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Claire Marie Fuscoe April 10, 2018

# The Promise of Uncompromising Christianity: An Examination of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Toni Morrison and Alice Walker

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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English Department

2018

Abstract

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*The Promise of Uncompromising Christianity* seeks to examine Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's ability to open a productive dialogue with their readers regarding the problematic aspects of the Christian religion within black communities. Both writers use character development to demonstrate how Christian traditions and values can negatively affect identity creation, self-worth, and sexual openness of black women. Christianity is limited to the religious traditions of Protestant and Methodist churches with predominately black congregations – also referred to as the black church. The significance of this discussion rests in Morrison and Walker's unique ability to interrogate religious customs that have resulted in the harm of black women *without* alienating readers of different races or religious beliefs. As the predominant voices of black women writers in the twentieth century, Morrison and Walker's fictional library serves as anecdotal evidence of how black women attempt to identify with a God that is traditionally depicted as a white male.

In order to uncover how both authors seek a new way of interpreting religious practices, six of their novels are discussed. Beginning with the identity creation of black women, Morrison and Walker reconcile how race functions within religious communities in their novels *God Help the Child* and *Meridian*, respectively. Both authors push back against biblical implications that desirability and leadership are primarily found in white males in novels *A Mercy* (Morrison) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker). Finally, despite the widely recognized Christian belief that lustful behavior and female sexuality is a sin, Morrison's *Paradise* and Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile* reveal similar conclusions regarding the healing nature of sexual freedom. Morrison and Walker demonstrate the black church can exacerbate the racial tensions it seeks to avoid, perpetuate gender inequality, diminish the healing power of sexuality, and yet be a force of hope and freedom to struggling communities. In a world alive with political, racial, and gendered tensions, Morrison and Walker's fiction provokes an open conversation about religion while uniting their readership in a common desire for hope.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, friends, and committee members for their support and guidance throughout this process. Dr. Wallace-Sanders, I appreciate the chance that you took on me as well as your patience and thoughtful and encouraging input. Dr. Warren, your class inspired me to write this thesis, and I cannot thank you enough for the invaluable insight I have gained from this process. Dr. Suhr-Sytsma, you have been a constant source of kindness and support, and your attitude and presence often gave me the courage to continue writing.

As for my family and friends, I thank you all tremendously for listening to me endlessly talk about a very niche topic. I have felt supported and loved in this endeavor from the beginning, and I will never be able to thank you all enough for that.

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## Introduction

A constant thread in ever-changing humanity is one of division. Current American society is no exception and contains a "political partisan gap that is wider than any previously recorded gap in American history" (Smith). The partisan gap reflects how each party views race, with Republicans and Democrats ranking themselves "twice as far apart" on the impact of racial discrimination as they reported when Obama was president (Smith). Despite the polarized political climate, if people seek to understand America from a new perspective there is hope for a more unified society.

The only way to mend divisions such as the ones mentioned above is to seek to understand those with different racial and religious backgrounds. Literature is important in this quest because it provides readers a window into the lives of others, and creates a safe atmosphere for one to practice sympathy and understanding. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, in their ability to articulate with eloquence, are universally available to aid humanity in understanding a perspective, such as a Christian black woman's, that may be different from their own. The aim of this thesis is to prove using anecdotal evidence from Morrison and Walker's writing that the black church creates unattainable standards for a *good Christian woman*, excludes women from leadership positions, and inhibits female sexual expression and body autonomy. In doing these things, the church psychologically harms and silences women. It is important to note that this essay is not an attack on the black church nor is it arguing that the black church only negatively impacts black women.

American society is comprised of a white, Christian majority, which begs the question - How can a black woman feel like a "child of God" when the "God" one sees in pictures, symbolism and text looks identical to the men who enslaved, beat, oppressed and historically

showered evil on your people? How is a black woman supposed to connect with, worship, or even respect, a "Heavenly Father" that is traditionally portrayed as a white male? Walker and Morrison engage the realities of a misogynistic religion and the oppressive way in which biblical doctrine deals with women's empowerment and sexuality. In all six of the novels discussed in this thesis, both authors demonstrate the black church can exacerbate the racial tensions it seeks to avoid, perpetuate gender inequality, diminish the healing power of sexuality, and yet be a force of hope and freedom to struggling communities.

There are three chapters within this discussion and each one seeks to answer a different set of questions – all of which surround the permeating influence of the black church on culture, society and black women. The first chapter, "Identity Creation" seeks to uncover what constitutes a *good, Christian woman* by using an analysis of the black church values that are present in *God Help the Child* and *Meridian*. Within that chapter, the intersectionality between white supremacy and Christianity is addressed, as well as the influence of racism on women who are hoping to create unique identities for themselves. Chapter 2, "Searching for Leadership" discusses how men are handed authority over others while women are frequently dismissed from leadership positions, and how silencing women's voices can affect their psychological development. Lastly, Chapter 3, "Balancing Sexual Tensions" explores why the reproductive nature of women is so frowned upon by the church and how the association between sin and sexuality affects women. Despite the problematic issues addressed within this paper, Morrison and Walker conclude all of the novels mentioned in this essay with a celebration of independence and resiliency.

**Review of Literature**

Morrison and Walker are featured in this paper because of their expansive audience and their prominence as black female writers. Morrison and Walker write in a way that is distinctively universally readable and as a result consistently garner a wide readership. Even though both authors frequently write the stories of black Christian women, their readership spans many more people than one singular category. Both authors combined have authored over 44 fictional and non-fictional works – showering readers with refreshing literature infused with sharp societal commentary, and both women have won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Despite similar protagonists, Morrison and Walker have distinctly unique writing styles. Oftentimes in her fiction, Morrison plays with time and place, creating an unstable environment for the reader. However, it is within an unstable environment, when the world is upside down, that one is truly pushed to question preconceived notions. Morrison, describing her own artistic vision comments that an artist's process "whether it's a painter or a writer, it's almost holy" (Kaiser). She embodies this sentiment, creating novels that seem to transcend space and time.

Throughout this paper, three of Morrison's novels are discussed: *God Help the Child, a Mercy* and *Paradise. God Help the Child* is the story of Bride, who's light-skinned mother resents her because of her dark skin tone. Throughout the novel Bride must physically regress into a pre-pubescent state in order to accept herself, showcasing how Christian values have had a lasting impact on her psyche.

*A Mercy* is a set in the 1600s and follows four women and one man as they work together on a farm in Virginia. Although the story took place 300 years ago, themes of gender inequality and religious tradition can be applied to modern society. Through characterization of the primary male caregiver as well as the independent female characters who run the farm, Morrison forces

her reader to question the church's tradition of gendered leadership. Throughout the book there are multiple stories of displacement, however the novel ends with a renewed sense of female independence.

Lastly, the novel *Paradise* surrounds a group of ostracized women as they push back pushback against a community's de-sexualizing of women. In describing how she writes her celebrated sex scenes, one of which is in *Paradise,* she comments "if you can associate sex with some other behavior that is interesting, then the sex becomes interesting" (Kaiser). Morrison makes sex, sexuality, and the stigmas that surround it both poignant and interesting in *Paradise.*

Walker's fiction is thematically less subtle than Morrison's even though she explores similar themes. Walker tends to occupy a space of greater risk taking and writes against a larger sense of audience approval that Morrison. Morrison's novels are paralleled with analysis of three of Walker's: *Meridian*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile. Meridian* follows the story of Meridian as she grows up in an explicitly Christian community, under the judgmental eye of her mother. Meridian battles sexual assault, racism, and much more before becoming a voice of activism in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. Similarly to Bride, Meridian is influenced by what her mother thinks is correct, even though often Meridian does not agree.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a novel detailing the psychological toll of female genital mutilation. Tashi, the protagonist, is foiled by her husband, Adam, and the gendered treatment of them both by the hands of religious institutions is blatant. The inevitable influence males exacted on women's sexuality is emphasized by the religious history of female genital mutilation.

Lastly, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* paints a poignant picture of how the black church's treatment of sexuality affects female development, empowerment and self-worth. When

Walker's characters are faced with a stifling of their sexual desires, they rebel and seek out new ways of assimilating into culture. Similarly to *Paradise,* both novels involve women banding together in resistance, and supporting each other on quests to free themselves from a stigmatized view of their bodies and sexuality.

**A Brief History of Christianity and the Black Church**

Christianity is a global and monumental religion, and as a result has amassed widespread interpretations of doctrine, traditions, and confusion on what exactly it means to be a *good* Christian. As society evolves, Biblical texts are thrust in front of different lenses – feminist, racial, and sexual. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use a combination of the aforementioned lenses in their effort to open a productive dialogue with their readers regarding the problematic aspects of the Christian religion within its treatment of race, women, and sexuality.

As the slave trade in the United States grew, Christianity was thought of by some as "a well-meaning attempt of middle-class New Englanders to teach primitive Black folk how to "act white" (Stanley 1). However, as blacks began to start their own churches, religious institutions slowly turned into the focal points in black communities. Since inception over three hundred years ago, "the black church in America has provided a safe haven for black Christians in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class" (Mellowes).

Eric Lincoln, a prominent historian, catalogued a ten-year study of the black church which culminated in the book *The Black Church in the African American Experience* and constitutes a major part of the foundation for this thesis. In his book, Lincoln establishes the importance of the black church as an institution in America as well as the limited inclusion of

women in leadership roles. He describes the church as the solution to "the complex problem of black male identity in a racist society," given that black males had little opportunity to create their own authoritative identity in the American South (278).

Given that "African Americans are more likely than any other ethnic or racial group to report a formal religious affiliation," the community founded around black church beliefs is strongly embedded within American culture (Mellowes). Therefore, the way the black church interacts with race, interprets doctrines of leadership, and speaks about sexuality is important not just to Morrison and Walker, but also the larger United States community.

**Racial Influence in the Black Church**

Due to the circumstance surrounding the origination of the black church, race inevitably plays a part in the interactions between church and society. The female characters in *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* encounter difficulties when establishing their identities in the black church due to demands from their families and culture to be *good Christian women* – a standard built on subjectivity that often involves race.

> The truest bearers of Christianity were White, and White Christians maintained the value-laden opposition of Black-White in every historical epoch, even as Christianity grew among the Black population in America (Fletcher 63).

Morrison and Walker help elucidate that whites have permeated the black Christian sphere in such a way that characters such as Bride feel as though they are less beautiful because of blackness.

It is worth noting that some theologians disagree with the connection between race and black Christianity, citing a modern rejection for feelings of atonement. The Bible frequently uses

stories of atonement and suffering to demonstrate the consequences of morality such as the stories in Exodus that explicitly describe God's wrath on the enslavers of Egypt. However, as the black church began to grow in power in the twentieth century, rejection of atonement grew. As Work points out, the ideas of atonement as redemptive suffering and election as nationhood are a "fatal combination" (8). Atonement projects "black suffering as God's wrath-satisfying 'redemptive requirement.' Black America would be God's scapegoat -- and white America would be among the beneficiaries" (Work 8). Despite this conjecture, both Morrison and Walker work with this theological framework and incorporate feelings of racial guilt within *God Help the Child* and *Meridian*.

**Values of the Black Church**

Apart from visual beauty norms, black communities have a standard of action for their members, especially women. As Katie Cannon points out, "the ethical values that the Black community has fashioned for itself are not identical with the body of obligations and duties that Anglo-Protestant American society requires of its members," instead, black churches have adapted more tailored guidelines (Cannon 114). These principles, more applicable to black communities and therefore more widely accepted in them, are often used to separate black communities of faith and their white counterparts. The ethical values that are discussed in this thesis are five-fold and based on Stacey Floyd-Thomas' study of the black church and its values.

Floyd-Thomas in an effort to combine a comprehensive study on womanist ethics and the African American Christian social ethics, created a rubric of values that reflect "black women, black church, and the larger society" (Floyd-Thomas 140). Within this rubric are values that are

consistently found in Morrison's and Walker's writing, and aid in defining what conservative American society sees as a *good Christian woman*.

One of such values is "traditional communalism" which is fulfilled by "caretakers of the community" who exude a "quiet grace" as they shoulder their burdens (141). This grace reflects itself in the novels *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* with the consistent willingness of mothers to overlook racism in an effort to remain part of a community that perseveres through hardship with patience. Another value that shapes women is that of "practical wisdom" which, despite being the "basis of African American moral reasoning" leads mothers in the aforementioned novels to neglect teaching their daughters how to tell right from wrong (133). Although in Floyd-Thomas' description she explains that this common sense is vital in upbringing children, Morrison and Walker demonstrate how such guidance can go awry. Finally, the idea of Beneficence as an "extension of hospitality" determines how women see themselves fitting into society (133). As caretakers and givers, women in Morrison and Walker's novels often focus radically on their outward charity and appearance, sometimes to the detriment of their children's development.

Despite the differences between black churches and other predominately white Christian denominations, the foundation remains the same. Many studies of Christianity agree that it is in "God's will to impose the model of the patriarchal household" (Tamez 371). For example, sentiment such as "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" are commonly found in the Bible, and increase the emphasis Christian culture often places on qualities of meekness in women (Ephesians 5:22). Additionally, women in the Bible are often written as submissive and quiet, a trend that began to be the norm in *good Christian women*. In both Morrison's and Walker's writing there are influential female characters who voice their

opinions on what a *good Christian woman* is, and in both cases a good woman is a woman who is confined to the home and docile – a woman who is "trained properly" (Morrison 42).

**Female Leadership in the Black Church**

The dichotomy between society and leadership within the church is exacerbated by the presence of women within the congregation –women compromised over half of the church-going population. Despite women's palpable influence within the community there were no avenues for women to grow as leaders. Due to Biblical doctrine such as "but I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence," Christianity often justifies the silencing of women's voices (Timothy 2:12). Even though some argue that in modern culture "a combination of several factors [has] legitimated preaching roles for black women," Walker repeatedly portrays women who are subject to the will and power of men (Lincoln 277).

Despite the lack of positions available for women who were "denied the chance to preach, growing numbers of women, mostly middle class, found ways to participate in religious life (Mellowes). Women quickly assumed roles of teaching and regulating the community events, something that is reflected in Morrison and Walker's writing. Within individual character construction, for example in *A Mercy's* character of Lina, women who are prohibited from using their own agency reclaim their voice through teaching.

"Whenever ordained leadership is involved, clergywomen are found to be paid less than their male counterparts, and they more often serve in entry-level positions, either as assistants or associates, or as solo pastors or rabbis of small congregations with limited funds" (Wessinger 55). The lack of female leadership in an institution designed to inspire hope and salvation, is unquestionably detrimental and often lulled women into a complacent state because they felt

they had no other option than to be submissive. Some theologians even argue that "the Holy Spirit's distinctiveness as a Person within the Holy Trinity does not give [the public] license to disfigure Christian revelation by erroneously considering the Holy Spirit a goddess figure" (FitzGerald 34). The idea that in order to connect the most closely with Christ one must be male is undoubtedly psychologically damaging for women of faith.

**Sexuality and the Black Church**

In a comparable way to how Lincoln's research on the black church experience shapes this paper, Kelly Douglas' comprehensive review of the relationship between sexuality and the black church in her book *Sexuality and the Black Church* is the foundation for Chapter 3 "Balancing Sexual Tensions". Early on, Douglas makes the distinction that "sexuality is not synonymous with sex. Rather, while sexuality is not the whole of who we are as human beings, it is basic to who we are" (6). This distinction applies also to Morrison and Walker, who regard sex as something that aids individuals in knowing themselves, as opposed to an act that involves reproduction.

Through their fiction, Morrison and Walker point out the harm that results from black Christianity's denial of female sexuality. Biblical doctrine frequently supports that chastity "is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication," and as a result sex becomes something taboo and not talked about in white and black communities alike (Thessalonians 4:1). As Douglas states "the dominant Christian thought regarding human sexuality emphasized it as something Christian women and men should strive to overcome so that they could live a life more pleasing to God" (Douglas 27). The relationship between sin and

lust is harmful for all women, who bear the brunt of the blame after Eve caused the fall of man, and God plagued women with desire and painful childbirth forevermore.

Douglas highlights that the difficulties in discussing sex are even more pronounced within black church communities due to the impact of white culture on black bodies and the sexual tension that results. As Douglas explains, exploiting black bodies became the norm in slavery, and continued as "white culture attacked black sexuality as a means of dehumanizing black men and women" (23). A tension that arises from this conflict is also one of patriarchy, reflected in Morrison's *Paradise*, where men are afraid of women's sexuality because of the evils lust represents.

The result of such attacks led the black church community to stay away from discussing sexuality even more so than their white counterparts. This lack of discussion contributed to a lack of female empowerment – females in Morrison and Walker's worth often struggle with owning their own bodies.

> A history of having their sexuality exploited and used as a weapon to support their oppression has discouraged the black community from freely engaging in sexual concerns…Some have even noted that the refusal to engage in public sexual discourse is a form of black cultural resistance to the corrupting influences of white culture (68)

Morrison and Walker highlight that the reluctance to talk about sexuality inevitably harms women, and through character development create anecdotal examples of how accepting one's sexuality is beneficial.

Through research and the aid of books like *The Black Church in the African American Experience* and *Sexuality and the Black Church,* Morrison and Walker's fiction has proper historical, cultural, and societal context. Both authors elaborate on "the bittersweet irony of the

Afro-American experience," one that "forces Black women to examine critically the conventional, often pretentious, morality of middle-class American ideals" (Cannon 117). Through careful analysis of Morrison and Walker's writing, one can see how the black church has produced various tensions within its community.

## Chapter 1: Identity Creation in Christian Communities

The transition from adolescence to adulthood within a community that prizes and prioritizes a set of beliefs is riddled with difficulties. Children often face pressure to conform to the same religious and political views as their parents, despite the variances in thought a generational gap inevitably produces. Expectations of conformity are often enhanced within black Christian communities due to an underlying need to feel unified on both a religious and a racial front. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use character development in their novels *God Help the Child* and *Meridian*, respectively, to demonstrate young black women's pushback to their mother's Christian values. The character development of the leading protagonists in both novels highlights the role race plays on identity creation of black women, the influence of a mother's religious beliefs on her offspring, and the final portrayal of both protagonists exemplifies values of hope, courage, and self-love.

As previously mentioned, throughout the assessment of Morrison's and Walker's writing, the scope of Christianity is confined to that of Protestant, Methodist and Baptist churches with historically predominately black congregations. Two aspects of Christianity, the foundation of the two aforementioned denominations, pose inherent problems within black communities. The first is that "Whiteness and Christian-ness have been twin pillars" within white peoples' efforts to enforce superiority over blacks (Fletcher 5). The second is that Christianity has been "appealed to so often as providing a divine mandate for [women's] second class status within many church structures" (Tolbert 233). The inherent white and patriarchal aspects of American Christianity influence black churches in America, as well as the fictional communities in Morrison's and Walker's writing.

Written in 2015, *God Help the Child* is Morrison's latest novel, and follows the story of Bride, a woman striving to overcome a history of child neglect. Morrison uses Bride's ironically named mother, Sweetness, and her community, as well as her physical and emotional regression into prepubescence, to exemplify society's role on one's identity creation. Although the characters that Bride interacts with throughout the novel are not explicitly religious, society as a whole in the United States at the time, and still today, is overwhelmingly 70% Christian – and Christian ideals have undoubtedly permeated community values (Wormald). Bride is plagued by a negative view of blackness that was forced upon her at a young age and through a rebirth sheds her resentment towards her race.

*Meridian* similarly follows a young woman's search for her own identity, however, Walker's novel is considerably more Christian. Written in 1976, *Meridian* tells the story of Meridian, a young woman in the heart of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement whose life is wrought with sexual assault, loneliness, and the constant battle of cultural stigmas. In her novel, Walker helps to explain how "Christianity is both a positive force in black social movements and in inharmonious figuration," inharmonious in the sense that black Christian ideals disrupt Meridian's self-worth and character development (Wingard 100). Morrison and Walker, through community creation and character development, demonstrate how pervasively black Christian ideals take root within a racially charged culture, how they are passed down from mothers to daughters, and finally how daughters find their own way to fit inside or outside the black church.

Morrison and Walker speak to how racism has seeped into western Christianity and affected the black church as well as how the black church affects the women who grow up underneath its influence. Racism interconnects with Christianity by allowing Christ to be

"imaged as White" even though "whiteness does not align with collective suffering" (Fletcher 150). This pervasive imaging of Christ as a white figure construes what many people hold to be their highest role model as a white male, which causes the protagonists of *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* to question their own worth as black women. In *Meridian* Lynne is described as "guilty of whiteness" in the black community. A sharp contrast from *God Help the Child* where it seems as though Bride is guilty of blackness. These two occurrences are examples of how Morrison and Walker create tension within their novels in order to explain the dynamics of race relations and beauty.

Embedded within character development Morrison and Walker also search for alternatives to the patriarchal model of Christianity, and expose how this model affects adolescents within black church communities. The sexist language often presents in Christianity causes women to place a higher emphasis on values such as bearing a heavy load with grace, speaking with propriety and being good mothers. As conservative culture in both novels encourages women to find their worth through becoming *Good Christian women* black women are no exception, and "have a history of being the maternal center of families," that often results in a stifling of personal development (Chavan 188).

The passage of beliefs and prejudice from mothers to daughters is a central theme in both novels. Both Morrison and Walker exemplify idea that "Children [can] absorb their parent's wounds through learned behavior," even when the wounds are a result from their religious beliefs (Tait 215). Bride, the protagonist in *God Help the Child*, must revert into a childlike state in order to come into her own as an adult, while Meridian suffers trying to find a place where she truly belongs. Both characters' lack the ability to find themselves, which correlates to

suppressive stigmas taught to each character by her mother, and reinforced by the community's Christian ideals.

**Attaining Beauty**

The impact and result of "harmful Eurocentric beauty norms" and relationship between those standards and Christianity are discussed in both *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* (Tait 225). In both novels, the protagonists are subject to communities that believe female beauty is either delved from whiteness or virginity and purity. *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* explore how Christianity often ties beauty to whiteness via imaging of Christ (despite the historical inaccuracies of those images) and influences black communities with those idolized images.

As American society evolved, slavery ended, and the movement for equality began, Christianity often remained an authority that reinforced the idea that white was "better" than black both morally and physically. As Jeannine Fletcher writes, "The truest bearers of Christianity were White, and White Christians maintained the value-laden opposition of Black-White in every historical epoch, even as Christianity grew among the Black population in America" (63). The viewpoint that white was more 'beautiful' than black, though subjective, was rampant in the media and continually linked whiteness to a higher morality. Morrison and Walker highlight the idea that white is often considered more beautiful, as well as the Christian idea that virginity, purity, and whiteness are inexorably linked to beauty.

Keeping the racial undertones of Christianity in mind, and acknowledging that the heavy majority of communities in the United States are comprised of Christian members, the pervasiveness of condemning black as 'less beautiful' undeniably links *God Help the Child* and *Meridian*. Morrison and Walker, through community creation and character development seek to

reconcile the rift between a black women and communities that think white is beautiful and value a woman's marital status and childbearing abilities.

The idea that either black or white can be more beautiful than the other is rooted in subjectivity. However, as Katie Cannon suggests, "Black women are subjected to all the ideals of white womanhood as a model to which [they] should aspire" (114). Additionally, the Eurocentric view of Biblical characters as well as the monumental history of saints and thought leaders of the church who are European creates an unattainable beauty standard for black women that is based on European beauty ideals. Combined with the prevalence of the church within black American communities, and the explicit presence of the church in Walker's writing, the battle between whiteness, purity, blackness and beauty is a struggle displayed in *God Help the Child* and in *Meridian*.

Morrison begins *God Help the Child* by calling attention to Bride's skin, so black she "scares" her own mother (Morrison 1). As the novel is propelled into action by Bride's mother, Sweetness, the readers learn that throughout Bride's childhood she is treated as something to be kept quiet and hidden. Sweetness even admits to trying to smother Bride. Bride only begins to feel beautiful when she changes her name to Bride from Lula Ann, and wears white clothes. Bearing striking similarities to the Christian ideal that pure is beautiful, Bride makes herself "pure" in every outward way possible. She does not wear makeup and often does not even wear jewelry, instead, she represents a simplistic and unadorned version of herself. She is even told that "white girls, even brown girls, have to strip naked to get that kind of attention" (36).

As critic Jean Wyatt explains: "a developmental logic governs her growth from a child treated as if she were only her skin to a beautiful adult woman whose self-image is determined by her looks" (172). This logic, when applied to how ugly Bride felt as the "too-black little girl

in her mother's house," helps to explain how Morrison is critiquing the ability black communities to fundamentally alter black women's perception of their own beauty and self-worth (Morrison 144). The conclusion of *God Help the Child* exemplifies that Bride needed to separate herself from society in order to feel beautiful.

In *Meridian* Walker also plays with the Eurocentric concept that virginity and beauty go hand in hand. Meridian is never described as beautiful, instead she is consistently connected with characteristics that are somewhat odd – she has "dark sad eyes" and a "too friendly smile" (Walker 22). Men in the novel ask Meridian "can't you smile some?" implying she carries a more morose demeanor than her female counterparts (55). She even realizes that the only man who ever loved her would have preferred her a virgin. When she expresses to Truman that he discounted her from being desirable, instead of recognizing the double standard he simply comments that "her breasts hung much too heavily" on her thin body (151). In this exchange Walker demonstrates how much the commonly held Eurocentric interpretation of the relationship between the Bible and sexual morality can affect a man's view of woman.

However, the conclusion of the novel marks a change in the relationship between Meridian's race, self-worth, and her religion. When Meridian brings herself to visit a black church as an adult, she "notices the congregation is more social conscious and inclusive…the glass [window of the church shows that Meridian's race and culture may finally be more exalted" (Wingard 99). Within this church, "instead of the traditional pale Christ …there was a tall, broad-shouldered black man" who demonstrates the transitional capability of the church to create beauty norms that are more inclusive. Walker's ability to transcend the religious praise of virginity to accept Meridian and her blackness is a harbinger of hope for the potential growth of the black church to more freely accept women.

Additionally, as previously mentioned in the introduction, both authors incorporate the idea of atonement in their novels. Although this idea is often rejected by the black church do to the possibility of interpreting the black race as one that is constantly 'atoning' for having black skin, Morrison and Walker include a series of physical developments in their novels that parallels how Biblical doctrine often alludes to atonement – a way to become closer to God through suffering for a sin. A foundational belief of Christianity is that Jesus died on the cross to *atone* for mankind's sin, and a similar physical progression of atonement is mirrored in *God Help the Child* and *Meridian.*

Morrison uses atonement throughout her novel by characterizing Bride as moving back through puberty to arrive in a childlike state. In this childlike state, Bride has a revelation and appears to have completed her progression of atonement, quickly maturing back into the person she was before. At first, the "tiny holes" in Bride's ears close up, followed by a drastic weight loss, and finally the disappearance of her pubic hair and her breasts, which Bride realizes is because "[Booker] left" (Morrison 50, 94). Throughout her transition back into prepubescence, Bride is lost in her own mind and relies on strangers to care for her – only after Bride reconciles her fight with Booker, her lover, and regains her own independence, do her "lovely, plump breasts" return (166). The progression Morrison describes throughout this novel is analogous to a physical atonement for sin. Bride's sin, committing an innocent woman to prison, is only remedied by Bride reclaiming her identity from Sweetness' corrupt influence.

In *Meridian*, Walker describes Meridian's crippling sickness, and her inability to walk, and Meridian goes through a final transformation at the end of the novel where she walks away from Truman, her lover, "strong enough to go" (Walker 241). When the readers are first introduced to Meridian, she has to be carried home by four men who appear to be "carrying a

coffin" (10). Through the course of the novel, Meridian seems to be trying to shed Truman's impact on her as well as the restrictive society in which she was brought up, only to finally be "cleansed of sickness" at the conclusion of the novel (241). It is no coincidence that only two chapters before Walker has name the section "Atonement…" which strongly suggests Meridian has atoned for her own sins (237). Truman himself describes this atonement as Meridian being "borne in terror" after her atonement from her sins (242). The way the Biblical allusion to atonement is paralleled in both novels with physicality serves to reinforce the idea that Christianity is influential within the texts as well as call attention to the problematic correlation between race, physical beauty, and atonement.

Morrison and Walker both use character development as a way to explain how societal conceptions of beauty effect the identity creation of black women. The idea that black is not as beautiful as white, or that in order to be considered beautiful one must be a virgin is an outward representation of ideals of black Christian communities being pressed upon adolescents. Morrison and Walker also tackle the inner workings of stifling upbringings as they each describe how mother's attempt to pass values of the black church onto their daughters – an effort to bring their daughters up as *good, Christian women*.

**Becoming a *Good, Christian Woman***

In *Black Church Studies, an Introduction,* Stacy Floyd-Thomas outlines the guiding principles of the black church. Although there are ten principles, three are present in *God Help the Child* and in *Meridian*: Practical Wisdom, Beneficence, and Traditional Communalism. Practical Wisdom is described as "common sense" and "moral reasoning" and "plays a vital role in the religious upbringing of children" (143). Beneficence by definition is the value of

community-centric goodwill and hospitality; however, the idea can turn into obligated charity. Lastly, Traditional Communalism is gender-specific, and prizes a woman's ability to carry her burdens with a "quiet grace" (143). By the conclusion of each novel, both protagonists have developed values of radical subjectivity and redemptive self-love. Their development exemplifies a strain of hope consistent in Morrison and Walker's writing.

Bride's mother, Sweetness, and Meridian's mother, Mrs. Hill, attempt to pass on ideals of goodwill and hospitality that manifest themselves in public appearances, a view of inherited *common sense,* and the idea that there is a *quiet grace* in living through hardship without protest. In retaliation against these sometimes stifling ideals, both Bride and Meridian end up with what Floyd Thomas deems a "redemptive self-love" (143). Both protagonists transition from one set of ideals to another, while remaining in the Black Christian sphere, demonstrating that while there are certain aspects of the Christian religion that are problematic for black women, there are ideals in place that give them freedom of expression and growth.

Morrison calls for a religious interpretation from the title along. No matter where the emphasis is placed, the emotion evoked from *God* help the child, God *help* the child, or God Help the *Child* weighs on one's heart. The novel begins with Sweetness "teaching" Lula Ann (subsequently known as Bride) the *correct* way of life. Sweetness imparts to Lula Ann that she must maintain a "less black" appearance at all times. Lula Ann grows up believing that she must compromise her moral compass in order to remain inconspicuous and that she must accept racism with a quiet demeanor. Morrison uses the beginning chapters of *God Help the Child* to allow the reader a glimpse into Lula Ann's upbringing, the pervasive nature of black church beliefs, and their lasting influence on Bride.

Walker introduces Meridian with a heavier emphasis on her surrounding Christian community. Her mother, similar to Sweetness, has strong convictions regarding who a *good, Christian woman* is, and tries in vain to pass a Christianized identity onto Meridian. As Mrs. Hill seeks to impart ideals of common sense, patience, and mindless charity to her daughter, Meridian responds with an increase in courage and self-love.

Throughout each protagonist's character development, there is parental pressure to become what conservative American culture views as a *good Christian woman.* For the sake of this argument, a *good Christian woman* is one who exemplifies both the previously mentioned beauty ideals, but also the traditional values of communalism, beneficence, and common sense – as defined in the introduction. Both mothers seek to impart black church values onto their daughters, and both daughters respond with aversion – Bride remakes herself, Meridian rebels.

Because Sweetness is so averse to her daughter's skin color, she maintains an attitude of always keeping up appearances. The idea that a lady must present herself in the best way exists within black church values as well as many other moral and religious traditions; however, Sweetness takes the idea to the extreme. Constantly worrying about Bride's "too thick" lips and her unruly hair, Sweetness teaches her daughter that her natural appearance is not societally acceptable (Morrison 6, 42). While this may not seem like a poor lesson to teach a child, Sweetness seems to never allow Bride a chance to play and to experience the unruly and restless side of life.

Mrs. Hill also seeks to teach Meridian how to keep up a good appearance, and behave like that of a *good, Christian woman*. For example, focused singularly on her appearance, Mrs. Hill, "In the ironing of her children's clothes…expended all the energy she might have put into openly loving them" (Walker 76). Walker continues to reinforce the debilitating idea that *good,*

*Christian woman* behave a certain way by using specific language such as "I always thought you were a *good* girl. And all the time, you were fast" as she recounts Mrs. Hill's judgements of Meridian (86). Language such as "this is an up-right *Christian* home" showcases that black communities can grow accustomed to the norms of citing Christianity when criticizing certain behaviors. Because Mrs. Hill is often described as ignorant and unwilling to use her own faculties, her use of Christianity to justify scolding Meridian for wanting to go back to school is unfair and frivolous.

Floyd-Thomas' idea of "practical wisdom" is paralleled within the communities in *God Help the Child* and *Meridian.* In both novels the protagonists grow up with a skewed perception of what is morally right and wrong. In Bride's case, she lies, and in Meridian's case, she is continually taken sexually advantage of by the men around her – both women are unaware of the psychological toll these actions will have on them in the future

Sweetness, in contrast to a lot of religious teachings, does not seem to have any concern for her daughter's moral compass. Despite extreme concern about her daughter's appearance and behavior in public, during Sweetness' limited appearance in the novel, there are two occurrences in which she instructs her daughter to lie, and her treatment of the situation suggests that lying is the *common sense* response – imbuing in her daughter a skewed sense of right and wrong. Although Sweetness' actions may be attributed to a need to keep her daughter safe and quietly present in society, she ultimately exemplifies the idea that common sense can be inherited and she refuses to converse with her daughter in an open manner, causing Bride to not understand the reason behind her actions.

The first instance occurs when Bride lies about being molested by a teacher at her school in order to win over Sweetness' affection. She remembers her mother "smiling like she had never

seen her smile before," and for once being physically affectionate in public with her daughter (Morrison 31). Sweetness remembers Bride as a "little black girl tak[ing] down some evil whites" (42). The dichotomy between the two suggests that as a mother, Sweetness lacked compassion, a genuine desire for her daughter to do the right thing, and the ability to listen. As critic Manuela Lopez describes: "Sweetness's destructive patriarchal mode of motherhood transmits racist ideologies and attitudes," ultimately harming Bride (Lopez 151)

The value that Sweetness is reflecting is what Floyd-Thomas refers to as "practical wisdom," and the paired rhetoric is to "train up a child in the way she should go, and when she grows old she will not depart from it" (Floyd-Thomas 134). By training her daughter, Sweetness is removing Bride's ability to think critically about her own actions. Unknowingly, Sweetness is planting a seed of guilt in Bride that will take only become resolved when Bride regains her agency.

Bride is coerced into lying once more when she sees her landlord molesting a child. When she tells Sweetness, she is "furious" and forces bride to stay quiet. As Bride grows up, she cannot forgive herself for staying quiet, and believes part of the reason she lied regarding the aforementioned alleged child molestations was due to residual guilt (Morrison 55). Again, Sweetness imbued in her daughter the idea that keeping a low profile is *common sense*. However, in this instance the reader can also see how Sweetness is protecting her daughter and retaining their place in an apartment building by asking Bride to lie. Because Sweetness refused to have an open conversation with Bride and explain her actions, she reinforced no need to fight for justice and she removed Bride's ability to think critically about her own actions.

Despite growing up in a faith-based community, Meridian struggles with a severe lack of guidance from her family members. From the outset of the novel, Meridian acknowledges her

mother's faults, describing her as a "willing know-nothing, a woman of ignorance" (Walker 17). Mrs. Hill's religious devotion contributed to her unwillingness to speak about things like sexual activity and men. Due to her propriety, Mrs. Hill only ever cautioned Meridian to "be sweet" and never explained the consequences of sex, which leads to Meridian's early pregnancy (56). When Meridian questions her mother's methods, Mrs. Hill approaches the topic as if Meridian is born with a sexual education.

Although Mrs. Hill uses her devout faith in Christ as a justification for her actions, her reasoning is supported by the "church building," rather than an apparent moral code (Walker 74). This surface-level belief system becomes problematic as Mrs. Hill seeks to teach her daughter how to conduct herself, yet Meridian picks up on feelings of obligation that surround her mother's relationship with the church and is dismissive of her mother's belief system. For example, Mrs. Hill makes so many "prayer pillows" that they fill closets, yet the pillows do not even support both knees and they go to waste (17). As Chavan notes, despite what would seem like a religious opportunity for release, so repressed is Meridian's mother that she even does not bother to complain about anything around her (Chavan 188).

The last value that both Sweetness and Mrs. Hill seek to pass to their children is one of "Traditional Communalism" described as "lifting as we climb" and fighting through hardship with a quiet grace as opposed to pushing back with courage and ferociousness (Floyd-Thomas 143). Although Sweetness expresses her disbelief at the idea that there should exist a Bible for whites and a different Bible for blacks, she admits that the only way for her to hold onto any dignity is to "group [people] according to skin color" (Morrison 4). However, due to this submissive and complacent belief, she allows her own child to be severely discriminated against. Morrison sets up this dual belief system framed by the sentiment that Bride's "color is a cross

she will always carry," which reflects Floyd-Thomas's idea that instilled within the black church community is an idea of a quiet grace in accepting one's burdens without complaint (Morrison 7). Bride quickly learns as a child to accept poor treatment as normal – letting the name calling "travel like poison through [her] veins," without ever standing up for herself (57). However, this ideal does not lend Bride a power of agency, or the feeling that she could affect change in her world.

Values of *patience* and *tolerance* stir conflict between Meridian and her mother as well. Although patience is often seen as a virtue, Mrs. Hill's prideful approach to stoicism as a way of life leads her to embody characteristics of quiet and passive resignation. She describes white men who attempt to sexually assault her "with weary religion-restrained hatred" (Walker 110). Despite Mrs. Hill's passive nature, Meridian strays in the opposite direction, embodying something Floyd-Thomas refers to as a womanist principle of "unshouted courage" (Floyd-Thomas 134). Meridian describes the black women she looks up to as "escaping to become something unheard of. Outrageous" (Walker 111). In stark contrast with her mother, Meridian exemplifies an ability to push past an early pregnancy and sexual assaults into a lifetime of resilient courage.

Bride exemplifies a similar character trajectory. Morrison alludes to Bride's rebirth, development of a stronger moral character, and demonstrates that Bride has gained courage and dignity. In a small detail recounted by Rain, when Bride saves Rain's life, she says: "nobody put their own self in danger to save me …but that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it" (Morrison 106). In this small occurrence, Bride has demonstrated courage to do the right thing and a willingness to ignore the race of the person she is helping (Rain is white) both attributes that cannot be found in Sweetness. Morrison and Walker show that mothers pass on

black church ideals to their daughters in a way that results in a lack of moral development and self-confidence – only with a distancing from their mothers' influence do the characters of these remarkably different novels come into their own.

Both Meridian and Bride struggle with their inability to be accepted by their mothers. With both mothers fueled by either a community or a belief system that makes their expectations of their daughters impossible, Meridian and Bride are set up for failure. Bride can never change her skin color, and could never hope to meet the conditions necessary to win her mother's love, while Meridian chooses not to raise the baby that resulted from her unplanned teenage pregnancy. Due to their inability to connect with their mothers, both protagonists suffer from plaguing guilt. Bride towards the child molester she wrongly convicted, and Meridian by believing that she had "stolen" from her mother any sense of individuality or purpose (Walker 43).

Despite the lessons Sweetness leaves Bride with, the novel concludes with Bride's fierce independence, courage and dignity. Morrison uses magical realism, Bride's inexplicable body changes (losing her pubic and underarm hair, her breasts and her ear piercings; even shrinking to the size of a child) to express the black woman's identity crisis," however the crisis culminates in a stronger Bride (Lopez 160). These are reflections of two other virtues Floyd Thomas alludes to – Radical Subjectivity and Redemptive Self Love. Radical Subjectivity is known as "unshouted courage" while Redemptive Self Love is known as "invisible dignity". Both values are quiet and personal, yet healing and independent. Despite having to regress to a childlike emotional and physical state in order to rebuild herself, Bride ultimately reaches these two pillars of the womanist faith in the black church.

As the novel progresses, and Meridian comes into her own she transitions, through education, into an independent, traveling woman, dedicated to spreading truth. Objectively she embodies values of "quiet grace, invisible dignity, and unctuousness," all of which Floyd Thomas identifies as essential to the womanist theological movement. Despite criticizing Christianity, Walker uses *Meridian* to embody the transition from some of the more restraining elements of the black church into the freeing values of womanist theology.

*God Help the Child* and *Meridian* display some of the faults found within the black church that are substantiated with religious dialogue, such as a celebrated ability to push through struggle, even if the compromise costs you your morality, the idea that sexuality is something that is "common sense" and does not need to be discussed, and there is a duty to do well regardless of circumstance. Morrison and Walker, despite demonstrating some of the setbacks of communities grounded in black church ideals, simultaneously showcase how women can grow into their own bodies and become confident, courageous, and full of integrity.

## Chapter 2: Searching for Leadership

The black female congregation in rural churches during the twentieth century outnumbered the males in attendance "three to one," yet there was little opportunity within church communities for women to hold leadership positions (Lincoln 103). In many interpretations of the Bible, the doctrine lifted from textual analysis implies that both desirability and leadership are found primarily in white males. The loss of dignity and self-worth that women face as they confront the lack of sexual equality within the black church (and many other Christian denominations) is palpable within theologian's accounts as well as Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's writing. Morrison and Walker struggle with the racist and sexist orientation of the Christ figure, and in opposition to those implications, create women with inherent qualities of leadership and sexuality. In novels *a Mercy* (Morrison) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker) both authors push back against biblical implications that women are less suited for leadership.

The lack of opportunity for female leadership and empowerment within the fictional, church-influenced societies in *A Mercy* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* correlate directly with the character development of Morrison and Walker's female protagonists. Both authors explore how male character respond to power and authority and the relationship between their male status and religion, as well as including powerful and independent female characters in order to demonstrate how religion can silence women by not providing females with adequate forums to express their voice. However, despite religiously influenced societal setback, female protagonists remain resilient in their search for finding alternative places to exercise their ambition and intellect.

Morrison and Walker's inclusion of the church within a dialogue of female leadership is based on religion's dominant place in African American culture during the late twentieth century – and the time during which they were writing. Research conducted on the foundation and sustenance of the stereotypical black church movement demonstrates that churches flourished "as the sustaining force that gave [blacks] the strength to endure when endurance gave no promise" and, as a result, became the only independent social institution for blacks in the twentieth century, the only place for black empowerment (Lincoln 93).

Amidst the social havoc of the Civil Rights Era, the church became an indispensable influence on the entirety of black society, often the only place where a black man could hold a prominent position of leadership. The rise of the Women's Rights Movement exacerbated sexist leadership within the church, given that black women fought alongside the churchmen for racial equality, yet received little support from them in the realm of women's rights.

As theologian Cheryl Gilkes observes, "The Sanctified Church came to prominence at a time when the role of black women in their community and the larger society was under tremendous negative pressure" (75). This pressure was largely a result of the current racial tensions in the United States, as well as societal definitions of what a 'good woman' was. A push for woman's rights within the workplace and leadership structure did not take off until the twenty first century, and the idea that a "good woman was a chaste woman…a woman who evinced concern for shame, expressed through reticence, deference toward men, and sexual restraint," remains pervasive and influenced Morrison and Walker's character construction. (Torjesen 27), pushing both authors to rebel against those stereotypes in *God Help the Child*, *Meridian*, *A Mercy* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Both Morrison and Walker construct female characters that pioneer and lead their own lives. Despite anecdotal setbacks at the hands of religious ideals, characters such as Lina and Tashi embark on journeys to carve out their own space within society where they can exercise leadership. As each novel journeys with a woman at the helm, Morrison and Walker push their audiences to 'retell' the story of Adam and Eve. Catherine Wessinger eloquently captures the battle for the right to lead that Morrison and Walker have embarked upon:

> In order to deviate from the normal view of Christianity, one must adopt a view that does not blame women for the fallen-ness or limitations of the human condition; and a view of gender roles that does not insist that marriage and motherhood are the only roles available to women (49).

As Morrison and Walker work to deviate their characters from inherited values and instead establish their identities as courageous and independent, in *A Mercy* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy,* character development demonstrates a pushback from the patriarchal version of normalized Christianity.

As women are pushed from leadership roles, their own self -worth and intelligence are questioned – if they are not fit to lead their communities, what are they fit for? The self-worth dilemma is enhanced with consistent reaffirmation that men are the most suitable leaders. While that exclusion seems outdated, Orthodox Christians such as FitzGerald currently argue that "Even to discuss women's lack of participation in the ordained priesthood as an "exclusion" implies that she can be "included". Woman is simply not called…This is because the female cannot symbolize Christ's masculine ontological relationship with the Church" (Fitzgerald 39). The external divide between men and women represents the deep seated sexism embedded in the church and overarching religious doctrine of the Bible. When the church functions as the "heart

of [black] history, trauma, and hope," separating oneself from the community of religion, even overtly sexist tendencies, proves to be extremely difficult (*Deeper Shades of Purple* 100).

**Inherited Authority of Men**

In order to fully understand the limitations placed on females, Morrison and Walker create male characters who exemplify the ease in which males can rise to a leadership position, and the way in which black church perpetuates the elevation of the male gender. The patriarchy entrenched within the church community created a harmful space for black women, although theologians believe "women have influenced [the church] as much as they were influenced" (*Deeper Shades of Purple* 65). Although "rural churches in the south reported having 15% more groups for women than for men, in this way furthering their development," female representation in higher positions is far lower (Lincoln 107).

Although both *A Mercy* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* follow a majority of female characters, the presence of a male voice in each novel serves as a point of comparison for societal treatment of men and women in leadership. *A Mercy* is bookended by two male perspectives, while the rest of the novel is compiled of chapters voiced by the four female characters. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is comparably cast, with females voicing the overwhelming majority of the novel, and then male characters serving as reoccurring voices of juxtaposition. In order to examine and demonstrate that women, especially black women, find themselves in lower level positions with no mobility upwards, not even in their religion, both Morrison and Walker create male characters, whom, despite their shortcomings, rise through society and gain leadership positions with ease.

Throughout *A Mercy'*s initial chapter, which is filled with pointed quips regarding the Christian tradition of the time, Morrison illuminates how culture accepts to male leadership, how men assume their entitled position as master of the house, and how women react to their subordinated place in society. Jacob Vaark, the patriarch of the family at the center of *A Mercy* is the first and only man's voice until the narrative of two male indentured servants concludes the novel. His journey from England to the America is punctuated by his observances of different facets of Christianity, all of which lend him the upper hand.

Although Morrison set *A Mercy* in 1682, centuries before the black church began to take hold in the United States, the thematic parallels to residual societal norms of gender inequality within church leadership and the resulting lack of leadership within society still hold true. Three centuries have passed since the setting of *A Mercy* yet there is continued sexism with regards to females in leadership positions. The current misconception "that women have not been an integral part of Christianity from the beginning" aids the reader in understanding church system continues to ostracize women today (Torjesen 13).

Immediately, Morrison clearly states the profound influence the church has on American culture. Although Vaark disagrees with the church's practices, his observances make the penetrating influence of the church very clear. As he adjusts to Maryland, Vaark comments on the "lax, flashy cunning of the Papists," and the "Priests [who] strode openly in towns," using "their sinister missions" to influence the native villages (Morrison 15). Due to his apparent abhorrence to the religious tradition, Vaark even goes so far as to seek a wife that is "unchurched" (Morrison 23). However, Vaark accepts the societal position he has been given without complaint, despite the church's role in enhancing the patriarchy and securing that position.

Morrison ties the influence of the church directly to the sexism present in 17th century society. In the span of one paragraph, Vaark observes his business partner's wife acting "as though her political judgement were equal to a man's," as well as acknowledges the pair's "unbreakable connection to God's work" (20). The observance groups together the deep-rooted influence of the church and the colonial culture of sexism towards women.

Inequality persists throughout Vaark's accounts of his travels, often resulting in situations that favor his wellbeing. Although this attitude was extremely common for society at the time, in 2008, when Morrison published *A Mercy* her readership had the opportunity to compare the differences and perhaps the lack of progress made within society regarding sexism. For example, in contrast with the unwillingness of the town's church to baptize Lina's daughter, Jacob simply has to sign his name in order to have a deposit waived (91, 11).

As Vaark enjoys the benefits he receives due to his gender, Morrison lays out for the reader that Vaark is set up to succeed in life. A "ratty orphan become landowner," Vaark wrongly attributes his success to his fearless and risk-taking attitude (13). While Vaark criticizes Papists for their pretentious attitudes and "obsequious nature" towards priests, Vaark himself enjoys the spoils that come with a religiously influenced society. Morrison makes no attempt to avoid the hypocrisy that is overwhelming in Vaark's acceptance of sexual inequality, and his bitter disgust at the custom of favoring a "Catholic gentleman over distant tradesman" (26).

Despite Vaark's belief that he is a man with a superior moral compass, he engages in extremely sexist behavior. In addition to referring to his wife as his "mate" he acknowledges that she is a source of 'steady female labor," yet he qualifies his statement by explaining that "in the right environment, women are naturally reliable" (23). In attributing the environment for women's fluctuating reliability, Vaark suggests that women, when left to their own devices, are

unreliable even though he previously had to rely on Lina to teach him how to "dry the fish they caught, and protect crop" (57). As the novel continues, Vaark never speaks again, he simply falls to the wayside however he returns to "climb out of his grave to visit his beautiful house," remaining an imposing male figure until the end of the novel (168).

Morrison uses Vaark's character as a set-up for the rest of the novel, where women are consistently faced with hardship that does not seem to plague their male counterparts. As Vaark purchases the women and, despite many implications of his stupidity, makes all the decisions, the backdrop of the novel is set as one of male-dominance and inherited superiority. The idea that women are less capable is reinforced by an inability for the church to accept their leadership.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Walker creates the main male character, Adam, as an antithesis to Tashi, the protagonist. Throughout the novel Adam, Tashi's husband, often embodies the hypocrisies of Christianity and the societal conflicts arising from the subordination of women. Again, Walker displays her disapproval of black-church enhanced traditions with less subtlety than Morrison, communicating her message with a more aggressive punch. Throughout the novel, Adam is seen assuming leadership titles and absorbing the power given to him because of his gender, eventually becoming a dense, self-absorbed, and hypocritical pastor.

As the readers are introduced to Adam, he is describing his view of Tashi. Walker makes it clear that upon their initial meeting Tashi is wailing with sadness, she is seen by Adam as "always laughing and making up stories" (Walker 14). Although the difference in description could be attributed to a glitch in memory, the opposition is a harbinger of the silencing of women that is to come. Adam repeats this cycle over and over again within the novel, discounting Tashi's sadness and suffering due to unwillingness to remember or embarrassment.

Adam's inability to reconcile his wife's feelings is thematically significant for Walker, who describes Adam as "physically stout, emotionally frail" (158). Despite Adam's inefficiencies in his emotional intelligence, over the course of the novel he reasserts his power over women. Walker connects Adam directly with western Christianity and the black church in two ways. First, she names the character Adam. Secondly, as a son of a Christian missionary, he fulfills his legacy by becoming a pastor of a nondenominational black church in California. Armed with these unmistakable connections to the black church, Walker explores how Adam, sometimes unknowingly, prevents his wife from rising through leadership.

Throughout the novel Adam is exposed to women who are making an effort to show him the error of his ways. Repeatedly, he silences their opinions and dismisses their efforts in favor of Christianity's preference for men. Walker gives Adam the ability to recognize "signs of woman's mental power" and "signs of the weakness and uncertainty of men," yet he still asserts his own voice and diminishes his wife's (161). Adam even goes so far as to engage vocally in the practice of female subordination, acknowledging things like "the carrying of water was not a man's job. It was a woman's job," even though Adam is observing a fact, he does not question its implications (42). Lisette, Adam's lover, is perhaps the most vocal character in her quest for women's rights, and while Adam listens, he seems to never understand. As the reader struggles against Adam's ability to sympathize, they must also come to terms with the fact that the foundation of his inability to sympathize is the result of deep-rooted Christian beliefs.

Lisette first explains to Adam that "Women are no longer chattel…even if it is only recently that French-women got the vote…now, we get to vote for one man after another" (31). Lisette has perfectly captured women's inability to lead due to lack of avenues, and Adam listens sympathetically, yet says nothing. Again, she attempts to describe to Adam: "I look and look in

this religion of mine and I am nowhere in it" (31). Even though they first met due to a shared love of Christ, Adam does not act upon Lisette's realization.

Walker, in the second to last chapter, describes an opportunity that Adam had to reconcile the rift between Christianity and women, and to include women in the black church he presides over. Tashi asks Adam if he will let her speak to the congregation, explain her own suffering, and tie that in to Jesus', and Adam dismissively says no. In perhaps one of the most important anecdotes in the novel Tashi explains that she is "a great lover of Jesus…still, [she] began to see how the constant focus on the suffering of Jesus alone excludes the suffering of others from one's view" (274). In hopes of remedying the lack of women's voices in the Bible, and perhaps allowing for the "the full inclusion of women in religious leadership [in order to] send the message to girls and women that they are as valuable as men in their human nature and talents," Tashi begs to explain her own story (Wessinger 49). In response, Adam says the congregation would be embarrassed to discuss something so private and that, in any case, he would be ashamed to do so" (Walker 274).

This anecdote, though brief in the novel, is poignant because the entirety of Adam's story has been listening to women explain that they are left out of the discussion, yet when he has a brilliant opportunity to include them, he chooses not to. The reader, as a result, is extremely disappointed in Adam who, in Tashi's trial, observes "how weary it is to think that nobody in this courtroom had ever listened to a woman," yet he cannot bring himself to do so (162).

Additionally, Adam repeatedly engages in stereotypically prejudice and unkind behavior. Although Adam seems aware of the mental boundaries of his condition of maleness, "it never occurs to [him] to think of Tashi's suffering as being on continuum of pain" (165). This lack of

sympathy is odd for a character who self-proclaims himself a "man of God," because Jesus Christ is seen as one who suffers continually in order to sacrifice for human good (263).

Analogously to how Morrison employs Vaark's character, Walker uses Adam to represent many of the problematic aspects of the black church. Both male characters embrace their inherited leadership positions without a second thought to the women on the wayside. Despite many attempts to elucidate Adam on the often unequal and oppressive nature of religious tradition, he is dense and resistant. As each novel builds, female characters begin to rebel and retaliate against the oppression they feel at the hands of their male antitheses.

**Creating Opportunities**

The patriarchy exhibited in Christianity contributed to the domination and repression of women. Researchers surveying predominately black churches in the 1980s reported direct quotes from men stating that they "could not accept a woman pastor" (Lincoln 107). This contradiction is pointed out by Walker throughout her consistent advocacy for spiritual growth and her assertion that the "God of women is autonomy," and not a God found in institutionalized religion (Walker 216). The lack of female leadership in an institution designed to inspire hope and salvation, especially during a time where racial and sexual inequality were rampant, was unquestionably detrimental and often elicited a rebellious response from women who felt called to lead.

However, although some churches sought to create a space for women, the space they created was a complacent one, where women were content to contribute to the church through cooking, cleaning, and teaching – not leadership. Women are naturally not complacent people, however, when the only institution that allows blacks to occupy positions of authority forbids

female participation, the willingness to lead in other areas is diminished as a result. The loss of faith and hope that results from lacking a platform in which to express your identity, as well as use your intelligence and work ethic is unimaginably frustrating. “The exclusion of women from such roles sends a message to all girls and women that devalues their inherent humanity” (Wessinger 49).

Lina, the first woman present on the Vaark farm, is a Native American who survived the smallpox outbreak that wiped away her tribe. Taken in by Christians whose demands confused her, Lina was eventually sold to Jacob Vaark and resided with the Vaark family since. Despite Lina’s strong willed, intelligent, and capable nature, she cannot rise up in the ranks of her nuclear family unit. Morrison uses the Anabaptists attempts at ‘Christianizing’ Lina to demonstrate the female response to society’s automatic trust of man, as well as the psychological harm that Lina suffers.

As Lina outlines her life, and the repeated attempts to convert her from Native American to Anabaptist, she outlines the troublesome characteristics of Europeans, who stand in for modern-day white Americans. Firstly, she alludes to their ability to “cut mothers down” which bears striking similarity to language that Walker uses when describing man’s repeated attempts to undermine women. Walker describes such attempts as men convincing women to “send for the knife” themselves (Walker 238). Both authors use violent language to describe the relationship between diminishing female opportunity for leadership and the resulting damage to women’s psyches.

Similar to the hypocrisy found in Vaark’s disdain towards the inequalities of religion yet endorsement of sexism, the Presbyterians that Lina meets “admire native women” yet do not allow them any responsibility (Morrison 55). Lina, while living with the Presbyterians, is forced

to “acknowledge her status as a heathen” eventually obeying enough that Presbyterians advertise Lina in a local paper as “Christianized” (55, 61). However, despite this removal of her culture and the silencing of her voice, the Presbyterians provide Lina with no assistance – even when the household becomes infected with smallpox, she accepts that “nobody, Baptists or any other, would come” (66).

Lina reacts to repeated attempts to Christianize her with a renewed strength and hardened independence, despite having no one to turn to for help. Even though her lack of religious affiliation begins to harm her as she realizes that “none [of the farm women] were attached to a church” which meant they could be “auctioned off to the Baptists,” Lina’s emotional state improves as she begins to find companionship uninhibited by religious prejudice in Rebekka and Florens (68).

Morrison uses the development of Lina’s character to demonstrate the ability of women to flourish despite their gifts being unrecognized. Lina soon uses her “self-invention” to apply medicine, tend to the farm, and often run the house. As Lina grows into her own character post her time with the Presbyterians, she begins to embody the “spirit of the Great Goddess, the archetypal feminine virgin/mother/crone who can provide what traditional patriarchal institutions have failed to provide: reverence for all forms of life” (Pessoni 439). Pessoni is referencing Sula, a character in another Morrison novel, however the description is also applicable to Lina, and equally as opposed to religious institutions that do not provide women an avenue in which to lead.

Both Morrison and Walker draw on women’s’ innate ability to teach. Within the dialogue of the nuances of religious beliefs, and the difficulty women find in their search for positions of leadership, both authors create female characters who are able to teach those around them. Their

ability to teach, despite occurrences of male backlash, demonstrates a psychological resiliency of response. Lina teaches Sir how to farm, observing his attempts to "bring nature under his control" (57). As the reader realizes how useful Lina is, the Presbyterians silencing her seems even more unjust.

Comparably to Lina, Walker creates black feminist characters (like Tashi) who embrace their gender, yet struggle to exist within a stereotypical, male dominated, black church setting. The women in her novels exemplify the struggle black women endure when the community they look to for empowerment uses religion to subordinate them and negatively define their sexuality.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* follows a protagonist so complex that she goes by two names: Tashi (her birth name) and Evelyn (her American name). Unsurprisingly, Eve is short for Evelyn, and matches her husband's name perfectly. Tashi, similarly to Lina, is born into a culture that values native customs and traditions, and is forced to be Christianized during her adolescence. Differently than Lina, however, Tashi rebelliously seeks out her native traditions and undergoes genital mutilation in order to feel closer to her African roots. As Tashi is submitted to opposing beliefs, one of her husband, and one of her people, she is lost and silenced trying to find herself.

As Tashi assimilates into Christianity, and then into America, she undergoes multiple realizations. When the reader is introduced to Tashi, she describes her mother as a woman who "never wept, though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the heavens with its praising pain" (Walker 17). This simple detail illustrates how even in Tashi's own customs there are ways in which women are silenced – her description of her mother resembles Adam's description of her as a child, never crying.

Tashi is subject to various beliefs throughout the novel that confuse her and create mixed feelings regarding her own identity. She goes from describing herself as "Kali" the Goddess with a dozen arms to describing herself as the "image of America" (143, 208). Tashi acknowledges her love of Jesus and also observes that "God deserted woman" (173). In the same way as how "gospel writers themselves betray signs of ambivalence over women's leadership," Tashi is ambivalent about her place in society and never seems to find a home that makes her truly comfortable (Torjesen 25). Even her home in America, which she loves, is spoken about as a place that is "never easy" for a black woman to live in.

As the novel progresses, the beliefs of the Olinka, Tashi's tribe, are realized. Even M'Lissa describes to Tashi that she "bowed [her] head and held [her] tongue, for [she] knew their church's water was a substitute for woman's blood" (203). Although Tashi did not make the connection prior to their conversation, M'Lissa was the most respected woman in the village, and the only woman who had any sort of authority. Walker sets up the reader to question whether the only woman with a leadership position has that position because she is perpetuating the cycle of women having no voice.

As Tashi reacts to being systematically silenced she undergoes an "operation she'd had done to herself [that] joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman" – women who are African, not Christian (63). Her circumcision is described as making her feel like a woman. Are the beliefs surrounding what a woman is so pervasive that the only way to achieve a feeling of self-worth is to engage in genital mutilation? Although these practices are not rooted in Christian faith, Walker goes to great extent to draw similarities between the two – using much more than simply the shared name of God as the leader for both faiths.

There are two significant parallels between the Olinka community and the black church in two significant ways. Firstly, Walker the culture "in which it is mandatory that every single female by systematically de-sexed" runs through both American and Olinka culture (227). In this fictional Olinka culture, Walker makes sure to draw parallels to America - "Even in America a rich white child could not touch herself sexually, if others could see her, and be safe" (185). Secondly, both cultures silence women. Adam silences Tashi in American, and Olinka culture never lets Tashi have a voice until she is on trial for murder and convicted to execution, and even then, the woman at her funeral do not speak. Additionally, as a result of her mutilation, "had taken to spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried" (66). Tashi, in this respect was silenced. Her walk was different, her mobility affected.

As Tashi falls deeper into silence, she resiliently tries to reassert her own dominance through counseling and therapy yet consistently is forced to confront a male figure that thwarts her development. For example, Tashi dreams about a rooster, and her dream becomes so all-consuming that she is forced to relive and paint the images of a "the large fighting cock… [that] walked about quite freely, crowing mightily," which starkly contrasts the shuffled walk of Olinka the women (71).

Therefore, Walker's conclusions regarding Christianity come as no surprise to the reader. When she asserts that "there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women" the reader sees the statement as justified purely from the anecdotal evidence of the story (216). When reinforced with perpetuated societal ideal that women are not integrally part of Christianity, the reader sinks deeper into the realization that Christianity is pervasive in its silencing of women. Even theologians question "Why does the powerful misconception [of the unimportance of women] continue to marginalize women in even the more enlightened branches

of contemporary Christianity?" (Torjesen 13) Instead of seeking an answer, Morrison and Walker seek to change the misconception.

Finally, Walker makes it clear that Tashi is psychologically damaged due to the marginalization of her gender by Christianity. Although in the courtroom she is referred to as mad using her murder of M'Lissa to justify their classification, Tashi's innumerable acts of rage, her depression, and consistent bouts of PTSD (in the shape of homophobia) push her to admit "maybe death is easier than life, as pregnancy is easier than birth" (249).

Morrison and Walker use similar character development to show that women who are silenced by Christianity have to fight to find their place in society. Lina fights to be accepted as a helpful farmhand, and remains a slave. Tashi fights to have her voice heard, and ends up being executed. However, both women are resilient in their quests to share their messages – Lina is passionate and vocal in her interactions with her makeshift farm family, and Tashi is put on trial for seeking to spread the truth about harmful Olinka mutilation practices.

**Legacy of Perseverance**

While Morrison and Walker use their novels to demonstrate sexual inequality that is exacerbated by the black church's beliefs, they also conclude both novels with an air of hope and a legacy of perseverance. Not only do Walker and Morrison use character development, but they also use anecdotes as well as powerful, female-led endings in both their novels in order to finish their fiction with a sense of hope. While *A Mercy* almost ends with the women on the Vaark farm being left in an ambiguous situation and judged by Willard and Scully, *Possessing a Secret of Joy* appears to end in an epiphany that only comes about as the result of Pierre, a male character. Walker's use of Pierre to uncover the patriarchal tradition that has been limiting Tashi her whole

life is significant. Once again, the women have been left in the dark, waiting for a man to enlighten them on their condition.

Prior to the end of *a Mercy,* there is a chapter from the standpoint of two male characters, who are hardly in the novel at all. Despite the novel being carried primarily by female voices, Morrison writes the last chapter of the novel from the perspective of Willard and Scully, the two indentured servants that frequently assist the Vaark farm. Morrison has set a situation in which the women of the farm are extremely vulnerable, slaves whose masters have died, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow are open to anyone to claim. In this troubling environment, the reader is able to see the power and influence Willard and Scully have on the women simply because they are men – a harmful societal practice that the black church still engages in. However, the last chapter represents

As Morrison creates her second to last chapter, she includes details that suggest a view of men as lustful, hypocritical, and seduced by the power given by religion and society. In the characters' short chapter, Scully describes Lina's "buttocks, waist, and syrup-colored breasts" as "seductive" – the only description of that kind in the entire novel (Morrison 170). As the men discuss how the women will fare, they remark on the "friendliness" of the Deacon, with little concern for the wellbeing of the women subjected to that 'friendliness' despite moments before describing them as the "closest thing they will ever know to family" (171). Morrison goes so far as to include Scully's musings on which women he would choose "if he was interested in rape" (179). The cavalier way in which he speaks about sexual assault is alarming, despite his claim that his "assessment of 'rape-ability' is impersonal" (179). Attached to these horrific observations is Scully's knowledge of the "third and seventh sins" which reinforces the societal pervasiveness of religion at the time (180).

The last chapter of *A Mercy* is a shining testament to the resilience of women. From the viewpoint of Floren's mother, Morrison uses the last five pages as a venue to caution her readers from mindlessly following religious traditions, as well as reinforce that subordinating women by refusing them venues in which to use their agency is wrong. The chapter begins with the sentiment that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal," reflecting the sexism still present in conservative American culture (191). Floren's mother goes on to adamantly describe the difference between a miracle from God's hand and a kindness from a human – a reminder to humanity to use their agency to promote kindness and equality amidst religious traditions that may not bring about those same sentiments. Finally, on the last page, Morrison reminds her audience that to "wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing," urging the narrative of Christianity to change (196).

However, Morrison's final chapter calls back the story Lina tells that demonstrates her thoughts towards men and their abilities to subordinate women. Her story, about an eagle, who cannot defend herself against "the evil thoughts of man" not only demonstrates the resilience of women (the eagle's young) but additionally the irreparable damage men cause (73). This overt storytelling is often more common in Walker's writing as Morrison tends to rely heavier on implications rather than outright lessons. There is a significance to Morrison including this fable. "Toni Morrison began to explore the possibility of discovering divinity and meaning from within, of reconnecting to the feminine archetype buried deep within the human psyche in order to resurrect a way of seeing and feeling which offers the promise of healing and life to an ailing world" (Pessoni 439).

Although as the *Possessing a Secret of Joy* comes to a conclusion, the dominance of man is everywhere, the conclusion of the novel is vibrantly feminine. From the courtroom interactions

- "originally [testimony] named the custom of two men holding each other's testicles in a gesture of trust," to the descriptions of the women outside the door - "the women do not fight back but scatter like hens; huddling in the doorways of shops up and down the street, until the shopkeepers sweep them back into the street" (Walker 105, 191).

Analogously, the ending of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is also dominated by male influence. Strikingly different from the rest of the novel, the ending centers around Pierre's revelation that Tashi is the queen Termite – her worst fears and nightmares come from a conversation she witnessed while she was young, and she has been haunted by misogynist visions ever since. As Pierre explains to Tashi that her "broken wings" and fear of a dark tower are the result of an old fable regarding the earth, she begins to realize how here society took advantage of all the women within it. It is not coincidental that the God of the Olinka elders, the God who encourages circumcision and subordination of women, goes by the same name as the Christian God.

The creation story of the Olinka begins with a God who is "all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill and had intercourse with the excised earth," the excised earth in this case is the clitoris of the female termite hill (169). Pierre goes on to explain that "since it was 'masculine' for a clitoris to rise, God could be excused for cutting it down" (229). As Tashi learns this story, her story becomes one of men putting women into place, and a history is told about women " "before their capture" (151). Walker moves Religion quickly into "an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women and to the earth" (229).

However, the conclusion of the novel does indeed reflect the title – joy, resilience and hope. Comparably to Morrison's ending of *A Mercy*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* concludes with fierce statements of female independence. Walker begins the chapter explaining that "the

women along the way have been warned they must not sing…but women will be women" and continues to describe the ingenuity with which women cope with their forced silence – bringing crying babies to Tashi's execution as a way to rebel from the men who threaten them (278). Finally, the mystery of the title of the book is seemingly revealed – "Resistance is the secret of joy" (279). Tashi spent the last half of her life resisting her husbands' attempts to fix her, the Olinka's attempt to silence her, and even her own post-traumatic stressors, yet the way Walker set the scene in her last chapter suggests the resistance she is referring to is that of females resisting male domination. Even though Tashi dies, the air of satisfaction and hope is unmistakable.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use their novels as a platform to recognize that the lack of leadership within the black church for women has innumerable societal ramifications. As Floyd –Thomas so eloquently states:

> The relationship between female empowerment and the Protestant faiths calls into question the validity of Christianity as a source of hope and support for black women. The black community, described as 'restrictively Protestant in its religious outlook and male in its leadership,' would have to undergo transformations in order to successfully provide spiritual consolation for black women (69).

Although "black women built and maintained the Sanctified Churches," they have been routinely left out of leadership positions, and their voices silenced (Gilkes 78). Morrison and Walker use their male leads to exemplify the ease with which men can rise to power, and how they do so with religious justification. By creating characters like Lina and Tashi, who showcase the intelligence and independence inherent in every female, both authors demonstrate the injustice that results from women who feel they have no place in a religion. Finally, by ending

the novels with hope, despite the men who influence the conclusion of both stories, these authors strikingly end their novels with a thundering note of female perseverance.

## Chapter 3: Balancing Sexual Tensions

The most overtly discussed variance between black church values and the values of Morrison and Walker lies in their treatment of female sexuality. Despite both authors writing about how the church's attitude towards sex is inhibited and problematic, their fiction reflects varying levels of personal disclosure. Morrison maintains a tight sphere of privacy around her life, reluctant to combine her novels with her own personal development, whereas Walker tends to question her own religious and spiritual beliefs publicly and echo those queries in her fictional portfolio. However, despite their differing approach to writing, both writers explicitly highlight the stigmatization of female sexuality within religious communities, the need for women to reclaim ownership and autonomy over their bodies, and the healing nature of sexual desire in their novels *Paradise* (Morrison) and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (Walker).

Published only a year apart, both works fearlessly engage the Christian doctrine and the lustful nature embedded in humanity. Throughout Morrison's efforts to chronicle the experience of black women within her fiction, and Walker's efforts to reconstruct her own experiences, both authors open a discussion to the larger Christian community. Reflecting on a doctrine that condemns female sexuality, Morrison and Walker use their novels to demonstrate that the church desexualizes women, robbing them from experiencing the healing nature of sexuality.

*Paradise* is the story of Ruby, an all-black patriarchy that functions as a town, and the neighboring Convent – a haven for societally rejected yet independent women. Through the tension between the townspeople and the Convent women, biblical allusions, nudity, and sexual imagery, Morrison both questions Christianity and alludes to its promise. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker creates two protagonists' who have problematic relationships with their father (who goes by the name of father in the novel) to rethink repercussions of misogynistic

oppressive, and shame inflicting behavior. Despite the underlying influence of Christianity in both novels, Walker takes a more secular approach to the freedom that accompanies fulfilling lust.

Beginning in the first chapter of the Bible, and taught in the majority of Christian denominations, including the aforementioned black church denominations of Methodist and Protestant, Eve is condemned as the first sinner in God's kingdom. The parable of the fall of man uses suggestive language to imply that women with independence and lust embody evil. In "Genesis", the Bible states that God "will greatly increase [Eve's] pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis. 3:16). As God punishes Eve with an increase in lust, female sexual desire becomes inherently shameful within the dominant interpretation of the Christian religion and women are thereafter positioned to be easily tempted by sin. Theologian Kelly Douglas corroborates the association between sin and sexuality within the black church – stating that "the manner in which black women are treated in many black churches reflects the Western Christian tradition's notion of women as evil and its notions of black women as Jezebels and seducers of men" (Douglas 83).

Even Lilith, who is argued to be Adam's first wife, is widely known as an overtly sexual demonic figure (Whitcombe). Morrison and Walker both compare characters to Eve and Lilith (respectively) as way to disrupt the current interpretation of biblical doctrine and open an honest dialogue regarding topics such as abortion and female nudity. In their quest to remedy "unhelpful responses about sexuality," that according to Episcopal minister Horace Griffin, have "long dominated black churches," Morrison and Walker's characters reclaim their sexuality from the stigma of biblical doctrine (Griffin).

Morrison confronts the banishment of sexuality head on in *Paradise* as she describes the end to the opening scene, an attempted massacre of the women who lived in the convent by the men who preached Christian ideals to the neighboring town. The women escaped as:

> Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game. God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby. (18).

With this iconic passage, Morrison clearly paints the divide between Eve, wrongfully blamed and unfairly treated, and God, who is on the side of those who are judgmental and harsh. Morrison's comparison of the convent women to Eve, and her subsequent use of "holy oil" of the sun, proves that Eve too can be seen as one worthy of God's love, although the men of Ruby, and black Christian societies, do not see her that way.

Morrison returns to the Eve trope at the conclusion of the novel with Consolata spearheading the movement to "Never break [Eve and Mary] in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263). The union of Eve and the mother of God represents the unity of Christian women and women who appreciate their own sexual desires. Book-ending the novel with this metaphor signifies Morrison's commitment to the joint nature of Eve and Mary. Her use of two iconic biblical women on the same team and in the same family, demonstrates that an acceptance of sexual freedom is possible within the Christian faith.

Walker, too, consistently calls out the misogynistic nature of the church however instead of using Eve, as Morrison does, Walker uses Lilith to exemplify a female figure that is aversive to men, but unifying for women. Lily Paul, whose name is compared to sexual Lilith's - The lily is the flower of Lilith, the first mother", is the foil of her mother, the childbearing Eve (Walker

178). As her mother is imprisoned by her constantly pregnant body, Pauline (also known as Lily Paul) is a sensual and strong woman, independent and vibrant and therefore aversive to men like Petros, Susannah's husband, who upon seeing her immediately comments that she is a "dyke" (136). Despite her family's conflicting values, and the sexual assault that took place at the hands of her parents, Pauline adopts the attitude that "you don't have to stay raped," becoming an independent powerhouse of a woman (107). Walker celebrates Pauline's connection with Lilith as a way to celebrate women who own their own body with a fierce and sexual autonomy.

Morrison and Walker's use of Eve and Lilith as representations of the unity between religion and sexuality serve as reminders that the two can coexist. Throughout both author's discussion of how communities interact with female sexuality, as well as how women respond to male scrutiny of sexuality, there is a common thread of hope for a Christianity that will forgo the sinful nature of lust in favor of a healing representation of sexuality.

**Community Response to Sexuality**

In *Paradise*, Morrison creates the fictional town of Ruby based on numerous all back towns that existed during the time period of the novel. The men who lead the town hall frequently cite Christian ideals as justification for discrimination against women, while simultaneously claiming to shield Ruby's residents from the racial inequality present in the United States. Amidst the hypocrisy of equality in Ruby, the town leaders justify the murder of the Convent women because of their *sexual* and *shameful* ways of life. In contrast, in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker creates a fictional community of the "Mundo" people, who exemplify a community that lives with a respect, not a fear of, sexuality. These two communities, as well as societal judgement passed on characters', demonstrate the authors

critique of the Christian belief that Eve sinned and condemned women's sexuality to represent God's punishment of painful childbearing.

The notion that Ruby represents a town created in God's image, one with no place for women's sexuality (yet home to characters such as K.D. who are free to sleep with multiple women without repercussions) is strung throughout the novel. The leaders of the town, call themselves "men of God," identifying so strongly with religious ideals that their town center "didn't belong to any one denomination," it was simply Christian (59,83). Yet, Morrison makes it clear that the men who lead the town are prone to misogynistic behavior and overbearing attitudes, habits that affect the women of the town, ultimately desexualizing their behavior. Even "The names of the two most powerful men, Deacon and Steward Morgan, signal their direction of spiritual and material life" (Vickroy 72). The town of Ruby and the corresponding Covent serve as a microcosm for communities in which a religion ostracizes a minority group that it does not understand.

Even the "Townswomen befriend Convent women and listen sympathetically to the youngsters' pleas but continue to believe deeply in their God and in many of the traditional values Ruby was established to preserve" (Shockley). Considering the women of Ruby live so close to the Convent, where erotica is ingrained within the bones of the house, they are shockingly sexually suppressed. Described with no desire to "powder their faces," the women of Ruby "wore no harlot's perfume" (Morrison 143). Although the women may not be affected by, nor feel the need to dress up or wear makeup, oftentimes those societal practices give women an avenue in which to experiment with to own their sexuality.

Morrison drives home this community's divide with the massacre of the Convent women. The patriarchy of Ruby justifies hunting the Convent with the logic that if "they don't need men

and they don't need God…We can't have it (276). Equating God and men is problematic, and Morrison, in her ability to express the misogynistic attitude of the men, is poignant and clear. Ruby's leaders take issue with the women's ability to act independent of male influence, and the resulting alienation from patriarchal societal norms instills fear in the men, who make controlling decisions in order to exercise dominion over the Convent women's lives.

Similar in creation to Ruby, yet opposite in values, lies Walker's community of the Mundo people. The Mundo, a fictional community compromised of "Blacks and Indians …isolated but said to have retained distinct tribal ways," serves to juxtapose conservative American culture, exposing the harsh ideals imposed by institutionalized religion (Walker 14). Using the Mundo people, the Christian practices of Father within the novel and the reaction of his wife, Langley, Walker illustrates the issue of a divided community and the danger of a community that delegitimizes sexuality.

The most acute depiction of the Mundo people, one that illustrates their defined differences from American Christian tradition, is their inability to accept women (Eve) as the root of evil. According to Manuelito, a Mundo man:

> [The Mundo] never understood how woman could be considered evil, either, since they considered her the mother of corn. When hearing of her original sin of eating the forbidden fruit, they scratched their chins again and said, even more gravely, perhaps this is the one biggest lie that has unraveled your world. The men had not wanted the women to even hear what they were accused of. (81)

The belief of the Mundo that women cannot be the nature of sin is consistently reflected in their approach to nudity, sex and pregnancy, and is so strikingly different from the dominant interpretation of Biblical doctrine, which states that God's people should "Flee fornication. Every

sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body" (Corinthians 6:18).

As Walker invites anthropologists masquerading as priests within the Mundo community, she uses the "black cloth" as a metaphor for the transition of the father into false priesthood and away from the Mundo people he is supposed to study. For example, a traditional song about the "nakedness of the sky" was banned from the church that father presided over, yet was an integral ritual for the Mundo people (21).

Additionally, Walker continues to illustrate the divide between the black church's view of sex and the Mundo community's view of sex with the development of father and Langley's relationship. Although Langley is a bold and energetic anthropologist, she is confined to the role of a "pastor's wife," one that requires her to wear dark colors and speak primarily with the women (16). Langley must act less sexually free in public as father's devotion to his role as a Christian grows.

Both Morrison and Walker painstakingly describe community reception to certain characters in an effort to emphasize the strength of the misogynistic roots in religious communities. Morrison uses Gigi, a promiscuous young girl, and the anger she incites in the townspeople of Ruby, to demonstrate how pervasive the fear of sexuality is within the community. In turn, Walker describes a Catholic community's reaction to the rape of a woman and the way they treated her child to highlight the importance placed on chastity.

Gigi, the most sexual character in *Paradise* incites rage among the men of Ruby's community. When there is strife among the townspeople, the sexuality of Gigi is to blame. Starting from her walk, "the walk that caused all the trouble," the appearance of Gigi escalates into a full-blown catastrophe (Morrison 53). The fear of Gigi and her obsession with "fun" that

was “clearly a sign of advanced decay,” emphasizes once more that the patriarchy of Ruby was so afraid of an embrace of female sexuality, that they could not extend a ‘Christ like compassion’ to anyone that violated their pure standards (157). Ruby’s aversion to Gigi calls to mind the Biblical decree: " I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions … Keep away from them,” the townspeople do exactly that, and keep away from Gigi. (Romans. 16:17) Gigi’s character and identity were created around her free-spirited ownership of her body, and the way that she incited the community around her, sparking realization into Morrison’s readers regarding their own perceptions of why being sexual is socially unacceptable for women.

In another attempt to illustrate the communal enforcement of Biblical doctrines, father’s youngest daughter, Susannah, visits the Church embedded within the Greek community only to find men “kissing the virgin’s feet” (Walker 47). As Susannah realizes the importance of chastity within the community, she befriends a native, Irene, who has been enslaved by the church because her birth was the result of her mother being raped. Although Susannah is full of inquiries about the dwarf who tends the church (Irene) the surrounding community is one of complacent women who ask no questions, and therefore can give her no answers. As Walker leads us deeper into this community and Irene recounts her past, Susannah realizes “it is difficult to sit across from anyone and to imagine that they were not wanted,” this piercing realization should be the nail in the casket of a religion that preaches acceptance, however, Irene returns to the church at the end of the novel and fills it with “prayer, love and light” a celebration of the possibility for an accepting and hopeful Christianity (57).

Morrison and Walker both use fictional communities to illustrate sexual repression. Using tools of community creation and societal reception, both authors create microcosms of patriarchic and sexually oppressive American life within their fictional worlds. As critic Laura

Vickroy acknowledges, "*Paradise* shows that religion can become destructive and dysfunctional when it is used to rationalize patriarchy and misogyny" (81). Comparably, Walker's writing in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* [represents characters]" who break free from the patriarchal order and reach wholeness and sexual healing." (Castro-Borrego 20). Together, as both authors illustrate how communities function within the conversation of sexual freedom, and how easily a stigmatization of sexuality is perpetuated, they incite a conversation from their readers concerning the repercussion of some of Christianity's most oppressive and sexually charged doctrines.

**Ownership of the Body**

The right and ownership of one's body come hand-in-hand with the practice and prevalence of nudity. Morrison and Walker both use character development to allow women to reclaim their own bodies, snatching them back from the patriarchal Biblical ideals that suggest women's bodies exist for the pleasure of men, and the pain of childbearing. Although there is a larger patriarchal undertone to the way male-dominated American culture treats the sexuality of women, the focus of this segment primarily relies on the way the patriarchal tendencies of dominant Christian thought influence how women embody their physicality. Through sex scenes and graphic imagery of naked women, Morrison and Walker question the way they both the characters and their audience's view women's bodies as well as how characters choose to embody their physical shape.

Morrison's feminist view of women's bodies in *Paradise* is constructed through her narrative, which uses "voices to construct an implicit critique of power: who has it and how it is used" (Vickroy 77). Through Morrison's consistent construction of women's bodies, the and

widespread nakedness within the novel, she creates a fictional narrative in which women have to explicitly own their own bodies in order for them to not be claimed by men.

Morrison jumps into descriptions of women's bodies immediately, highlighting one of the Convent women, Gigi's experience in the convent as one marred with "nipple tipped doorknobs" and "vagina ashtrays" (Morrison 72). As Gigi continues to explore the mansion that houses the Convent women, she finds "Saint Catherine of Siena" was engraved on the small plaque of the woman whose breasts were held out like "two baked Alaska's" (74). As the religious and sexual messages are mixed in a house that used to be both a playboy's mansion and a religious convent, Morrison places female characters in a place ready to reclaim their sexuality.

The importance of bodily ownership continues to grow in strength throughout the novel. As Gigi walks around the Convent in the nude, the home becomes a place where their sexuality is freed, eventually bleeding into their newfound freedom within the deeply religious town of Ruby. As the Convent women crash a wedding, they are described as "throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies" (157). As Morrison distinctly describes the women rocking "their own" bodies, she allows not only voracious Gigi, but also Mavis (a survivor of domestic abuse) and Pallas (a survivor of rape) to reclaim their own freedom. Amidst many non-possessive descriptions of women's bodies, overly sexualized commentary, such as the men in Ruby describing Gigi's breasts as "screaming," is seen as aggressive and controlling.

Walker also frequently includes nudity in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Within the first two pages, Walker describes two women's naked bodies in graphic detail. Walker sexualizes the women's bodies to a massive extent, describing in detail the breasts, vaginas, and especially the clitorises of both Pauline and Susannah (Walker 7-10). By paying special attention

to the clitoris, the only organ on a human body that exists solely for sexual pleasure, Walker highlights how women are inherently gifted with the ability to experience pleasure in sex, yet culture has deemed this pleasure unworthy of public discussion. By opening the novel with imagery that is overly sexual, despite the subject of the description, Walker sets a precedent for the remainder of her work – women can reclaim their own sexuality.

Consistent with her opening chapter, the Mundo beliefs abound with the presence of nudity. The nakedness of the sky, an earthly symbol consistently portrayed as female, demonstrates the Mundo's acceptance of female sexuality, and appreciation for women's bodies. Walker also describes the Mundo people as those who appreciate pregnancy and practice a "non-possession of others" in a way that differentiates from western culture (96). This non-possession is represented through a relationship of appreciation between men and women, but not one that claims other's bodies as one's own.

Morrison and Walker continue to engage in a discussion of body autonomy in their views on abortion. Morrison calls out the hypocrisy inherent in men making the choice for women as to whether or not they have a baby, and Walker criticizes the thought that abortion is a sin in the eyes of God. Morrison broaches the subject of abortion – which legally often comes down to men making choices about how a woman handles her own body. Clearly recognizing the hypocrisy of this abuse of power, Morrison describes a man of Ruby as "A husband who had left his future bride pregnant and on her own, knowing that it was the unmarried mother-to-be (not the father-to-be) who would have to ask her church's forgiveness" (152). The mother ends up receiving an illegal abortion, and shunned by the town, further the ostracizing the Convent women, who helped her recover.

Pauline's mother also lost her freedom of movement and body autonomy throughout ten pregnancies. As a result, "Lily Paul refuses to yield to the fate imposed upon her by the patriarchal order, bearing children and having her body deformed by successive pregnancies like her mother" (Castro-Borrego 33). Although Pauline's parents "thought birth control was murder," they allowed Pauline to be raped in their own home (Walker 103). The hypocrisy present in her parents' religious beliefs is strikingly present in Walker's depiction of the home. Even Pauline remarks,

> They thought it was the Christian thing to do, she said. They thought if they did anything to stop the births, God would judge the harshly. Though how much more harshly he could judge them than to make them live with ten children in a three-bedroom apartment, I can't imagine (127).

Although the statement is politically charged, the call for pro-choice abortion beliefs is Walker's continuation in her push for women to take control of their own bodily decisions, and for the patriarchy in society to let them.

Finally, through rituals of Consolata and the Mundo, Morrison and Walker highlight how an acceptance and celebration of nudity can be freeing. Morrison describes an event where the Convent women lie in their own nakedness only to become bewitched by themselves, whereas Walker uses the Mundo's funeral practices to emphasize a naked body as a natural phenomenon.

Morrison encompasses the acceptance of nakedness with Consolata's last form of teaching the Convent women. Although "for thirty years [Consolata] offered her body and her soul to God's son," she spent her last weeks at the Convent encouraging women to accept their bodies (225). As the women return to their spiritual roots, "Consolata told each to undress and lie down…Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. Once the outlines were

complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight." (263). This scene contradicts the women of Ruby who don't wear makeup, and don't dance freely at weddings with the painted, naked bodies of the Convent women.

Through a celebration of nudity, references to abortion and the freedom to choose, and finally, sexual imagery that advocates for body autonomy, Morrison and Walker continue their crusade to free female sexuality from a patriarchal grasp. Walker explains the birth and funeral rites of the Mundo, which involve kissing every woman in "all the places that touch the light," and in doing so she celebrates nudity in its purest form (208). In order to regain ownership of one's body, current religious practices as well as interpretations of Eve and Lilith must be modified in order to accomplish an equal viewing of male and female sexuality.

**Sexual Healing**

Biblical doctrine is rife with examples of sexuality and lust as dangerous motivators, sinful and satanic pressures that make people act in a way that disappoints God. Such as, "For lust is a shameful sin, a crime that should be punished. It is a devastating fire that destroys to hell. It would wipe out everything I own" (Job 31:11-12). Morrison and Walker turn this idea on its head in their writing, allowing sex to become something innately healing, helpful, spiritual, and even religious, presenting their reader with an alternative way of looking at implications derived from scripture.

The misogynistic patriarchal behavior of many of black Christian communities includes the belief that the sexuality of women is improper and taboo. In the textual analysis of *Paradise* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* the relationships between women and the societies that surround them exemplify the deep-seated fear of female sexuality present in Christian

communities. Not only does the Bible condemn sex, but as theologian Kelly Douglas explains the black church also condemns sexuality:

> There is a sex-negative Christian tradition, laden with puritanical mores, imposed on black people [as well as] racist attacks on black sexuality and black bodies. Black people carry a history of sexual violence directed toward them largely by the many white men who saw no contradiction in violating the bodies and minds of black women (Douglas 48)

Morrison and Walker seek to open up this dialogue, and rewrite it instead as one without attachment to moral judgement. For example, Walker writes "Bad women aren't the only women who enjoy sex. Good women have been known to get down," and through their novels, Morrison and Walker both demonstrate that the words "bad" and "good" have no place defining female sexuality (127).

Morrison and Walker, as they seek to reconcile Christianity's oppressive view of sexuality, demonstrate that shame and sexuality are often discussed hand in hand and that sexuality can heal a mental state. Morrison explores the shame that comes from sexual stigmatization in her characterization of Billie Delia. Walker speaks to the psychological effects of shame within June's relationship with her father.

Through a short, one-page recount of an event in Billie Delia's childhood, Morrison encompasses the vast amount of judgement that is applied to a woman's interaction with her own body. When she was five, Billie found she loved riding horses, and, when seeing a horse in Ruby's center she "pulled down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto Hard Good's back" – She got an unintelligible whipping from her mother and a dose of shame it took her years to understand" (Morrison 151). This whipping bears striking similarities to

fathers' beating of June even though June reacts rebelliously as opposed to with shame. The shame that is heartlessly applied to the sexuality of young women instills a precedent of distrust in them for years to come.

In *By the Light,* father's relationship with June is one rife with controlling interests and possessiveness of her body. While June grows up, her father writes "it seemed to be necessary to tame her," and as she hit puberty, he kept her from her friends (Walker 18). Additionally, June begins to gain weight, acquiring a "lumbering tilt" that confines her to reading, and strips her of her freedom to move and explore, and her Father is unbothered by this restriction (21). Father's ownership of June's body directly parallels the ownership exacted over women's body by the church, an ownership based on reinforced feelings of shame, he even whips Jane with a belt – an occasion that haunts both sisters for the remainder of their lives (19). With dripping hypocrisy of father, who was an atheist anthropologist that assumed the role of a pastor to the detriment of his family and his manipulation of shame Walker consistently points out the misogyny embedded within Biblical doctrine. as she describes June in the eyes of the Mundo. The Mundo view Jane as a "Changing Woman," one who "appears to have no shame" (94). The Mundo celebrate the lack of shame in June, noting that it correlates to a freedom of the mind, and an observational and accepting intelligence.

Although both writers acknowledge the forced sense of shame that accompanies female sexuality in a patriarchal society, they advocate vehemently for the sense of peace and healing that sexuality can bring. Morrison creates an avenue for healing by acknowledging that sex is natural and freeing. Walker celebrates the peace that accompanies eroticism and orgasmic freedom.

Introducing Gigi as a woman on a journey to find naturally sculpted stone that resembles "a man and a woman fucking forever," Morrison immediately grounds sexuality in nature (Morrison 63). Despite the townspeople's view of sexuality as something that "destroyed its own self," the women in the Convent all have different experiences with sex, and together form a house of women that indulge in the soothing nature of sexual healing (104). Through their various experiences reclaiming their own bodies and sexuality, the women began to feel a sense of healing.

Ruby defines love as "divine" a virtue that is a "learned application without reason or motive except that it is God's" (141). The Convent, absent from all men, defines love in their own manner – one that is applicable to a multitude of individual women without any religious stipulation. Within the Convent, Consolata functions as the leader of the group of women. Consolata inherited her title with the passing of the last Nun of the convent, the woman who had saved her from abandonment. Although Consolata looked up to her and the Catholicism she practiced, eventually she ventured upon her own journey of sexual healing. During her first sexual encounter since entering the convent 30 years prior, Consolata's lover asks her "Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?" to which she responds, "I am looking now" (231). Though brief, this dialogue represents the ability to find beauty within sexuality. Although the idea that a woman would not recognize her own body until it was viewed by a man can be construed as misogynistic, the encounter as a whole is healing for Consolata, who afterwards recounts "beginning to see in the dark" a sign that she "had been spoken to" by God (241).

Consolata's newfound sexual ability transcends into a renewed sense of leadership. Following the death of the last Nun, Consolata assumes control over the women at the convent

"like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst" (265). The spiritual nature of Consolata consumes the Convent, and spurs healing within the women who had placed their naked bodies on the floor, leaving silhouettes behind them.

Morrison's take on sexuality, ownership of the body, and the connection the women still have to religious life – through the town, through the home that they call 'the Convent' suggests there lies an opportunity for a peaceful dichotomy between the two. Although the Convent women "had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below," suggests a divide between sexual acceptance and function in society, Morrison reaffirms at the close of *Paradise* that "unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted," they were healed (265-266).

Walker opens the novel with her own refrain: "The reason people and angels hover around human sexuality is because it is a light source that has been kept in the dark" (Walker i) This idea that both earthly and heavenly beings will "hover" but never make contact with sexuality opens the novel with Walker's idea that sexual healing is so powerful that it is inherently connected with angels and therefore belongs within Christianity. Walker "proclaims the power of eroticism as sexual healing," and this idea is threaded through *By the Light of My Father's Smile* within Mundo beliefs and Susannah and June's sexual development (Castro-Borrego 26). The Mundo people believed, as Walker staunchly writes, that "It is while fucking that we normally feel closer to God" (111). This idea, that in the act that inspires creation one is closest to the creator, is incredibly discouraged in Biblical texts as well as dominant Christian culture, which support a heterosexual union only because humans do not have the control to abstain from sex – "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*; Adultery,

fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness," but the black church also condemns sexuality (Galatians 5:19).

In the title, *My Father's Smile*, Walker alludes to the Christian God, otherwise known as the Heavenly Father, that hovers above, theoretically watching his children on earth. The title refers to the protagonist, Susannah's, own father, who is so invasively omnipotent that he watches his own daughter make love (4). Susannah and June's relationships with sex are both colored by the whipping that took place between father and June while they still lived with the Mundo people. The novel follows both sisters as they seek to reconcile fear and shame with the pleasure and power as they embrace their own sexuality.

June's relationship with sex is arguably the most problematic, given that she was beaten when she was 15 because she was engaging in acts with Manuelito that allowed her to feel "worshipped" and "innately holy" (23). Walker's choice of the words "worshipped" and "holy" directly contrast June's lack of respect for her fathers' position as a pastor for a religion he does not believe in, but still uses as a rationalization for punishing June. Although when father disciplines June for her sexual behavior, and Susannah sees, he reflects, asking himself "what message about the consequences of a searing passion, ecstatic sex, he sent her," despite many opportunities while he was alive he never spoke to June about it again (27).

June develops an addiction to food largely fueled by her inability to let the memory of her father's abuse leave her. This addition, one that fuels her health problems and eventually leads to her death, has only one remedy – Manuelito. Walker uses the reunion of June and Manuelito to express to the fullest extent how healing sex can be. June, in writing to Manuelito, admits she has "been contemplating dieting," something only Manuelito has the power to urge her to do (81). She writes "for me, for us, I knew Manuelito would stop drinking. Just as I knew I would

immediately begin noticing my weight." (87). The ability for the two lovers to help the other find healing and refuge from harmful behavior illustrates that sex can stir something within someone that is as profound as faith.

Similarly, Susannah faces her own sexual battles. She has relationships with men and women within the novel, the man proving to be unsatisfying, while the women allow her to explore deeper recesses of herself. Susannah's female partners are able to relate to her sexually and with knowledge of female anatomy. There are misogynistic parameters of heterosexuality, Walker explains, such as "Orgasmic freedom" which "has been a male right with any woman they've wanted to fuck, since the beginning of patriarchy" (132). Although depictions in religious paintings, such as *the Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* suggest orgasms can be religiously charged, speaking of them in twenty-first century conservative culture remains largely taboo.

The contrast between loving a man and a woman continues through comparisons of Pauline and Jesus, and their abilities to love. In direct comparison with the church, Susannah describes her sexual encounters with Pauline:

> "Jesus might love you, this you might know, but being made love to by a woman like Pauline puts the love you fantasized about then in a new perspective. Obviously, Pauline is doing loving like Jesus couldn't and wouldn't. At least not the version handed down to the adoring and gullible" (110).

Walker uses this opportunity to illustrate that sexual healing can provide women with something they cannot achieve from religion. However, the combination of both is present in Irene's life, a woman who reclaimed her own body from the church, but instead of abandoning it, "transformed [the church] into a place where people could learn ancient rituals that had once been beloved by

the people of Greece… Loving and prayer as one" (198). Loving and prayer as one, Walker explains, is possible.

> "The Erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde).

As acclaimed feminist Audre Lorde writes, the sexual nature of females is a source of inner light, a light that is often dimmed by religious practices, institutionalized stigmas, and hyper-critical receptions of society. As Morrison and Walker seek to engage the role communities play in desexualizing women, as well as the ownership women have over their own bodies, and finally the healing nature of sexuality, they simultaneously prove that religion and female sexuality can coexist. Biblical doctrine is rife with examples of sexuality and lust as dangerous motivators, sinful and satanic pressures that make people act in a way that disappoints God. Morrison and Walker turn this idea on its head in their writing, allowing sex to become something innately healing, helpful, spiritual, and even religious, presenting their reader with an alternative way of looking at implications derived from scripture.

Although both novels contain routine criticism of biblical doctrines, Morrison and Walker tie their conclusions to the harmony that can be found within Christianity and sexual healing. Within Ruby, the Convent and the town are starkly separate; however, Christianity transcends the two at the culmination of the novel where

> "God had given Ruby a second chance. He made himself so visible and unarguable a presence that even the outrageously prideful and the uncorrectable stupid ought to be able to see it. He had actually swept up and received His servants in broad daylight for goodness' sake! (298).

Morrison ties her novel together by posing to the reader that the Convent women, deemed so sinful by the men of Ruby, were actually valued by God, and when He saved them from the men's wrath, He was providing Ruby with the ability to transform into a place where sexuality was accepted, and religious ideals did not preclude compassion and acceptance.

Walker also engages Christianity towards the end of *By the Light of My Father's Smile* by drawing parallels between the Mundo beliefs and Christian beliefs and commenting that Jesus could exist within both religious spheres. Not only does Walker "legitimize the power of female sexuality" but she also engages Christianity, challenges the assumptions between a heavenly Father and his children, and concludes with a pattern of healing that suggests the rift between the church and female sexuality can be mended. Ultimately, Walker and Morrison demonstrate the black church can diminish the healing power of sexuality, and yet with the right amount of patience and acceptance of those who are different than you, the church can be a harmonizing force within communities.

## Conclusion

The past three chapters have argued, upon a historical and theological foundation, that the black church has practices that harm black women who are members of the Christian community. The black church, as exemplified in Walker and Morrison's fiction, often creates unrealistic beauty ideals that can be linked to race, as well as perpetuates a façade of a *good Christian woman* and the values that those women should embody. The black church has a history of not including women in leadership, supported by Biblical doctrine that encourages such behavior: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23). Lastly, the black church does not openly discuss sexuality, which leads to an aversion to sexuality, especially female sexuality, and is detrimental to the psychological well-being of black Christian women. Morrison and Walker's novels are a platform in which these connections can be made and discussed within a fictional community – a safer way to bring about change within a racially and religiously charged atmosphere.

It is worthy to note that this thesis does not in any way argue that the black church is always detrimental to black women, or that it has negatively impacted society. On the contrary, the church has been a force of hope and salvation for many who enter it, and has provided a venue in which black people could feel as though they had a community and a home. Even Morrison can be counted in those who appreciates the church – she re-named herself after she was baptized into the Catholic faith.

In the *God Help the Child* and *Meridian* there are two values into which the protagonists plainly mature into – Redemptive Self Love and Radical Subjectivity. Both researched by Floyd-Thomas, these values represent the hope that women have for the black church. Radical

Subjectivity is "unshouted courage" which inspires black women to "take control of their lives in ways both bold and cautious" (142). Redemptive Self-Love is that of "invisible dignity" and an inherent value of self-worth. Both values are invaluable to black women and humanity as a whole, and represent a direction in which the black church is growing.

Despite the numerous ways in which the black church imposes restrictions on women, Morrison and Walker end every novel previously mentioned by emphasizing the importance of female autonomy and independence. In *Meridian*, the reader ends the novel feeling as though Meridian uses her own agency to consistently change the world for the better while in *God Help the Child* Booker and Bride end the novel excited to bring their baby into the world. Similarly, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* ends with Tashi's revelation and true feeling of happiness, even though it is at the moment of her death – *A Mercy* is also finished with a call of independence and resistance. Finally, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* ends in the peacefulness of reunion between father and daughter, and *Paradise* ends with the disappearance of the convent women into a world more welcoming that Ruby.

There is a reason Morrison and Walker end all of their novels with an air of positivity, the same reason this thesis ends on an air of hopefulness. In all societies there is undoubtedly division. In almost every major world religion there is a history of dismissing women, as well as a history of stigmatizing sexuality. However, religion still can be a force of unity. Walker and Morrison's fiction is special in that, despite criticizing religion, it still appeals to the masses, and causes them to question their own beliefs, and how their belief systems treat the people within them, yet it does not push audiences to reject those same beliefs. In every novel, the character development, and the reactions of religion and culture, serve to caution every reader to carefully

examine their own religion – in every novel, Morrison and Walker also celebrate the fierce independence of women, and the hope for a more resilient and unified society.

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