying: "I must fight my battle alone. I had a woman's pride and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (85). Through this manifestation of will, the mother's love for her children is at stake again. She considers her freedom as the condition for her children's survival. Her struggle for the children's survival demands that she abandons them. Levander (1999) remarks that "in order to become powerful enough to protect her children successfully from slavery, Linda must strategically reject her motherhood" (35). The need for temporarily rejecting the children requires courage and determination. Carby (1993) states that "she realized that necessity of struggling for the freedom of her children even more than for herself. Thus, the slave woman's motherhood was situated by Jacobs as the source of courage and determination" (75). Encouraged by this personal decision, she runs away from the plantation to the house of a friend and, then, to the loophole of retreat of her grandmother's house where she is kept hidden for seven years, enduring many hardships. She describes the difficulties of the place: "to this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without

hitting the roof" (114). However, physical endurance brings spiritual independence to her. The retreat, Smith (1987) notes, "a place of concealment, also renders the narrator spiritually independent of her master, and makes possible her ultimate escape to freedom" (29). Yellin (1987) sees self-affirmation and sexual emancipation in Linda Brent's escape:

Linda Brent chooses the space above her grandmother's storeroom in preference to her master's bed; and her grandmother, the apparently conforming woman in the kitchen below, supports her insurgency. The goals of Harriet Jacobs's woman in hiding are not destruction and self-destruction, but freedom and a home. (xxxix)

Like Lee who, during her sanctification, retreats to develop spiritual strength, Linda Brent's retreat and concealment fortify her spiritually and emotionally. Smith (1987) associates Linda Brent's progression in concealment with progression in pursuing freedom:

Jacobs explicitly describes her escape as a progression from one small space to another. As if to underscore her helplessness and vulnerability, she indicates that although she ran alone to her first friend's home, she left each of her hiding places only with the aid of someone else. In fact, when she goes to her second and third hiding places, she is entirely at the mercy of companions, for she is kept ignorant of her destination. Yet each closet, while at one level a prison, may be seen as well as a station on her journey to freedom. (31-32)

The hard conditions of the loophole reflect the endurance in her body and

spirit and evidence an instance of Sethe Suggs's "thick love" which, in Otten's (1993) views, transforms "conventional 'signifiers' of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love" (652), and self-love. From the loophole she is able to observe her children. Levander (1999) judges Linda Brent's shelter as a "self-imposed imprisonment" that presents positive aspects. For her, it "reinforces Linda's condition as a slave but with one vital difference: while it keeps her from exerting a traditional mother's sway over her children, her confinement enables her to watch over Ben and Ellen from afar, exerting a limited but significant authority over their well-being" (35). From the shelter she is able to plot her escape. Her scheme, in combination with friends, makes Dr. Flint believe, through letters pretended to have been sent from New York, that she is living there. Smith (1990) explains:

She dates her emancipation from the time she entered her loophole, even though she did not cross over into the free states until seven years later. Given the constraints that framed her ordinary life, even the act of choosing her own mode of confinement constituted an exercise of will, an indirect assault against her master's domination. (213)

In other words, like her relationship with Mr. Sands, her confinement exposes the hybridity of the nihilism and self-love that her life has turned out to be due to the prolonged exposure to Dr. Flint's violence.

Immobilized and without her children for seven years, Linda Brent's goal is finally attained when she reaches freedom in the North. She escapes from Dr. Flint's lustful assaults, trades moral integrity for dignity and physical safety, and reaches freedom with her children. However, she has to challenge once again the kind of

freedom that she finds there because, in many aspects, Levander (1999) notes, it “resembles her early slave experience” (36). In the North, a black woman’s sexuality is not free from threats, as she finds out when she cannot protect her daughter Ellen from harassment by her master Mr. Thorne. She closes her narrative explaining the meaning of her freedom, but relativizes its success:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free. We are as free from the power of slave-holders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. (201)

Her words testify to a wish for freedom and a home for her children as well as an appeal to the audience’s sympathy. Johnson (1998) argues that she “wishes to communicate effectively with her audience; she can do so only by engaging the sympathies of that audience” (25). However much more has to be done, as she believes her freedom “is not saying a great deal” (201). Freedom in itself cannot automatically guarantee her American citizenship and full possession of the civil rights granted to Northerners. Although her present situation “is a vast improvement,” full citizenship implies other personal demands for her and children. She needs a home, that is, a possession that would reflect her desired economic independence: “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than my own” (207). She believes she will be able, Carby (1993) notes, “to protect her daughter, Ellen, from the sexual exploitation she herself had experienced” (72). Carby adds: “Ellen was subject to sexual harassment in the household in which she

lived and worked as a servant in New York, which made Linda Brent question the nature of and extent of her freedom in the 'free' states of the North" (72).

As Linda Brent's freedom is not only one woman's success but an entire community's, in the next section this collective enterprise is analyzed.

The Outcome: Nihilism Defeated, Freedom Reached

Linda Brent defeats nihilism and achieves freedom but her victory over despair is very hard. Nihilism or what she describes as "the crisis of my fate" (55), is "the doom I so much dreaded," into which "I made a headlong plunge" (55). But her accomplishment is joyfully expressed: "reader, my story ends with freedom" (201). Acknowledging the uplifting achievement in Linda Brent's plight, Smith (1990) remarks that her final possession of freedom and a home "inscribes a subversive plot of empowerment" (213). Her performance reflects West's (1994) warning that empowerment results from "the black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World" (23). Linda Brent's "struggle against degradation and devaluation," (23) visible in Dr. Flint's sexual harassment, becomes responsible for eliminating the nihilistic threat. In her individual experiences of racial empowerment, personal gains and collective achievement have become possible because she has been doubly committed, on one hand, to personal self-valuation and, on the other, to the community love ethic. In her double commitment, the narrator positions herself, as Morrison (1984) notes, as both the genuine "representative of the tribe" and the artist who manages to join the "tribal or racial sensibility" and the "individual expression of it" (339).

The “individual expression” of “racial sensibility” in Linda Brent’s devastating experiences of sexual exploitation allows her to behave as an individual tied to a group. Like Lee, who unites “the self-within” to “the world outside” in her spiritual conversion and freedom from “the slavery of sin,” Linda Brent obtains freedom from “the sin of slavery” by fusing individual and communal values. In so doing, her life results in both personal gains and collective achievement. Scholars recognize the participation of the individual and the group in her experiences. Johnson (1998), for instance, remarks that Linda Brent develops “a sense of self-in-connection” (40), actually “a web of relationships that develop and sustain her” (41), inducing her “to escape slavery” (40). Smith (1988) also highlights the slave narrator’s networks with the community, observing that she “underscores her reliance on other people” (xxix). The interdependence existing between Linda Brent and the neighborhood reflects the aspirations for freedom of all slaves in the group. Smith (1987) analyzes the successful joint enterprise of the individual and the group and notes that out of that appears “a triumphant self-in-relation” (33) who “readily acknowledges the support and assistance she received” (34).

In her evaluation of Linda Brent’s relationships to the community, Johnson (1998) remarks that they bind the family, relatives, and friends together in different places. “These connections,” Johnson observes, include family members and people from the community: “not only her grandmother who hides her, her children who help her develop a sense of self, her brother who encourages and supports her, and other members of the slave community who aid in her escape,” but also “the friends who support and provide employment and traveling opportunities once she arrives first in New York and then in Boston” (41). As “a triumphant self-in-relation,” Linda

Brent's self-valuation, to use West's (1994) term, beats the nihilistic threat represented in Dr. Flint's sexual persecution and generates the communal politics of conversion more substantially personified in the love ethic of Aunt Marthy.

In some aspects, Linda Brent's political community reflects Lee's spiritual community and reaffirms the dialogical ties between spirituality and politics. Both Lee's and Linda Brent's support network have to challenge racist and sexist impediments against female self-valuation. Both are devoted to spiritual and political empowerment of the women who struggle for spiritual and political emancipation. Both also are not restricted to public participation and, therefore, welcome multiethnic contribution and involvement. Finally, both seem to have their emancipatory missions, to eradicate "the slavery of sin" as well as "the sin of slavery" from black people's consciousness.

Community involvement is at the center of the politics of conversion that takes place in *Incidents*. Its love ethic is fused with Linda Brent's self-valuation to generate the politics of conversion that resists Dr. Flint's persecution. Being supported by individual and collective forms of womanism and sisterhood, Linda Brent's and Aunt Marthy's racial leadership activates the kind of politics of conversion that echoes the kind of leadership West (1994) has in mind for a politics of conversion:

It comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons. Without a vibrant tradition of resistance passed on to the new generations, there can be no nurturing of a collective and critical consciousness – only professional consciousness survives. Where there is no

vital community to hold up precious ethical and religious ideals, there can be no coming to moral commitment – only personal accomplishment is applauded. (56-57)

The politics of conversion is, in West's (1994) view, "a turning of one's soul" against nihilism. Slaves achieved this because their version of the politics of conversion, fortified by community values and ideals, established stronger emotional ties among the members of the community and works as an emotional barrier against the devastating assaults aimed by the slave system and its major agents.

The emotional ties that both bind the slaves together and support the community's politics of conversion present two elements: resistance and empowerment. The community's resistance and empowerment are deeply associated with the slaves' decision to provide a "tribal or a racial sensibility" for "an individual expression of" freedom. Linda Brent's freedom would not be possible without the collective cooperation of the group. As Johnson (1998) notes, Linda Brent "appears as a helpless woman who is dependent upon friends and family for support" (26). Her words reinforce the group's struggle of communal involvement. Two levels of support are offered to her: one inside the slave family and another inside the extended family. Inside the family, many instances of this communal sensibility and support to Linda Brent's helplessness and struggle are visible in the actions of her parents, brother, uncles, and aunt but especially her grandmother. Inside the community, help also comes from white men and women. Thus, the final outcome in the politics of conversion projects racial and gendered aspects as the conversion results from the active contribution of blacks and whites, men and women.

Black participation in Linda Brent's victory over Dr. Flint's sexual abuses starts in the family. Initially, her father, though he dies prematurely, indirectly contributes through self-empowerment with his job. He is "considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade" (5), Linda Brent writes, and he uses his expertise as a carpenter to purchase his children. He never succeeds in freeing his daughter and son, but manages to offer the family "a comfortable home" (5). Uncle Benjamin's contribution is closer to Linda Brent's experiences than her father's. The uncle does what the niece will do later, when he decides to run away from Dr. Flint's plantation. His justification for running away shows a slave man's unsubmitiveness: "we are dogs here; foot-balls, cattle, every thing that's mean. No, I will not stay. Let them bring me back. We don't die but once" (21). He is, then, captured, kept in prison for six months, sold, runs away again, but never surrenders. Benjamin expresses his feelings for freedom: "If I die now, he exclaimed, thank God, I shall die a freeman" (21). His motivating words and challenging behavior have certainly touched Linda Brent deeply and have made her think of her condition as a slave woman. Likewise, the black lover represents another kind of emotional healing to Linda Brent's wounded soul. Their mutual attachment and proposed marriage become a source of comfort. She expresses her self: "this love-dream had been my support through many trials; and I could not bear to run the risk of having it suddenly dissipated" (38).

The father's parental responsibility, the uncle's struggle for liberty, and the lover's feelings are certainly invigorating and motivating male contributions, but not the only instances of encouragement that Linda Brent receives. Andrews (1988) notes that Linda Brent's quest for freedom "would not have been successful without the support of women's community" (254). Likewise, Lee's public ministry of love

would not be possible without a community of women supporting her. Without mutual womanism and reciprocal sisterhood, Linda Brent's "self-in-relation" would certainly be disenfranchised. Many black women in Linda Brent's community share a type of collective leadership that, in West's (1994) words, "comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons" (56-57). These women love other "women, womanhood and women's culture" (784), and portray "outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior" (xi).

Among black women, Linda Brent's Aunt Nancy is another member of the community who, through a number of attitudes, resists slavery and empowers the community. Like Aunt Marthy, she echoes Morrison's (1984) ancestor's qualities and therefore encourages, strengthens, and comforts Linda Brent's family to pursue freedom, saying: "I could die happy if I could only see you and your children free. You must pray to God, Linda, as I do for you, that he will lead you out of this darkness." (145). Linda Brent's life is a great example of resistance to slavery and an enormous contribution to collective empowerment. Her "sense of self-in-connection" places the children's freedom and literacy at the center of her existence. Johnson (1998) states that Linda Brent "made her escape to the North only after her children had been bought by their father and sent to New York. She was later reunited with both children" (41). Her struggle against Dr. Flint's lustful advances empowers the other slaves and lead them to help her escape.

However, the best example of resistance and of collective empowerment is Linda Brent's grandmother Aunt Marthy. Her stature attracts respect and, therefore, functions as a guide for other slaves' lives as well as for her granddaughter's freedom. Linda Brent recognizes her grandmother's importance to her freedom. Her

grandmother is the elder empowering her by an invigorating physical presence, spiritual force and innovative example. Linda Brent expresses Aunt Marthy's feelings through what her son tells her:

He began to tell me that grandmother had not eaten any thing all day. While he was speaking, the door was unlocked, and she came in with a small bag of money, which she wanted me to take. I begged her to keep a part of it, at least, to pay for Benny's being sent to the north; but she insisted, while her tears were falling fast, that I should take the whole. "You may be sick among strangers," she said, "and they would send you to the poorhouse to die." Ah, that good grandmother. (155)

Aunt Marthy's leadership in the collective politics of conversion activated by the family succeeds in offering the racial and tribal support for Linda Brent's self-valuation. The grandmother's social strength is the emotional instrument Linda Brent uses to resist slavery, become empowered, escape from Dr. Flint's lustful assaults and, finally, achieve freedom.

Black politics of conversion in *Incidents* is not a victory that depends solely on black people's efforts – men and women's. It attracts the contribution of white supporters as well. Despite the cruelty and betrayal that mark and disrupt the relationships between Linda Brent and Mrs. Flint, other white persons engage themselves, directly or indirectly, in Linda Brent's plan for freedom. Among white people, men's involvement is less emphatic than women's, if a certain white slaveholder's and Mr. Sands's association with the plight of her family are taken into consideration. For instance, the white slaveholder participates in Linda Brent's

family's struggle against slavery when he makes her Uncle Benjamin's escape to the North easier by not denouncing his whereabouts in Baltimore to slave hunters. Later, Mr. Sands's connections with the family's struggle for political emancipation can be understood in relative terms. If, on the one hand, his sexual relationship with Linda Brent allows her to challenge Dr. Flint's persecution, on the other, his dubious and untrustworthy behavior toward the freedom of her two children relativizes his support. Indeed, Mr. Sands's minor role in Linda Brent's quest for freedom is marked by uncertainty because she has to urge him to buy her children's freedom. Even his promise "the children are free. I have never intended to claim them as slaves" (138) is carefully weighed by Linda Brent since she is not sure whether he freed them or made them slaves in the North.

Different from the indirect and dubious association of white men with Linda Brent's quest for political rights, white women's encouragement of the narrator's pursuit of social emancipation reflects a profound commitment to freedom. Yellin (1985) argues that the alliances between the narrator and white women "represents an attempt to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that sisterhood in the public arena" (276). Two white women's support is particularly relevant. The first comes from a woman who, respecting Aunt Marthy's "intelligence and good character" (11), buys Linda Brent's grandmother at an auction when Dr. Flint decides to sell her. Linda Brent describes the purchase:

When the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block. Many voices called out, "Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell *you*, aunt Marthy? Don't stand there! That is no

place for *you*.” Without saying a word, she quietly awaited her fate. No one bid for her. At last, a feeble voice said, “Fifty dollars.” It came from a maiden lady, seventy years old, the sister of my grandmother’s deceased mistress. (11-12)

Similar to the liberating act of this old white woman who decides to free Aunt Marthy is the attitude of another white woman who manages to protect Linda Brent during her escape from Dr. Flint’s persecution. This woman hides Linda Brent in her house after she runs away from Dr. Flint’s plantation. When Linda Brent, conducted by a slave, Betty, arrives at the house, the white lady welcomes her:

“You will be safe here, Linda,” said she; “I keep this room to store away things that are out of use. The girls are not accustomed to be sent to it, and they will not suspect any thing unless they hear some noise. I always keep it locked, and Betty shall take care of the key. But you must be very careful, for my sake as well as your own.” (100)

Actually, these white women’s contributions extend the scope of black womanism, sisterhood, and leadership as their politics of conversion becomes a biracial phenomenon. Once activated for Linda Brent’s rescue, this partnership involving both black and white women is, in Andrews’s (1988) view, “the first manifestation of a liberating female community in the slavery-ridden South” (257).

This biracial “liberating female community” antedates the agency of the black intellectual whose future, in West’s (1993) words, “lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent nor in a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation and insurgent

transformation of this black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world” (85). However, despite the catalyst enterprise of “the liberating female community,” the positive effects produced by its politics of conversion cannot be measured in absolute terms. They have to be relativized, at least, by Linda Brent’s relationship with white Mr. Sands, a fact that establishes a several conflicts between her and her grandmother and imperils her daughter’s life in the North. In other words, the politics of conversion activated by the community is successful as shown by Linda Brent’s escape to the North, but also reveals conflicts, at least temporary, between Linda Brent’s self-valuation and community values. Her two pregnancies with Mr. Sands are not approved by the community, despite their empowering force for her. This relationship tends to reinforce the relevance of the other instances of hybridity of nihilism and self-love existing in slaves’ lives. Hybridity illustrates the complexity of her experience as a slave woman, and her final achievement suggests that the maintenance of hope and meaning, as West (1994) recommends, is needed if “the possibility of overcoming oppression” (23) is the goal.

FOUR

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Self-love and love of others
are both modes toward increasing
self-valuation and encouraging
political resistance in one's
community.

Cornel West (1994, 29)

Preservation of hope and meaning in the individual's life and in the community's dynamic, as shown in the previous chapter, is exemplified by Linda Brent's overcoming the oppression of slavery and the restoring of her humanity and soul by escaping to the North. Linda Brent's mingling of selfhood and grouphood relates her to Lee's fusion of "the self-within" and "the world-outside." West's (1994) words in the epigraph above encourage both individual and collective love as sustaining forces toward defeating oppression. Like hope and meaning, self-love and love of others are needed if a politics of conversion is to be articulated. Since some of the deepest wounds of African Americans are spiritual in nature, self-love and the love of others are required for healing the wounded hearts. Self-love strengthens self-valuation and the love of others enfranchises a communal love ethic. Through communal actions, self-valuation and a love ethic are able to turn the potential success of the politics of conversion into a real event. Since self-love is an individual phenomenon and the love ethic a collective one they must operate together. That is, without one the other is invalidated, and therefore, a successful outcome is

prevented. In Jacobs's narrative, Linda Brent's self-love in conjunction with the black community's love ethic results in her freedom from slavery. The instance of a politics of conversion, depicted in Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, clearly exemplifies the association existing between Sethe Suggs's self-love or self-valuation with the community's love ethic. The association of the individual's values to communal aspirations seeks to hold, West suggests, "the nihilistic threat at bay" (27), and to promote liberating enterprises among the former slaves of Bluestone Road. Indeed, the dialectic of nihilism and love involving Sethe Suggs's experiences – and those of other ex-slaves – marks the politics of conversion on Bluestone Road.

Like *Incidents*, *Beloved* deals with a people's experience in slavery. Slavery is an appealing theme to Morrison who describes her concerns in an interview to Washington (1994):

I'm trying to explore how a people – in this case one individual or a small group of individuals – absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something [Slavery] that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely. Something that has no precedent in the history of the world, in terms of length of time and the nature and specificity of its devastation. (235)

With her reference to the "undigestible and unabsorbable" horrors of slavery, Morrison highlights the devastating effect of slavery on Sethe Suggs and her group and, in so doing, echoes Jacobs's picture of the slave system as "that pit of abominations" into which Linda Brent falls. Like the nineteenth-century female hero who succeeds by overcoming the abominations of the slave system, Sethe Suggs's refusal to digest and absorb the horror will guarantee her freedom from the

“devastation” of slavery. Yet Sethe Suggs’s final freedom from her daughter’s ghost results from the community support, which wants to reintegrate the mother to its values. Thus, her rescue from *Beloved* exemplifies the individual and collective contribution to an effective politics of conversion.

In hybridizing self-love and the love of others, the politics of conversion is defined by West (1994) as “a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people” (29). Being such an empowering collective enterprise in Morrison’s *Beloved*, the politics of conversion makes special sense in this study if guided by Gates’s (1988) concept of signifying. From this perspective, the politics of conversion in Morrison’s work signifies upon the politics of conversion in Jacobs’s (1861) *Incidents*. Thus, this politics of conversion develops an intertextual conversation with the previous politics of conversion. In other words, from Gates’s perspective, the politics of conversion activated by Sethe Suggs and her black community repeats and revises the politics of conversion performed by Linda Brent and her black community. The reciprocal conversation that associates Sethe Suggs with Linda Brent provides the links between hope and meaning, self-love and the love of others – the forces that will be put into action to destroy oppression and nihilism.

The concept of signifying, already introduced in the first chapter, is briefly discussed under the notion of African American literary self-reflexiveness. Various critics acknowledge self-reflexiveness in African American literature. Andrews (1993), for instance, argues that “the history of African American narratives has been informed by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel” (1). Gates (1987) himself unveils the process of call-and-

response among slave narrators, saying that “when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading, the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them” (x). Gates's (1988) discussion of the concept of signifying is a detailed and sophisticated expansion of his ideas about self-reflexiveness in black American literature, presenting two aspects: first, he suggests that signifying is the lived experience of black people who “have been signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery” (68). Second, and most importantly, signifying is a metaphor for textual repetition and revision, a process in which “one text signifies upon another, by tropological revision or repetition and difference” (88). Gates argues that, consequently, black literary signifying activates a form of intertextuality which allows “black texts to talk to other black texts” (xxvi). Signification functions as the double-voiced tradition of the talking book – Esu and the Signifying Monkey being its versions in both African and African American cultures – which establishes forms of intertextuality between black texts from slave narratives to contemporary novels. He suggests that, as an instance of African American literary signifying, Ismael Reed's (1972) postmodern novel *Mumbo Jumbo* works as the example of intertextuality *par excellence* because it exemplifies a tertiary form of signifying by repeating and revising Zora Neale Hurston's lyricism, Richard Wright's naturalism and Ralph Ellison's modernism. Thus, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a signifying pastiche of the African American narrative itself. Atkinson (2000) comments on Gate's signifying, affirming that he relates his theory to the “rhetoric of the Black English oral tradition of Call/Response and Witness/Testify” (16). In other words, she notes, “the writers are called on to respond to what they have witnessed in the works of other African American authors” (16). Atkinson adds that

the new black writers' "response becomes their testimony and a reaffirmation of community" (16). One instance of this is present in Linda Brent's "testimony and reaffirmation of community" – a literary one – that starts with Lee's spiritual narrative.

The claim here is that the intertextual politics of conversion allows Jacobs's *Incidents* to talk with Morrison's *Beloved* and, thus, the two black works can be shown to converse with each other. In fact, they talk on various levels. As regards genre, Linda Brent's story is a slave narrative, and Sethe Suggs's experience is a novel – indeed a neo-slave narrative. Slavery and its negative portrayal and the slave and his or her positive depiction are the common elements that relate the genres to one other. Andrews (1997) argues that the slave narrative depicts "the inhumanity of the slave system" (667) by portraying "the humanity of the African American" (667). Rushdy (1997) explains that, as a contemporary fictional work, the neo-slave narrative portrays "the experience or the effects of New World slavery" (533), and "represent[s] slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences" (533). The slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative highlight the hybrid duality of the slave's life, show how the inhumanity of the slave system permeates the humanity of the slave, and mark the opposition between them by denouncing the former and highlighting the latter. Thus, similarly, the hybridity of nihilism and love of Jacobs's slave Linda Brent is also present in Morrison's former slave Sethe Suggs, which makes the black experience unique. As West (1994) puts it, "the initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism" (23), by means of love, individual and collective, we must add.

Other signified conversations also occur. As Morrison herself is familiar with slave narratives, and especially very familiar with Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents*, parallelisms between her novel and Jacobs's text may be developed. For example, like Jacobs, Morrison is a womanist whose main concern, to use Washington's (1975) words, "has been the Black woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity" (x). Peach (1995) subscribes to Morrison's womanism, remarking that *Beloved* welcomes the idea "that female slave narratives planted the seed of contemporary Black feminist and 'womanist' writing early in the Black literary tradition" (93). In their concerns with "the Black woman herself," both Jacobs and Morrison are associated with Cooper (1892). That is, while Jacobs anticipates Cooper's claim of "the exact voice of the Black woman" (1-2), Morrison stresses its validity. Thematically, Morrison repeats in *Beloved* what is introduced in *Incidents*. Through Sethe Suggs's experiences in slavery, she denounces the sexual and economic exploitation that threatens the womanhood of slave women, and highlights the slave woman's resistance to exploitation. Stylistically, she revises Jacobs's text by replacing its chronological retelling of facts and incidents by an imaginative construction and reconstruction of the past. Plasa (2000) summarizes the narrative differences and similarities involving the two works by arguing that "while the slave narrative characteristically moves in a chronological, linear narrative fashion, *Beloved* meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down into space" (51). In *Beloved*, narrative discontinuity and fragmentation, Matus (1998) observes, suggests the experience of a traumatic past: "the nature texture is built up for memories that disrupt linear time and blur the boundaries between past and

present experience” (111).

Besides the level of characterization, Sethe Suggs repeats Linda Brent's experience. In Jacobs's (1861) work, Linda Brent fights the inhumanity of slavery, reaffirms her own humanity and provides an emotional ground for the community's resistance. She keeps hope and meaning and, therefore, does not only preserve “the possibility of overcoming oppression” (23) but actually defeats her master's persecution and escapes to freedom. In so doing, she reaffirms Lee's restoration of black soul and humanity. In Morrison's text, Sethe Suggs denounces the inhumanity of the slaveholders so that both her own humanity and soul and that of the other slaves are reaffirmed. Sethe Suggs also revises Linda Brent's experience in her relationship with the community. Actually, Linda Brent establishes a harmonious conformity with her community and, therefore, fuses individual self-valuation with the community love ethic. To use Morrison's (1984) words, despite an incidental and minor conflict, Linda Brent is the artist who has “a tribal or a racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (339). Different from Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs rejects conformity with her community and, therefore, causes a disruption between her self-valuation and the community love ethic. With Sethe Suggs's rupture, Morrison's seems to validate the “conflict between public and private life” (339). However, she favors harmony between these two spheres as well, and justifies Sethe Suggs' s disruptive behavior, saying,

There is conflict between public and private life, and it's a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem, just a conflict. Because they are two modes of life that exist to exclude and annihilate the other. It's a conflict that

should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects.
(339)

Though temporary, Sethe Suggs's conflict is crucial for the understanding of her challenging and intimidating presence in the black community of Bluestone Road specifically as well as of black women in America generally.

Atkinson (2000) states that "signifying is an act of delineation; it is didactic and inclusive" and "when one is Signified on one must acknowledge the Signification" (17). The politics of conversion of slaves, in *Incidents*, is signified by the politics conversion of former slaves in *Beloved*. The acceptance of signification is made evident through the methodological structure proposed. That is, structurally, the politics of conversion repeats and revises, in *Beloved*, the five elements present in the politics of conversion found in *Incidents*. Thus, the antagonizing setting is represented by slavery whose values of wealth and property are set into action against Sethe Suggs's struggle for her children's safety. The antagonizing agent is Schoolteacher, for he embodies the values of slavery in Sweet Home, bringing them into use in order to constrain Sethe Suggs's desire for freedom and protection of her children. The supporting agent is Baby Suggs, who personifies black values and enables her daughter-in-law's resistance to slavery and protection of her children. The purpose of Sethe Suggs's search for freedom produces an unbeatable wish for freedom and for the protection of her children against Schoolteacher's persecution. Finally, the outcome is the achievement of the politics of conversion which, in mixing both black and white men and women, manages to maintain Sethe Suggs's

safety and integration with the community of Bluestone Road.

The Antagonizing Setting: Sweet Home Slavery

Sweet Home plays the role of the antagonizing setting in *Beloved*. Like Dr. Flint's house and plantation do in *Incidents*, Sweet Home encapsulates slavery and its values. The approximation of these two black texts through the depiction of slavery somehow positions Morrison's work as a response to the call that it finds in Jacobs's narrative. In the call-and-response process in which they are tied and from which they obtain especial meaning, Morrison's novel, or neo-slave narrative, signifies upon Jacobs's slave narrative and, thus, *Beloved* repeats and revises the slave system in operation in *Incidents*. As the levels of signification, repetition, and revision generate conversational links between the two black works, they exemplify self-reflexiveness among the texts, which emphasizes the idea that Linda Brent's devastating experiences in slavery are reflected in Sethe Suggs's struggle. In other words, as it does to Linda Brent's life, slavery activates its devastating forces both to neutralize Sethe Sugg's self-valuation and to weaken the community love ethic. In the two slave experiences, slavery dehumanizes, brutalizes, and victimizes the women by using them as wealth and property. Being the locus of the slave system in *Beloved*, Sweet Home signifies upon Dr. Flint's plantation. Thus, these two places are viewed as "a kind of hell on earth" (668), as Andrews (1997) remarks. Being Morrison's condemnation of the "hell on earth," Sweet Home causes its slaves a double pain. It causes what Bouson (2000) describes, on the one hand, as "the humiliations and traumas the slaves were forced to endure at the hands of their white

oppressors” (131) and, on the other, as “the insidious effects of internalized racism – that is, socially produced feelings of self-contempt and self-hatred” (131). The slaves’ humiliation and trauma or self-hatred not only result from cruel oppression expressed through physical depredation, they also derive from subtler behaviors sponsored by the slaveholders.

In *Incidents*, the female narrator states that “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women” (77). Like Linda Brent, Kubitschek (1998) is aware of “slavery’s horrifying destruction” (126) of slave people and culture, remarking that *Beloved* denounces “the effects of slavery on individual men and women, on black families, and on the black community” (126). In *Sweet Home*, slavery’s dehumanization also derives from subtler behavior by the slaveholders, such as the disenfranchisement that occurs with naming. Lawrence (2000) notes that “on *Sweet Home*, where Garner believes that he allows his slaves to be men, the power of naming remains with the white master” (234). Having their manhood defined by Garner, Morrison writes: “and so they were: Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner, Paul A. Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man” (11). In fact, even this given manhood is under constant threat. Paul D. questions it: “is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?” (125). Even worse, Sixo loses his manhood as a result of his cleverness. Accused of having stolen the meat he had cooked and eaten, he denies the theft by adroitly arguing: “improving your property, sir (...) Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work” (190). And Morrison explains: “clever, but Schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined” (190). Lawrence emphasizes the uselessness of the defined Sixo’s argumentation in the environment dominated by the

white definer: “Sixo’s rhetorical artistry – stealing and eating the shoat is ‘improving property’ since such apparently transgressive behavior actually will increase his productive capacity – is futile” (234). The slave’s intellectual sophistication does not seem to touch the sensibilities of the slave system and, therefore, does not prevent the slave from being treated cruelly. Therefore, Sweet Home is not only “the condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation” (668), for Sixo and the other men, as Andrews (1997) says. It also emphatically symbolizes the hell where Sethe Suggs suffers the sexual and economic exploitation from which she desires to escape. As a result, besides being the loci of suffering, Dr. Flint’s plantation and Schoolteacher’s Sweet Home are also the loci of Linda Brent’s and Sethe Suggs’s resistance and empowerment.

Sweet Home is certainly “a kind of hell on earth” to Sethe Suggs and is introduced to the reader through her recollections. Linda Brent’s memories of slavery and sexual assaults help her become critical of the treatment dispensed to black women in both the South and the North. While Linda Brent is fighting off sexual advances in the South, her daughter Ellen is the target of similar abuse in the North. When Sethe Suggs recalls the atrocities perpetrated against her in Sweet Home, Morrison explains, in an interview with Darling (1994), the validity of her heroine’s rememory: “there is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive” (247-248). Sethe Suggs explains her recollections: “some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there” (35-36). Recollection, Bouson (2000) notes, is

“uncontrolled remembering and reliving of emotionally painful experiences” (135). And the place, Sweet Home, “is a picture floating around out there outside my head” (36), Sethe Suggs remarks. In recollection, her feelings toward the farm are ambiguous, mixing beauty and shame. The ambiguous feelings derive from the impossibility of her exerting some control over past experiences. The narrator shows Sethe Suggs's ambiguity: “and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and though there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty” (6). Sethe Suggs's ambiguity toward Sweet Home seems plausible because of the peculiarity of its slavery. In *Incidents*, Dr. Flint's plantation seems to be a constant and regular presence in its cruelty under the master's control. However, Sweet Home is ironically named, associating slavery with sweetness and home. Consequently, Sethe Suggs's and Paul D's memories of Sweet Home are different. With the ♣ Garners – its former owners – Sweet Home seems a bearable place to live and work with some dignity and humanity. Kubitscheck (1998) subscribes to this description: “A beautiful Kentucky plantation, Sweet Home, originally houses a white couple, Mr. and Mrs Garner, and nine slaves (...). Garner allows them [slaves] many male privileges. Garner also permits Halle to buy his mother's – Baby Suggs – freedom” (116). A conversation between Mr. Garner and Baby Suggs, Jenny for the Garners, clarifies the Bodwins' doubts about the Garners' view of slavery and intensifies the ambiguity of Sweet Home and its form of enslavement:

“Tell em, Jenny. You live any better on any place before mine?”

“No, sir,” she said. “No place.

“How long was you at Sweet Home?”

“Ten year, I believe.”

“Ever go hungry?”

“No, sir.”

“Did I let Halle buy you or not?”

“Yes, sir, you did.” (145-146)

Paul D’s impressions of Sweet Home conflict with both Baby Suggs’s experiences and Sethe Suggs’s recollections. He diverges from his lover, and her mother-in-law breaking the ambiguity of shame and beauty attached to Sweet Home in the women’s mixed feelings toward the place. Affirming that “it wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (14), his evaluation makes Sweet Home only a humiliation, a damaging repetition of the cruelty established on Dr. Flint’s plantation, which prepares the reader for Schoolteacher’s devastating management of the plantation.

In *Incidents*, Linda Brent evaluates slavery, observing that it is worse for women than for men. She states: “it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own” (77). Both herself and Sethe Suggs have become vivid examples of this statement, especially in their womanhood and sexuality. Actually, after Mr. Garner’s death and Schoolteacher’s arrival, Sethe Suggs feels on her own flesh how terrible slavery can be. The former irony and ambiguity of “Sweet Home” cease to function here. Sweet Home under Schoolteacher’s supervision becomes a world of pain, Bouson (2000) observes, through “Sethe’s paralyzing and dirtying memories of the physical and psychic assaults on her humanity” (136). Her

recollection unveils the condemnation of the sexual exploitation that the slave woman has to endure. Like Linda Brent's abuse from Dr. Flint, Sethe Suggs's sexual exploitation is connected with the economic commodification of the slave woman. We are informed that Sethe Suggs's sexual exploitation parallels the two plantations in cruelty. She is taken as the breeder whose breeds are commodified. She is seen, Morrison writes, as "property that reproduced itself without any cost" (228). Thus, Sweet Home repeats and revises Dr. Flint's plantation, itself becoming the locus of cruelty and abomination, which steal the slaves' humanity by lowering them to the level of chattel and discardable wealth and property. Being utilitarian items brutalized in various ways, slave families are destroyed, parents are separated from their children, women are sexually abused, men's spirits are crushed, and many others are killed or disappear. Sweet Home, then, exemplifies, in cruelty, any other kind of plantation. For instance, Sethe Suggs remembers how she was separated from her mother, how her mother's ribs were branded with a circle and a cross and, later, how her mother was hanged and mutilated: "Hung. By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not" (61).

The cruelty and abomination plotted against her mother are repeated many years later, in her own flesh, by the slave system Schoolteacher implements at Sweet Home. Furman (1996) argues that Sethe Suggs's escape from Sweet Home is her "emphatic rejection of slavery's power to circumscribe her motherhood" (770), as it had done to her mother. Physical violence and brutalization are the expedients to control Sethe Suggs's female sexuality. Kubitschek (1998) clarifies Sweet Home's sexual brutalization of Sethe Suggs: "Schoolteacher's nephews brutally abuse Sethe sexually, sucking her milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody" (116). In

her remembering of the damaging event, it is awareness that convinces Sethe Suggs to denounce the exploitation of slave women by controlling their motherhood, and to associate her milk with her mother's milk that goes to the white babies before she can have it. She still suffers from this damaging memory: "the little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none" (200). Omolade (2000) remarks that the stolen milk represents slavery's most devastating sacrilege against the humanity of the slave woman. Omolade adds that slavery invades the very place that is inviolable and sacred to both African and European societies, that is, "the sanctity of the woman's body and motherhood within the institution of marriage" (125). In so doing, slavery adds other dramatic colors to the bodily depredation of slave women like Sethe Suggs.

Like her mother, Sethe Suggs herself has her flesh marked but, unlike the mother, the marks on her back from floggings resemble a tree, as Amy, Sethe Suggs's white friend who helps her escape, describes in plain words:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – its red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. (79)

Besides Sethe Suggs's marked flesh, other forms of brutalization are added to the miserable fate of woman at Sweet Home. Sethe Suggs's stolen milk and sexual abuse during her pregnancy position her motherhood and sexuality as the targets of the cruel

and brutal slave system at Sweet Home. Once again, the dehumanization of slavery assaults the slave woman's dignity.

In *Beloved*, the slave woman's brutalization is not limited to Sweet Home, but is extended to house 124 on Bluestone Road. In this house the horror of slavery results in Sethe Suggs injuring her children, even murdering one of her daughters. Sethe Suggs's infanticide is associated with despair and revolt against slavery and its brutality. She cannot bear the possibility of seeing repeated in her children everything she had to go through at Sweet Home. She decides to do something to protect her children from slavery. Furman (1996) her action:

When Schoolteacher, his nephews and the sheriff enter Baby Suggs's yard to reclaim Sethe, and worse, to take her children back to slavery, she revolts. In an instant she is transported back to the brutal beating she endured in the hours before escape and to her deepest violation (...) Sethe resolves that "nobody will ever get my milk no more except my children." (71)

What Sethe does has to do with her "thick love," a profound act of maternal love justified by her need to protect her children: "they ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (165).

In its mingling of nihilism and love, "thick love" is Sethe Suggs's possible reaction to stop the continuing brutalization of herself and her family. Likewise, in *Incidents*, Linda Brent's feelings of infanticide are an act of affirmation of will and emancipation of the slave woman. In both cases, infanticide suggests that death is preferable to slavery. Infanticide is only an imagined option to Linda Brent, but to Sethe Suggs it is a concrete fact. Levander (1999) notes that, through its libertarian

aspects, “infanticide is the one way for slave mother to express their desire to exert maternal control over their children” (34). Peach (1995) observes that the murder of her daughter “subverts the white myth of Southern paternalism in which the slave owners were envisaged as presiding over an extended and subservient family of both blacks and whites” (97). With her act, Sethe Suggs challenges Schoolteacher’s authority over herself and her family. With her death, *Beloved* becomes the testimony of those sixty million or more slaves who perished in slavery. In fact, as the locus of enslavement and cruelty, Sweet Home echoes and rearticulates Dr. Flint’s plantation. Both places victimize, brutalize, and dehumanize the slave, but while Dr. Flint’s assaults against Linda Brent are constant, Sethe Suggs’s experience with slavery shows two different moments when the Garners’ more humanitarian management of the place is replaced by the devastating rule of Schoolteacher. Like Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs, Lee also denounces the cruelties of slavery. As a free black woman she empathizes with the slave woman’s burden and plight by associating her public preaching with the eradication of the slave system. “I pray God to forward on the work of abolition until it fills the world, and then the gospel will have free course to every nation, and in every clime,” (90) she writes. Schoolteacher’s cruelty is the focus of the next section.

The Antagonizing Agent: Schoolteacher

Like Dr. Flint in *Incidents*, Schoolteacher is the major slaveholder in *Beloved*, but not the only one. Before Schoolteacher arrives at Sweet Home, Mr. Garner is the master of the plantation. Although slavery is always oppressive, Mr. Garner’s

authority over his slaves does not seem to be based on violence, brutality or oppression. On the contrary, he seems to embody a certain humanism toward his slaves. Kubitschek (1998) remarks that he is “a permissive slaveholder” who “allows his slaves unusual activities” (121). Paul D recollects some of these activities: “to buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even reading” (125). Paul D also reports that “they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened too” (125). Like Paul D’s, Baby Suggs’s impressions about Mr. and Mrs. Garner are positive. She observes that they “ran a special kind of slavery, treating them [the slaves] like paid labor” (140). However, Kubitschek observes that slavery is “never benign, no matter how ‘good’ the master” (126). Not only does slavery remove “Africans from their cultures,” but it also places them in an alienating environment.

Mr. Garner’s replacement by Schoolteacher marks a radical transformation in Sweet Home, from an alienating environment to a brutalizing one. As the new master, Schoolteacher becomes the antagonizing agent of the slave system. Thus, *Beloved* rearranges the same pattern in which Schoolteacher plays a role that is similar to that played by Dr. Flint in *Incidents*. In Jacobs’s work, Dr. Flint functions as the persecutor who, enchanted by the beauty and virtue of Linda Brent, or overwhelmed by power, sexually assaults his servant. In Morrison’s novel, Schoolteacher’s role is also associated with sex and lust and, therefore, is equally devastating in its violence and cruelty. Like Dr. Flint, Schoolteacher utilizes two of the three values sponsored by the slave system – wealth and property - to assault the slaves’ humanity, in general, and Sethe Suggs’s safety in particular.

Schoolteacher transforms the plantation into the abominable ugliness of hell and, thus, personifies Baby Suggs’s accusation of the slavery’s inhumanity. She

plainly condemns the slaveholder in general: "those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, she said, and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (89). Included in Baby Suggs's group of "whitefolks" who "broke my heartstrings," Schoolteacher becomes both the slaves' and Sethe Suggs's disgrace in Sweet Home. As representative of slavery, Schoolteacher commits atrocities against the slaves' human integrity and, therefore, seems to destroy Sethe Suggs's dreams, and breaks her heartstrings. He is, in fact, Sethe Suggs's bad luck, to use Baby Suggs's words. Both Sethe Suggs and Paul D describe him in specific moments. For her the nephews and he "had pretty manners, all of them. Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gently in a lot of ways" (37). However, Paul D denounces Schoolteacher's cruelty: "yeah, he was hateful all right. Bloody too, and evil" (72). Kubitscheck (1998) extends Paul D's judgment of Schoolteacher's cruelty to his acts: "he is thus responsible for Beloved's death as well as the events of the escape: the assault on Sethe, Halle's madness, and the horrible deaths of the other Sweet Home men" (122).

Paul D's description more aptly fits Schoolteacher's bad character. Unlike Dr. Flint, who sexually tyrannizes the slave woman's body, Schoolteacher does not seem enchanted by the beauty or virtue of his servant Sethe Suggs or of any other slave woman. Rather, he seems attracted to them as objects of study, willing to tyrannize and dominate their mind. Sethe Suggs describes his intellectual interests in the slaves' life, saying, "at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn't know that right away" (37). Ambiguously, his intention to study slave lives does not seem to correspond to the violence and atrocities he will inflict upon Sethe Suggs later, but it makes perfect sense precisely because he is the guardian of

the slave system produced by Sweet Home. For Kubitscheck (1998), by associating personal education with others' degradation "his name suggests the falsity of 'learning,' that can justify butchery" (122). x

Both Dr. Flint and Schoolteacher are formally educated masters: Dr. Flint, an epicure and Schoolteacher, a man of study. However, unlike Dr. Flint, who feels attracted to the beauty of his prey and derives his cruelty from the admiration and inability to have Brent submit to his control, Schoolteacher despises Sethe Suggs, while contradictorily admiring her skills. Morrison's narrator suggests that Sethe Suggs is both the mother who is able to kill a daughter, and "the woman Schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damned good soup, presses his collars the way he liked" (149).

As the major representative of the slave system Schoolteacher sees Sethe Suggs as wealth and property but behaves as the possessor and predator of his wealth and property. It is through Sethe Suggs's rememory that the reader is informed about Schoolteacher's atrocities in Sweet Home. She recollects how her dehumanization began when Schoolteacher's nephews stole her milk during her pregnancy with Denver. Sethe Suggs also tells Paul D about her sexual brutalization: "after I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came for. Held me down and took it" (16). Sethe Suggs's wounded motherhood informs about Morrison's concerns about the slave subjectivity. Matus (1998) remarks that Morrison indicts "slavery as an institution devoted to distorting and truncating maternal subjectivity" (109). A later atrocity is Sethe Suggs's whipping, which she describes to Paul D:

"Schoolteacher made one open my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk." (17)

When Paul D examines Sethe Suggs's back he understands the atrocity of it. The narrator describes Paul D's impression: "he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, 'Aw, Lord, girl'" (17).

Schoolteacher does not circumscribe to Sweet Home the scope of his brutalization of slaves. He extends it to house 124 when he decides to recapture Sethe Suggs and her children, an event which leads the mother to perform the extraordinary act of "thick love" – killing one of her children to protect them from slavery:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time. (149)

Wishing to protect her children against both slavery and Schoolteacher, she justifies her extreme behavior, saying: "love is or ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (165).

Matus (1998) argues that, fortified by her maternal feelings, “Sethe cannot permit her children to be captured and taken back into slavery for they will be returning to the world effectively signaled in his [Schoolteacher’s] dehumanizing, bestializing view of slaves” (107). Sethe Suggs’s resisting act works as a response to Schoolteacher’s cruelty. Like Linda Brent’s infanticidal feelings and sexual relation with Mr. Sands, Sethe Suggs’s “thick love” represents an act of will and resistance against oppression. Indeed, the effects of her infanticide are highly devastating upon the community, but even more devastating in Baby Suggs’s life, the subject of discussion in the next section.

The Supporting Agent: Mother-in-law Baby Suggs

Sethe Suggs’s struggle against slavery and its major agent, Schoolteacher, attracts supporters inside and outside the black community of Bluestone Road. Paul D, Stamp Paid, Denver, a group of women, and white Amy are the most active ones. As they live with Sethe Suggs in house 124, Paul D and Denver have a lasting and effective influence in her life. The lover is able to love and affirm Sethe Suggs because, like her, he has survived Sweet Home. The daughter leaves the house for help in the moment the mother is haunted by Beloved. Stamp Paid, white Amy, and the group of women present relevant but only episodic participation. Stamp Paid, for instance, helps Sethe Suggs cross over the Ohio River to house 124, while Amy assists the mother deliver the baby Denver, and the black women are responsible for exorcising Beloved’s presence from the mother’s tormented existence. As a result of these ties of communal participation, Sethe Suggs is reintegrated to the life of the

community after a long separation.

The validation of Sethe Suggs's self-valuation coming from these different supporters is invigorating and healing, but does not seem to approach, in quality, Baby Suggs's contribution to it. Baby Suggs has become the daughter-in-law's major healer: her support of Sethe Suggs's struggle parallels Aunt Marthy's involvement in Linda Brent's fight against Dr. Flint. In their families, the two female healers function as the agents who provide the necessary solidarity and emotional vitality for black women's self-valuation. Their presence in the communities works as an invigorating force, counterbalancing the devastating atrocities plotted by both Dr. Flint and Schoolteacher. In *Incidents*, Aunt Marthy invigorates her granddaughter with the extraordinary energy and experience of a loving grandmother. In return, the granddaughter faces slavery's brutalizing cruelty, resists Dr. Flint's lustful assaults, activates a personal form of self-valuation and generates an extraordinary communal love ethic among the slaves. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs energizes her daughter-in-law with the quality of her life and preaching of love. In return, the daughter-in-law endures the devastating cruelty of Sweet Home, heroically endures Schoolteacher's assaults, processes an invigorating self-valuation, and generates an empowering communal love ethic in Sweet Home and in house 124.

What makes Baby Suggs such an invigorating manifestation of empowerment among the slaves, in Sweet Home and in house 124, is the special kind of life she has. She is a freed slave like Aunt Marthy, and like Linda Brent's grandmother, Baby Suggs has her own expertise: she is a good cobbler and cook. Also like Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs is admired and loved by many people, black and white, slaves and freemen. In Sweet Home, she is so gently treated by the Garners that slavery seems

bearable to her, as the narrator explains: “the Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known” (140). And among the Bodwins for whom she cooks after getting her freedom, slavery is not practiced. The Bodwins themselves explain their hatred of slavery: “we don't hold with slavery, even Garner's kind” (145). Like Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs is Sethe Suggs's children's grandmother who, in Awiakta's (1995) analysis, functions as the “preserver of her extended family and race, a communicator of her heritage, lore, and wisdom, and a source of spiritual strength” (363). In working as a spiritual healer she offers Sethe Suggs the black community's love ethic, a love ethic whose values repeat in Morrison's novel the values established by the black community in Jacobs's work. Values like service, sacrifice, love, and care are lived and experienced in Baby Suggs's house at 124 Bluestone Road.

Baby Suggs's racial stature, leadership, and support of the daughter-in-law are initially present in a number of simple things and attitudes that she dispenses to her family. Being portrayed as the concrete and living experience of family safety, mutual protection, solidarity, and companionship, Baby Suggs receives Sethe Suggs with a kiss, offers her a house, cleans and nurses her, and protects her four children: Howard, Buglar, Beloved and Denver. Her concerns for them are an instance of black womanist sisterhood. Indeed, like Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs symbolizes the womanist who appreciates women's empowerment in general and African American women's enfranchisement in particular. Thus, Baby Suggs is the womanist whose sisterhood displays “the lines of affection, association and influence that exist” (808) between herself, her daughter-in-law and the children. Womanist sisterhood in Baby

Suggs clarifies Morrison's preoccupation with black women's experiences. It also subscribes to Washington's (1975) view of the black woman writer, whose "main preoccupation (...) has been the Black woman herself and her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationships to her men and her children, her creativity" (x). In response to Baby Suggs's immense racial love, Sethe Suggs feels comforted and transfers all her maternal love to her children when they are brought to her presence. The narrator describes Sethe Suggs's love and care for them: "she kept kissing them. She kissed the back of their necks, the tops of their heads and the center of their palms" (95). In so doing, Sethe Suggs, like her mother-in-law, vividly exemplifies black motherhood operating in association with black womanist sisterhood.

Though important, family stability and safety do not seem to be the only foci of Baby Suggs's racial enterprise. Indeed, she equally looks after her extended family at Bluestone Road. Baby Suggs's instigating instance of black womanism and concerns about other black women find a fertile ground in the way the community is created by Morrison. In these respects, Furman (1996) explains the concept of community in Morrison's novels. She suggests that "community finds expression as traits of characters in Morrison's novels. Its values and beliefs shape the background against which the individual's behavior is assessed and defined as a repertory of cultural traditions. The community is usually necessary to the individual's wholeness and identity, and those who do not embrace it are incomplete" (72). Indeed, Baby Suggs's behavior conforms to the desired values and beliefs of the community, shapes her love ethic and embraces the notion of community "as a repertory of cultural traditions" (72). In this respect, she shows common features with Aunt Marthy and Lee. In this cultural texture, Baby Suggs's love ethic is addressed to the black

community through her preaching in the Clearing. Her words express black self-identity through the language of the black body. “Central to the pursuit of self-ownership,” her sermon, Lawrence (2000) notes, “is the articulation of a self-defining language that springs from the flesh and blood of physical experience and that gives shape to the desire so long suppressed under slavery. Baby Suggs discovers such self-definition immediately upon gaining freedom” (235). She then renames herself Baby Suggs after her husband’s family name, thus rejecting Jenny Whitlaw, her slave name.

Self-definition, self-renaming, and preaching all link her to Lee. Like Lee, Baby Suggs dwells in the spiritual arena. Like Lee, she encapsulates the view of “the self-within” that is essentially spiritual. And like Lee, she responds to the inner call and positions herself in “the world outside” with her message of love. Both Lee and Baby Suggs believe that spirituality demands self-identification and social commitment, and they respond to the call the best they can. Linda Brent does not follow public preaching, either in Lee’s institutionalized way, or Baby Suggs’s unconventional form. Rather her spiritual and social commitments are reflected in her teaching literacy to those slaves who want to read the Bible. Through her public commitment she instrumentalizes the slaves’ spirituality through their access to a sacred text.

Free and renamed, Baby Suggs’s ministry of love inundates, with racial and spiritual energies, the Clearing where she values her people’s dance, songs, and prayers. As a result, house 124 becomes the place where Baby Suggs loves, cautions, feeds, chastises, and soothes – where people find food if they are hungry and light if they feel in darkness, where newcomers may rest if they are tired, and where

messages are left to keep people in touch. In other words, house 124 and its Clearing becomes Baby Suggs's church. The narrator portrays her sanctified presence in that black community: "Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing" (87). And she prays and preaches about communal love and self-love, saying: "In this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it" (88). Corey (2000) observes that her voice and body "preached a religion of joy that loved and affirmed the physical body" (40). Addressed to the body, her "religion of joy," Corey continues, reflects "a subversive message, an effort to counter years of social conditioning which had denied slaves the capacity to experience bodily pleasure and joy" (40). Corey ends her comments on Baby Suggs's communal message remarking that she preaches "the renewing power of the communal body as a means of connection" to "individual bodies" and to "the regenerative power" (40) of the ancestral black body. Like Corey, Plasa (2000) observes that Baby Suggs's speech on mutual love revises the slaves' "mortifications of flesh endured under slavery" (91). The dance, the songs, and the prayers that accompany the sermon are performed and uttered to exorcise all those past "mortifications of the flesh." Baby Suggs's preaching of bodily love is a call, in Stern's (2000) view, for "a universal recognition of physical beauty" (90). For Stern, physical beauty, in the woman preacher, "has more to do with the commonality of physical suffering than with commonalities of taste, more to do with how all bodies feel rather than how they individually look" (90). Certainly, Pecola Breedlove – the black girl in *The Bluest*

Eye who wants the bluest eye to feel beautiful and love – would benefit a lot from Baby Suggs's preaching of black physical beauty.

Unfortunately, the community is not only a source of hope to Baby Suggs. It is also the cause of her despair. And physical beauty resulting from suffering is not slavery's only legacy. Jealousy comes with it. Though revitalizing and invigorating, Baby Suggs's ministry of love and beauty among the former slaves of house 124 is threatened by the neighbors' jealousy. Plasa (2000) believes that the contact with slavery made the neighborhood insensitive to its traditional quest for reciprocal love. She notes that "in defending itself against the bodily deprivations of enslavement, the community has learned to choke off its capacity for pleasure and love, for the experience of *jouissance*" (91). Considering Baby Suggs's acts of love and the community's reaction through jealousy and envy, Morey (2000) observes that she "is a Christ symbol. She makes a feast with blackberries that taste so good that 'to eat them was like being in church,' and her feast expands like loaves and fishes to feed the entire neighborhood" (252). However, communal jealousy betrays Baby Suggs's festivities and ministry of love. In so behaving, the Bluestone Road community does not echo, at least for a long period of time, the protective attitudes the slaves in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* have toward Linda Brent's self-valuation and her grandmother's love ethic. On the contrary, moved by jealousy and spite, the community does not correspond to Baby Suggs's expectations and makes her feel betrayed. This betrayal, Lawrence (2000) emphasizes, announces the dilemma of the community: "the black community of Cincinnati is caught in a cycle of self-denial, a suffocating repression of fundamental bodily needs and wants" (232). Lawrence adds, a collective self-negation that is intensified by the haunting presence of

Beloved. In fact, Baby Suggs is betrayed by the neighbors when they fail to warn her and her family of the invasion of house 124 by Schoolteacher, his nephews, and the sheriff, who come to arrest Sethe Suggs and her children. Defeated by their betrayal, Baby Suggs abandons both her preaching of love and life. In her profound disappointment, she tells Stamp Paid that “she was going to bed to think about the colors of things” (177), blue and yellow being two of these colors. Baby Suggs’s dedication to “the colors of things” seals her defeat and depicts her shame of having faced an inexhaustible number of dramatic experiences (specially the invasion of her yard), in slavery and in freedom. She seems to have reached her limit, a sensation that is expressed by her conversation with Stamp Paid:

“When you get through with blue and yellow, then what?”

“Can’t say. It’s something can’t be planned.”

“You blaming God,” he said. “That’s what you doing.”

“No, Stamp. I ain’t.”

“You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.”

“You saying nothing counts.”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.” (179)

Baby Suggs’s words seem to be suggesting that no consolation is possible after the events in her yard that result in Sethe Suggs’s infanticide except her lying in bed to consider the colors – blue and yellow – of things. The narrator develops Baby Suggs’s feeling of disappointment and frustration with her neighborhood. “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 – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance,” the narrator clarifies, “well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (177). The impression that remains is that her profound love seems to have reached a nihilistic despair, generating hybridization of love/self-love and nihilism. In Otten’s (1993) view, Baby Suggs has become the both-and character, like Eva Peace, Sula Peace, and Pecola Breedlove in Morrison’s other novels. Likewise, in Linda Brent’s narrative, Aunt Marthy can be seen as the both-and supporter who toils for her granddaughter’s freedom and also strives “to make us feel that” slavery “was the will of God” (17), to which the slave had to surrender. The next section shows how Baby Suggs’s ministry of love has not been in vain and supports Sethe Suggs’s freedom

Sethe Suggs's Purpose: Children’s Protection

Sethe Suggs has a clearly defined purpose in *Beloved*. She wants to protect her children from slavery. However, She is not the only person with a purpose in the novel. Other former slaves also have their purposes. Paul D, for instance, loves and affirms Sethe Suggs. Denver initiates her mother’s escape from the haunting *Beloved*, leaving the house for help. Stamp Paid carries runaway slaves to safe places. Ella leads the community to continue the work of freeing Sethe Suggs from *Beloved*’s ghostly power, initiated by Denver. Finally, Baby Suggs, Kubitscheck (1998) notes, works as “the nurturing female ancestry that sustains Sethe” (123). Not only black characters offer their energies to support Sethe Suggs but some white people do too. Among them, Amy excels as she nurses Sethe Suggs’s physical scars

and helps the runaway slave mother give birth to Denver, after escaping from Sweet Home. Sethe Suggs's wish to protect her children from slavery situates her between the self-love that she builds and the love of all those people that surround her in the neighborhood. West (1994) remarks that "self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community" (23). Nurtured by this double love, Sethe Suggs increases personal "self-valuation" and encourages collective "political resistance."

As the woman who develops self-love and attracts the communal love ethic, Sethe Suggs signifies upon Linda Brent. Her self-valuation repeats and revises the kind of self-valuation Linda Brent demonstrates in *Incidents*. Like Linda Brent, who escapes from both slavery and Dr. Flint's sexual persecution, Sethe Suggs runs away from both Sweet Home and Schoolteacher's cruelty. But unlike Linda Brent whose self-valuation fits in the values of her community, Sethe Suggs's self-valuation conflicts with the values of her community, at least temporarily. As the member who conforms to the community's precepts Linda Brent represents the artist, who, in Morrison's (1984) words, symbolizes "the tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). Not even her relationship with Mr. Sands is enough to break this harmony longer than the effects of angry words of a grandmother. In other words, Sethe Suggs's disruption echoes Morrison's (1984) view of "conflict between public and private life" (339). For Morrison, conformity to and disruption from the community precepts are the two available alternatives. Aware of these alternatives, Morrison validates both conformity and disruption. As she does with conformity, she also values the conflict, saying: "it's a conflict that should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this

country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects" (339). Similarly, Furman (1996) validates the conflict between the member and the community and, having Sethe Suggs in mind, the scholar remarks that "Sethe's exercise of power is, in effect, a declaration of independence from an unsympathetic community" (72).

Sethe Suggs's self-valuation and her purpose depict a kind of black motherhood which, being an alternative female parenthood, challenges the white motherhood of nineteenth-century Southern society. Like Lee and Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs both embodies and challenges the ideals of true womanhood. The true woman, Johnson (1998) notes, is characterized "as gentle, innocent, pure, pious, domestic, submissive and somewhat helpless" (18). As her marriage to Halle and love for her children show, she temporarily establishes conventional familial ties. "She had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that 'somebody' son who had fathered every one of her children" (23). She also refuses to be submissive to slaveholders when they threaten the physical and emotional integrity of her children. Her purpose, then, in *Beloved* is to prevent her children from experiencing slavery and, consequently, from being defined, Bouson (2000) notes, "as the racial Other – as biologically inferior, morally degenerate and animalistic" (131). Willing to avoid her children's definition "as racially inferior and animalistic," she protects them against slavery at any cost, even at the cost of their lives. As a result, her act of threatening her children's lives and of killing her infant daughter generates both instability and stability between herself and the black community. The infanticide hybridizes conflict and harmony and remains the turning point for her presence in the community. Sethe Suggs and her community depict a peculiar form of relationship

which shows 28 days of mutual solidarity, 18 years of reciprocal hostility, and finally, another moment of mutual respect. Their reciprocal hostility derives from her idea of maternal love, the kind of love that goes to its extreme. The community is unable to accept what she considers is an act of love. Scholars pay special attention to Sethe Suggs's expression of maternal love. Furman (1996), for instance, explains that Sethe Suggs has an "extraordinary capacity for love and sacrifice. She does kill her two-year-old daughter, and she does attempt to kill the other three children before she is stopped, because she wants to place them where no one could hurt them (...) where they would be safe" (69). Bouson (2000) argues that Sethe Suggs's crime becomes a kind of "infanticide which is presented as an example of excessive mother love that is, at once, brutal and protective, shameful and heroic" (134). ✍

The infanticide – the temporary abandonment of children as well – links Sethe Suggs to the mothers who came before her. Indeed, Lee and Linda Brent do not kill or harm their children, but they can be associated with Sethe Suggs's drama. Lee, for instance, leaves her son in the good hands of relatives for months while she does what God has called her for, but Linda Brent's connection with infanticide is more concrete. She prays for her child's death, and like Sethe Suggs, she believes that "death is better than slavery" (62). What these three women's sense of motherhood has in common is this idea that due to social constraints, their relationships with their children is always an endangering experience. Levander (1999) remarks that "infanticide is the one way for slave mothers to express their desire to exert maternal control over their children" (34). Sethe Suggs's infanticide repeats in more dramatic terms Linda Brent's imagined infanticide. Similarly, like Lee's concerns toward her son and Linda Brent's dedication to her son and daughter, Sethe Suggs's protection

of the children, though devastating as it may appear, fuses love and nihilism. Paul D describes Sethe Suggs's extreme way of protecting her children as "thick love," to which she reacts: "love is or ain't. Thin love ain't love at all," adding "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). It is her experience of "thick love" that distances her from the community's expression of love personified by Baby Suggs's moral, emotional, and tribal stature. As Otten (1993) observes, Sethe Suggs "defies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character or action" (652) in *Beloved*.

During a period of twenty-eight days, after she arrives from Sweet Home, mutual solidarity is kept between Sethe Suggs and the community. In this period, Sethe Suggs's and Baby Suggs's racial strength converge. Baby Suggs offers her daughter-in-law the warmth of a family, and in return, Sethe Suggs dispenses love for her children and mother-in-law. After the "Misery", as Stamp Paid calls Sethe Suggs's murder, the two women's love diverges. In fact, the conflicts between Sethe Suggs's "thick love" and Baby Suggs's "thin love" are many. Baby Suggs's love is communal, therefore, it unites, heals, and preserves life.¹ It embodies "values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (24), values which, West (1994) observes, fortify a politics of conversion. Sethe Suggs's love, on the other hand, is individual and, therefore, it separates, bleeds, and kills. The two black women seek the protection of their loved ones, but neither guarantees complete safety for them. Though uplifting, Baby Suggs's spiritual love does not prevent the jealousy of the neighbors from taking its course, and Sethe Suggs's "thick love" is not able to protect without killing. Her infanticide, although exemplifying her exercise of power and independence, attracts the jealousy and hatred of the

community, resulting in a mutual split that lasts for eighteen years. The separation is caused by the neighbors' failure to understand the reasons Sethe Suggs have to do what she does. Furman (1996) explains the attitude of the community: "sometimes the role of community is not so easily justified. In such instances its function as cultural arbiter is tainted by smugness and pettiness which the individual who would be free is compelled to resist" (72). In spite of jealousy, and meanness change the group and make it different from Linda Brent's group of slaves, who support her individuality. The community of Bluestone Road fails in its obligations toward Sethe Suggs and Baby Suggs when its members decide not to warn house 124 about the whites coming to arrest the mother and the children.

Because of the murder, the former mutual and reciprocal fellowship that existed between Sethe Suggs and the community develops into a long rupture and separation. Sethe Suggs's love is fed by an extraordinary kind of maternal love seeking to protect her children from slavery and Schoolteacher's brutality. Her quest of self-valuation protects her children from the brutalization, dehumanization, and victimization that the slave system and its major agent have plotted against the slaves of Sweet Home and house 124. In her pursuit of protection for her children, she develops a sense of motherhood that is allied to the notion of womanism and sisterhood. Like Linda Brent, Aunt Marthy, and Baby Suggs, Sethe Suggs develops the kind of sisterhood that finds its base in the mutually supportive attitudes that she shares especially with Baby Suggs, and her children. As a womanist, Sethe Suggs appreciates black womanhood, its culture and its enfranchising aspects for the entire race and for herself. Furman (1996) also focuses on Sethe Suggs's womanism and explains that "she is the first of Morrison's women to demand the privilege of

defining herself" (74). She resists Schoolteacher and his wish to subject her to the level of the cow that is milked. Sethe Suggs, Furman explains, reveals "herself capable of thinking for herself and by insisting upon the right to determine her own and her children's fates in life and death" (74). Acting alone, she sends her children to Baby Suggs's house, and waits for her husband who grows insane watching the wife to be milked by Schoolteacher and his nephews. In so doing, she depicts the behavior of the womanist mother who, in Walker's (1983) words, expresses "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" (xi).

Associated with an unbeatable wish to protect her children, Sethe Suggs's self-valuation is marked by dramatic physical mutilation. Schoolteacher's nephews steal her milk, and later she is brutally whipped by Schoolteacher. This is the kind of brutality that sullies the victim, as Sethe Suggs describes: "they dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (251). All these bestializing events coincide with Omolade's (2000) view of the slave woman who, in slavery, is made a fragmented commodity:

Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into the field of labor where she was forced to work with men and work like a man. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family (....) Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market. (124-125)

At the same time, despite being a commodified wife and mother, Sethe Suggs loses her husband and runs away from Sweet Home after sending her children to Baby Suggs's house. Paul D recollects in her presence the kind of protective mother Sethe Suggs was eighteen years before, when she was planning to run away from slavery. Paul D remembers: "Halle's woman. Pregnant every year including the year she sat by the fire telling him she was going to run. Her three children she had already packed into a wagonload of others in a caravan of negroes crossing the river. They were to be left with Halle's mother near Cincinnati" (9). Considering Andrews's (1997) portrayal of slavery "as the condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth" (668), against which she struggles, her heroism has to be judged as extraordinary and unconventional.

Other instances of Sethe Suggs's quest for self-valuation are also associated with her wish to protect her children through escaping from Sweet Home, for example, her solitary escape, Denver's birth with Amy's help, their crossing the Ohio river in Stamp Paid's boat, and their arrival at Baby Suggs's house. These events and people symbolize the sustaining solidarity to Sethe Suggs's struggle. Peach (1995) argues that Baby Suggs and Amy are Sethe Suggs's "main healers in the novel" (103), which provides the novel with a peculiar kind of biracial womanism, like the one in *Incidents*. During her struggle for self-valuation and quest for freedom, Linda Brent's quest is nurtured by Aunt Marthy's racial stature and by a white woman's solidarity. As a healer of bodies, Amy's attitudes toward Sethe Suggs are complemented by Baby Suggs's more spiritual healing. Amy nurses Sethe Suggs's wounds, alleviates her despair, helps her escape from Sweet Home, and acts as her

midwife. Amy protects the slave woman and the newborn till Stamp Paid carries them over the Ohio River. Baby Suggs receives Sethe Suggs in house 124 where the mother, baby, and other children are protected and nurtured. Another similarity is their concern with the colors: blue and yellow for Baby Suggs and carmine velvet for Amy. However, what distances them in relation to their favorite colors is the reason why they are attached to the colors, in the first place. Baby Sugg's love for blue and yellow results from disappointment with the community, which "step[s] back and hold itself at a distance" (177) when she needs. She, then, decides to "quit the Word" (177) and "fix on something harmless" (179) like "blue. That don't hurt nobody. Yellow neither." (179). Amy's search of velvet, on the contrary, is associated with hope. She is seeking "the prettiest velvet" (32) because "velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth." (33)

Nurtured and uplifted by this kind of biracial womanism that approaches the old Baby Suggs and the young Amy, Sethe Suggs feels a sense of personal and individual success and victory. Love of others and self-love are the guarantees of her self-valuation and political resistance. Proudly she expresses her achievement: "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" (162). Later, in the same mood of self-satisfaction, she tells Paul D about her protective feelings towards her children:

If 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. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper

in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (162)

Sethe Suggs's words not only establish critically her view of freedom – a place to live and love her children, without asking permission for love – but also emotionally guide her self-valuation.

Sethe Suggs's personal and individual experience of "thick love" justifies her extraordinary act when Schoolteacher comes after her and her children. Her killing of Beloved and her attempt to kill the other children make her sure that she had to do what she did to stop Schoolteacher. She tells Paul D: "I stopped him (...) I took and put my babies where they would be safe" (164). Sethe Suggs herself explains the infanticide: "how if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter" (200). Her words are clear evidence that what she did what she did for love. For her it is death for love, fusing love and nihilism. Furman (1996) justifies Sethe Suggs's extreme act: "she had been willing to die with and for that child to keep her from slavery" (82). Like Furman, Morrison (1983) validates Sethe Suggs's act explaining that "people do all sorts of things under" (652) love's guise. In an interview to Moyers (1994) Morrison tells that there is not necessarily safety in love: "if you want to hang on to your sanity or hang on to yourself, don't love anything; it'll hurt" (268-269). She seems to invite people to try to love, even when safety and sanity cannot be guaranteed, because, she adds, "that's a big problem. We don't

know when to stop. When is it too much and when is it not enough? That is the problem of the human mind and the soul. But we have to try. Not trying is so poor for the self. It's so poor for the mind. It's so uninteresting to live without love" (268). And Otten (1993) echoes Morrison's idea that extreme attitudes like Sethe Suggs's "become acts of signifying a profound if often convoluted love" (652). It is her "thick love" that offers emotional grounds for the self-valuation she performs and that fortifies her to say no to slavery and to Schoolteacher. However, unfortunately, killing her daughter is taken by the others as pride, in Kubitscheck's (1998) view: "Sethe's ferocious pride and independence isolate her from her neighbors, who expect her to express remorse for her action" (123). Echoing the community's reactions against Sethe's extremist attitude, like his neighbors, Paul D does not seem to accept Sethe Suggs's "thick love" and her personal expression of self-valuation:

"Yeah. It didn't work, did it? Did it work?" He asked.

"It worked," she said.

"How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?"

"They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em." (165)

However, Paul D's failure to accept or understand his lover's extreme act does not lead him to ostracize Sethe Suggs. On the contrary, his sustaining solidarity to her is viewed by Peach (1995) as the attitude of a black man who "is associated with the feminine" (103). Because women – including Sethe Suggs – are able to create a favorable image of him, as the narrator writes, "there was something blessed in his

manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep – to tell him that their chest hurt and that their knees did too” (17). Sethe Suggs finds comfort in the way Paul D loves her as she welcomes all demonstrations of support received from the moment she leaves Sweet Home to the moment she is rescued from *Beloved*. She feels dirtied by Sweet Home but survives. She is cleaned, dirtied, and then cleaned again in the black community. The narrator expresses Sethe Suggs’s sense of cleanness: “whites may dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean” (251). The next section will discuss how the community helps Sethe Suggs’s cleaning.

The Outcome: Sethe Suggs’s Rescue and Reintegration

West’s (1994) remark that “the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people” (30) addresses itself to Sethe Suggs and the Bluestone Road community. The mother and the neighborhood have committed “self-destructive and inhumane actions” leading to mutual disruption for eighteen years, and now are led by mutual interests to rebuild the kind of communal harmony they both shared for twenty-eight days. Sethe Suggs’s presence brings to the community an experience that the community is no longer able to cope with and refuses to remember. As Corey (2000) puts it, it is “the physical inscription of a brutal humiliation” (34). On her back, “the scar recalls the horror of that historical past” (34). Therefore, Sethe Suggs’s infanticide and the inability of the community to see maternal love in the mother’s unusual act to protect the daughter against the horrors of slavery ask for a resolution that demands the participation of both

individual and group. A pact of mutual support is foreshadowed, and Conner (2000) notes that this alliance “shows communal concerns and individual quests enabling and complementing each other” (50). As the alliance does not involve the entire community, but instead a small group of black women, it relativizes the achievement of the alliance without invalidating it.

The reconciliation of “individual quests” with “communal concerns” links *Beloved* to *Incidents*, and draws several parallels with Lee’s spiritual mission. Like Lee’s communal toil, the one in these slave communities is likewise a double-gendered, multiethnic centered and emancipatory enterprise. Like Lee’s community of the spirit, Linda Brent’s and Sethe Suggs’s groups also create room for black women’s resistance and emancipation from spiritual, social, and emotional impediments and, thus, establish dialogical ties between black women’s spirituality and politics. The approach, or signifying, between Sethe Sugg’s and Linda Brent’s plights and the supporting roles of the communities to which they belong reveals that the outcome achieved by the slave community at 124 Bluestone Road repeats and revises the resolution obtained by Linda Brent’s slave community. In her slave narrative, the individual’s self-valuation and the community’s love ethic band together successfully, resulting in Linda Brent’s emancipation and freedom through the decisive collaboration of a community of supportive people formed by blacks and whites, men and women. Similarly, in *Beloved*, the individual and the group work together. Sethe Suggs’s wish to recollect her past and the community’s desire to integrate Sethe Suggs with itself are empowering experiences for both parties. As Bouson (2000) suggests, Sethe Suggs and the neighborhood establish “an affective and cognitive connection with the lost victims of slavery by depicting, and in places

poetizing, the inner lives of the slaves" (137). In West's (1994) view, the outcome of a politics of conversion is expected to be the community's "struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World" (23). As with the slaves in *Incidents*, the former slaves' "struggle against degradation and devaluation" (23), in *Beloved*, is both a bigendered and biracial enterprise, for it involves men's and women's contributions and black and white people's assistance. Actually, supportive attitudes of white Mr Garner and Mr Bodwin and of black Stamp Paid and Paul D are associated with the womanist behaviors of white and black women, like Amy, Denver, and Baby Suggs.

The politics of conversion of Sethe Suggs's group is a reflection of the outcome generated by the politics of conversion of Linda Brent's neighborhood. The politics of conversion at 124 Bluestone Road derives from the participation of Sethe Suggs's self-valuation and the community's love ethic, producing gains to both the individual and the community. Unlike Linda Brent's experience, which basically fuses and harmonizes the individual self-valuation with the group's love ethic, Sethe Suggs's life is based on disruption and reintegration between the individual's self-valuation and the group's love ethic. The disruption between Sethe Suggs and the community highlights Morrison's (1984) acknowledgement of the "conflict between the public and private life" (339) as an inevitable phenomenon: "it's a conflict that should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects" (339).

The conflict between Sethe Suggs's self-valuation and the black community's love ethic is at the basis of the politics of conversion constructed in house 124. Her threatening her children's lives and killing the daughter make her a shunned outlaw

in the community of former slaves, an exile that lasts eighteen years. Furman (1996) explains Sethe Suggs's ostracism, saying, "after the woodshed she must give up Baby Suggs's healing care, and all ties of friendship that developed for twenty-eight days are severed by those who fear her determination" (71). The disruption happens because Sethe Suggs's individual values, especially the one through which she justifies an internal force to protect her children against slavery, do not seem to arise in the group's evaluation of the maternal infanticide the community's values of service, sacrifice, love, care, discipline, and excellence that generate family stability, love, protection, solidarity, and companionship. On the contrary, her values reflect a personal, individual, and extreme vision of love, her "thick love," which the black community fails to accept and the white law decides to punish. Even her lover Paul D tries to understand her act but fails to see the justification. In a conversation with Sethe Suggs, he clearly exposes his conflict by evaluating Sethe Suggs's instance of love that leads her to murder her daughter.

"What you did was wrong, Sethe."

"I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?"

"There could have been a way. Some other way."

"What way?"

"You got two feet, Sethe, not four."

(165)

A mother's natural wish to protect her children is central to Sethe Suggs's justification. Bowers (2000) notes that "Sethe defines herself as mother in defiance of the near-impossibility of that role" (216), that is, as a slave woman her maternal

love is risky, but is not paralyzing, demanding action, sometimes unpredictable. Bowers explains: “it was to avoid a future in slavery for the children that lead Sethe to plan escape and to get her milk to her baby – sent ahead with the other children – that made her attempt it alone” (216). Sethe Suggs’s mother feeling is both wrong and right, nihilism and love. What she did seems to be a debatable attitude of a slave mother without plausible alternatives or options, if the event is considered under the light of Morrison’s views of love. Morrison validates ambiguity in the way people love saying that “all about love...people do all sorts of things under its guise. The violence is distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do” (in Otten, 1993, 652). Likewise, Otten’s (1993) notion of love parallels Morrison’s. For him love is:

The creation of forces so brutal that they can transform conventional ‘signifiers’ of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love – incestuous rape, infanticide, and murder articulate not the immorality condemned by the dominant culture, but the inverse. They become acts signifyin(g) a profound if often convoluted love. (652)

The ambiguity and indeterminacy of Sethe Suggs’s murder are crucial for the former slaves to position themselves to, and over eighteen years, different behaviors are depicted toward the event. Oscillating between the individual’s life and the group’s experience, during different moments and involving different people, the freed slaves manage to build a net of communal ties to support Sethe Suggs. In West’s (1994) words, these ties are “forms of life and struggle which embody values of service and sacrifice, love and solitude, discipline and excellence” (24). These communal ties are “strategies for holding the nihilistic threat at bay” (27) and

become “a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people” (29). These ties reach Sethe Suggs’s life when her existence seems to be in danger or in need of help. Like these ties in Linda Brent’s community, they also provide resistance against the past, present, and future atrocities of slavery while empowering and emancipating the community.

Among the free slaves, Stamp Paid, Paul D, Denver, a group of women, and Baby Suggs are at the center of the politics of conversion activated in the community of house 124. The neighbors reflect West’s (1994) view of black leadership. Indeed, Sethe Suggs’s supporters and healers behave like “talented and gifted people”; they embody “a vibrant tradition of resistance”; they assist the “community to hold up precious ethical and religious ideals,” and they ensure “moral commitment” (56-57). West’s conception of black leadership encompasses service, sacrifice, and solidarity, values that empower the community’s resistance to nihilism and slavery. Stamp Paid’s contribution, among others, is to help runaway slaves cross the Ohio River. He finds Sethe Suggs and her newborn Denver and takes them to Baby Suggs’s house. In Kubitscheck’s (1998) view, Stamp Paid “handles the practical aspects of freedom” (123) by helping fugitives and making “sure that families in the area have what they need to survive” (123). Additionally, he tries to persuade Baby Suggs to go on with her ministry of love and to call for the preaching in the Clearing when she is about to give her ministry of love up in order to consider the color of things.

Paul D is Sethe Suggs’s lover who returns after a long period of separation and becomes her healer. Lawrence (2000) observes that “with instinctive compassion, Paul D goes straight to the source to learn of Sethe’s suffering, the network of scars inscribed by Schoolteacher’s nephews that has numbed her entire back” (238). Being

a womanist man, as Morrison portrays him, he does not understand the infanticide, but does not condemn her either. He empathizes with Sethe Suggs's plight, telling her: "you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). This solidarity with his lover derives from his sensible attitudes toward women in general. Morrison depicts him: "there was something blessed in his manner" that makes women weep, "because with him, in his presence, they could" (17). Like the other women, Sethe Suggs also cries with him when, telling him about the stolen milk and the tree on her back. Morrison explains his reaction in a moment of intimacy: "behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, held her breasts up the palm of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (17). Paul D's sensitivity toward his lover echoes Bowers's (2000) impression that "if mothering is at the core of Sethe's identity, feeling is at the core of Paul D's" (217). Morrison also shows Sethe Suggs's comfort in his company. She "trust[s] things and remember[s] things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). However, ironically, Paul D is no longer there when Sethe Suggs is sinking under Beloved's haunting power.

To rescue Sethe Suggs from Beloved's cruelty is, in part, Denver's responsibility. Her participation in the network wishing to protect Sethe Suggs and rescue the mother from Beloved's ghostly spell has to do with personal interest as she is tired of the community's ostracism. She expresses her feelings against her family's exile: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (15). However, when the opportunity comes, she knows what to do and does it. Actually, her contribution to the reintegration of the family into the community

occurs when her mother is totally dependent on Beloved's selfish love, and Denver feels she needs to protect and rescue her mother from her sister. The narrator explains Denver's rescue: "the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (243). And she knows that she has to help them: "Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go and ask somebody for help" (243).

Bowers (2000) describes Denver as "the redemptive figure," who functions "as an intermediary between the spirits and living" (221) and represents the future. Bowers remarks that Denver's "efforts lead to every one's salvation: the reunion of the community" (221-222). Indeed, Denver's responsibility toward her sister and mother not only brings food and comfort to house 124, but also solidarity to the women's group. She goes out for food and brings the women help. Lady Jones, one of the women, symbolizes the communal solidarity, telling Denver "but if you all need to eat until your mother is well, all you have to do is say so" (243). From that day on, food starts to appear on the porch of the house. Later, Denver goes out for work and brings the women help again. They are available and committed to helping those who need help. The women come singing and assemble in front of house 124 because they know about Beloved's ghost presence tormenting the mother. Beloved's presence in the community is complex. Bowers (2000) observes that the girl "is much more than Sethe's resurrected daughter. She is the embodiment of the collective pain and rage of the millions of slaves who died on the Middle Passage and suffered the tortures of slavery" (217). The haunting ghost figure of Beloved mixes the spiritual world with the political world. Like Lee who knows that the

spirituality of “the self within” requires the politics of “the world outside,” like Linda Brent who believes that spirituality vitalizes her quest for freedom, Sethe Suggs’s communication with the spiritual world through Beloved leads her to reunify the community, through these women’s intervention. Their feelings and reactions are mixed between supporting the daughter or the mother. Some women say “you can’t just up and kill your children” (256). Others reply: “No, and the children can’t just up and kill the mama” (256). Furman (1996) analyzes the relationship established between Sethe Suggs and Beloved and believes that the mother’s vulnerability under her daughter emanates from the same “thick love” that led her to resist Schoolteacher. Furman adds: “the love that gives Sethe courage in the woodshed and bitter triumph over Schoolteacher and slavery make her vulnerable to the manipulations of a ghost child” (82). Fortunately, Sethe Suggs’s vulnerability is recognized and redeemed by the community’s solidarity, represented in the women’s support.

Against Sethe Suggs’s “thick love” that kills or destroys, saves or protects, Stamp Paid, Denver, and the women give visible and concrete evidence of the precious values among them, symbolizing the kind of love ethic they share. The strong love ethic contributes greatly to the establishment of the politics of conversion in the community of house 124. However, the greatest and most invigorating manifestation of the community’s love ethic is recognized in Baby Suggs’s extraordinary figure and enormous emotional and racial stature. As such, she repeats and revises Aunt Marthy’s empowering presence in Linda Brent’s self-valuation. She also echoes Lee’s development of spirituality and humanity through a spiritual life. Through spirituality, but especially through the collective leadership she embodies in

her preaching at the Clearing, Baby Suggs unites the former slaves, gives them emotional and racial orientations, guides their resistance against slavery and offers them an effective strategy for self-empowerment. She preaches and proclaims that love, self-love, solidarity, protection, and companionship can bind them together. She also presents service, sacrifice, discipline, and excellence as the qualities that can strengthen the group. Her preaching invigorates the community and is an example of collective empowerment that both fortifies and gives meaning to Sethe Suggs's self-valuation and lies deeply in their hearts. These words below perhaps best sum up Baby Suggs's commitment to the community: "More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize" (89). Corey (2000) observes that Baby Suggs "proclaimed the healing power of the body in her preaching and produced it on Sethe" (40). The mother-in-law focuses "on the physical body," Bowers (2000) suggests, "as an important site in the process of transforming identity" (40).

The net of ties that is managed to protect and rescue Sethe Suggs does not only involve free black men and women but also white people. Therefore, it is at the same time a bigendered and a biracial enterprise. As it happens in the politics of conversion activated by the slaves in *Incidents*, the success of the politics of conversion reached by the community of former slaves at house 124 is a victory supported by biracial experiences. This same contribution of blacks and whites, women and men, is also visible in Lee's quest for the community "of the spirit" in her preaching. Besides Stamp Paid, Paul D, Denver, a group of women, and Baby Suggs, white people like the Garners, the Bodwins, and Amy are also important

supporters. Interactions of black women and men with white women and men produce an empowering politics of conversion. It associates black womanism with what West (1993) prescribes for the catalyst African American who believes that the solution for America's race problem requires the contributions of different races. West explains the double consciousness that energizes the black community with black and white elements, suggesting that the future of both the black individual and community "lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent nor a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation and insurgent transformation of this black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world" (85).

In fact, the white contribution to this "better world" comes through the Garners. They are the former owners of Sweet Home whose administration is far better than Schoolteacher's. Mr. Garner does not treat his slaves as animals or property: "now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of them. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one" (10). This positive attitude is also manifested in his wife's participation in Sethe Suggs's marriage to Halle and in his decision to allow Halle to buy his mother Baby Sugg's freedom. Similarly, Mr. Garner's relationship to Baby Suggs seems to be based on mutual respect, a feeling that is expressed when he takes her to work for the Bodwins and brags about his courtesy to the slaves, in general, and to Baby Suggs, in particular. He asks her in front of the Bodwins: "tell em, Jenny. You live any better on any place before mine?" (146). And she answers: "no, sir. No place."

Like the Garners the Bodwins dispense humane attitudes to slaves, in general, and to Baby Suggs, in particular. First, the Bodwins are against slavery and do not

have slaves. Sister Bodwin expresses the family's reaction to slavery: "we don't hold with slavery, even Garner's kind." Janey, the black woman who works for the Bodwins, tells Denver, who appears at the house for a job, years later, they are good white folks: "they good. Can't say they ain't good. I wouldn't trade them for another pair" (255). They hire Baby Sugg's washing and in return for her work they offer her a house to stay in. It is the house at 124 Bluestone Road. As Mr. Bodwin accepts to offer a job to Baby Suggs he also decides, years later, to hire Denver when she needs a job to help her mother. Particularly important is the idea that, though these white people show sympathy to slaves and freed blacks and treat them humanely, they have nevertheless benefited from slavery and all its attendant atrocities.

Both the Garners' and the Bodwins' participation in the former slaves' politics of conversion is processed indirectly through what they do to Baby Suggs, and to Denver. Amy's contribution is directly connected with Sethe Suggs's life and eventual escape. In fact, Amy is also a runaway who is escaping from a violent family when she meets Sethe Suggs. She is going to Boston to "get myself some velvet. Carmine. You don't even know about that, do you? Now you never will" (80). In her way to her color, she turns to be Sethe Suggs's healer. For Peach (1995) "the two main healers in the novel, Baby Suggs and Amy, are women" (103) whose assistance is addressed to Sethe Suggs or her family. As a healer, Amy nurses the terrifying wounds on Sethe Suggs's back and feet, helps her deliver Denver, carries her to the banks of the Ohio river and puts her under Stamp Paid's protection. Her healing help gives her an immense self-pride when she tells Sethe Suggs: "but you made it through. Come down here, Jesus, Lu made it through. That's because of me. I'm good at sick things" (82). For Corey (2000) Amy's spiritual energies are her

“healing power of physical touch,” expressed through her rubbing “Sethe’s bruised and torn feet” (40). Amy’s white womanist solidarity saves Sethe Suggs’s life and helps her to arrive at the house at 124 Bluestone Road.

The final resolution of the politics of conversion is an integration of Sethe Sugg’s family with a group of black women within the larger community of Bluestone Road. Morrison describes the moment when the women collide. This represents the communal fusion and Sethe Suggs’s integration in it. The narrator goes on: “now she [Sethe Suggs] running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people” (261). Conner (2000) sees this “hill of black people” as the integration of the individual self within the group: “the individual self is restored; the individual is reconciled with the community; the community is regenerated” (71). For him, “the concluding tone is one of peace, hope, survival and love” (71). And Paul D’s last words seem to affirm Conner’s views. Talking to Sethe Suggs, after having come back to her, Paul D celebrates hope in a better future for both of them: “Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). However, the narrator refuses to commit herself totally to both Connor’s celebratory tone and Paul D’s happy-ending-like expectations. Adding uncertainty to Paul D’s lover’s haunting story, which he and the black women seem to have assimilated, the narrator prudently warns us that “this is not a story to pass on” (175), a warning that still reflects the dialogical ties of love and nihilism in African American experience.

FIVE

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION IN MORRISON'S *SULA*

But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments and analyses; it is tamed by love and care.

Cornel West (1994, 29)

Linda Brent's preservation of hope and meaning and Sethe Suggs's affirmation of self-love and the love of others have sustained and nurtured the black community's politics of conversion in *Incidents* and *Beloved*. West's (1994) words above address Morrison's (1973) *Sula*, as well as the two previous books already discussed, and make the novel's politics of conversion effective in its intention to tame nihilism and its devastating effects upon black people. He states that "nihilism is not overcome by arguments and analyses; it is tamed by love and care" (29). From his perspective, though important, arguments or analyses are not judged as effective as love and care to hold "the nihilistic threat at bay" (27) or to beat it. Love and care empower black people's experience and are present in the kind of politics of conversion activated by the black community of the Bottom, in *Sula*.

Love and care are the healing qualities that Morrison personally acknowledges in her novel's characters. In an interview with Stepto (1976) she states that when she wrote *Sula* she "was interested in making the town, the community, the neighborhood, as strong as a character" (11). She notes that the community becomes

“this life-giving” and “very strong sustenance” to its people. She points out that these qualities are “the responsibilities of the neighborhood” (11) toward those who depend on it. She observes that the group’s concerns are required

So that people were taken care of, looked up or whatever. If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they needed something to eat, other people took care of them; if they were old, other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them, or related their madness or tried to find out the limits of their madness. (11)

Morrison’s emphasis on the group’s protection in *Sula* is also present in Lee’s spiritual narrative, especially during her periods of illness, as well as in the community’s help in Linda Brent obtaining her freedom and in the neighborhood’s contribution to Sethe Suggs’s rescue from *Beloved*. As a result, the literary self-reflexiveness of the African American literary tradition is reaffirmed here again through the iterating of collective and individual displays of love and care. Self-reflexiveness is reclaimed among these four African American texts because hope and meaning, self-love and the love of others, care and love are not only common experiences of black people, but they signify on each other.

As “tropological revision or repetition and difference” (88), Gates’s (1988) concept of signification makes literary self-reflexiveness possible because, as he suggests, “one text signifies upon another” (88). As a result, *Sula* signifies on *Beloved*, which signifies on *Incidents*. The links interconnecting these three black texts elaborate a triple textual conversation by means of which three black collectivities are matched: the group of slave women in Dr. Flint’s plantation, the

Bluestone Road neighborhood of ex-slaves women and the community of African American women in the Bottom. Therefore, the self-reflexiveness signaling the triple textual conversation mainly mirrors the experiences of catalytic individual women like Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace but is amplified to the collective action of the distinct black communities to which these three women belong.

While depicting female individual and collective empowerment, the three black texts studied so far communicate on various levels. The texts talk in the way Jacobs and Morrison rearticulate “the exact voice of the Black women” (1-2), as Cooper (1892) claims. In so doing, they rearrange Washington’s (1975) claim that “the main preoccupation of the Black woman writer” must be addressed to “the Black woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity” (x). Their mutual talk displays a kind of self-reflexiveness involving the slave narrative, neo-slave narrative, and novel. *Incidents* (a slave-narrative) and *Beloved* (a neo-slave narrative) propose black experiences depicting a hybrid duality interweaving both the inhumanity of slavery and the humanity of the slave and freed women. In other words, as articulated by the institutionalized inhumanity of slavery, nihilism determines “the initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World” (23). Besides, the talk evinces a black existence portraying a hybrid duality that involves both the interests of the collectivity and the wishes of individuality. In *Beloved* and *Sula*, both collectivity and individuality contribute with greater or less responsibility, to “the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people” (30), on the one hand, and to the soothing of people’s wounds, on the other.

Self-destruction and self-rehabilitation mark *Incidents*, *Beloved*, and *Sula*, in a peculiar way. They may generate harmony or disruption between individuality and collectivity. In Jacobs's text, though a minor conflict occurs between Linda Brent and her grandmother concerning the granddaughter's sexual association with Mr. Sands, black experience depicts a clear harmony between individual and group values. Integration of the individual within the community, like the one provided by Linda Brent and her group of slaves, is celebrated by Morrison (1984) as crucial for the survival of both the individual and the group. She formulates such a fusion in the way "an artist could have a tribal or a racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). While Linda Brent is seen as the artist who fuses herself with the community of slaves with whom she lives, both Sethe Suggs and Sula Peace establish a disruptive relationship with their communities. In so doing, they fit Morrison's (1984) acknowledgment of conflict involving the individual and the group. A conflict that she sees not as a problem but as a mode of life that separates the public from the individual life.

As far as conflicts between individuality and collectivity are concerned, *Beloved* and *Sula* both approximate and, at the same time, are different from the harmony that goes between Linda Brent and her group as portrayed in *Incidents*. In *Beloved*, this disharmony is later defeated as we have seen in the previous chapter, and as a result, Sethe Suggs's integration into the community appears to be reestablished. Therefore, the novel also dramatizes the harmony between an individual and the group. As a result, Sethe Suggs becomes a potential communal artist who may certainly embody "a tribal or a racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). Because she is the living embodiment of a renewed "racial

sensibility,” marked by her personal rememory of the destructive, but also redemptive, past, she becomes a catalyst in the community. Paul D’s wish “we need some kind of tomorrow” (273) alludes to Sethe Suggs’s role in the expression of this new communal life, guided by the balance between critical forgetfulness and healing recollection. In *Sula*, however, the individual and the group seem to accept the inevitability of mutual and reciprocal disruption, which places Sula Peace and the Bottom community in antagonistic positions. While Sethe Suggs’s reintegration into the community echoes Linda Brent’s harmony with her group, Sula Peace’s rupture with the Bottom residents distances itself from Linda Brent. However, for Sula Peace there exists the possibility of integration with the group through somebody else. Indeed, Sula Peace’s separation from her community seems to be somehow overcome by Nel Wright’s spiritual awakening and embodiment of both her friend’s individuation and the Bottom’s collectivity.

Atkinson (2000) suggests that signification is “didactic and inclusive” (17), so the politics of conversion articulated in *Beloved* acknowledges the signification of the politics of conversion negotiated in *Sula*. This acknowledgment manifests itself in the methodological apparatus. The analysis of the politics of conversion in the black Bottom community encapsulates the five previously mentioned elements: (1) the antagonizing setting is the Bottom’s collective love ethic that is activated against Sula Peace’s individual wish to “make herself;” (2) the antagonizing agent is Eva Peace, for she encompasses the group’s values, which she employs against her granddaughter’s individuality; (3) the supporting agent Nel Wright supports Sula Peace’s quest for individuality culminating in identifying with her friend’s struggle and personality; (4) the purpose of Sula Peace’s quest for individuality is “to make

herself;” (5) Finally, the outcome, or achievement, of the politics of conversion guarantees a temporary empowerment of the Bottom community, which is later destroyed due to its inability to reconcile individual and group energies.

The Antagonizing Setting: The Bottom Community

In the texts discussed here the antagonizing setting behaves as the social environment whose forces and dynamics are organized in order to prevent the individual woman from satisfying her self-valuation. These forces and dynamics are the values or behaviors that the group prescribes for those who, with no other alternative, live under its oppressive gaze. Being articulated by external or internal rules, the antagonizing setting is the enemy against which the individual woman struggles on her way to accomplish her individuality.

Both *Incidents* and *Beloved* identify the antagonizing setting with slavery, that is, with the external enemy of two individual women. Slavery articulates its damaging values of wealth, property, and religion to commodify Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs and, consequently, inundates their lives, as Andrews (1997) explains, with “the conditions of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation” (668). Indeed, as it is exemplified by both Dr. Flint and Schoolteacher, slavery functions as “a kind of hell on earth” (668) from which Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs successfully manage to escape with help from their support groups. Unlike *Incidents* and *Beloved*, which associate the enemy of slave women with the institution of slavery, *Sula* circumscribes the antagonizing setting to the black community itself, that is, to an internal rival. On one hand, *Sula* echoes both

Incidents and *Beloved* because, it also has an antagonizing setting, but on the other, it rearranges the two previous works because it also has an antagonizing setting is no longer slavery but the black community that is unable to deal properly with Sula Peace's self-valuation and individuality because of its fixed values.

In *Sula*, the antagonizing community of the Bottom is associated with a joke about how a white master fools a black servant. Instead of giving the slave "a piece of bottom land," (5) promised as a reward for the good work, he gives the servant an unfertile hilly plot saying "when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven – best land there is" (5). In her analysis of the novel, Feng (1998) remarks that the superficial laughter of the joke "disguises deep racial tension" (89) that brings consequences to the community. She observes that "the lives of the Bottomites, especially Nel's and Sula's, are overshadowed by the residue of this original 'loss'" (89). Despite the laughter upon the Bottomites and their self-laughter, a sense of shame is also derived from the joke. Bouson (2000) remarks that "the racial shaming that begins with the 'nigger joke' played in the black founder of the Bottom community is perpetuated in the shaming-ridden and driven life" (49) of many Bottom people, but is especially visible in Jude Green. Despite the haunting presence of the joke, the Bottom community, as Powell (2000) observes, becomes "a world which revolves around a black cultural center" and, thus, is "governed by the black mythology" (52). This "black cultural center" or "black mythology" behaves as the antagonizing setting that plots against Sula Peace's self-valuation and its fixed values of family and marriage stability, solidarity and companionship, and intraracial sexual intercourse. Communal values like familial responsibility of children and parents, interpersonal ties and sexual

relationships within black race are highly valued and rewarded. These values represent the community expectations. They are behavioral guidelines that create a collective code of how members are expected to live. Disobedience may occur, but it is controlled as much as possible.

In the context of strict communal surveillance, Sula Peace's self-valuation and strong individuality may be seen as an example of individual rejection of the group values. It is based on the inevitable conflicts between its own expectations and Sula Peace's self-valuation. This rivalry is expressed in Kubitscheck's (1998) remarks: "Sula consults only her own feelings and disregards all community expectations. Confrontations between these ideas of how to live generate most the rest of the plot" (52). Sula Peace's disrespect of collective interests in order to privilege individual aspirations is crucial in the novel. Morrison (1984) herself does not criticize the disharmony that may occur between the individual and the group. On the contrary, she justifies the conflict, saying, "the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects" (339), i.e., public and private life. In the conflict, Sula Peace fails, as Powell (2000) remarks that she shows "inability to create herself a true sense of self-worth" (53). However, Sula Peace's personal failure is somehow neutralized by her friend Nel Wright. In a sense, Nel Wright wins for her friend. Gillespie and Kubitscheck (2000) acknowledge this success noting that "years after Sula's death, Nel feels her presence and makes a crucial step toward authenticity" (86-87). They observe that "the emotional connections between Sula and Nel (...) do not exist in isolation but in a community" (87-88). As a result, through Nel Wright's stable integration within the group, Sula Peace's individual affirmation finds its place in the Bottom.

Indeed, the Bottom has its values, and Sula Peace refuses to follow them in her quest for self. Why does the Bottom community follow such a strict, and why does Sula Peace disregard it? An answer to the first question lies in the features Morrison creates for the Bottom community. This community finds its racial roots its black ancestors, and in Southern rural culture and traditions. Willis (1985) explains that Morrison's fictional creation of this black community coincides with that of other black women writers. The common trace of the black community in many black women writers' texts is the cultural reservoir of the rural South. Thus, the Bottom community is similar to Linda Brent's and Sethe Suggs's black communities. However, if critically ranked, the Bottom occupies a more developed black community than the other two. That is, although the group of slaves in *Incidents* cannot be considered a community in the strictest sense, it already experiences some of the characteristics of the more established Bottom community. In fact, Linda Brent's group of slaves have their autonomy and interests somewhat determined by the slave system and by the rules stipulated by Dr. Flint. Compared with Linda Brent's group of slaves, Sethe Suggs's group, in *Beloved*, is more developed community. House 124 and the black community of Bluestone Road are different from Sweet Home but are continually threatened by the haunting presence of slavery, as represented by Schoolteacher and Beloved. People's autonomy and self-determination, then, result from internal forces, not being directly influenced by external agents but rather distant from the stability they have already reached in the Bottom.

As the "reservoir of culture," the Bottom fits in Willis's (1985) analysis of the contemporary black women writers' interests in community:

Contemporary black women writers tend to associate the existence of community with their mothers' generation, while they see themselves struggling and writing against the devastating influence of late capitalist society, particularly as it erodes the cultural identity of black people, replacing cultural production with commodity consumption. (214)

The writers' nostalgic association of fictional community with their mothers' experiences of actual community seems to suggest that both a wish for the preservation of traditional values and a desire to activate barriers against the erosion of black racial identity caused by capitalist consumption are required. Willis's (1985) views of black women writers' defense of cultural identity and production against capitalist dilapidation finds similarities in West's (1994) description of the black community. Like Willis, West refers to the ancestral community:

The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. (23-24)

Willis's black "cultural identity" and West's black "cultural armor" are the ingredients that fortify the emotional and racial ties among black people and,

therefore, prepare them both to resist “commodity consumption” and “to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness” (24).

Like Willis’s and West’s emphasis on black cultural vitality, Morrison’s (1984) focus on the cultural density and ancient tribal habits of the black community points out the required presence of blackness:

We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. (340)

As the Bottom community fits the black cultural energies prescribed by Willis, West and Morrison for the black community, we see a gap between the community’s strict code and Sula Peace’s individual and personal interests. To use Willis’s and West’s words, the Bottom community depicts “the cultural identity of black people” and portrays “cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities,” to which Sula Peace does not seem to belong. As the cultural energies of the community are based on collective interests, they conflict with Sula Peace’s individual expectations, as illustrated by highly assertive sentence, “I want to make myself” (92).

The community values emphasize family and marriage stability, solidarity, companionship, and endogamy. These values are the compass expected to guide Sula Peace’s life in the community. She needs to be controlled because the community fears both what her freedom will bring and the transgression that her way of living represents to everybody in the group. The evil that Sula Peace represents is

denounced when she arrives at the Bottom after a ten-year absence. She is received as an outsider or scapegoat that has to be reincorporated into the community. Morrison shows people's concerned reaction to her arrival: "such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it" (89). Cautious and alert, they watch her enter their community and think of how they can manage her intimidating presence. However, they do not plot any physical harm against her. That is, they do not mean to root out the evil but instead to control it in order to keep the threat at bay. In fact, they believe that their values will create strong barriers against the evil that Sula Peace represents. Morrison describes the community's watchfulness over Sula Peace's presence: "by the time she reached the Bottom, the news of her return had brought the black people out on their porches or to their windows. There were scattered hellos and nods but mostly stares" (91).

This shunning strategy to control Sula Peace and to redimension her self-valuation so that she conforms to their expectations is designed to force her to submit to their values. A stable marriage for raising a family is an important value, but two modalities of marriage are found in the community. One is described by Morrison as "a real wedding, in a church, with a real reception afterward" (80). The other is explained by the author as "the rest just 'took up' with one another" (80). Both kinds of marriage are social events in the novel: "a real wedding, in a church, with a real reception afterward, was rare among the people of the Bottom. Expensive for one thing, and most newlyweds just went to the courthouse if they were not particular, or had the preacher come in and say a few words if they were" (80). Morrison also explains that in an informal wedding "no invitations were sent. There was no need for that formality. Folks just came, bringing a gift if they had one, none if they

didn't" (80). Nel Wright's formal wedding is the evidence that marriage is a value that the Bottom community judges a relevant social event, with its public gathering, celebration. At Nel Wright's wedding, people "danced up in the Bottom on the second Saturday, in June, danced at the wedding" (84). Even Sula Peace shows personal involvement in the friend's wedding. "Sula was no less excited about the wedding. She thought it was the perfect thing to do following their graduation from general school. She wants to be the bridesmaid" (84).

However, marriage is not only a social event to which people go and in which they have some fun and dance, it is also an act of maturity and responsibility. Eva Peace, now a mature and responsible grandmother, is deeply identified with the community's value of family and marriage stability. Her sense of familial concern appears when she advises her granddaughter: "when you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (92). Despite the conventionality of her advice to her granddaughter, Eva Peace's life in the community is full of instigating experiences. She is the woman who is married and abandoned by the womanizing, drunk and abusive husband Boy-Boy, the woman who later abandons the children for eighteen months, who is accused of having sold one of her legs, and who sets fire to her drug-addicted son and kills him. Despite her unconventional existence it seems that Eva Peace is later converted to the values of the community, defends and lives them, and tries to co-opt her granddaughter. However, Sula Peace's refusal to submit indicates that her interests and the interests of her grandmother and the community do not match. Sula Peace defends her individuality: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). The hard conversation between the two women in this respect suggests that the community may accept an unmarried woman if she has

no other alternative, as is the case of both Eva Peace and Hannah Peace (Sula Peace's mother), who is unmarried but "not by choice." And yet, Eva Peace seems unable to accept her granddaughter's position: "ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man" (92). That is, for the grandmother, Sula Peace's marriage seems to be a necessity.

The second value praised by the community is solidarity and companionship. The whole Bottom feels sorry for Eva Peace when people are informed that Sula Peace puts her grandmother in Sunnydale, a place for old people. Morrison describes the angry reaction of the community: "the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach" (112). In the people's curse of Sula Peace's evil attitude against her grandmother, we can see the community concerns with Eva Peace's health and safety. The solidarity toward Eva Peace's discomfort in her senile age is associated with the value of family stability, which suggests that a granddaughter is responsible for her grandmother's safety. Indeed, Nel Wright exemplifies the group's practice of solidarity and companionship that compensates for what Sula Peace lacks. During her visit to Sula Peace, Nel Wright shows solidarity with Eva Peace when she is informed that Sula Peace had put her grandmother at Beechnut, "the home the white church run"(100). Thus, Sula Peace's lack of solidarity to her grandmother is counterbalanced by Nel Wright's sense of solidarity to the old woman. She expresses her disapproval of Sula Peace's attitudes toward the grandmother: "that ain't no place for Eva. All them women is dirt poor with no people at all. Mrs. Wilkens and them. They got dropsy and can't hold their water – crazy as loons. Eva's odd, but she got sense. I don't think that's right, Sula" (100). Emphasizing that the women at Beechnut are poor with no relatives to take care of

them, Nel Wright means that Sula Peace is responsible for Eva Peace's health and safety because she is her only relative. Later, Nel Wright offers help, saying: "let's work out a plan for taking care of her. So she won't be messed over" (101). Another type of communal solidarity to a member takes place when the husband Boy-Boy abandons Eva Peace without money or food. The community then supports her. The Suggs bring her "a warm bowl of peas," "a plate of cold bread," and castor oil for Plum's constipation. Mrs. Jackson gives her milk, which evidences that "people were very willing to help" (32). Later, Mrs. Suggs keeps Eva Peace's three kids when the mother decides to leave the Bottom, only to come back eighteen months later, one leg left, and \$10,000 richer. Eva Peace builds a big house, which becomes a shelter for single and wed homeless people, especially children like the Deweys. Morrison describes Eva Peace's solidarity: "among the tenants in that big old house were the children Eva took in. Operating on a private scheme of preference and prejudice, she sent off for children she had seen from the balcony of her bedroom or whose circumstances she had heard about" (37).

The Bottom community also expresses solidarity with Nel Wright and other wives when Sula Peace takes Jude Green from his wife and the husbands of other women. People then say that Sula "was a bitch" (112). Because they see Sula Peace's way of loving men an evil and destructive thing, they condemn her. People compare Sula Peace's affairs with her mother's and decide that Hannah Peace's love is evilless because "her flirting was sweet, low and guileless (42). Men themselves seem to be very protective and understanding in relation to Hannah's way of dispensing her love to them. They never gossip about her, on the contrary, they

“defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill” (45).

Finally, the community of the Bottom defends endogamy. This value is expressed in the men’s condemnation of Sula Peace’s sleeping with white men. For them this is the evil “for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion” (112). The community judges this as one of the biggest sins a member can commit. As Morrison writes, this is “the route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away” (112). Because this infraction was condemned as the most damaging evil, people tried to exorcize both the evil and the evil doer, when they heard about it. Morrison expresses people’s reaction, saying, “it made the old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her – just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her (112-113). Their inflexible reaction to her sin does not take place because Sula Peace’s affront seems to be the only case of a black sleeping with a white – in fact, it is not. The reaction represents what interracial dating. “They insisted,” Morrison writes, “that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did (113). The community does anything necessary to stop the dangerous and malignant effects of Sula Peace’s infraction. They lock their doors and sprinkle “salt on porch steps” (113) to prevent both the woman and her evil from entering their houses. However, they avoid molesting her physically, as they look “at evil stony-eyed and let it run” (113). If Sula Peace’s relationship with white men is judged a sacrilege, Nel Wright’s relationship with Jude and marriage are seen as a

blessing by the Bottom community. Nel Wright and Jude establish the idea of a black couple whose wedding reception is celebrated by the whole community.

Finally, love is a precious value in the Bottom community. It is love that fortifies the other values of family and marriage stability, solidarity and companionship, and endogamy. First, one kind of love that is valorized by the community is the one that involves the family. This kind of love is present in Hannah Peace's question to her mother: "Mama, did you ever love us? (66). And she explains to Eva Peace, surprised by the unexpected question, what she means by love: "I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (78). Eva Peace's answer associates maternal love with responsibility. As a community member who also valorizes love, Eva Peace gives her daughter a sense of love that goes beyond the daughter's notion of love as a mother playing with her kids. Eva Peace's love is pragmatic, related to the mother's crucial duties toward the health, and safety of her children:

Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?
(69)

Like the mothering experiences of Lee, Linda Brent, and Sethe Suggs, Eva Peace's motherhood, Kubitscheck (1998) notes, "rejects the more sentimental aspects of conventional motherhood" (61). Though Eva Peace's pragmatic love

derives from necessity, it is not less intense, as Hannah Peace seems to imply. Because of a difficult life, Eva Peace's love for her children, like that of Lee, Linda Brent, and Sethe Suggs, is based on duty and responsibility rather than on sentimentality. However, this kind of black love is not only associated with Eva Peace's unconventionality but also is extended throughout entire community, depicting, as it does, a similar kind of love. They want to exorcise the kind of evil that is associated with Sula Peace's presence among them. Love for them, then, results from their need to protect themselves against the failing that Sula Peace represents. As they identify Sula Peace not only as "the source of their misfortune," but also "they had leave to protect and love one another" (117). Morrison explains their communal utilitarian love: "they began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-118). The next section focuses on Eva Peace, who performs the role of the antagonizing agent.

The Antagonizing Agent: The Grandmother Eva Peace

The antagonizing settings have their agents, who personify the values of the social group to which they belong or which they represent and act against the individual black woman's self-valuation. In both *Incidents* and *Beloved*, the antagonizing agents embrace the values of slavery – wealth, property, and religion. In Jacobs's text, Dr. Flint functions as the representative of the slave system, who harasses his servant Linda Brent. Likewise, in Morrison's narrative, Schoolteacher abuses his servant Sethe Suggs, both sexually and physically. In their persecution of

slave women, both Dr. Flint and Schoolteacher lower Linda Brent's and Sethe Suggs's humanity down to the level of wealth and property so that they can prey on them.

In *Incidents* and *Beloved*, slavery and its slaveholders articulate the barriers intending to prevent Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs's from accomplishing their wish to protect their children, and reach and keep freedom. In *Sula*, Eva Peace replaces the slaveholders and, thus, works as the antagonizing agent who plays the role of the member who embraces the values of the community of the Bottom. Eva Peace, however, is not the only antagonist in Sula Peace's struggle for self. Like her, other members of the community also play the role of antagonists of Sula Peace's self-valuation, at least momentarily. Hannah Peace, the mother, is one of them, as her comment on her feelings toward the daughter works as an instance of opposing attitude. The mother's comment "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57), overheard by the daughter, marks her profoundly and, somehow, determines her individuality. Sula Peace's reaction reveals a girl, Matus (1998) suggests, "stung, immersed in 'dark thoughts'" (64). Matus goes on, saying, "the comment does affect Sula by clarifying her independence. The moment functions as a turning point for Sula" (64). Like Hannah Peace, Nel Wright also behaves as a temporary antagonist to Sula Peace's personhood. Two events reflect their conflicts. First, when Nel Wright criticizes her friend's decision to put her grandmother in Sunnydale (a nursing home) by saying, "I don't think that's right, Sula" (100). The second event happens when Nel Wright accuses her friend of having slept with her husband Jude Green, "what did you take him for if you didn't love him and why didn't you think about me" (144).

Like Hannah Peace and Nel Wright's antagonizing attitude toward Sula Peace's self-love, Eva Peace's antagonism is temporary. Unlike both Dr. Flint and Schoolteacher, who, as representatives of the slave system, work as the external enemy of Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs, Eva Peace acts as the enemy of Sula Peace inside the community. However, Morrison provides Eva Peace with a deeply complex role. Though she antagonizes her granddaughter's quest for self, Eva Peace's story and Sula Peace's life show confluent elements. They both reveal unconventional personalities and behaviors. Feng (1998) argues that "the grandmother and granddaughter, although with mutual dissatisfaction, share very much the same story. Both Eva and Sula commit self-mutilation. They both murder black males and are abandoned by their men. Both of them disappear from the Bottom mysteriously and return suddenly" (84). Despite their similar extraordinary unconventionality, they diverge in their relations with the group. While Sula Peace disrupts to favor self-valuation, the grandmother embraces the values of family and marriage stability, solidarity, companionship, love and endogamy and, thus, approaches Lee, Aunt Marthy, and Baby Suggs in the way they encapsulate communal values, especially those related to black womanhood. Like the three black women, Matus (1998) notes, Eva Peace is "a woman of action" (67). She is "the abandoned wife and mother who survives" (67), "she faces, and overcomes enormous obstacles" (67).

The "enormous obstacles" Eva Peace has to overcome are not different from those Lee, Aunt Marthy, and Baby Suggs face. They are related to the mother's responsibility to her children and to the woman's concerns with her community. Awiakta's (1995) defines the features of the black grandmother, who reveals "status

as a preserver of her extended family and the race, a communicator of heritage, lore, and wisdom, and a source of spiritual strength” (363). Eva Peace conforms to the grandmother’s role but also brings unconventionality to it. As Sula Peace’s grandmother, Eva Peace lives an unconventional life marked by her facing and overcoming obstacles. Her unconventionality is sustained by the “both-and” duality that fuses good intentions and wickedness, which Otten (1993). In an interview given Stepto (1994) Morrison notes that in her duality, “she’s god-like, she manipulates – all in the best interest” (16). Eva Peace’s dialectic finds its roots in the community values of the Bottom. Initially, her embrace of family and marriage stability is reflected in her marriage to Boy-Boy and her responsible dedication to their three children – Pearl, Plum, and Hannah. After a sad five-year marriage, Boy-Boy leaves Eva Peace because, Morrison explains, “he did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (32). Without money or food she feels desperate but does not desert her children. Morrison describes her despair:

When he left her in November, Eva had \$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry. (32)

However, despair and the threat of starvation do not paralyze her, on the contrary, they compel her to the action that solves her problem. In fact, Eva’s experience of family and marriage stability is a mixture of a strange, despairing, and devastating

kind of love for her family. Like Jarena Lee, Linda Brent, and Sethe Suggs, Eva Peace abandons and separates those whom she loves and protects. This love is present in her desperate decision to leave her three kids with Mrs. Suggs and come back eighteen months later with \$10,000 – probably the price she gets for the missing leg. People in the community wonder what happened to her leg and how she got the money. Morrison echoes the collective gossip saying that “somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000” (31). As a result, like Aunt Marthy and Baby Suggs, Eva Peace manages to provide emotional and financial support for her family.

Eva Peace’s practice of unconventional acts of family stability initiates with self-sacrifice and self-mutilation, but later it culminates in the sacrifice and mutilation of her son Plum. Her burning Plum is as intense and dramatic as the loss of leg for the family’s benefit. Her destructive attitude toward her son is even more intense than the community’s behavior toward Sula Peace and the evil they believe she represents. Unlike Eva Peace, the community controls the evil effects without destroying the evil doer, but Eva Peace believes that she can only destroy evil by eliminating the person who personifies it. Plum is the evil doer and the drugs are the evil. Eva Peace believes she will kill both if she burns her son. One night she goes to his room, and Morrison describes the moment of maternal tenderness: “Eva held him closer and began to rock. Back and forth she rocked him, her eyes, wondering around his room” (46). Later, when he is sleeping, she sets him on fire:

Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw

it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the *whoosh* of flames engulfed him, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey to the top of the house. (48)

Later, when Hannah, in Eva Peace's room, tells the mother that Plum is burning, Eva Peace's reaction seems to be the reaction of the mother who knows that the tragedy could not be avoided. She just responds to her daughter's words, saying: "is? My baby? Burning?" (48)

How different from, or how similar to, Sethe Suggs's killing of Beloved is Eva Peace's murder of her addicted son? Is Eva Peace's love for her family as thick as Sethe Suggs's for her children? Bouson (2000) examines the scene and suggests that Eva Peace can no longer stand Plum's weakness, "a soldier in World War I who returned to the Bottom a heroin addict," who had difficulty in his birth and "was trying to return to her womb" (58). Bouson concludes: "an object of shame, the adult Plum was weak, contemptible and dirty" (58). Between similarities and differences, Sethe Suggs's and Eva Peace's treatment of their children evidence the indeterminacy, hybridity, and ambiguity that go between nihilism and love like theirs. Otten (1993) analyzes horrific kinds of love in Morrison's novels and argues that through depicting unconventional motherhood, "Morrison defies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character and action" (651). He explains that Morrison's characters associate virtue with flaw, good intentions with wickedness. Thus, Eva Peace's burning of Plum, Otten suggests, is "an ironic act of compassion" (652) and "manifests another kind of 'indeterminant' love that defies simplistic moralistic judgment" (654). A question still remains: are these nihilistic or

loving acts? If they are nihilistic acts, West (1994) finds an explanation for them saying that they can be measured as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important) lovelessness” (22-23). However, if they are acts of unconventional love, Morrison’s explanation might fit better: “all about love (...) people do all sorts of things under its guise. The violence is distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do. Within the best intentions in the world we can do enormous harm, enormous harm” (652).

Eva Peace’s unconventional life dictates the kind of love she offers to her children. In fact, her love, as unconventional as her life, may be called a pragmatic love because it derives from a mother’s duty and responsibility to the health and safety of her kids. In its pragmatics, it involves providing food for their hunger nursing their ills. Hannah Peace’s sentimental view of motherhood questions her own mother’s love as shown when the daughter Hannah Peace asks, “mamma, did you ever love us” (67), Eva Peace reacts with another question: “Well? Don’t that count? Ain’t that love?” (69) Hannah Peace insists on probing this further and says: “I was talkin’ ‘bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?” (68). Due to all the financial difficulties, Boy-Boy’s desertion from her life and her children’s illnesses, in 1895, there was no time for games, not even with her children. She explains to her daughter:

I’m talkin’ ‘bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets. (...) Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over

your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love
 tou girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or
 what is that between your ears, heifer? (69)

Being based on motherly pragmatism, Eva Peace's type of love keeps both her children's physical and moral health. When Plum's moral health is in danger Eva Peace uses an unconventional kind of love in order to save him by killing him. She justifies her act to Hannah Peace, believing that she could not have acted differently. "I done everything I could (...) to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (72).

Eva Peace dwells between two conflicting facets of her love toward her family: physical destruction and salvation. These two contradictory attitudes reveal the complexities of her sense of motherhood. Bergenholtz (1999) remarks that "distorting the responsibilities of motherhood, Eva murders her son" (12) and, "literally, takes a free fall in an attempt to save her daughter" (12). Besides family and marriage stability, Eva Peace also embraces another communal value: solidarity and companionship. Kubitscheck (1998) also acknowledges Eva Peace's social responsibility as the basis of solidarity and companionship: "she becomes the mother to most of the Bottoms, renting part of her large house to lodgers, supervising newlywed women's cooking for their husbands and taking orphans" (56). Her big house becomes a social center for the Bottomites. Powell (2000) remarks that she "becomes a connective force in the community, her traditional goodness a generative force for those around her" (77). Her involvement is visible in her decision to build a

house for the homeless, but her solidarity and companionship seems to be especially addressed to the three Dewey boys. She shows a definite preference for homeless children. Morrison describes these children: “they come with woolen caps and names given to them by their mothers and grandmothers, or somebody’s best friend. Eva snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names. She looked at the first child closely, his wrists, the shape of his head and the temperament that showed in his eyes and said, “well. Look at Dewey. My my mymy” (37). She decides to call the other two boys who are later brought to her house Dewey too. In fact, though they are given the same name, they have different skin color: the first is deep black, the second light-skinned, and the third chocolate. Her inclination to family and marriage stability in the Bottom community is manifested by her concerns for the women tenants to prepare their husbands’ supper and iron their shirts:

She fussed interminably with the brides of the new wed couples for not getting their men’s supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc. “Yo’ man be here direc’lin. Ain’t it ‘bout time you got busy? (42)

Eva Peace’s unconventional way to encapsulate the community values turns her into a “god-like” woman. Interviewed by Stepto (1994), Morrison states that she “plays god, names people and, you know, (...) and she is very, very possessive about other people, that is, as a king is” (16). Like a king, she administers the communal values to her own family and others, thus establishing the rupture with her granddaughter Sula Peace. Kubitscheck (1998) explains that “Eva does not advocate her own unconventionality for other women, and in fact calls Sula selfish for not wanting to marry” (56) and have children. The granddaughter reacts to the

grandmother's wish: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92), which not only marks the conflict between them but also indicates, as Kubitscheck suggests, that "Eva and Sula are linked by their energy and independence" (56). Eva Peace seems to want to control Sula Peace's individuality, by passing judgment on the granddaughter. For example, she expresses her feelings toward Sula Peace's arrival, which was preceded by the plague of robins: "I might have knowed them birds meant something" (91). Like the Bottom community Eva Peace associates her granddaughter with evil, the evil that disappears for ten years, that does not send any message, that is terribly disrespectful of the grandmother. Their conflict culminates when Eva Peace accuses the granddaughter: "don't talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach" (93). In response, Sula Peace threatens her grandmother: "maybe I'll just tip on up here with kerosene and – who knows – you may make the brightest flame of them all" (94). However, later, the threat becomes real when she puts Eva Peace in Sunnydale and takes possession of the house.

The Supporting Agent: The Friend Nel Wright

In the politics of conversion, both the antagonizing setting and agent play the specific role of confronting the individual community member in order to prevent her from accomplishing self-valuation. However, in her quest for self-valuation, the individual is never alone; indeed, she is helped by the supporting agent, a woman whose role is to be at the side of the individual supporting her self-valuation. In both *Incidents* and *Beloved*, the supporting agent embraces the values of the black

community – family and marriage stability, solidarity and companionship, and endogamy and activates them in favor of an individual member so that she can fight obstacles. In Jacobs's slave narrative, Aunt Marthy functions as the representative of the slave community who decides to offer her black cultural vitality so that her granddaughter Linda Brent is capable of facing Dr. Flint's harassment and eventually escape with her children to freedom. Similarly, in Morrison's neo-slave narrative, the preacher Baby Suggs supports Sethe Suggs's decision to confront Schoolteacher. Both Aunt Marthy and Baby Suggs humanize Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs so that they can resist and conquer nihilistic threats.

In *Sula*, the damaging actions of both the antagonizing setting and agent are countered, in their devastating effects upon Sula Peace's quest for self, by the presence of Nel Wright who functions as the major supporter of Sula Peace's self-valuation and individuation. Other neighbors also participate in Sula Peace's quest for self on more affirmative grounds than Hannah Peace and Eva Peace – Chicken Little, Ajax, and Shadrack. In a certain way, these men represent attitudes that approach some kind of support. Although Chicken Little's relationship with Sula Peace ends in his tragic death, their friendship lets them spend time together. She teases him for his picking his nose and teaches him to climb trees, following "the boy, steadying him, when he needed it, with her hand and her reassuring voice" (60). His accidental death happens when she is swinging him "outward then around and around" (60) and he slips from her hands into the water. Chicken Little's friendship for Sula Peace starts when she is becoming friends with Nel Wright. Ajax offers Sula Peace the chance of loving a man who really cares for her. The narrator reveals his romantic concerns: "he came regularly then, bearing gifts (...). Ajax was very

nice to women" (125), and especially nice to Sula Peace, till he leaves her. As Kubitscheck (1998) notes, Sula "pushes him to trade his independence for traditional domestic security" (57). Shadrack, like Chicken Little and Ajax, represents links to Sula Peace. They first meet on the day Chicken Little drowns, when she runs to his house for help and he nods an "always," thus answering a question she never asked. The narrator comments on Sula Peace's feeling when she faces Shadrack: "always. Had answered a question she had not asked, and its promise licked at her feet" (63). Later, when Sula Peace dies, Kubitscheck (1998) notes, "he does not want to hold his annual parade (...) because he misses her" (59).

Nel Wright's affirming presence in Sula Peace's quest for self is not as temporary as that of Chicken Little, Ajax, or Shadrack. Despite their ups and downs, it is an enduring friendship. Unlike Sula Peace's quest for self, Nell Wright's womanhood-in-relation, Feng (1998) notes, is assisted by her "rootedness in community" (77). Like Lee, Aunt Marthy, and Baby Suggs, Nel Wright functions as the supporting agent who, on one hand, embraces the community values of the Bottom and, on the other, supports Sula Peace who comes into conflicts with it. In fact, as Aunt Marthy does in *Incidents* and Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, Nel Wright in *Sula* represents the black woman who embraces the values of family and marriage stability, solidarity and companionship, and endogamy. As Morrison explains to Stepto (1994), "I wanted Nel to be a warm, conventional woman, one of those people you know are going to pay the gas bill and take care of the children. (...) They like these small tasks and they do them (...). They get the world's works done somehow" (12-13). Unlike Eva Peace, though, she also understands Sula Peace's needs to create herself, something both the community and Sula Peace's grandmother

do not know how to cope with. In fact, considering the conflictual relationship between Sula Peace and the Bottom, Nel Wright fuses two contradictory behaviors: she is able to embrace the community values while supporting Sula Peace's self-valuation. This both-and duality reflects Otten's (1993) view of Morrison's characters' duality that merges virtue with vice, good intentions with wickedness. As for Nel Wright's encapsulation of communal values, Furman (1996) writes that "Nel wraps herself in the conventional mantle of sacrifice, and martyrdom and takes her place with the rest of the women of the community"(25). Sula Peace herself points out the friend's submission to the group: "now Nel was one of them. (...) Now Nel belonged to the town and of its ways" (120). Like Eva Peace, Nel Wright conforms to the interests and values of the community, so she embodies Morrison's (1983) view that the individual reflects the group, represents its cultural vitality, like the artist's art that echoes communal sensibility.

Nel Wright "takes her place with the rest of the women of the community" (25) when she decides to embrace family and marriage stability. Educated by her mother Helene Wright, Nel Wright's conformity to community values and laws seems to be the right track for her to take. Stein (2000) remarks that, in her marriage, "her life becomes one of passive limitation and stagnation" (52). Described by Bouson (2000) as "a pillar of middle-class respectability in the Bottom community" (53), Helene Wright conducts her daughter to social adaptation and conformation, not to individual self-affirmation. This occurs when Nel Wright marries Jude. As Spillers (1999) points out, Helene Wright's denying her daughter education keeps "Nel's young feminine imagination underground, causing the young woman to repress many parts of herself that struggle to emerge as adolescence impinges" (79). As a result,

Nel Wright adapts herself to her mother's project of conventional respectability. Like Eva Peace and other Bottom women, Nel Wright believes in marriage and feels that Jude's interest in her makes her different from Sula Peace, in fact, singularly special. Morrison writes: "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle" (84). In fact, Nel Wright's relationship with Jude provides another dimension to her existence, one more special than her relationship with her friend. Being chosen by Jude makes her feel singular and "this new feeling of being needed by someone" (84), of singularity, is judged by her as superior to her friendship to Sula Peace.

Besides providing this sensation of being special and singular, Nel Wright's acceptance of family and marriage stability reinforces endogamy. She believes that a black man is always worth keeping. Her conversation with Sula Peace about black men's worth in black women's lives seems to confirm that in this particular subject, they disagree:

"I always understood how you could take a man. Now I understand why you can't keep none."

"Is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?"

"They worth keeping, Sula." (143)

Nel Wright implies that marriage has to do with both taking and keeping a man, an opinion with which Sula Peace disagrees, because she would never spend a life

trying to keep a man. In fact, Nel Wright means that her Jude is worth keeping – first, because he is a man and, second because he is black. However, despite her firm belief about the importance of keeping a man, she is unable to keep Jude after Sula Peace sleeps with him. When Jude leaves Nel Wright, she blames her friend for her being abandoned by her husband: “But what about me? What about me? Why didn’t you think about me? Didn’t I count? I never hurt you. What did you take him for if you didn’t love him and why didn’t you think about me? (...) I was good to you, Sula, why don’t that matter?” (144). Nel Wright denounces Sula Peace’s philandering. By sleeping with her friend’s husband, Sula Peace betrays Nel Wright twice: first, for having an affair with Jude whom she does not even love and, second, for disregarding their long friendship. Furman (1996) argues that “Nel and Sula’s estrangement offers Morrison an opportunity to examine women’s lives in and out of marriage” (24). Stein (2000) argues that marriage turns Nel Wright’s life into “one of passive limitation and stagnation” (52), but resistance to marriage makes Sula Peace “the daring, sensuous, active woman, seeking to experience life and her own being to the fullest” (52). Even worse, marriage could be said to cripple Nel Wright, as Reddy (2000) suggests: “that one’s values as a woman is determined by one’s ability to attract a man and then to provide that man with children” (7).

Nel Wright symbolizes the values of family stability and endogamy stipulated by the Bottom for its members. Being married to a black man, Nel Wright can avoid the harsh accusation of having slept with white men, of which Sula Peace is being accused. Morrison expresses the concerns about Sula Peace’s betrayal of her best friend and misbehavior by saying that sleeping with white men is “the route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed out” (112). Nel

Wright's marriage to Jude represents her conformity to the community's expectations. Sula Peace does not conform. After Nel Wright's wedding celebration, Sula Peace leaves the Bottom for ten years and when she comes back she finds a friend who is no longer the old Nel Wright, but a woman who has taken "her place with the rest of women of the community" (25). Feng (1998) elaborates on the two women's conflictual relationships with the community:

Between Nel's and Sula's bifurcated narratives is a seeming opposition between a traditional plot of female development and an unconventional one. Nel embodies the (w)right womanhood and follows a "normal" mode of development for women: her life is absorbed completely by a heterosexual relationship and familial obligations. (...) Conversely, Sula is a female "salt taster" who indulges in dangerous freedom. (78)

Therefore, if these two women's conflicts are based on the community values that Nel Wright embraces but Sula Peace ignores, Nel Wright's support of Sula Peace's self-valuation may be based on their similarities, not differences. Their friendship reveals an association with black womanism, an experience, which Marsh-Lockett (1997) describes as being based on women's reciprocal empowerment and self-affirmation. Kubitscheck (1998) suggests that Nel Wright, "finds in the Peace household, and especially in Sula, a release from her mother's stifling conformity" (57). Nel Wright's support of her friend reveals her association with another community value: solidarity and companionship. Furman (1996) explains their childhood friendship: "as girls Nel and Sula had cunningly authored the dimensions of their own existence without the permission or approval of their

families or the community” (24). Both women show their similarities in the strong wish to be themselves and nobody else. Sula Peace’s inner energies are expressed in her answer to her grandmother who wants to see her granddaughter married, with children, and settled: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). The child Nel Wright’s sense of personhood is visible in her thought, after she visits her grandmother Cecile Sabat in New Orleans. When she returns to the Bottom, she discovers and expresses her sense of self: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (93). Morrison adds: “Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut. ‘Me,’ she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, ‘I want ... I want to be ... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful’” (29).

Although Nel Wright’s statement of individuality is a child’s decision, it becomes the basis for her friendship with Sula Peace. Christian (1999) remarks that “it was her new sense of me-ness that allowed her to cultivate a friend, Sula Peace” (30). Years later, when she visits Sula Peace before she dies, and having forgiven the affair with Jude, Nel Wright reaffirms their long friendship: “we were friends,” (145) to which Sula Peace replies “oh, yes. Good friends” (145). Bouson (2000) echoes the two women’s affirmation of friendship, saying that “Sula and Nel, in Morrison’s description ‘complement’ and ‘support’ each other” (53). In fact, when they first meet as children in the Bottom, they feel “the ease and comfort of old friends” (52), and Morrison adds “their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality” (53). Morrison describes their personalities: “although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger

and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes. Yet there was one time when that was not true, when she held on to a mood for weeks, but even that was in defense of Nel” (53). In defense of herself and her friend, Sula Peace faces the four Irish boys, on their way home from school. As a demonstration of extreme courage and audacity, instead of attacking the boys directly, Sula Peace cuts one of her own fingers and says to them: “if I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (55).

Despite Sula Peace’s courage, the narrator believes that “toughness was not their quality – adventuresomeness was – and a mean determination to explore everything that interested them” (55). Their friendship seems to be fueled by their adventures, a particularly striking example of which is Chicken Little’s death. This tragic accident occurs when the two girls are tree-climbing with Chicken Little, who is accidentally flung into the river and drowns. Morrison writes that “Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outwards then around and around. His snickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank” (61). In vain, Sula Peace walks to Shadrack’s house for help but runs back and collapses in tears. Nel Wright comforts and quiets her: “sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh, sh. Come on, le’s go, Sula. Come on, now. Was he there? Did he see? Where’s the belt to your dress?” (63).

Nel Wright’s and Sula Peace’s mutual friendship and solidarity continue even when Nel Wright marries Jude. Sula Peace is glad to participate in the wedding,

which Morrison describes: “Sula was no less excited about the wedding. She thought it was the perfect thing to do following their graduation from general school. She wanted to be the bridesmaid. No others” (84).

Friendship, solidarity, and companionship continue to unite them, when Sula Peace returns to the Bottom after a ten-year absence. However, the two friends are battling in different sectors: Nel Wright has become a housewife. Dixon (1999) observes that “the relationship between Sula and Nel ruptures when Sula interprets Nel’s possessiveness of her husband, Jude, to mean that Nel is one of them, the conventional housewives of Medallion” (100) (of which the Bottom is a sector). As an outsider Sula Peace sees enemies in the Bottom. Nel Wright has a different perspective:

“Somebody need killin’?”

“Half this town need it.”

“And the other half?”

“A drawn-out disease.”

“Oh, come on. Is Medallion that bad?”

“Didn’t nobody tell you?”

“You been gone too long, Sula.” (96)

Their last encounter occurs under very special circumstances. When Nel Wright visits Sula Peace on her deathbed, their conversation shows that they remain friends but agree to disagree, especially with regard to Jude. Nel Wright accuses her friend: “and you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You have to take him away” (145). Sula Peace reacts: “what you mean take him away? I

didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). Nel Wright's last thought of Sula Peace is articulated when the Bottom is recovering from the inundation. She feels the spiritual presence of the friend. She whispers to herself "Sula (...) all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (174). Her recognition of the other represents how interconnected the two friends have become. Nel Peace's self-in-relation and Sula Peace's self-valuation, finally, become united. Gillespie and Kubitscheck (2000) explain Nel Wright's spiritual insight: "Nel's final synthesis of the two necessary constituents of authentic selfhood, emphatic caring and self-assertion, argues for actual individual growth and potential interdependence among members of a community" (87). Sula Peace's empowering individuality, or self-assertion, is discussed in the next section.

Sula Peace's Purpose: To Make Herself

The antagonizing setting and agent function to defeat the black woman's self-valuation. The supporting agent and the black woman empower the individual woman's struggle against the oppressive limitations imposed by both the antagonizing setting and agent. In *Incidents*, Aunt Marthy supports Linda Brent's decision to defend her chastity against Dr. Flint's harassment and validates her quest for freedom. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs's helpful moral presence in the community validates Sethe Suggs's efforts to defend her children against Schoolteacher's cruelty and provides the emotional basis for her later rescue and reintegration. In *Sula*, the damage caused by both the Bottom community and Eva Peace, the antagonizing setting and agent, are controlled or diminished by Nel Wright's support of Sula

Peace's attempt to be herself. In fact, while Linda Brent struggles for virtue and freedom from slavery and while Sethe Suggs battles for her children's safety and liberty at 124 Bluestone Road, Sula Peace pursues her individuality and independence, which challenges community values. Morrison states in an interview with Stepto (1994) that, unlike Nel Wright who "is the community" and "believes in its values," Sula Peace "does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them" (14). Morrison does not condemn Sula Peace's independence, remarking that her sense of freedom allows her to know "all there is to know about herself because she examines herself, she is experimental with herself, she's perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing" (14).

Sula Peace's defiance of community values echoes Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs's ruptures with their own groups. At least temporarily, Linda Brent disrupts values of the slave community when she has a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, who is white; Sethe Suggs's transgression occurs when she murders her daughter. Despite the differences, these three women embody a sense of black womanhood that is unconventional, therefore, admirable and empowering. Sula Peace's personal sense of womanhood is the basis for the disharmony that she maintains with the Bottom community. Sula Peace's disharmony is even more challenging than that of the other two women because it remains a conflict for her entire life. While Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs are forgiven and reintegrated into the group, Sula Peace's sense of self continues to be rejected by the community even after she dies (in a sense, this is also true of *Beloved* herself). As Feng (1998) points out, Sula Peace's quest for self or experimental life, develops "an unprecedented 'woman-for-self' with antagonistic passion, who loses collective love for the race and community"

(77). Being, in Feng's evaluation, "an incarnation of this disquieting quality in her insatiable artistic curiosity and her disturbing presence" (78), Sula Peace embodies a purpose of self-affirmation, expressed as "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). She wishes to be and to make herself an example of a daring womanhood, which is sustained on an "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" (xi). Indeed, it is her unconventional black womanhood that orchestrates her disharmony with the Bottom. Morrison's (1984) credo acknowledges the valid conflict between the individual and the group. In this respect, Sula Peace follows this credo. Morrison believes that the "conflict between public and private life" should "remain a conflict" because individuality and collectivity "are two modes of life that exist to exclude and annihilate the other." Therefore, she argues, the conflict "should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects" (339).

Sula Peace's affirmation of individuality collides with the Bottom values, which, as we have seen, include family and marriage stability, solidarity, companionship and endogamy. Sula Peace's critical position towards community values certainly results from the kind of black womanhood she is able to develop during her ten-year absence, in which time, she lives in different places but finds boring sameness everywhere. "All those cities," the narrator reports, "held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat. The men who took her to one or another of those places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love" (121). Because of her wish for unconventionality, she is unable to cope with sameness,

especially the sameness of love. In fact, in those cities she meets many men and lovers but does not find a friend. The narrator describes her disappointment: “they taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman” (121). She also discovers that she herself is the kind of friend she is looking for. “There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was” (121). The narrator closes her description of Sula Peace’s quest for self by establishing that “she was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself – be consistent with herself” (119).

Though Sula Peace seems to become more self-conscious during her absence from the Bottom, in fact, her search for individuality starts in childhood. Her individuality finds space to develop in the solitary hours she spends in the attic of her disorderly household as a child, “galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse” (52). Later, three events seem to play an important role. First, Sula Peace’s self-affirmation is influenced by her contact with the threatening white boys who “stood like a gate blocking the path” (54) to her and Nel Wright. Her reaction is daring. She cuts off “the tip of her finger” (54), and threatens them, saying that if she could mutilate herself she could do even worse with them. The second occurs when she overhears her mother Hanna Peace say to some neighbor, “I love Sula. I just

don't like her" (57). The comment hurts her feelings deeply and immerses her "in 'dark thoughts'" (64). A final event is Chicken Little's accidental death.

Years later, when Sula Peace comes back to the Bottom, she is conscious that her affirmative individuality cannot cope with the community's expectations. Her voiced independence, "I want to make myself," is viewed by Furman (1996) as the manifestation of a rebel who has decided to resist "any authority or controls, and Morrison offers her as one of the lawless individuals whose life she is so fond of examining. From Sula's days in childhood when she retreated to the attic, she rebels against conventionality" (26). Her rebellious spirit manifests itself in the way she defies the community values. Initially, she attacks the stability of family and marriage. Both Eva Peace and Nel Wright represent this value. Eva Peace symbolizes family stability through her unconventional love toward her children. She mutilates herself for the family, frees Plum from drug addiction, and tries to save Hannah from burning. As Gillespie and Kubitscheck (2000) remark "Eva has the most capacity for authenticity in care-taking"; she recognizes "her own as well as others' needs" and "dictates the terms of social life in the community," although but "Sula is sufficiently independent to rebuff her prescriptions" (80). Sula Peace first verbally defies her grandmother's authority, saying, "just 'cause you was bad enough to cut off your leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump" (93). And later, she threatens Eva Peace's life, saying, "you know what? Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and – who knows – you may make the brightest flame of them all" (94). Finally, she puts her grandmother in a nursing home and abandons her there.

Sula Peace also defies the communal value of family stability and marriage when she sleeps with Nel Wright's husband Jude. Although they are friends, when Sula Peace sleeps with Nel Wright's husband, she not only defies the injunction but casually disregards their long friendship. She subordinates marriage and friendship to the decision to sleep with a man she finds attractive, but she as easily discards him because she is not interested in keeping a man. When challenged by Nel Wright to keep a man for herself, she asks, "is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?" (143).

Sula Peace defies the values of solidarity and companionship when she decides to put Eva Peace in Sunnydale. Eva Peace's concerns with her family and others symbolize the solidarity and companionship found in the Bottom. She builds a house, which functions as a communal center where people live, share experiences, and find a home. Therefore, people's reaction to Sula Peace's decision to put her grandmother away is to shame and shun her. "They shook their heads," the narrator tells, "and said Sula was a roach" (112).

Sula Peace's sense of womanhood reveals a duality in relation to men. She sleeps with whom she chooses and discards them when she chooses. Her affair with Jude Green exemplifies her lack of emotional commitment. However, in her relationship with Ajax, she tries a more lasting emotional involvement. He visits her regularly, with gifts and the kind of conversation she likes. Morrison explains:

They had genuine conversations. He did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities. Thinking she was possibly brilliant, like his mother, he seemed to

expect brilliance from her, and she delivered. And in all of it, he listened more than he spoke. (127-128)

All this makes her interested in, and enthusiastic for, Ajax because he does not baby or protect her, but sees in her a tough and wise woman. Furman (1996) acknowledges Sula Peace's enthusiasm for Ajax and judges it dangerous for her independence: "only once has she come close to subsuming herself to some other, named Ajax" (26). Later, Sula Peace's interest and enthusiasm for her lover turn into possession and desire for his presence at her side. In an interview, Morrison sees the possibility of Sula Peace's adapting to her community when she is emotionally involved with Ajax. Morrison tells Stepto (1994) "marriage, faithfulness, fidelity; the beloved belongs to one person and can't be shared with other people – that's a community value which Sula learned when she fell in love with Ajax, which he wasn't interested in learning" (15). When he leaves her, she has the feeling that his presence in her life is something that she had created: "perhaps, I made it up" (137). This thought, in fact, restores her independence and makes her me-ness (selfhood) remain intact.

Bouson (2000) argues that "while the narrative condemns Nel's conventionality, it praises Sula's rebelliousness, viewing this trait as a potential source of creativity" (67). Sula Peace's individuality and creativity are the basis of her duality of freedom and sin, of an artist who lacks a medium. Furman (1996) explains the artistic image Morrison creates for her character's self-valuation: "an art form augments life by giving it purpose; perhaps it teaches the individual compassion, but without it someone like Sula is, as Morrison describes her, strange,

naive and dangerous” (27). Otten (1993) goes in the same direction and emphasizes the duality of several Morrison characters, especially Sula Peace, who combine virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness, safety and danger. He writes that, by depicting the undetermined, ambiguous, and hybrid elements, “Morrison defies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character and action” (652).

In her duality, Sula Peace embodies conflictual behaviors toward people. She gives Nel Wright friendship at the same time as she seduces her husband. She is Eva Peace’s granddaughter who threatens to burn her grandmother. She is Hannah Peace’s daughter who watches the mother incinerate her brother but does not help him. Furman (1996) sees, in all these examples, evidence that Sula Peace lacks “the moderating and mediating influence of her own humanity” (27). Besides, her duality is also associated with the community. She lives in the neighborhood but does not honor the communal values. She has a family but dishonors it; she has men but does not marry any of them; she goes to church but disrespects religious beliefs. Morrison describes one of her disrespectful attitudes: “she came to their church suppers without underwear, bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it – relishing nothing, exclaiming over no one’s ribs or cobbler. They believed that she was laughing at their God” (114-115). As a result, she represents the threat that produces community cohesiveness, an outsider the community needs to defend itself against. The neighbors feel that only mutual love may protect them, and so “they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against

the devil in their midst” (117-118). Thus Sula Peace has, ironically, a communally reinforcing role.

Shadrack also portrays hybrid experiences. Sula Peace’s and Shadrack’s duality reveals some similarities, for example, both elaborate instances of individuality and independence. Shadrack also does not fit into the Bottom community. Like Sula he is an outcast due to his unconventionality. Shadrack becomes more independent during the war. Bouson (2000) notes that Shadrack, “who is presented as the utterly traumatized individual, is also the shamed black man, forced by his war experiences to recognize his own utter helplessness and deficiency” (52). Besides, Bouson argues, Shadrack decides “to make political sense of his shameless, mad behavior” (52) and fears. In fact, Shadrack’s belief is that if fear is confined to a place it can be controlled. Therefore, he decides to institute National Suicide Day so that death and the fear it causes can be controlled. Morrison explains his thought and practice: “he hit the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” (14). The Bottom community seems to learn with Shadrack to hold fear or evil at bay and apply it to Sula Peace. The aim is to control fear and evil, not to destroy them. The neighborhood controls Shadrack and Eva Peace, but do not banish them. When she dies, the Bottom “felt that either *because* Sula was dead or just *after* she was dead a brighter day was dawning” (151). The community’s attitudes toward Sula Peace’s self-valuation is the focus of the next section.

The Outcome: Reestablishing Sula Peace’s Presence

Sula Peace overcomes the nihilistic threat derived from the constraints that the Bottom community imposes on her quest for self. After she dies, she is, somehow, assimilated into the community through Nel Wright whose acknowledgment of Sula Peace's spiritual presence in the neighborhood symbolizes the fusion of two different selves: the self-in-isolation and the self-in-relation, or the individual and the group. The integration of these two values is anticipated in the last meeting Sula Peace has with Nel Wright before she dies. They are discussing whose way of living is better and Sula Peace tells her friend: "maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (146). When she dies, she recognizes Nel Wright's value, as well, as her first thought about death is addressed to her friend: "Wait'll I tell Nel" (149). Years later, it is Nel Wright who recognizes the worth of Sula Peace's values when she admits that she misses her friend, saying, "Sula. (...) All that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (174). The spiritual alliance that remains between the two women, even years after Sula Peace dies, projects for the Bottom community a future that hybridizes the quest for the self and for the group, and thus prescribes, as Gillespie and Kubitscheck (2000) note, "moral authenticity" for the neighborhood: "Moral authenticity requires both truth and empathy. Without truth, degenerative goodness co-opts empathy in the service of control. Without empathy, truth destroys the possibility for connection" (86).

The merging of truth and empathy, or of Sula Peace's self-in-isolation and Nel Wright's self-in-relation, echoes the politics of conversion developed by both the slaves in *Incidents* and the ex-slaves in *Beloved*. Like the Bottom, the community of black people depicted in the two previous texts also integrate the values of the individual with those of the group. Thus, West's (1994) view that the outcome of a

politics of conversion is the community's "struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World" (23) can be associated with the idea that it also "requires love and care." Indeed, in the three groups of black people, the politics of conversion works as a collective enterprise leading to resist any kind of oppression, external or internal. The three instances of a politics of conversion combine, in different periods of black experience, hope and meaning, self-love and the love of others, love and care. This idea of collective and individual resistance to oppression symbolizes a communal behavior similar to West and hooks's (1991) notion of "breaking bread together": "I liked the combination of the notion of community which is about sharing and breaking bread together, of dialogue as well as mercy, because mercy speaks to the need we have for compassion, acceptance, understanding and empathy" (2). The communal work previously happens, when the slaves manage to free Linda Brent from Dr. Flint's cruelty in *Incidents* and, later, reappears in *Beloved*, in the former slaves' rescue of Sethe Suggs from the daughter Beloved and in the reintegration of the mother into the Bluestone Road community.

Sula also develops the experience of "breaking bread together" among the African Americans in the Bottom community. On the one hand, it shows the people's attempt to deal with a person who challenges community values by isolation or shunning. On the other, it depicts a struggle for a more integrative relationship to the challenger. In its struggle for including difference and variety, a community of black women is formed, which parallels other groups of women who – in Jarena Lee's preaching, Linda Brent's escape, and Sethe Suggs's strivings – establish social commitment to the security of both group and individual members. Different from

the community in *Religious Experiences*, *Incidents*, and *Beloved*, the politics of conversion in *Sula* is not a biracial enterprise for it does not call white and black people to “break bread together,” as the two previous texts do. This is so, maybe, because the members “regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did” (113), which seems to justify the absence of whites in the Bottom. Indeed, the politics of conversion is circumscribed to the limits of black experiences in the Bottom community. In its racial limits, the politics of conversion can be seen from two different perspectives: one in which individual members in the Bottom elaborate ways to support each other; another in which the whole community designs a strategy to neutralize Sula Peace’s evil presence, without destroying it. From this double perspective, the Bottom community develops a duality – a both-and duality – that exemplifies on the collective level what its members, especially Eva Peace, reflect on the individual level. That is, like Eva Peace, the Bottom community shows a duality toward its members, marked by indeterminacy and ambiguity or hybridity. In his explanation for this duality in Morrison’s novels, Otten (1993) remarks that “Morrison defies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character or action. She has called her fictional characters ‘the combination of virtue and flaw, of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people made whole again’” (652). The blurred borders between good and evil, virtue and vice, completeness and incompleteness, are present in Linda Brent’s infanticidal thoughts, as well as Sethe Suggs’s “thick love.” Sethe Suggs goes beyond Linda Brent’s thoughts and acts nihilistically. She dramatically reflects duality of virtue and vice, of good intentions and wickedness, of love and nihilism. In her, there is no guarantee that virtue is different from vice, or that good intentions are different from

wickedness. What motivates her is love, her thick love for the children, which ends in violence, the murder of her daughter. Believing she is preventing a worse thing from happening, she acts on the notion that death is preferable to slavery. Otten quotes Morrison's words to show that the author herself clearly acknowledges Sethe Suggs's and other characters' duality, as resulting from their experiences of love: "all about love (...) people do all sorts of things, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do (...) with the best intentions in the world we can do enormous harm, enormous harm" (652). Likewise, in *Sula*, Eva Peace acts for the benefit of others. She amputates her leg and kills her drug-addicted son. Thus, Eva Peace exemplifies the duality in a mother who wants to protect the lives of those she loves in a way she judges to be fair. In childhood, Sula Peace portrays such a kind of love toward herself, especially when, as we have seen, she cuts her finger in order to counteract the Irish boys' threat. In adulthood, a disturbing kind of self-love involves her affair with Nel Wright's husband Jude Green. She rebuts her friend's accusation of having taken her husband away: "I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). Later, Sula Peace somehow allies a sense of goodness and morality to her act, in particular, and to her life, in general, saying: "About who was good. How you know it was you? (146). She herself answers: "I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (146). At the end of the novel, Nel Wright seems to have acknowledged her friend's both- and, or dialogical, love.

On the individual level, some women and men participate in the politics of conversion and, thus, contribute to the integration of Sula Peace's individuality into the communal ethos. These people's efforts manifest interest in uniting self-

assurance with care for others. Among women, Eva Peace, Helene Wright, Sula Peace and Nel Wright are the contributors. Among men, Chicken Little, Jude Green, Ajax, and Shadrack are involved. Duality in the politics of conversion in the Bottom community suggests that, on the individual level, the members are mutually helpful, and especially helpful to Sula Peace's quest for self. Despite their differences and conflicts, Eva Peace's support of other people works as an instance of self-in-relation that Sula Peace may follow if she wants. Indeed, Eva Peace protects the Dewey boys by buying them a home, education, and love. In that house, the three Deweys seem to have been fused into one, at least for her: "they got all mixed up in her head, and finally she could not literally believe her eyes. They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy" (39). Besides, in spite of her caring for the Dewey boys, and these other men and women who live in her house, she remains alone. Page (1999) observes that in her independent life, Eva Peace assumes "a goddess-like imperialism that privileges the righteousness of her self and her will at the expense of others" (191).

Helene Wright's contribution to the politics of conversion is reflected in the way she prepares Nel Wright for a conventional life nurtured by empathy and connection with others and social acceptance. Gillespie and Kubitscheck (2000) remark that Helene Wright's "ostensive attention to others' need is motivated by her own need for social approval. This option of conforming through service is, however, available only to a woman with sufficient income (...). Middle class status allows the development of patterns of caring" (72).

Sula Peace and Nel Wright have been helpful to each other since their childhood. Their mutual caring starts when they make a meaningful discovery, as

Morrison explains: “because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (52). Their creation is a kind of identity that combines independence and commitment, leading them to elaborate mutual support, so that “in the safe harbor or each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). “Their own perceptions of things” make them share experiences in which courage and audacity are the main ingredients and, which solidify their solidarity. In supporting each other, but allowing space for conflicts as well, Sula Peace and Nel Wright exemplify black women’s experience of womanist sisterhood. As Marsh-Lockett (1997) suggests, Sula Peace and Nel Wright love themselves, each other, and love “women’s culture” (784), and value “salient characteristics of the African American experience” (785). One instance of their “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (xi), to use Walker’s (1983) notion of womanism, is how they fight the four Irish boys on their way home from school. As a result of their challenge, Sula Peace daringly cuts her own finger, menaces to do the same with theirs and successfully defends her friend. Later, toughness is associated with adventurousness which ends up in Chicken Little’s accidental death. Nel Wright, now, is the comforter of the friend: “you didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh, sh. Come on, le’s go, Sula” (63).

Among males, Chicken Little is the first example of the masculine participation in Sula Peace’s experiences. For a very short time, involving their games, laughter, and climbing trees, his presence intensifies Nel Wright’s association with Sula Peace. His death – and the girls’ involuntary involvement in it – becomes a crucial

revelation about Sula Peace's personality and friendship with Nel Wright. At his funeral Sula Peace cries "soundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath" (65) and, in the cemetery she feels that Chicken Little's coffin will "lie in the earth, but his "bubbly laughter" will "stay aboveground forever" (66). Sula Peace's silent but emotional reaction is supported by Nel Wright's presence. "They held hands" during Chicken Little's burial and "during the walk back home their fingers were laced in a gentle clasp as that of any two young girlfriends" (66).

Jude Green's presence in Sula Peace's life symbolizes the affirmation of her self-assurance in a casual affair without emotional involvement. Although they make love, what really informs about her values is what she gains from his need to feel complete. He is married to Nel Wright, but as Kubitscheck (1998) remarks, he "becomes interested in Sula (...) because she refuses to provide the sympathy that he whines for, and she turns his needs into a joke" (58). Her joke is the reason why he finds Sula Peace "a funny woman (...) not that bad-looking," a woman who can stir "a man's mind maybe, but not his body" (104). Jude's "observation that a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world" (103) causes Sula Peace's critical reaction and joke. She adds, ironically, "it looks to me like you the envy of the world" (104). Then she asks, "ain't that love?" (103).

Chicken Little's death awakens Sula Peace's childish tears, and Jude Green's self-pity provokes her adult irony and joke. Ajax, however, is the possibility of emotional commitment in Sula Peace's life. Though temporary, her relationship with Ajax offers her a moment of developing a self-in-connection. However, his fascination for planes and flying, Kubitscheck (1998) notes, offers "a symbolic suggestion of his preoccupation with freedom and exploration" (58). Sula Peace

misjudges his originality and independence and almost compromises her own quest for an independent self, when, Kubitscheck suggests, she “tries to push their relationship into a conventional marriage” (58). However, Ajax resists and leaves her, allowing Sula Peace to continue her quest.

Shadrack’s independence approaches Ajax’s freedom and also seduces Sula Peace. He is also interested in her. In their first encounter, the death of Chicken Little allows them to establish an uncertain commitment, when he vows “always.” This commitment is reenacted in her death as he refuses to lead his annual parade on Suicide Day. His survival during the flood symbolizes the survival of Sula Peace’s legacy.

Duality in the community’s behavior has to do with its values and how they reflect the individuals and the group. These values include family and marriage stability, solidarity, companionship, and endogamy. A number of experiences suggest that individual members support those who they think deserve their support. An example is provided by the Suggs. They are supportive to Eva Peace, when abandoned with no money or food, by the womanizing, drunk, and abusive husband Boy-Boy. The Suggs, then, bring food and medicine to the family. They also keep Eva Peace’s three children when she leaves the Bottom and comes back eighteen months later, minus a leg but \$10,000 richer.

On the collective level, the Bottom neighborhood is hateful to Sula Peace. The communal duality here is also visible in Eva Peace’s attitudes toward Sula Peace, if we accept that the grandmother’s inability to understand her granddaughter is a reflection of the community’s incapacity to evaluate Sula Peace’s quest for self and unconventionality. Eva Peace’s life is also marked by unconventionality: she

amputates one leg for money, kills her drug-addicted son, tries to save her daughter Hannah Peace from burning, and adopts the Dewey boys. However, she is unable to accept or support Sula Peace's unconventional life. When Sula Peace returns to the Bottom after a ten-year absence, the conflict between them is visible. Eva Peace associates Sula Peace with the robins which are plaguing the Bottom and, like the rest of the community, sees something evil in her granddaughter: "I might have knowed them birds meant something" (91). The remark shows the disharmony that remains between them. As Eva Peace is now one of the respected women in the community, she wants her granddaughter to submit to the same community values as well: "when you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll set you" (92).

Similarly, the community sees evil, vice, and wickedness in Sula Peace's return to the Bottom. And they start plotting to protect themselves. They elaborate a politics of conversion that subordinates individual self-valuation to collective expression of selves-in-connection (or collectivity). In other words, they refuse to include Sula Peace and her individuality in their collective practices. West (1994) views the black community as an empowering element, able "to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meanings and feeling that created and sustained communities" (23). They learn how to control evil – and fear – with Shadrack and his National Suicide Day. People's annual participation in the event helps them deal with the fear of death and madness. They assimilate the event by marking personal facts and social happenings in connection with Shadrack's Suicide Day. Birth, marriage, and

sermons refer to it, as the narrator reports: “easily, quietly, Suicide Day become a part of the fabric of life” (16). In fact, when the neighborhood learns how to cope with Shadrack’s festival, they are able to fit him into the routine life of the community.

The Bottom community deals with Sula Peace similarly. Figuring her to be a nihilistic force, the neighbors do whatever they can to hold “the nihilistic threat at bay,” as represented, in their view, by her presence. First, they scrutinize her actions and evaluate them. When they find out that she has put her grandmother in Sunnydale, they say she is a roach, and when they are told that she is sleeping with Jude and other black men, they call her a bitch. Finally, when they discover that she is also sleeping with white men their reaction is the harshest. Sula Peace’s sleeping with white men “made the old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her” (113). The neighbors’ hateful reaction against Sula Peace’s integration with white people is explained by their belief that “all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable” (113). When they become aware that the evil among them is a real presence, they decide to protect themselves so that they can look “at evil stony-eyed and let it run” and do “nothing to harm her” (113). They watch her actions closely and decide to accuse her of anything that happens in the Bottom. They accuse her of Teapot’s fall and injuries, of Mr. Finley’s death, of laughing at God, of “trying men out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow” (115), and of always being healthy. Morrison explains their envy of her health:

She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck. It was rumored that she had had no childhood diseases, was never known to have chicken pox, croup or even a runny nose. She had played rough as a child – where were the scars? Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability. (115)

In not being able to see her commonality, they decide to concentrate on her unconventionality. In so doing, they not only identify “the source of their personal misfortune” (117), but also find mutual love and protection. Morrison describes their new attitudes toward themselves and each other. Wishing to neutralize Sula Peace’s evil presence, “they began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117-118).

After Sula Peace’s death, Nel Wright reintegrates her friend into the community. Morrison’s last words refers to Nel Wright’s cry for empathy: “it was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). She not only misses Sula Peace, but “helped with the wisdom from a withered Eva,” Feng (1998) notes, “Nel Wright finally recognizes the ‘Sula’ in her” (100). This recognition, Feng continues, allows her “to recall her own complicity in Chicken Little’s death and that she too, like the rest of the Bottomites, uses Sula in a negative way to define herself” (100). Her acknowledgment of Sula in herself is consistent with Morrison’s words: “all these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her passion for

Sula's frightened and shamed eye. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation" (170).

Like Nel Wright, probably many other Bottomites, despite their hesitations, do validate Sula Peace's self-valuation, as if suggesting that they need her unconventional independence for group security, which implies that a variety of cohesiveness may coexist. Furman (1996) explains that such variety is mirrored in the coexistence of "characters as unlike as Sula, Nel, Ajax and Shadrack" (31). We may add others as incongruous as Eva Peace, Helen Wright, and Jude Green. Their presence makes the politics of conversion of the community derive its strength and success from variety and cohesiveness. Furman believes that difference and diversity are highly valid in the black community. This final acceptance of difference, variety, and diversity is the basis of the process of conversion in the black community. The community reaffirms its values and goes a step further to become more inclusive. Nel Wright and her conventional life are not the only model for the Bottomites; they also manage to make room for Sula Peace's unconventional individuality.

SIX

A POLITICS OF CONVERSION IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*.

Black existential *angst* derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture. These beliefs and images attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character daily in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Cornel West (1994, 27)

A certain balance is kept in the politics of conversion among African Americans in the three texts previously analyzed. *Incidents* and *Beloved* display the protagonists' disruption that remains for some time, is overcome and, thus, the preexisting balance is restored between the individual and the group. Linda Brent's relationship and two pregnancies by Mr. Sands has several consequences. She is temporarily rejected by the community, her grandmother rebukes her, but she is ultimately reintegrated into the group, which decides to help her escape from slavery. Sethe Suggs's rupture with her group, exemplified by the neighbors' inability to cope with her desire to free *Beloved* from the devastating experience of slavery by killing her, is later reevaluated by the neighbors, leading to her reintegration into the community. In Morrison's *Sula*, however, the conflict between the protagonist Sula Peace and the Bottom community, as shown by the neighbors' reaction to her as the

evil that needs to be kept under surveillance, is not dismantled until she dies. With Sula's death the quest for harmony between individuality and collectivity is transferred to Nel Wright who, experiencing a spiritual awakening, validates Sula Peace's challenging presence. Through acknowledging Sula Peace's individuality Nel Wright embodies in herself the values of the individual as well as of the group.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* appears to take the rupture between the individual and the group to its extreme since neither seem capable of creating the necessary conditions that favor reconciliation. This occurs because as both the individual and the group are dispossessed of their own values, they assimilate those of others. These alienating values, in West's (1994) view, are "white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture" (27). Unprotected, the community allows itself to be colonized by these beliefs and images and internalizes them. This assimilation creates a devastating experience for African American's life because it validates external alienating values. The validation of white ideals by African Americans is responsible for generating "black existential angst," an emotional phenomenon made of "the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars" (27). As a result, the effects caused by this angst are terribly devastating to blackness because they "attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character" (27). For Morrison, a destructive overvaluing of white beauty is at the center of black moral debilitation. In an interview to Bakerman (1994), she points out the debilitating effects of this internalization, observing that her novel is a "writing about beauty, miracles and self-images, about the way in which people can hurt each other, about whether or not one is beautiful" (40).

Samuels (2001) remarks that in *The Bluest Eye* the presence of white beauty changes black life in Lorain. It “displays how the ethnocentric idealization of whiteness” (105) produces “new desires and new objects for consumption” (105) and “serves to produce these desires with a racist and ethnocentric order” (105). *The Bluest Eye* depicts the ways through which “white supremacist beliefs and images” of beauty and “idealization of whiteness” poison the Lorain community, i.e., “attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character” (27), and neutralize the effects of black beauty upon black people. The nihilistic experience of racial depredation is shown on both the collective and individual levels. The Lorain community and Pecola Breedlove internalize the white values associated with beauty and submit to them, with damaging consequences to Pecola Breedlove, who becomes insane. In the depiction of damaging whiteness, the novel denounces how these images and beliefs devastate Pecola Breedlove’s intelligence, ability, beauty, and character to the point that the unfortunate girl is unable to keep her sanity. However, the novel does not only features black nihilism in the community’s acceptance of white values in Pecola Breedlove’s physical and emotional depredation; it also reveals communal feature of black love and self-love as, for instance, in the MacTeers’ behavior toward the Lorain community and especially toward Pecola Breedlove.

The black neighborhood in *The Bluest Eye* perpetrates nihilistic forms of behavior, generating meaningless, hopeless, and loveless experiences in Pecola Breedlove’s life. It also articulates invigorating attitudes of love as “the strategy for holding the nihilistic threat at bay” (27). Embodying nihilism and love, the text displays a peculiar instance of a black politics of conversion by establishing a

conversation involving *Incidents*, *Beloved*, and *Sula*. This textual conversation illustrates Gates's (1988) concept of signifying which suggests that, through textual self-reflexiveness, *The Bluest Eye* manages to echo and revise the other three texts. As a matter of fact, through signification, the politics of conversion activated by blacks in the Lorain community repeats and reinterprets the other three politics of conversion.

Pecola Breedlove's nihilistic experience is rooted in her internalization of the "white supremacist beliefs and images" (27) associated with ideal beauty. Like Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace, she has to endure "ontological wounds and emotional scars" generated by others. Thus, Pecola Breedlove's scapegoating by her own black neighbors repeats and revises Linda Brent's sexual harassment by Dr. Flint, Sethe Suggs's physical abuse by Schoolteacher, and Sula Peace's demonizing presence in the Bottom community. Fortunately, if not for Pecola Breedlove herself – because of her final madness – at least for her neighbors, her nihilistic devastation is counterbalanced by the MacTeers' communal racial stature inundating the Lorain community with black love and self-love. Thus, through the assistance they offer to Pecola Breedlove, the MacTeers' love and solidarity rearticulates the kind of nurture Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs, and Nel Wright offer Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace, respectively, so that the latter women can overcome the nihilistic damage that threatens their experiences. Other variations in the textual conversation involving these four black texts reveal race matters related to slavery in *Incidents* and *Beloved*. *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* concentrate on more recent aspects of the African diaspora: the disruption of individuality from collectivity, in the first novel, and black addiction to white values, in the second.

My analysis of the politics of conversion in *The Bluest Eye* will deal with five familiar elements by now: the antagonizing setting is the Lorain community, as it is permeated by and validates the white ideal of beauty. The antagonizing agents are Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Pauline Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church because they personally assimilate white beauty values and scapegoat Pecola Breedlove. The supporting agents are the MacTeers and the three prostitutes, who represent the black values that may potentially prevent Pecola Breedlove's collapse under the influence of the white beauty. Pecola Breedlove's purpose is a personal quest for love and mitigation of ugliness. Finally, the outcome or the achievement of the politics of conversion indicates an alternative behavior to the collective submission to whiteness and its ideals of beauty.

The Antagonizing Setting: The Lorain Community

As the first element of a politics of conversion, the antagonizing setting invariably articulates a damaging threat against the individual black woman's safety, an attack that causes nihilistic harms. In the three previous instances of the politics of conversion, the antagonizing setting portrays similar damaging attitudes against a group of black women and, in so doing, allows the black texts to establish a dialogue and signification. Through the dialogue, *Incidents* and *Beloved* mutually signify by means of the ways slavery plays the role of the external antagonizing environment, which activates its damaging forces against a group of slaves and ex-slaves, among whom two women are chosen as scapegoats. In Dr. Flint's plantation, for instance, slavery chooses Linda Brent as a scapegoat, and in *Schoolteacher's Sweet Home*, the

scapegoat is Sethe Suggs. However, in *Sula*, the antagonizing environment is no longer external slavery but the internal Bottom community whose racial interests are addressed against Sula Peace's individuality and, therefore, makes her a scapegoat. Indeed, the external danger is not totally absent from the Bottom because it operates more indirectly through internalized racism.

Scapegoating is a way of generating nihilism. As it occurs in the three previous texts, scapegoating must be addressed by the politics of conversion activated through the black women in *The Bluest Eye*. This allows the textual talk and signification among black texts to be possible. Thus, *Incidents*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye* signify through scapegoating Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace, and Pecola Breedlove. The black community of Lorain repeats and revises the antagonizing roles of both slavery in *Incidents* and *Beloved* and of the Bottom community in *Sula*. As an instance of Gates's repetition and revision of the previous antagonizing social environments, it activates its devastating energies against young Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Under these circumstances, *The Bluest Eye* is more properly associated with *Sula* than with the other two black texts. That is, like *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* presents an internal antagonizing setting, the black community with its own values. Like the neighborhood in *Sula*, the black community in *The Bluest Eye* is unable to deal with the individual. In *Sula*, this is because the community is permeated by inflexible black values; and in *The Bluest Eye*, the group does not seem to possess black values but rather adopts white values as its own. Because of these inflexible or absent values, both communities seem unable to deal with their women's self-valuation and, therefore, do not encourage Sula Peace's or Pecola Breedlove's individuality.

Besides nihilism, love or self-love also occurs in the four black texts. In these texts, the black community shows meaningful variation in its relationship to individual women. In oscillating between an individual member's integration or rupture with the group, the four instances of community vary dramatically toward Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace, and Pecola Breedlove. While in *Incidents* the group seems to be racially and emotionally glued to Linda Brent's individuality and helps her, in *Beloved* the neighbors vacillate between assistance and hatred of Sethe Suggs. Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs end up becoming invigorating members who empower the communities to which they belong. However, in *Sula* and in *The Bluest Eye*, since the neighbors do not seem able to offer adequate support to the individual women, individual members assume their responsibility. Thus, Nel Wright supports Sula Peace and the MacTeer sisters assist Pecola Breedlove. Through Nel Wright, Sula Peace's sense of individuality finds a space in the neighborhood, and Claudia's concerns redimension Pecola Breedlove's presence in Lorain.

Except for the MacTeers' black vitality and the prostitutes' sense of rootedness, the Lorain community displays racial debility derived from its internalization of "white supremacist beliefs and images" (27). On its very first page, Morrison introduces some of these beliefs and images, associating them with the idealized white house, family, and happiness depicted in a textbook: "here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are happy" (1). The house and its colorful beauty and the family and its material happiness are complemented by the harmony that exists for the mother, the father, the son, and the daughter. Tirrel (2000) observes that the textbook creates "a classic normative

statement of white middle-class American culture, which provides the context within which the lives of the Breedloves and the MacTeers are set" (14). In fact, however bookish, the family harmony and "white middle-class American culture" are not only imaginative elements suggested by the book but become a concrete experience associated with the Fishers' house. Through Pauline Breedlove's impressions of the only white family in the novel, the linkage among whiteness, happiness, and perfection becomes truly evident. The narrator describes Pauline Breedlove's internalized feelings toward the house: "here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around in deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise" (127). Both the bookish images of beauty and Pauline Breedlove's views on the white sanctuary of middle-class familial perfection are complementary elements of the external values that have managed to invade the Lorain neighborhood and have captivated people under its spell.

Indeed, the ideals of whiteness are not reduced to the attributes of familial happiness and perfection present in the imaginative and real houses. These white ideals are expanded to a number of other images of whiteness associated with beauty, especially white women's beauty. These models or paragons of beauty-carriers include Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, and Jean Harlow. Shirley Temple's beauty is shown through Pecola Breedlove's adoration in the MacTeers's house. The artist's picture is stamped in a blue-and-white cup, which Pecola Breedlove uses to drink her milk while she admires the actress's beauty. Claudia – the narrator – stresses her companion's admiration: "we knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet

Shirley's face" (23). Later, Claudia mentions the "big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" (20), which she despises but which "adults, other girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (20). These quotes not only suggest that white values of beauty are spread all over the community, but also that black adults and children have succumbed to their seducing appeal.

Besides Shirley Temple, other images of white beauty permeate the Lorain community. Mary Jane's picture is a very revealing one. Her picture wraps the sort of candy Pecola Breedlove most enjoys, because of the white girl's face on the wrapper. The black girl's seduction by the white face is so powerful that her buying the candy seems to be just an excuse for consuming Mary Jane's beauty. Claudia's description of Pecola Breedlove's admiration for the white girl is mixed with her appreciation of the candy, and symbolizes the black digestion of white beauty. Claudia denounces it: "she eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50). The association of Shirley Temple and Mary Jane with certain products like the cup and the candy relates white beauty to consumption. Samuels (2001) refers to the consumptive aspect of beauty as calling attention to "the beauty industry" that is created in the Lorain community, which represents "the prime example of the way that global capitalism has linked itself to a cycle of prejudices" (105). Likewise, Jean Harlow exemplifies the expansion of "the beauty industry" to other cultural products like the movies, thus reinforcing the hold of white ideals among blacks. She is associated with romantic movies that provide Pauline Breedlove with a special sense

of physical beauty that she equates with virtue and decides to apply to herself: “I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine” (123).

According to Samuels (2001) the “idealization of white beauty transforms the vision of all of the subjects in Morrison’s novel” (107). Visibly manifested in the textbook descriptions, in the Fishers’ house, in the beauty of movie stars like Shirley Temple and Jean Harlow, and in aesthetic symbols like the Baby Doll and Mary Jane, the “idealization of white beauty” becomes internalized by the black community. This shows how the “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27) associated with white beauty permeate the Lorain community and, consequently, generate a number of devastating and destabilizing effects by convincing the neighbors to accept the notion that they somehow fail to measure up. The admission that they may be “deficient” implies self-hatred. Bouson (2000) notes, they are welcoming “the pernicious effects of internalized racism,” resulting from “the shaming qualities whites ascribe to their blackness” (25). Under these circumstances, Bauer and Lutes (1995) argue that “beauty has been distrusted (...) because dominant white standards have been used to judge racial and ethnic others as inferior” (96). Judging themselves less or inferior, they destabilize themselves, which causes the black group to distance itself from the experience of the traditional black community that Morrison (1984), Willis (1985), and West (1994) describe as a strong black achievement. The scholars unanimously share the notion that the black community must function as the reservoir whose cultural density and racial vitality derive from the communal experiences of Southern ancestors. West expresses this shared idea of black community announcing that it has a crucial role: “to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat” (23). Functioning as “cultural structures of meaning

and feeling”, he explains, these buffers “equip black people with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness” (23). For sharing and supporting self-deprecatory feelings and experiences and for activating them against those members who are particularly vulnerable, the Lorain neighborhood as a whole shows itself empty of the racial qualities attributed by West to the black community.

Under the oppressing spell of white ideals, institutionalized racism becomes internalized for many blacks and is, thus, inevitable. Contaminated by a close contact with and assimilation of these “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27), these black people, as Furman (1996) suggests, “promulgate standards of beauty and behavior that devalue Pecola’s sensitivities and contribute to her marginalized existence” (14). Thus, Pecola Breedlove’s victimization comes from various sources of internalized self-deprecation, both inside and outside of her family. As Bouson (2000) notes, she “is rejected and physically abused by her mother, sexually abused by her alcoholic and unpredictably violent father, and ultimately scapegoated by members of the community” (25). Pecola Breedlove’s victimization seems to derive from the fact that, in the Lorain community, the “black culture,” as Peach (1995) suggests, “is being destroyed by the impact of white norms upon it” (39), for which “blackness and ugliness are perceived as synonymous” (39). Therefore, the idea of self-shame implies that, if blackness is ugliness, then ugliness has to be eradicated so that beauty may reign alone, as Pecola Breedlove’s desire for blue eyes suggests. In so behaving, the Lorain community contradicts Furman’s concept that, functioning “as a repository of cultural traditions, the community is usually necessary to the individual’s wholeness and identity” (73). Being devoid of what is necessary “to

equip black folk with cultural armor” (24), to use West’s (1994) words, the community leads Pecola Breedlove to “the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness” (24) which, in West’s view, describe the nihilistic threat. In other words, the community’s uncritical association with and naive submission to white beauty and the consequent unfair attitudes toward the vulnerable girl become a source of devastating nihilism in the girl’s life.

Corrupted by the alienating white culture, the neighbors seem unable to resist the beauty standards emanating from these white artists, images, and places. Among these neighbors we see Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Pauline and Cholly, Breedlove and Soaphead Church. Maureen Peal’s association with white beauty is terribly threatening to Pecola Breedlove and the two sisters Frieda and Claudia MacTeer. Claudia describes her as the representative of the black middle class, who has assimilated whiteness. She, thus, embodies “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me” (62). Proud of her white-like beauty and wealth, Maureen Peal judges herself beautiful and the other girls – Pecola Breedlove, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer – ugly. She screams the following aesthetic judgment at the girls: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute” (73). Her beauty attracts everybody at school. Teachers, black and white boys, white and black girls pay their humble respect to her presence. As Bouson (2000) points out, the entire school plays an important role: “The teachers smile at her when they call on her in class; black boys do not trip her in the hallways, and white boys do not stone her; white girls readily

accept her as their work partner, and black girls move aside when she wants to use the sink in the girls' washroom" (31). Her beauty specially attracts Pecola Breedlove. Like Maureen Peal, another light-skinned woman is Geraldine. Because of her light skin and internalization of white values, she classifies herself as "colored" by making a specious distinction: "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (87). Since she considers herself "colored," her house reflects her assumed status and evidences the neatness, which seduces Pecola Breedlove when she first enters Geraldine's house:

How beautiful, she thought. What a beautiful house. There was a big red-and-gold Bible on the dining-room table. Little lace doilies were everywhere – on arms and backs of chairs, in the center of a large dining table, on little table. Potted plants were on all the windowsills. A color picture of Jesus Christ hung on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened on the frame. She wanted to see everything slowly, slowly. (89)

Like Maureen Peal, Geraldine symbolically represents black middle-class values. Samuels (2001) observes that "these African-American middle-class subjects accept the dominant order" by repressing "eruptions of uncontrollable sexuality and emotions through rituals of purification and classification" (111). Helene Wright in *Sula* and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* reflect similar patterns of internalized self-hatred. They hide their stigmatized racial identity behind behaviors that are more socially acceptable. They also favor the neat houses and light-skinned children. Helene Wright wishes to improve the shape of Nel Wright's nose, and Geraldine puts "Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen" (87). Like

Helen Wright, Geraldine, Bouson (2000) remarks, trades black “funkiness” – passion and spontaneity – “for internalized white middle-class standards of beauty and behavior” (37). From this superior self-positioning, Geraldine dares to shun Pecola Breedlove, “viewing her dark skin as a sign of her stigmatized racial identity” (37).

As they do with Maureen Peal and Geraldine, the external ideals of white beauty fill Pauline Breedlove’s life from two different sources: the romantic movies where she spends part of her daily routine and the Fishers’ house and family where she finds a job. In trying to compensate for the lack of emotions in her house, she looks for emotional compensation in the movies, where she not only finds emotions but manages to elaborate a concept of beauty that she associates with virtue. Her inspiring model is the beautiful actress Jean Harlow. The narrator describes Pauline Breedlove’s aesthetic aspirations: “there in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty” (122). As a result of this insight she decides to add Jean Harlow’s physical beauty to her black body: “I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. I looked just like her” (123). Later, the Fishers’ house and family seems to be an extension of the kind of Jean Harlow’s beauty. As Pecola Breedlove does with the Mary Jane candy, her mother embodies the beauty associated with the Fishers’ family and house, and what they represent to her, or metaphorically consumes it. “Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her forefront, or to her children” (128), writes the narrator, indicating the woman’s feelings toward the house and secret possession of it. Pauline Breedlove’s coping with white values leads her to distance herself from her

daughter. Bouson (2000) remarks that the mother transmits to her daughter her own “ugliness” and “a sense of inferiority and defectiveness” (33).

Cholly Breedlove’s contact with “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27) and white racist society causes him “a stigmatized racial identity” (34) and “feelings of humiliation and defeat” (34), Bouson (2000) notes, toward his sexuality. His sexual initiation is marked by a devastating white presence. Furman (1996) describes his contact with whiteness as “the lesson of childhood learned when he is forced by armed white men who discover him with Darlene in the woods to continue his first act of sexual intimacy while they watch and ridicule” (17). Feeling threatened in his intimacy, he hears one of the two white men ask him: “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good” (148). As a consequence of his devastating experience and resulting impotency with Darlene, Cholly Breedlove elaborates inverted attitudes. He restrains his hate for the white men: “his subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess – that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke” (151), writes the narrator. Instead, he addresses his outrage against the one who does not deserve it – Darlene – for having witnessed his sexual failure. During his life, in encapsulating love and hate for those women whom he is supposed to protect, Cholly Breedlove’s antagonistic feelings find an explanation. His love is dangerous for it destroys in its wish to protect. Thus, like both Sethe Suggs and Eva Peace, he reveals the complexity of Morrison’s characters who, as they are basically portrayed as both-and, not either-or, embody virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness. Cholly Breedlove’s love *and* hate are later repeated with his wife Pauline Breedlove and daughter Pecola Breedlove.

As they did to Cholly Breedlove, the white beliefs poison Soaphead Church's existence. He is born in a creolized family with his light-brown skin and the kind of education that lends itself to white values. The narrator explains his education: "for all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. His responsibility to his father controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of and fascination with any kind of disorder and decay" (169). According to Samuels (2001), imprisoned in this process of self-whitening, Soaphead Church, like his father, "must constantly attempt to present and prove his whiteness" (113). "His own hatred of blackness and his desire to escape from his memories of being abused by his father" (113), Samuels adds, determines his behavior toward Pecola Breedlove. He abuses her by playing the role of God, making her believe that he is able to provide her with the blue eyes she wishes to possess.

Some sort of counterbalance to the black community's adoption of white standards embodied by Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church seems to be present in Lorain. The counterbalance comes from the MacTeers, who are a group that fits West's description of black community. Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia, and Frieda seem to be empowered by the kind of "cultural armor" and racial density that permit them to become the agents of Pecola Breedlove's security, at least temporarily. Being supported by conscious blackness, their house does not encapsulate imaginative or bookish happiness, it envelops concrete black harmony. The house is not superficial like the Fishers' but rather shows human solidarity. For all that, the MacTeers' house and family are equipped with the dearest values possible in a black community, showing, as West (1994) suggests, "ways of

life and struggle that embodied values of service, and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence” (24). In other words, the MacTeers family and house become the sanctuary of the blackness that can resist the whiteness that has invaded the Lorain community. Like the MacTeers, a group of three women can be also associated with Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love – the prostitutes China, Poland and Marie – who positively interact with Pecola Breedlove. She visits them and they tell her stories. Among these women there is an exchange of care and love. Pecola Breedlove takes care of their things, and they tell her stories about love. Besides, a comparative view of the MacTeers and the Breedloves reveals the racial gap that exists between them, indicating that while the former family lives under the guidance of black values, the latter lacks them. The MacTeers remain together because they search for social support in black values. In uncritically assimilating external white values, the Breedloves entirely split. As a result, Pecola Breedlove and her parents are unable to express ordinary instances of reciprocal companionship and solidarity. Thus, the lack of black values is eventually fatal to the Breedloves.

The Antagonizing Agents: White-Faced Blacks

Permeated by “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27), the Lorain community creates agents who seem to validate these beliefs and images through wicked attitudes and behaviors toward Pecola Breedlove’s vulnerability. In so doing, they antagonize Pecola Breedlove’s self-valuation and desire to be loved. These attitudes generate the girl’s nihilism, which repeats and revises the kind of nihilistic experience promulgated by the antagonizing agents against the black women in the

three previous texts discussed. Like Dr. Flint who in *Incidents* assaults Linda Brent's chastity, like Schoolteacher who in *Beloved* violates Sethe Suggs's individual values, and like Eva Peace who in *Sula* struggles to beat Sula Peace's individuality, several people contribute to Pecola Breedlove's despair in *The Bluest Eye*: Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church.

These agents have been uncritically seduced by the ideals of white beauty. In ignoring their black skin, their actions tend to derive from the need to exclude black Pecola Breedlove from their communal experiences. In so doing, they deny Aunt Marthy's, Baby Suggs's, and Nel Wright's black solidarity and womanism. Distant from Baby Suggs's preaching toward a black identity in the Clearing, to use just one instance of collective demonstration of love and self-love, these people are unable to resist or critically evaluate whiteness. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs teaches racial love toward the black body: "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it" (88). She goes on proclaiming her sensuous black love, expanding it to the many external and internal parts of the black body, asking them to love their eyes, skin, hands, face, mouth, feet, backs, shoulders, arms, necks, liver, heart, and lungs. Baby Suggs's racial love is crucial for communal integration, as it functions to counterbalance the devastating effects of the white values in operation in the neighborhood and, therefore, would beat exclusion in order to include, and certainly would include Pecola Breedlove.

Unlike Baby Suggs's ministry of love, the Lorain neighborhood is unable to resist "the internalization of racism" which, according to Samuels (2001), "can result in the abuse of members of one's own community" (115). Unfortunately, Maureen

Peal, Geraldine, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church lack the quality and integrity of Baby Suggs's love. They replace love with hatred and pride with shame. Having internalized the stigma of racism, they decide to shame Pecola Breedlove as well. Maureen Peal seems to be the best representative of shaming whiteness in the community. When she appears in Lorain she becomes the center of attention for her beauty and light skin. At school, she becomes the favorite of the teachers and enchants black and white boys and girls, but not the McTeer sisters who consider Maureen Peal's beauty dangerous. As Bauer and Lutes (1995) point out, it is "used to judge racial and ethnic others as inferior" (96). The two girls' fear seems justifiable: "the Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, not us" (74), Claudia writes. Though validated by white standards Maureen Peal's beauty shows several minor imperfections. The two girls, later, find ways to make Maureen Peal's beauty relative and, consequently, less fearful, at least for them. They discover a defect: a dog tooth and "six fingers on each hand" (63) that were removed. The six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie Maureen Peal antagonizes Pecola Breedlove's search for self-valuation in two occasions. First, like the black boys, she accuses Pecola Breedlove of having seen her father naked. Then, especially when she insults Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove for their blackness and ugliness, saying: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute" (73). The MacTeer girls and Pecola Breedlove react differently to Maureen Peal's insult. While the two sisters are able to react against Maureen Peal and "chanted this most powerful of our arsenal of insults" (73), Pecola Breedlove shows two reactions. One displays her disorientation in relation to what happened, as she "tucked her head – a funny, sad, helpless movement" (72). The other depicts a resisting admiration

toward insulting Maureen Peal. Pecola Breedlove remains seduced by her beauty and keeps “her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing” (73). Pecola Breedlove’s helplessness in the event is incontestable. Conner (2000) remarks that “Pecola’s reaction embodies her desire to vanish, to disappear in the face of a communal rejection she cannot bear” (53). Bouson (2000) evaluates Pecola Breedlove’s submissive response to Maureen Peal’s hate, saying that Pecola Breedlove “enacts the classic withdrawing and concealing behavior of the humiliated individual as she folds herself ‘like a pleated wing’” (31). She passively accepts “visible pain and shame at the public exposure of her inner sense of defectiveness” (31).

Besides Maureen Peal, another antagonist of Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love and self-love is Geraldine, the light skinned woman who distinguishes light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks. Because of these biased categories, she teaches her son Louis Junior to play only with white children and does “not like him to play with niggers” (87) they “were dirty and loud” (87). Morrison reveals that, like the other middle class black women, she obtains her middle-class status through secondary or college education and through learning “how to do the white man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food, teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul” (83). Her close association with whiteness is extended to the way she dresses her son: “he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool” (87). In the way she manages her house, she transforms it into a place that dismisses funkiness. Thus, in the neat house of a woman with such white ideas, Pecola Breedlove’s presence is a disturbing

element, the “trashy” black girl who must be repelled as if the girl were the “funkiness” that she wants to repress. The way she insults Pecola Breedlove when she finds the girl in her house is a clear example of the spite she feels for dark-skinned blacks: “get out,” she said, quietly, “you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (92). Pecola Breedlove’s banishment implies the owner’s hate toward the girl who represents a threat to her unstable position in relation to whiteness. In other words, her whiteness is endangered by Pecola Breedlove’s dirt and ugliness. Feng (1998) remarks that “Geraldine’s hysteria is triggered by an instinctive sense of how easily her simulacrum of a bourgeois urbanity can be shattered and turned to waste” (65).

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola Breedlove’s mother, is another woman who antagonizes her daughter’s self-valuation. Being seduced and nurtured by the kind of white beauty that she finds in both romantic movies and in the Fishers’ house, she denies the black value of family stability. Instead, she teaches her daughter self-confinement and reclusion. Even when Pecola Breedlove was a baby, Pauline Breedlove reacted negatively to what she considered her daughter’s ugliness. She is shamed by the doctors who suggest that black women like her “deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (125). As a result, Bouson (2000) notes, “Pauline unconsciously equates her child with excrement: that is, with something dirty and disgusting” (35). The mother expresses her rejection of the baby, saying, “I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). For her, Pecola Breedlove’s ugliness is the kind that cannot match the beauty suggested by movie stars or by the Fishers’ house and family. Therefore, her monstrosity needs to be exorcised or extirpated through maternal spite or neglect. Being absorbed by her new

model of beauty “Pauline is incapable of a mother’s love and forgiveness” (16), suggests Furman (1996). Instead, Morrison writes, “into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128).

Through Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Pauline Breedlove, Morrison displays a deplorable instance of black submission to the fearful ideals of white beauty, and the consequent neglect of Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love and racial vulnerability. In so doing, she shows how these women deny a form of womanism which, in Marsh-Lockett’s (1997) view, is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male, as well as to a valorization of women’s works in all their varieties and multitudes” (70). They deny Pecola Breedlove’s access to survival, wholeness, and valorization and exclude her from the communal life, from a house and from an uplifting family. Besides, they also ignore black sisterhood – the major support of womanism – which, in Singley’s (1995) views “describes the lines of affection, association, and influence that exist among women” (808), and calls for mutuality.

Cholly Breedlove antagonism to Pecola Breedlove’s self-valuation is paralleled to Pauline Breedlove’s neglect. Like the mother, the father is not supportive. His attitude toward his daughter is certainly associated with his first tragic intimate experience with Darlene. The white men’s intrusion of his intimacy with Darlene traumatizes him, resulting in his future violent behavior toward women. Guerrero (2000) remarks that the event “permanently scars Cholly by showing him his ‘place’ in a racist society and as an object of that society’s sadistic, dominating gaze, ‘the look’ contributes directly to the formation of Cholly’s violent character and his undying mistrust of all women” (31). As a result, Cholly not only hates Darlene, but also extends his hatred to his wife and daughter. The lack of mutual love and

frequent fights between the parents influence Pecola Breedlove to desire blue eyes and, with their beauty, manage to make family love possible. She looks for love in God, in the community, in the people, and in the family. Cholly's crime – raping of his daughter – is an unforgivable response to her call for love. He feels guilty and impotent toward her and is led to think that his love will redeem both himself and his daughter. Samuels (2001) remarks that “Pecola embodies his own failures to be a father and to defend himself against the people who oppress him” (116). Morrison mixes incest with love:

what could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those hunched, loving eyes. The hunchedness would irritate him – the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? (161)

As Bouson (2000) suggests, Morrison illicitly “sympathy for Cholly” (41) and “also invokes the pernicious – and shaming – racist image of the black man as rapist” (41). Certainly Cholly Breedlove's expressed concerns with Pecola Breedlove surround his crime with love, but does not mitigate it. Furman (1996) analyzes the complexity of his deed, which does not distinguish hate from love: “it leads to a sensitive treatment of the complex emotions that determine character, male and female. In Morrison's writing there are no easy villains to hate; there are no predictable behaviors” (18). Indeed, his love for Darlene is repeated in his double feeling toward his daughter.

Cholly's duality of love and hate for Pecola Breedlove is repeated in Soaphead Church's relationship with Pecola Breedlove. Like Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church's attitudes toward her are determined by a debased blackness that he inherits from his father, a schoolmaster who has struggled to repress his black ancestry with an interracial marriage and a bourgeois education. Inherited from his father, Soaphead Church's despising of blackness marks his relationship to Pecola Breedlove. Samuels (2001) observes that his response to Pecola Breedlove's petition is "directly attached to his own hatred of blackness and his desire to escape from his memories of being abused by his own father" (114). Morrison's tale of Soaphead Church's life suggests that he gives his father – a schoolmaster – "ample opportunity to work out his theories of education, discipline, and good life" (169). From his philosophical and literary education and knowledge "he responded to his father's controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder and decay" (169). He manipulates the naive girl's dreams and uses her desire for blue eyes to help him kill the nearly deaf old dog Bob. In fact, "he regarded this wish for the dog's death as humane, for he could not bear, he told himself, to see anything suffer" (171). So he gets Pecola Breedlove to kill the dog for him, promising to give her blue eyes if she gives Bob the rotten food he prepared. When the dog dies, Pecola Breedlove naively believes that her black eyes have magically turned blue and leaves.

Through good intentions and wickedness, Soaphead Church abuses Pecola Breedlove by intending to help her. He considers Pecola Breedlove's wish "the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. (...) Of all the wishes people had brought him – money, love,

revenge – this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (174). In response to Pecola Breedlove’s helpless petition, Soaphead Church plays God and makes her believe that in the place of the “ugliness” of her two black eyes lies the beauty of two blue eyes. In opposition to all these neighbors who deny support to Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love are the MacTeer girls – Claudia and Frieda – the focus of the next section.

Supporting Agents: The MacTeers

Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs, Nel Wright, and the MacTeers – Mrs., Frieda and Claudia – play similar roles. In the kind of racial support they provide for Pecola Breedlove’s safety and quest for love, the MacTeers signify on Aunt Marthy, Baby Suggs, and Nel Wright. Signification implies that the MacTeers echo and change in relation to Pecola Breedlove the type of assistance that the other three previous women offer to Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace’s struggle for self-valuation and individuation. Through invigorating instances of solidarity with Pecola Breedlove, the MacTeer women can be associated with Aunt Marthy whose supportive companionship to Linda Brent becomes essential for the granddaughter to resist to Dr. Flint’s sexual harassment. Similarly, the MacTeers’ offer of their family and house to Pecola Breedlove can be related to Baby Suggs’s experience of protecting her daughter-in-law and her children at House 124 against the cruelty of Schoolteacher’s slavery. Finally, the MacTeers’ empowering friendship toward Pecola Breedlove approaches Nel Wright’s efforts to safeguard Sula Peace’s

individuality. All these women have one common aspect. Their experience of blackness in the community illustrates the interconnections between black individuality and the community in which they live. In so doing, these women embody the links that exist between “the self-within” and “the world outside” dramatized in Lee’s spiritual narrative. The integration of selfhood and grouphood becomes the basis for the profound connections of politics and spirituality of conversion.

The MacTeers are the major supporters of Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love and self-valuation but are not the only ones. In a minor dimension, the three prostitutes – China, Poland, Marie – play a similar supporting role. They keep friendly relationships with Pecola Breedlove, receive her in their place and entertain her while she is there. Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990) remark that “these women seem to provide clear alternatives that are available to Pecola” (20). Their healing availability to the girl lies in the fact that they are black women who, through social outcasts like Pecola Breedlove herself, become “self-employed people who control their business; they are independent and self-reliant, though no longer young, they do not appear squandered or devastated. They are social pariahs, yet they are not devoid of self-confidence” (20). They have a credo that empowers their self-reliance and self-confidence, as the narrator suggests, with three basic attitudes. First, they “hated men, all men, without shame, apology or discrimination” (56). Then, they do not “have respect for women who (...) deceived their husbands – regularly or irregularly” (56). Finally, they only respect the ““good Christian colored women’ (...) whose reputation was spotless, (...) who tended to her family, who didn’t drink or smoke or run around. These women had their undying, if covert, affection” (56).

They express self-confidence and self-reliance through singing, enjoying food, laughing, and telling stories. Their songs, food, laughter and stories add “a sense of experience and wholeness” to their house, where “Pecola can find genuine love” (20). They somehow find more refined manners when Pecola Breedlove visits them. Different from middle-class Geraldine, who insults the defenseless girl, they call her “dumplin,” “puddin,” “honey.” Unlike Pauline Breedlove who teaches her daughter “fear of life,” they sing her the blues and tell her stories. Unlike Maureen Peal who insults Pecola Breedlove, they protect her. Their friendly contacts with her become better alternatives than Maureen Peal, Geraldine, or Pauline Breedlove. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990) observe, the three whores form “a unit akin to a neighborhood, in which the crucial element is caring for” (21) Pecola Breedlove.

Like the three prostitutes, the MacTeer women represent a viable alternative to Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love and authenticity. Their uplifting presence in Pecola Breedlove’s life brings them very close to the supporters already discussed. Like the grandmother in *Incidents*, the mother-in-law in *Beloved*, and the friend in *Sula*, Mrs., Frieda and Claudia MacTeer perform acts of communal solidarity that guarantee Pecola Breedlove the warmth of a stable family environment, at least temporarily. In so doing, they clearly empower black womanhood, in associating blackness with womanism, and supportive solidarity. Their womanism approaches Marsh-Lockett’s (1997) view of the womanist who “values salient characteristics of the African American in general, of African American womanhood in particular, and loves herself” (785). Therefore, the MacTeers’ womanhood assists Pecola Breedlove’s quest for love and is accompanied by the “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” proposed by Walker’s (1983) womanism. Their

racial and tribal energies are addressed in favor of a naive black girl who is desperately succumbing under the spell of a devastating kind of whiteness. In so doing, like China, Poland, and Marie, these three MacTeers accept the responsibility to provide a space where black values may guarantee the racial safety to the helpless girl.

In their womanist relationship to Pecola Breedlove's vulnerability, Mrs. MacTeer is the nurturing mother; Frieda is the sister who knows more and sooner than others, and Claudia – the narrator – is the one who feels. Being the owner of the house, Mrs. MacTeer provides the warm feelings of a stable black family, the control over wasting food, and religiosity. As Kubitscheck (1998) notes, "Mrs. MacTeer loves her children and provides them with an orderly, disciplined world" (39), which offers protection but demands a sense of frugality. As for her concerns with wasting food, she comments: "what the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?" (23). When Pecola Breedlove consumes more milk than Mrs. MacTeer finds necessary, she expresses worry: "I don't know what I'm supposed 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" (24). Mrs. MacTeer's concerns about milk consumption symbolize her maternal responsibility for the family. Like Eva Peace, she subordinates conventional forms of maternal love for its more pragmatic aspects. As a result, her sustaining force and healing love, necessary when Claudia gets sick and when Frieda is harassed by Mr. Henry, are extended to Pecola Breedlove. She assumes the maternal role toward Pecola Breedlove when the girl experiences her first menstruation. Like Poland she sings the blues and like the whores she feels connected to her racial roots.

Frieda and Claudia are closely bonded, and “together,” as Feng (1998) notes, “the MacTeer sisters combat adversity” (69). Frieda is older than Claudia and does not only know more than her younger sister but also knows things sooner. For instance, it is Frieda who knows how to deal with Pecola Breedlove’s menstruation before Mrs. MacTeer interferes and informs Claudia that their young visitor can have a baby after menstruating. Claudia reacts to her sister’s knowledge uncomfortably, showing jealousy: “I was sick and tired of Frieda knowing everything” (28). A similar demonstration of Claudia’s childish jealousy appears when she is told that Frieda is harassed by Mr. Henry, a roomer in their house. When Frieda tells her that he pinched her breasts, the two sisters have this conversation:

I looked at my chest, “I don’t have nothing to pinch. I’m never going to have anything.”

“Oh, Claudia, you’re jealous of everything. You *want* him to?”

“No, I just get tired of having everything last.” (101)

Despite this childish rivalry, they are deeply tied by friendship, which they put at Pecola Breedlove’s disposal. Claudia is the narrator of Pecola Breedlove’s tragedy but is different from her. Feng (1998) establishes their oppositions, emphasizing that Claudia’s story “is in direct contrast to Pecola’s in the aspects of personal, racial and cultural experiences. Although Claudia is of the same class as Pecola, her family works to keep themselves ‘indoors’. Unlike Pecola, Claudia learns love, self-respect, and a sense of security from her parents” (68). She presents a personality that feels rather than possesses. She expresses this characteristic in relation to the Christmas gifts she gets by explaining that she needs to feel something, rather than possess

something on Christmas day, a feature of her personality that associates her with her black cultural roots: "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (22). An inclination to feeling rather than knowing supports her consciousness toward blackness. Her sense of blackness makes her ignore Shirley Temple, opt for Jane Withers, and dismember a blue-eyed Baby Doll because she cannot love it and wants to "examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (21).

In their individualities and sensibilities, Mrs., Frieda and Claudia MacTeers exemplify in concrete action the standard black values of family and marriage stability, solidarity, and companionship. Like the three prostitutes the MacTeer sisters provide Pecola Breedlove with a counterbalance to the white values that permeate the Lorain community in general and submit Pecola Breedlove's self-esteem in particular. They associate their blackness with material possessions so that family and marriage stability imply owning a house to avoid being outdoors, the dramatic situation Pecola Breedlove has always faced. Claudia expresses this need:

Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor. 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 selves; they painted, picked, and poked at every corner of their houses. And these houses loomed like hothouse sunflowers among the rows of weeds that were the rented houses. (18)

Being able to possess and maintain a house of their own, the MacTeers associate themselves with the ability Lee, Aunty Marthy, Baby Suggs, and Eva Peace evidence in their communities. These four women develop a sense of blackness that supports family stability. In other words, they may temporarily be out but are never “put outdoors” because they possess a house of their own.

Because Pecola Breedlove needs shelter after Cholly Breedlove sets fire to their house, the MacTeers let Pecola Breedlove join their household. Claudia tells how she and Frieda are informed about Pecola Breedlove’s misfortune: “mama had told us two days earlier that a “case” was coming – a girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited. We were to be nice to her and not fight” (16). In fact, the two sisters welcome their guest and put her enough at ease so that she realizes they are “trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors” (19). Claudia explains that “when we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her. She laughed when I clowned for her, and smiled and accepted gracefully the food gifts my sister gave her” (19).

Frieda’s and Claudia’s friendliness toward Pecola Breedlove in their house and at school are permeated by the kind of black sisterhood that, as Singley (1995) suggests, “describes the lines of affection, and influence that exist among women” (808). They believe that “the bonds of sisterhood may implicitly or explicitly challenge the status quo” (808) and may denounce “the context of traditional patriarchal [as well as racist] systems of values and behaviors” (808). They help Pecola Breedlove and, by so doing they challenge the racist and “white supremacist

beliefs and images” (27) that both permeate the Lorain community and submit its members to the ideals of external standards of beauty. They assist her with menarche, especially Frieda who starts cleaning the girl and, later, teaches the meaning of her physical eruption: “it just means you can have a baby” (28). They also protect her at school against the boys who insult her with the accusation that she has seen her father naked. In their daring defense, they physically attack the boys: Frieda “brought her books down on Woodrow Cain’s head” (66), and Claudia, using verbal insults – “you shut up, Bullet Head” (66) – discouraged the boys’ attack against Pecola Breedlove. Later, the two sisters defend Pecola Breedlove again, this time against Maureen Peal’s attack on their ugliness, and against her beauty that everybody seems to cherish and validate. Claudia expresses their feelings toward the kind of beauty that dangerously inundates the Lorain community:

If she was cute – and if anything could be believed she was – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. (74)

Their sense of impotence before Maureen Peal’s beauty, and before what validates such standards and who propagates them, somehow reflects and justifies their opposition to Maureen Peal and support of Pecola Breedlove. The MacTeers’ concerns about Pecola Breedlove’s struggle for love continue even after she leaves their home. After Pecola Breedlove’s rape, Frieda and Claudia intend to protect the girl’s pregnancy and future baby’s life against everybody’s concern that it will not

survive. More than wishing a miracle that may preserve the baby's life, they want "to make it a miracle" (1991). The miracle would symbolize their victory over the devastating presence of white ideals in the community and their devastating action against black people's lives. Claudia expresses this expectation, saying, "more than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals" (190). They do their part for the miracle, giving their money and bicycle up for the baby's life. Pecola Breedlove's quest for love and beauty is the focus of the next section.

Pecola Breedlove's Purpose: To Be Loved

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's main goal is to be loved. Through her quest for love she rearticulates the quest of three other black women in the preceding politics of conversion. That is, her self-valuation repeats and revises the kind of self-valuation that Linda Brent depicts in *Incidents*, that Sethe Suggs reveals in *Beloved*, and that Sula Peace evinces in *Sula*. Like Linda Brent who faces the sexual assaults articulated by white Dr Flint against her quest for freedom and security, Pecola Breedlove has to deal with the emotional and sexual damage caused by several black and white people. Like Sethe Suggs whose physical safety and emotional wholeness are threatened by Schoolteacher's cruelty at Sweet Home, Pecola Breedlove's management of her self-esteem is menaced by the devastating oppression of the white values in operation in the community of Lorain. Finally, like Sula Peace whose individuality has to struggle against the internal values of the black neighborhood of

the Bottom, Pecola Breedlove's self-love has to fight the various forms of discrimination aimed against her by black neighbors in the community of Lorain. In the dramatic events of her life, Pecola Breedlove also revises the nihilistic experiences of Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace. Pecola Breedlove is unable to validate black values in her quest for the kind of love that subordinates itself to white ideals related to beauty. Thus, she differs from Linda Brent and Baby Suggs who both embody and deny black experiences and values. Likewise, she distances herself from Sula Peace who struggles to replace some fixed black values for more flexible ones that will include her unconventional self. Additionally, through Pecola Breedlove's experiences, both the politics of conversion and spirituality of conversion are related, as both Lee and Pecola Breedlove struggle to integrate selfhood and grouphood.

Pecola Breedlove's quest for love is initially manifested in her prayer for blue eyes. Her story embodies a racial conflict in Lorain that subordinates her blackness to external white standards, suggesting that Pecola Breedlove's disenfranchisement results from the replacement of black concepts of beauty for white ones. In so doing, she reverses the political activism of the sixties, when activists campaigning for civil rights black empowerment proposed the slogan "Black is beautiful" to counteract the dominant ideology of "White is beautiful." *The Bluest Eye* clearly warns that the mere replacement of one slogan for the other is not enough to preserve Pecola Breedlove's sanity. Her dilemma is crucial because neither the blackness that she possesses, nor the whiteness that she desires can save her because of a central flaw: a focus on the physical appearance. As a result, the substitution of blackness for whiteness does not guarantee her the love she is in search of. This resolution

symbolizes Morrison's refusal of these two proposed ideals of physical beauty. Feng (1998) explains the futility of Pecola Breedlove's tactics: "'white is beautiful' only intensifies the neurotic symptoms of racial inferiority complex" (73), and "'Black is beautiful' is just a reversal of the mainstream ideology of 'White is beautiful'" (73). Through Pecola Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove's struggle for beauty, Morrison develops a critical response to the subject, arguing, through the narrator, that "physical beauty" is "probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought" (122). Like romantic love, she reminds the reader, physical beauty "originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (122).

Pecola Breedlove's search for blue eyes and physical beauty becomes her strategy to find love. She appears to believe that if she possesses blue eyes she will have love and acceptance, and she prays for that to happen. Feng (1998) states that "Pecola is the narrative embodiment of this prayer" (55). Her wish for love is first manifested in her conversation with Frieda and Claudia after her menarche. Knowing that she can have a baby because of menstruation she wants to know how. Frieda tells her: "somebody has to love you" (32). And then she asks "how do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" (32). This is the question that will haunt her entire life and lead her to try to find an answer. Her search for the answer leads her to a crossroad. In fact, because she feels ugly, she seeks love in beauty. Ironically, because she is ugly, she finds love in ugliness, in rape.

Divided between the ugliness that covers her body and the beauty that she desires, Pecola Breedlove's quest for love is permeated by what West (1994) classifies as the "white supremacist beliefs and images" (27) which, in her neighborhood, are translated as the white values of beauty. Submission to whiteness

and the kind of beauty it encompasses is explained by the fact that the whole community of Lorain is addicted to the external standards of white beauty. Blackness and whiteness both collide and also fuse in her. That is, beauty and ugliness mutually fight, but also mingle, resulting in her mental confusion and chaos. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison expresses the chaotic presence of white standards in a paragraph that eliminates the spaces between words and punctuation in order to reflect the mental chaos of the black girl after she has her “black intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character” (27) affected by the white ideals of beauty:

hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilynot
herfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy. (2)

The textual chaos anticipates the psychological chaos that will occur in Pecola Breedlove’s experiences throughout the novel and will result in insanity by the end of the story.

Like Morrison, who critically depicts the ways the white standards of beauty deplete Pecola Breedlove’s emotional and racial stability, West (1994) denounces the “existential angst” that black people develop when they uncritically assimilate “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27). He explains the angst of black people: “black existential angst derives from the lived experience of ontological scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture. These beliefs and images attack black people’s intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character daily in subtle and not-so-subtle ways” (27). Separation from “black intelligence, black ability, black beauty and black character”

(27) isolates Pecola Breedlove. Alternatively, she then addresses her quest for love to several black people – women and men – who are similarly devoid of these black qualities. Like her, they decide to focus on the more superficial aspects of life: popularity, a house, a job, uncritical independence, or education. And like her they have also assimilated the “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27) associated with white beauty, and have internalized forms of racism, stigma, and self-hatred. Initially, Pecola Breedlove tries to conquer Maureen Peal’s love, but the beautiful light-skinned young girl’s response is an aesthetic insult: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute” (73). Pecola Breedlove also tries to gain Geraldine’s love but this “colored” woman’s reaction is hate: “you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (92). She, finally, tries to have her mother Pauline Breedlove’s love, but the mother is unable respond affirmatively. Pauline Breedlove, Furman (1996) notes, “is incapable of a mother’s love” (15) because she is both terrified by the daughter’s ugliness and identified with the white beauty she finds in Jean Harlow and in the Fishers’ house. These three women’s refusal to respond positively to Pecola Breedlove’s love reflects their inability to respond to the emotional needs of the others and dramatizes her isolation in a community that is unable to support one of its members. As Conner (2000) observes, “rather than offering a site for survival in a hostile and threatening world, the community in *The Bluest Eye* represents the very antithesis of survival: it rejects Pecola, and indeed drives her to the psychic disintegration she suffers by the novel’s conclusion” (56).

The most crucial consequence of Pecola Breedlove’s fruitless search for love is her devastating nihilism. In her struggle to possess whiteness she endangers her existence because she is led to equate blackness with ugliness, whiteness with

beauty. As a result of such a naive judgment she allows whiteness to define her ugliness: “long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45). And her internalized ugliness concentrates itself on her black eyes. Indeed, she does not judge herself completely ugly, as she discovers some quality on the other parts of her face: “her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute” (46). The eyes are the focus of her attention because she tends to believe that they can separate ugliness from beauty, define good and evil, and say what is beautiful or ugly, who is the ‘one’ or the ‘other’. According to Feng (1998), the blue eyes that are meant to replace her black ones symbolize “an accentuating movement of the closing-in of dominant society on the self-definition of the non-white” (56). Since her eyes are black, they do not help and need to be removed or replaced, if the love of others is to be expected. She thinks “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (46). Indeed, she believes that if she possessed these blue eyes she would look different and be loved as well: “if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those blue eyes’” (46). As her quest for blue eyes implies a personal search for the love of others, Pecola Breedlove petitions God. Her prayer for blue eyes is a kind of spirituality antithetical to Baby Suggs’s. A certain black spirituality related to beauty is present in the two women’s different prayers. Pecola Breedlove’s prayer unveils “a universal recognition of physical beauty,” which reverses Baby Suggs’s experience of black beauty in the Clearing: the black body that needs to be restored through self-

love after having been damaged. That is, while Baby Suggs's preaching of beauty focuses on physical suffering, Pecola Breedlove's petition of beauty implies physical and emotional satisfaction. Stern (2000) remarks that Morrison appears to privilege, at least temporarily, Baby Sugg's idea of physical beauty: "it has more to do with the commonality of physical suffering than the commonalities of taste, more to do with how all bodies feel rather than how they individually look" (90). Lacking the communal experience of beauty preached by the former slave, Pecola Breedlove has to trust her individual aesthetic taste and, thus, she prays for the eyes: "each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for one year she had prayed" (46). Her quest for blue eyes is not only associated with praying but is also pursued in concrete things that may suggest the kind of beauty that derives from whiteness: the beauty of the artist Shirley Temple and the candy.

Love comes to Pecola Breedlove without her being conscious of its arrival, either because she is incapable of seeing it or because the lovers are too complex to demonstrate their love directly. For instance, the kind of black love that Pecola Breedlove is offered in the MacTeers' house does not seem to be assimilated by her because of her complete submission to white values. Similarly, the prostitutes' support does not deflect or impede her way to madness. Different from Maureen Peal, Geraldine and Pauline Breedlove, the MacTeer women and the whores represent an alternative modality of communal life put at Pecola Breedlove's disposal. The MacTeers offer her a house and family stability, and China, Poland, and Marie unveil to her a moment of black unconventionality, self-satisfaction, and rootedness. Unfortunately, Pecola Breedlove is unable to grasp what they offer. However, Cholly Breedlove's kind of love is too complex for her. This is the love of

a man who is not able to pacify his mind in relation to his past trauma with whiteness. His love of his daughter, then, reflects the complexities of virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness, and the duality of a man who portrays himself as both-and, not as either-or. The narrator Claudia explains Cholly Breedlove's dual feeling toward his daughter:

Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the only one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But this touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (205)

Soaphead Church's attitudes toward Pecola Breedlove's quest for love through the possession of blue eyes can be associated with her father's behavior. Soaphead Church himself reflects a dual disposition toward the black girl who looks to him for blue eyes. He fools her and abuses her because he feels profoundly for her. He makes her believe that she possesses the blue eyes she desires, as he acknowledges the validity of her petition. The narrator describes his acknowledgment: "a surge of love and understanding swept through him, but it was quickly replaced by anger" (174) for him, not for her, because he feels that he cannot help her. Pecola Breedlove's wish is, Soaphead Church seems to believe, "the one most deserving of fulfillment" (174). Being commanded by these conflicting sensations of good intentions and

wickedness, Soaphead Church makes her believe that she possesses the blue eyes she desires. His letter to God is again an instance of the distorted spirituality of a confused mind, which believes it has “caused a miracle” (182).

Pecola Breedlove’s quest for blue eyes also reflects her duality of nihilism and self-love, which results from the community’s insufficient support and from her insufficient attention toward the alternatives available in Lorain. Involving both communal and individual limitations, her hybrid duality, thus, approaches that of Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, and Sula Peace. However, because of the tragic consequences of their individual and group acts, Pecola Breedlove’s merger of nihilism and self-love seems most to echo Sethe Sugg’s experiences. Therefore, like Sethe Suggs, but also like Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church, she is both-and, because, in a sense, her experience embodies a racial individuation that is not single, but complex, due to the convergence of white and black values. Her final madness reflects her inability to deal properly with this duality. In front of a mirror, Pecola Breedlove’s conversation with her blue eyes does not only expose her self-love but also her insanity:

You’re looking drop-eyed like Mrs. Breedlove.

Mrs. Breedlove look drop-eyed at you?

Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too?

Could be. They are pretty, you know.

I know. He really did a good job. Everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off.

Is that why nobody has told you how pretty they are?

Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them. Isn't that funny? (...) I said, isn't that funny? (195)

Pecola Breedlove's final emotional imbalance seems to reflect the character's dialogical struggle between madness and lucidity. Here again, her behavior unveils a both-and person in whom the "eye" conversation mingles self-love and nihilism. This is a moment in which she shows herself articulate because her speech appears to reflect her mental lucidity. However, the content of her talk results from her desired – not real – blue eyes. Therefore, her insanity, like her entire life, demands some relativization. Morrison dramatizes her mental illness by showing the neighbors' inability to deal critically with the destructive overvaluing of the "white supremacist beliefs and images" (27) that permeate black people's experiences and, as a result, certainly keep the Lorain community from supporting Pecola Breedlove effectively. This leads to the question whether there is a way to propose an alternative community, which can guarantee a space for Pecola Breedlove's intimidating legacy. An answer for that is attempted in the next section.

The Outcome: Pecola Breedlove's Potential Rescue

In *The Bluest Eye*, the outcome achieved by the Lorain community echoes and changes the achievement of the slaves in *Incidents*, of the former slaves in *Beloved*, and of the African Americans in *Sula*. As West (1994) notes, the achievement of a

politics of conversion remains the community's "struggle against degradation and devastation in the enslaved circumstance of the New World" (23). This idea of resistance against oppression implicitly suggests, but also explicitly demands, a collective behavior similar to West's and hooks's (1991) "notion of community which is about sharing and breaking bread together, of dialogue as well as mercy, because mercy speaks to the need we have for compassion, acceptance, understanding and empathy" (2). Black people in the texts we have been discussing make a survival tactic out of "breaking bread together." That is, black people in *Incidents* break bread together when the slaves free Linda Brent from Dr. Flint's cruelty. The ex-slaves behave similarly when they rescue Sethe Suggs from her daughter's dominion and reintegrate the mother to the Bluestone Road neighborhood, in *Beloved*. And finally, the communal love ethic in *Sula* allows the group to cope with Sula Peace's unconventional individuality.

As they do in *Religious Experiences*, *Incidents*, *Beloved*, and *Sula*, in *The Bluest Eye*, a community of women organizes itself to guarantee its own survival in a racist and sexist society. These black women associate themselves with other people to process love ethic, despite their failure to allow Pecola Breedlove to escape her internalized standards of white beauty. The politics of conversion is required because of the conflicts between the community's love ethic and Pecola Breedlove's self-valuation. Because Morrison (1984) recognises the relevance of group conflicts with the individual, her words disclose the strained relationships between Pecola Breedlove and the Lorain community. Morrison suggests that given "the social machinery of this country at this time" the "conflict between public and private life (...) ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem, just a conflict" (339). The gap

separating Pecola Breedlove from the others in Lorain is associated with the presence of the white ideology, which, West (1994) explains, subordinates “nonmarket values” to “the market-inspired way of life,” resulting in the predominance of “images of comfort, convenience, machismo, femininity, violence and sexual stimulation” (27) over “love, care, service to others” (27). In the novel, a “market-inspired way of life” like this submits people “living in poverty-ridden conditions” (27) to a “beauty industry,” which, Samuels (2001) suggests, “shows that all modes of representation (books, toys, movies, billboards, stores, magazines and newspapers, etc.) in our current culture tend to idealize whiteness and devalue blackness” (105). As a result, beauty, capitalism, and racism are intertwined and, thus, shape “the unconscious subjective desires and fears” (106) of Lorain. Pecola Breedlove’s desires and fears and those of her neighbors are guided by uncritical acceptance to the standards of white beauty. They are unable to elaborate mutual support, so the community does not function in relation to Pecola Breedlove, as West (1994) suggests, as “powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness” (24). For instance, Pecola Breedlove’s family internalizes self-hatred and decides to wear “their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them” (38). And the teachers in Lorain reinforce Pecola Breedlove’s internalized ugliness by refusing “to glance at her,” while her schoolmates chant “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove” in order to tease her and others. The lack of mutual support between the individual and group is not the only element that approximates and separates the black experiences in Lorain from the other black communities. Another element is the inflexibility of inclusion. That is, the politics of conversion articulated

by the Lorain community is not as flexible as the inclusive ones in *Incidents* and *Beloved*. Indeed, it is more like the one in *Sula*, which is circumscribed to blacks.

The politics of conversion, or love ethic, articulated by the Lorain community reflects the hybridity of Pecola Breedlove's experiences and must be analyzed from this perspective. In her hybridity, she fuses blackness and whiteness in her search for blue eyes. She also has a baby from her own father. In fact, if a consistent politics of conversion does not occur, at least sparse instances of a love ethic are articulated to empower her so that she may potentially resist the dramatic assaults of "white supremacist beliefs and images" (27) and the "beauty industry." From this perspective the articulation of a love ethic toward her, at least on the part of some neighbors, is aimed at guaranteeing her safety and includes people like the prostitute The Maginot Line, Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church, and the MacTeer women. As personal manifestations of a love ethic these people's empowering attitudes become specific manifestations of the racial attention which Pecola Breedlove is exposed to in her quest for love.

Pecola Breedlove's question "how do you get somebody to love you" (32) functions as the motivation for her search for love. At least two kinds of reactions are encountered: negative ones that isolate her from the community and positive ones that, alternatively, reunite her with the community, at least temporarily. The negative reactions come from Maureen Peal, the boys, Geraldine, and Pauline Breedlove. Having also committed themselves to the "beauty industry," these black people scapegoat Pecola Breedlove rather than support her. Cleaning themselves on her, as Claudia suggests, they scapegoat the girl. The vampiric behavior of these people toward Pecola Breedlove is viewed by Conner (2000) as "the community preying

upon and sucking the very life out of the individual, making Pecola a sacrificial figure whose destruction guarantees the continued existence of the community” (56).

The ugliness in these people’s scapegoating is counteracted by the admirable behaviors of other people: the whores, Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church, and the MacTeers. According to Conner (2000), these other neighbors “match with remarkable symmetry the tenets of the beautiful” (51). He remarks that the beautiful requires “the preservation of the individual self; the reconciliation between the individual and the community; the restoration and regeneration of the family, the home and the natural world; and a powerful emphasis on survival” (51-52). Initially, she is exposed to the three prostitutes’ kind of love. Their association with the love ethic toward Pecola Breedlove is visible in the girl’s visits to the women’s house. The narrator reveals the kind of relationship the girl has for them by remarking, “Pecola loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her” (51). In fact, they love her, especially The Marginot Line and Miss Marie, who calls Pecola Breedlove endearing names and tells her stories, especially romantic ones with love, princes, and children that the innocent girl loves. “Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough” (57), and the love in the stories appeals to Pecola Breedlove’s need for love. As a result of these stories, Pecola Breedlove tries to discover what love is like, by imagining how love between her mother and father might be. The narrator describes how she sees her own family:

Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat

and wouldn't let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence. (57)

Though revealing and insightful for the girl's self-valuation, it is not Cholly Breedlove's love for Mrs. Breedlove that matters now, but the love of the father for the daughter. Though Claudia portrays Cholly Breedlove's love positively, considering his emotional devastation as a man and father, which is his contribution to the love ethic that aims to empower Pecola Breedlove's experiences, his is a complex manifestation of feeling because it is mixed with love and hate, good intentions and flaws. His is the love that comes through incest. Therefore, if there is any doubt that he loves his daughter while he rapes her, the narrator decides to eliminate it: "oh some of us 'loved' her. The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did" (206). In its complexity, Cholly Breedlove's love toward his daughter is that of a free man, the narrator states, which implies the unconventionality of the father who rapes because "love is never any better than the lover (...), but the love of a free man is never safe" (205).

Indeed, safe and conventional is the love that the MacTeer girls offer Pecola Breedlove. It adds some sense of practicality to the kind of love dispensed by both The Maginot Line and Cholly Breedlove. Its practicality derives from the kind of economic and cultural safety they provide. Not only do they provide housing and food, there are also the black values that envelop the whole family and are, therefore, potentially, at Pecola Breedlove's disposal. In a small way, the MacTeers' love comes, at least temporarily, with the ingredients that, West (1994) suggests, turn the

black community toward “ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence” (24).

Unfortunately, individual articulation of a communal love ethic does not seem to serve as guidance for Pecola Breedlove’s self-valuation and quest for love. Indeed, despite the supportive involvement of individuals in her quests, she remains caught in the spell of white standards of beauty and endangers her personal safety. Like Pecola Breedlove the entire community of Lorain is permeated by the “white supremacist beliefs and images” (27) and, therefore, is in need of salvation as well. The girl’s final unconventional self-talk, pregnancy, and dead baby confirm the nonsustaining relationships in the community, a situation that, from now on, must meet a more positive and constructive attitude. The narrator suggests some visible signs of the group’s new social consciousness:

Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated ours scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural – a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful, and not us. (74)

By clearly identifying the group menace as “the *Thing* to fear” (the “beauty industry”), the narrator suggests that whiteness and its values both define beauty and ugliness and distinguish those who are beautiful from those who are ugly. As

whiteness is “the Thing to fear”, its dangerous effects must be submitted to an invigorating type of blackness. In other words, Pecola Breedlove could have been depicted as a catalyst, not as a girl who was deliberately left to wander around in madness. The challenging legacy of this new Pecola Breedlove demands a new community, a community centered on a different concept of blackness that cares for and heals those who are contaminated by what West (1194) calls a “sense of worthlessness and self-loathing” (27). The beginning of such a community is visible in the MacTeer women, the prostitutes, and in the black women who marked Cholly Breedlove’s childhood. Though the conversion of the community can be articulated by these women, the narrator recognizes Pecola Breedlove’s doomed fate in the Lorain community:

The 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. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late. (206)

Claudia’s personal self-consciousness certainly is meant to involve the whole community. Her words “we are wrong” (206) represent a communal warning. Indeed, it is too late and the young mother and the baby can no longer be saved. And yet, it is not too late for the community to save itself.

The narrator’s instance of consciousness is not only personal and individual, it is far more collective. She is now the group’s consciousness and seems to be speaking for her town. She implies that it is too late for Pecola Breedlove but also

suggests that Pecola Breedlove might be taken as an example for the group because, as West (1994) suggests, “for as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive” (23). The narrator and Frieda argue that hope and meaning remain possible in the community of Lorain, through Pecola Breedlove’s baby who is about to be born:

“What we gone do, Frieda?”

“What can we do? Miss Johnson said it would be a miracle if it lived.”

“So let’s make it a miracle.” (191)

The proposed articulation of a miracle implies a collective attitude toward the baby but especially toward themselves. The narrator expresses this potential love ethic as a way of coping with Pecola Breedlove’s martyrdom, which offers the community salvation:

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. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (205)

The narrator’s ironic consciousness of the benefits that Pecola Breedlove’s unbalanced life brings to the group is the beginning of a new collectivism. It is now time for the Lorain community to prepare a better place for the Pecola Breedloves

who will come in the future. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990) put it, “each individual’s willingness to take responsibility for his or her own life” (29) will certainly prepare the community to be responsible for the life of everybody. From the perspective of the fusion of individual and collective concern with individual and group needs, Pecola Breedlove’s legacy, its productive as well as destructive aspects, is assimilated by the neighborhood. Like the Bottom community whose final sense of togetherness derives from their acceptance of Sula Peace through Nel Wright’s reevaluation of the friend’s individuality, Lorain is meant to be generous, eloquent, and stronger since Pecola Breedlove lived among them.

SEVEN

CONCLUSION

BOTH NIHILISM AND LOVE

[A politics of conversion] stays on the ground among the toiling everyday people, ushering forth humble freedom fighters – both followers and leaders – who have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults.

Cornel West (1994, 31)

West's (1994) words reinforce the work done by "the toiling everyday people" like Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace, Pecola Breedlove, and others. In his words, these women were the "humble freedom fighters" who dared to look nihilism in the eye and managed – or failed – to control its devastating effects. These "followers and leaders" like Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs courageously took "the nihilistic threat by the neck," temporarily succumbed, but finally domesticated "its deadly assaults" (31). Like Sula Peace they overcame nihilism indirectly through Nel Wright's spiritual insight. And some like Pecola Breedlove failed but left a redemptive message to the MacTeer girls. Throughout this study, groups of black women and their supporters, during different periods of the African American literary tradition, fought for freedom and won it when they joined their individual selves to their communities. Some of them won directly; others indirectly, through

the contribution of supporters. Some profited from the achievement, others did not profit but left a legacy for the benefit of others. These black women, with more or less intensity, or bigger or smaller presence, made the conversion from sin to salvation, from slavery to freedom, from nihilism to love. The idea of movement, progress, and achievement, present throughout the study, embodied the practice of black self-reflexiveness on the literary and spiritual/political levels. On the literary level, self-reflexiveness indicates that African American literary tradition is informed by a process of interdependence between two literary genres: the autobiography and the novel. On the spiritual/political level, self-reflexiveness reveals that the development of the novel from the autobiography is followed by two other moves: one contemplating black women's dislocation from the spiritual to the political, another depicting their passage from nihilism to love.

Literary self-reflexiveness positioned the African American literary tradition in its historical perspective by privileging the "call-and-response relationship" that made the autobiography and the novel two interdependent genres. The autobiography, the novel, and the mutual interconnections between them were the concern of African-Americanists. As Andrews (1993) points out, since the publication in 1853 of Brown's *Clotel: A Narrative of a Slave Life in the United States*, the first black novel, "the history of African American narrative has been marked by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel" (1). The same "call-and-response relationship" occurred inside the black autobiography, as well, suggesting the interdependence between the spiritual and slave narratives. Gates (1987) expressed this, saying, "when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading,

the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them" (x). Like the literary self-reflexiveness, the "call-and-response relationship" was present in the self-reflexiveness that interwove the spiritual and political conversions. The spiritual conversion favoring the black women's Christianity restored their souls, and the political guaranteed their possession of civil rights. The restoration of the black spiritual status antedated and urged the black possession of political status. As Andrews (1986) put it:

Before the fugitive slave narrator could hope for success in restoring political and economic freedom to American blacks, the black spiritual autobiographer had to lay the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites. Without the black spiritual autobiography's reclamation of the Afro-American's spiritual birthright, the fugitive slave narrative could not have made such a cogent case for black civil rights in the crisis years between 1830 and 1865. (1-2)

In the spiritual conversion, the emphasis was placed on the female narrator's move from sin to salvation and, through public preaching, from "the self-within" to "the world-outside." Lee's *Religious Experiences* was the focus of the analysis of the spirituality of conversion. The political conversion concentrated on the black woman's move from nihilism to love through their personal quest for political empowerment. Slave narrative and novel were the interests of the analysis and, through the discussion of nihilism and love, established the politics of conversion among black women. In Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents*, and Morrison's novels,

Beloved, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*, the battle of nihilism and love reflected the women characters' access to freedom and empowerment or represented failure.

Conversion, on a spiritual level, informed Lee's ties to her selfhood and community. Built upon a "call-and-response relationship," the interdependence between these aspects of conversion was extremely relevant to the black woman's Christianity. The divine calling established her association with God and allowed her to reclaim the soul and humanity that had long been denied to her. It was a calling for which she asked and prayed, saying, "Lord sanctify my soul for Christ's sake" (10). According to Gates (1993), Lee's conversion witnessed her "possession of a 'humanity' shared in common with Europeans" and revealed her "own membership in the human community" (8). Like Gates, Mullen (2000) remarks that Lee's spiritual conversion "concerned itself" "with the shackles placed on the soul and on the spiritual expressiveness of the freeborn or emancipated African American, whose religious conversion, sanctification, and worship were expected to conform to the stringent standards of the white Christian establishment" (627). In Lee's conversion, the personal sanctification, selfhood or the assurance of "the self-within" demanded, and was expanded by, the public preaching, grouphood, or the participation in "the world outside." It was through public preaching that she was able to associate social activism and Christianity, resulting in the formation of a black community, especially a community of women. She was able to unite individual spirituality and social identity, by making her insertion in the black community to become, Bassard (1999) notes, "an integral part of salvation, wholeness, and self-discovery" (93). She reflected the need that the individual spiritual life could not be set apart from the social spiritual life "in this collective consciousness in formation" (93).

Lee's community was preferably composed of a group of women, black and white "sisters of the spirit," whose activist spirituality was profoundly restrained and denied space in the larger racist and sexist society of converted men. Aware of the divine selection that rested upon their spirituality, these women challenged male resistance to women's public preaching and forced themselves into the practice of public activism and the conversion of those who were willing to be converted: Indians, black and white men and women. Inclusive as it was in its religious multiethnicity, Lee's community "of the spirit" integrated different religious sects and races. This multidenominationalism and multiethnicity resided, as Moody (2001) notes, in the assertion of "a collective identity" and the "resistance to individuality" of Lee's "religious community" (54).

Dixon (1985) observed that "the conversion experience emphasized a person's recognition of his [or her] own need for deliverance from sin and bondage into a holy alliance with God" (301). In her "deliverance from sin," Lee's spiritual experience exemplified "a holy alliance with God" that did contain in itself the realm of "the self-within," as it extended itself to the reign of "the world outside." Thus, the individual and the community, in spiritual harmony, could not be restricted to its spirituality, but had to aspire for secularity and, thus, reclaimed black deliverance from bondage and political conversion. The spiritual conversion created both a spiritual self and a spiritual group for black women. The relevance of a spiritual community of women is shown by a dialogical connection with the various political communities of women in the other stories. Initially, the political conversion developed her secular self and community through Linda Brent's slave narrative. The fusion of the black secular self with the secular group informed the politics of

conversion. West (1994) argued that the politics of conversion became the strategy that black people employed to hold “the nihilistic threat at bay,” functioning as “a direct attack in the sense of worthlessness and self-loathing” (27) that devastated the individual and community as well. Being the agency leading to emotional and cultural empowerment, the politics of conversion also became “a turning of one’s soul” aiming at defeating “any disease of the soul” by means of the individual and the group’s contribution. Thus, he observed, “this turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth – an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion” (29).

Like the spiritual convert’s emphasis on the connections linking the self and the group, the political convert’s attention addressed itself to the scrutiny of the various relationships kept between her “self-within” and “the world outside.” That is, “one’s own affirmation of one’s worth” was monitored “by the concern of others,” or it was informed by their lack of concern. In the four examples of black women’s politics of conversion analyzed here, the group’s participation was crucial, contributing to the individual self-assurance or denying help in order to remain consistent with its values. Likewise, the individual woman’s self-affirmation did not always position itself in agreement with the group, temporarily or completely. The disagreement generally occurred when the nihilistic threat was too big to be positively managed by the individual and the group, and as a result, love did not occur, causing the failure of the individual woman and her separation from the group. In those situations, love could only be restored through the intervention of other individuals, and only then was the integration of the individual and the group possible.

Though this situation reminds us of Sethe Suggs's experience, I have Sula Peace's instance in mind. Pecola Breedlove's example was even more dramatic as her integration in the group never occurred. In general terms, these politics of conversion revealed, with certain variations, the movement from nihilism to love. In *Incidents*, communal womanism and sisterhood ensured Linda Brent's quest for freedom from Dr. Flint's sexual harassment and eventual escape to the North. Similarly, in *Beloved*, the communal work of black women guaranteed Sethe Suggs's final harmony with the Bluestone Road neighborhood. However, in *Sula*, although the collective overcoming of nihilism through love did occur, it did not repeat the harmonious group participation, as the two previous instances of the politics of conversion did. Indeed, the community excluded Sula Peace's self-valuation, independence, and individuality from collective empowerment. Finally, in *The Bluest Eye*, a collective articulation of agency leading to the overcoming of nihilism through love was not possible, due to the individual and group's total submission to "white supremacist beliefs and images" (23). However, a politics of conversion remained potentially present in the neighborhood through the MacTeers girls' social responsibility and consciousness.

The argument developed throughout the study was that the movement from nihilism to love would occur. Indeed, the outcome of each instance of the politics of conversion, in each text, pointed to the group's achievement. The community of slaves guaranteed Linda Brent's eventual freedom, and the Bluestone Road neighborhood celebrated Sethe Suggs's reintegration with the group. Even the Bottom found a space for Sula Peace's unconventionality through Nel Wright's recognition of her relevance for the group. And though Pecola Breedlove remained

ostracized and excluded from the group, the MacTeer girls elaborated strategies to remind the Lorain community of its responsibility in the events that resulted in the girl's devastating plight. As far as the individual woman is concerned, however, the overcoming of nihilism through love calls for the relativization of their achievement. The movement from the destructive position where the individual or group was to the invigorating situation where the individual and the group wanted to be did not necessarily occur in a linear fashion. Actually, the borders separating the two antagonistic experiences, nihilism and love, were not always clear as the previous paragraph seems to suggest, but remained blurred in many cases. The blurred limits of nihilism and love encapsulating black women's experiences certainly derived from the complexity of the female characters, especially of Morrison's women, who were always both-and characters. In other words, their hybrid attitudes did not separate virtue from vice, but combined good intentions with wickedness. Otten (1993) explained the hybridity and duality of Morrison's characters: "in characterization as well as narrative structure, Morrison defies all attempts to resolve the duality and moral uncertainty of character or action" (651), by combining virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness. Therefore, the characters' experiences signified in the interstices of those two opposing poles of nihilism and love.

In this study, various instances of a politics of conversion functioned as the background upon which the play between nihilism and love, virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness were measured. Bearing the idea of play in mind, the black women's experiences could neither be solely reduced to nihilism nor could they be concentrated on love, but resulted from the linkage that could not distinguish one from the other. Therefore, what made the black women's experiences in

Morrison's novels significant was neither nihilism nor self-love or love but both nihilism and love. Similarly, what made the politics of conversion meaningful was the concern it addressed to these two elements. Indeed, the move from nihilism to love suggested in the title seems to be less a reality than a dream of a move from whiteness to blackness, considering that whiteness was supposed to generate nihilism and blackness was expected to develop love. In general terms, this was certainly true in *Incidents*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. In the first two texts, the nihilistic whiteness derived from slavery; in the third, it was suggested by whiteness surrounding the black group; and finally, in the fourth, it was evinced by white standards of beauty inundating the black community. In specific terms, however, both whiteness and blackness were hybrid generators of nihilism as well as love.

From the duality, or hybridity, of nihilism and love two major sets of conclusion were drawn: one related to the individual and her self-valuation; the other associated with the group and its love ethic. As for the individual, we may say that the indeterminacy between nihilism and love was present in the lives of many black women like Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace, and Pecola Breedlove. As they were the catalysts they attracted the group's interest and convinced the group to behave as it did. Linda Brent's experiences in *Incidents* dealt with the ambiguity of nihilism and love in two ways: one suggested that she explored self-valuation by fighting against Dr. Flint's sexual harassment so that she could keep her virtue and chastity, while at the same time giving her virtue and chastity to Mr. Sands. She explained her situation: "the crisis of my fate now came so far near that I was desperate (...) and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge" (55). Two, as a result, the solution she took had to do with

love and self-love. Her own words were self-explaining: “it seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (55). Virtue and flaw, nihilism and self-love, determined her actions, but she left uncertain the borders between one and the other as she decided to protect her human integrity by giving chastity, not to an oppressor, but to “a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (55).

In *Beloved*, Sethe Suggs’s existence also mixed nihilism and love as well, and in her life, the indeterminacy between these two elements derived from her murder of her daughter so that the daughter was not made a slave by Schoolteacher. By naming the murder of her own daughter “thick love” she blurred the borders between good intentions and wickedness and equated death with liberation. Her own words were clear: “ I stopped him (...) I took and put my babies where they would be saved” (164), suggesting that death was preferable to slavery. In *Sula*, Sula Peace’s life associated nihilism with love as she explored a special kind of self-valuation. In her struggle to develop individuality and independence, she embodied virtue and vice in her friendship and sisterhood with Nel Wright, which she wanted to be flexible enough to allow her to seduce her best friend’s husband. Her explanation to Nel Wright made the limits of virtue and vice uncertain: “I didn’t kill him. I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145). The other experience in which Sula Peace blurred nihilistic attitudes with self-love happened when she and Nel Wright had to defend themselves against the four Irish boys, and Sula Peace threatened them courageously. “She slashed off only the

tip of the finger,” (54) telling them “if I could do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove’s trajectory merged nihilism and love as well. The ambiguity between these two conflicting attitudes was expressed in her desire to possess blue eyes, so that they could make her lovable to her family and community. Through her mixing of blackness with whiteness she expected to offer herself a harmonious life in the neighborhood. “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (46), ran to Soaphead Church and asked him “I want them blue” (174). Thus, she pictured herself with those blue eyes and thought: “why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those blue eyes” (46). And finally, she faked a conversation with those long desired eyes:

So what? You asked for blue eyes. You got blue eyes.

He should have made them bluer. (203)

The indeterminacy between nihilism and love that the individual women expressed in their behaviors evinced two degrees of complexity and dramaticity, depending on the kind of relationship they kept with the group. If harmony occurred between the individual’s self-valuation and the group’s love ethic, as was the case for Linda Brent and her slave community, then the damage of the individual’s acts were mitigated by the group solidarity. In her life, Linda Brent’s sexual relationship with Mr. Sands in order to escape from Dr. Flint’s abuse, however contradictory, neither imbalanced her acceptance by the group nor interrupted her struggle for freedom. Indeed, it was part of her scheme to achieve freedom. Despite her grandmother’s angry, but temporary, disagreement, the community did not fail to support her quest for freedom. Yet, if disharmony reigned between the individual

and the group, which occurred with Sethe Suggs, Sula Peace, and Pecola Breedlove and their communities, then the indeterminacy between virtue and vice, in the individual's experiences became even more devastating. In Sethe Suggs's experience, the conflict between the individual and the group resulted in her banishment for almost eighteen years, and her haunting by Beloved before she was reintegrated again. In Sula Peace's existence, the disharmony involving the individual and the group resulted in her characterization as evil by their neighbors, an evil that needed to remain under surveillance. In Pecola Breedlove's life, conflict between the individual and the group intensified her scapegoating by the neighbors and by her own family, which caused her final insanity.

Like the individual the community also encapsulated instances of the ambiguity between nihilism and love, virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness. The love ethic and the community values included in themselves a double experience. The slave group in *Incidents*, the ex-slave neighborhood in *Beloved*, the black community in *Sula* and the African American neighborhood in *The Bluest Eye* depicted visible instances of the duality. Aunt Marthy's group of slaves mixed nihilism and love when her son Benjamin naively ran away from Dr. Flint's plantation without any collective concrete escape plan, was caught, and then imprisoned, and tortured, for six months. Baby Suggs's group of ex-slaves combined love and nihilism in their experiences as well. Love was clearly evinced in the Clearing where, under their spiritual leader's supervision, they articulated a collective appreciation of the black body and existence during which

laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (88)

Nihilism appeared when these same people who promised love for each other, and for their leader, because of jealousy of Sethe Suggs, refused to warn Baby Suggs's family against the presence of Schoolteacher in her garden. The consequence was devastating, leading to Baby Suggs's collapse into the beauty of the colors and denial of her love ministry, and to Sethe Suggs's murder of a daughter and threatening her other children. Eva Peace's group of African Americans also fused nihilism and love. The group's nihilistic attitudes were exemplified in their decision to associate Sula Peace's individuality and independence with evil and, as a consequence of this judgment, to keep her under surveillance so that they could neutralize the evil that she symbolized. The members' love appears in their attitudes of using self-love and communal support to preserve the group from Sula Peace's threatening presence. The Love ethic in the Bottom community was clearly expressed by the narrator: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-118). The MacTeers' neighborhood also united nihilism and love. The group favored nihilism when it despised black values by substituting them for white ones. Sustained by the standards of white beauty, the blacks in Lorain

accused Pecola Breedlove of being the source of their misfortune. As a result, they scapegoated her, which led her to insanity. In the Lorain community, however reduced, the evidence of a communal love ethic is associated with the MacTeers who were able to provide a variety of instances of solidarity with Pecola Breedlove.

Fusion of love and nihilism was not an experience limited to blackness but was also extended to whiteness. In the four black texts there are instances of white people behaving as sources of both black people's damnation and emancipation. In *Incidents*, while white Dr. Flint became the source of nihilism due to his sexual harassment of Linda Brent, two white women were involved in the kind of love ethic that supported her eventual emancipation. One of these women bought Aunt Marthy's freedom and the other hid Linda Brent when the slave girl decided to escape from slavery. In *Beloved*, on the one hand, white people's contribution to black people's nihilism was visible in Schoolteacher's terrifying persecution of Sethe Suggs and her children. On the other, the whites' efforts to sustain black people's love ethic were evinced in both the Garners' and the Bodwins's solidarity with Baby Suggs. Schoolteacher butchered her through stealing her milk and whipping her back. The Garners allowed Sethe Suggs to marry Halle, and the son to buy Baby Suggs's freedom. The Bodwins gave Baby Suggs House 124. In *Sula*, the white presence in black people's self-love was made nihilistically ironical by the author in the joke of the creation of the Bottom community, as the gift from a white to a black. In *The Bluest Eye*, the standards of white beauty functioned as a source of both nihilism and love in black experience. As a nihilistic force, white beauty was the source of white people's violence against black people. Two white hunters used their racism against Cholly Breedlove during his first moment of intimacy with Darlene.

Likewise, Mr. Yacobowski articulated his racism against Pecola Breedlove in his store, by refusing to touch her black hand. However, being associated with love, whiteness became the source of Pecola Breedlove's quest for self-love and the love of others.

Black people's experiences pointed to West's (1994) concerns with the relationship between the individual and the group, in which the politics of conversion plays a crucial role: "the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people" (30). Marked by the duality of virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness, love and nihilism, and being immersed under whiteness and blackness, "self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people" (30) were mitigated if not neutralized by the politics of conversion. Indeed, the positive results of the politics of conversion reflected the racial concerns introduced by Lee's spirituality of conversion. After having restored the black soul and humanity, the struggle for political freedom and empowerment was the natural step these women could follow. They toiled the everyday fight, ushered the "humble freedom fighters" and showed the necessary "audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults."

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