I. Introduction

Toni Morrison, in a conversation with Sheldon Hackney said, “In personal life, you have to know what happened and why and figure it out, and then you can go on to another level freer, stronger, tempered in some way. Constantly burying it, distorting it, and pretending, I think, is unhealthy” (129). In this 1996 interview, Morrison is speaking of a major theme of her novels: the idea that silence must be overcome to build a strong community. As Eugene D. Genovese explains, this sense of community, so important to the African-American population, was a complicated matter. Historically, it was highly dangerous for African-Americans to display solidarity, and thus the community developed a deep suspicion of those deemed to be outsiders (623, 625). However, as Morrison explores in her fiction, for individuals to thrive, they must establish a sense of identity as part of a community.

Morrison, ever concerned with the role of community in African American culture, repeats the phrase “Quiet as it’s kept” in three of her novels. This distinctive phrase appears in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997) to directly reference one specific secret in each novel; in each case, it also acts as a signal to the reader that secrets are being kept by and from the characters and from the reader. The infrequent but meaningful recurrence of this subtle phrase spans nearly 30 years of Morrison’s fiction and provides an entry point for tracking the doubled theme of destruction and healing in her work.

Silence allows what should be known or spoken to develop into a secret. The longer a secret is kept, the more difficult it becomes to speak out and share the secret. Keeping silent can be dangerous when the information withheld could provide protection. When silence is used as protection by the community, individual members are left isolated and vulnerable. Ultimately, the practice of keeping quiet employed by the community leads to the destruction of its members. Morrison illustrates that these secrets will eventually destroy those who are keeping them and those from whom they are being kept. The specific secrets signaled by the phrase in each novel build in significance and scope while the importance of keeping quiet becomes pervasive. In *The Bluest Eye,* the earliest novel, there is one featured victim of silence, Pecola. In *Jazz,* published 22 years later, it is a small group, or family unit, that is affected by the keeping of secrets. Finally, in *Paradise,* the entire community of Ruby is left vulnerable due to their silence. The potential healing represented by breaking the silence similarly grows in scope as Morrison continues across the novels to portray the increasing hope and power in sharing secrets. What begins as tentative salvation for one girl in her first novel grows in magnitude and impact through the successive novels where "Quiet as it's kept" appears. Using communication and the breaking of silence to help one character, Morrison stresses this factor and expands upon it. She takes the idea of communicating and speaking up that she first introduces in *The Bluest Eye* and takes it a step further in *Jazz.* The healing power of relationships proves strong in *Jazz,* and Morrison experiments again, pushing one step further by using characters breaking their silence in *Paradise* to benefit an entire town. The revelation of secrets serves as a tool of redemption and survival, and follows a similar pattern of progression in each novel.

As Morrison explains in the Afterword, *The Bluest Eye*, her earliest novel, was inspired by a comment from a friend in Morrison's childhood. A friend wished she had blue eyes and even as a child Morrison was troubled by what this wish indicated (209). Like her childhood friend, her character Pecola wishes for blue eyes. She is told by her family, community, and society that to be loved and valued she must fit a certain narrowly prescribed image. She recognizes that this is unattainable her. Accepting this standard, the only recourse left open to her is in insanity, where she imagines herself to have the blue eyes she so desires as the central symbol of an elusive sense of self-worth. She is prevented from creating any source of self-identity because she receives no examples or instructions on how such a thing is possible. All other routes to creating a place of value are cut off by silence. The society in which Pecola lives is based on keeping secrets to maintain the status quo. However, Morrison uses Claudia, one of Pecola's few friends, to provide the possibility of redemption. In telling Pecola's story, and in fact her own, Claudia is refusing to keep quiet. She is breaking the silence, and while she may be the only one, her act is one of incipient community building that Morrison will develop further in her later novels.

In *Jazz*, published in 1992, Morrison shows Claudia's attempt to break the silence as the project of a larger group of people and expands it onto a group of people. Moreover, Morrison experiments with a metatextual approach, which furthers the idea of breaking the silence as it draws readers into the secrets and demands their participation. Identity as a secret to be uncovered provides another layer to the theme of secrecy. Joe Trace especially struggles with knowing his identity. His lack of a firm sense of self leads him, and others, to a sense of isolation. Not knowing who he is, he is unable to share his life with others. His wife Violet shares this uncertainty of self. Her childhood, like Pecola's, is tainted by an unattainable ideal in the form of Golden Gray, the child her grandmother must leave home to help raise. She accepts the standards he represents and struggles to find a sense of self worth against this impossible goal. After Joe kills his young lover, he, Dorcas, and Violet must break their silence and defeat their secrets by communicating them. Dorcas's aunt, Alice, and her friend, Felice, help the couple come to terms with their identity and their place within the community. As is demonstrated by the differing versions of portions of the story, the emphasis is not squarely on the facts of history, but on the power of sharing one's experiences. Here Morrison portrays the strength of building connections by defying secrets and shows how this defiance benefits a small group of people.

The phrase appears again, twenty seven years after it was used in *The Bluest Eye*, in Morrison's 1997 novel, *Paradise*. In this final example, Morrison takes the idea of speaking up and breaking the silence and expands it to offer the potential for saving an entire community. In *Paradise*, Morrison creates a community based on a silently, and at times violently, enforced rule of exclusion. To maintain the strict ideals of Ruby, its citizens, especially the women, are silenced in many ways. Their practice of using silence and isolation as a way to preserve their way of life fails. They take their anger and frustration out on a nearby community of women. These women, living at a place called the Convent, have only recently learned to overcome their own secret and violent pasts. The women learn that in sharing their secrets, they deny the power of those secrets and open a space for self-creation. The end of the novel, as suggested by the ambiguity over the inscription on the town's symbolic oven which mysteriously reads "Furrow of his Brow" (93), suggests the breakdown in silence and the possibility for open communication. As in *Jazz*, there exist multiple stories, supporting the idea in that novel, that it is not mere factuality, but the relating of personal stories and experiences that forms a community.

II. The Bluest Eye: "An uneasy quiet."

Silence can be dangerous when the information withheld could provide protection. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores the cost of keeping quiet. By describing a community that does not fully educate or inform its members, the novel depicts its valuing personal protection over communal success, a choice that weakens community ties and leads characters to isolation. Many things are kept quiet in the novel although the novel itself is the narrator's, and author's, act of speaking up. As young girls, Claudia McTeer, one of the narrative voices, and the protagonist, Pecola, suffer from this silence. However, the degree to which they suffer varies widely. Claudia survives and is able to see the need for communication within the community, while Pecola merely becomes the town's scapegoat, driven to insanity by the silence. Secrets are maintained at several levels, from society at large, to community, to the intimacy of family and finally to Pecola herself, as a victim. Morrison illustrates that these secrets will eventually destroy those who are keeping them, and from whom they are being kept.

The society in which Pecola Breedlove lives is based on keeping secrets to maintain the status quo, an idea that Morrison will revisit in *Paradise*. Media, functioning as a representative of society, tells only one, narrow version of the truth, withholding the whole picture. In order for the majority to retain their sense of power, they must disenfranchise the minority. Society does not merely repress certain individuals; it justifies such action to the repressed and teaches them to repress themselves.

The far-reaching effects of silence in society are introduced before the story even begins with Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane primer passage. The passage is repeated three times, successively deteriorating. With each repetition, it loses standard conventions, such as punctuation, spacing, and capitalization. The deteriorating passage reflects Pecola's mental state. Finding nothing in society that allows her space to be herself, as the Dick and Jane stories also do not, she begins to break down conventions of meaning. The schoolbook reflects social standards and how society is educating children to view white stereotypes as right. Dick and Jane portray a very narrow stereotype of the American family, one with which many children will not identify. Nowhere are there examples to which they can relate. If they do not fit the prescribed standards of what is right, they are left to believe they are wrong. Jane Kuenz writes, "mass culture and, more generally, the commodity capitalism that gave rise to it, is in large part responsible—through its capacity to efface history—for the "disinterestedness" that Morrison condemns throughout the novel" (421). Society loses sight of the individual and forgets that not every member will fit the prescribed mold. In the classrooms, the children are not told that other ways exist to be valuable to society. Kuenz notes that the primer passage is "the seeming given of contemporary life," and "it stands as the only visible model for happiness and thus implicitly accuses those whose lives do not match up" (422). Denied a place as a member of society, they are left isolated and disconnected.

The standard is set so that it will be impossible for many to meet it. Indeed, the system requires the failure of some to define the success of others. Donald Gibson observes how the primer "reveals the role of education in both oppressing the victim—and more to the point—teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty" (20). This internalization is the most damaging consequence and is what will destroy Pecola. She, like many other characters in the novel, will learn to judge herself by the standards of society that equate black skin and low economic status with failure, because she is ultimately offered no other scale on which to base her judgment. The standards of society are silently accepted.

The reader is not able to forget the harmful silencing influence of society and is reminded of it again in the image of Claudia's doll. Claudia explains, "I learned quickly, however, what I was expected to do with the doll. . . . [p]icture books were full of little girls sleeping with their dolls" (20). As with the Dick and Jane primers, Claudia is learning how to behave from a book that does not truly relate to her life. She goes on to say that the doll "resisted my flesh" (20). While her observation is based on a physical experience, the doll also resists her on a psychological level. The white baby doll being held as the ideal symbolically denies that Claudia's body can be beautiful. She is aware of this dilemma. Morrison describes a scene where, while taking a bath, Claudia revels in her scars and dirt, essentially appreciating her own body. The next line is "I destroyed white baby dolls" (22), which might seem incongruous, but actually reveals that Claudia understands that, in order to love herself, she cannot love the doll that denies her value. Claudia even acknowledges, "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (20). All the world is keeping quiet about other types of beauty. She realizes that this is the standard applied not only to dolls, but girls too, merely because "all the world had agreed." Claudia destroys the dolls to try and uncover the mystery of their beauty and power. She is attempting to discover for herself what everyone else is keeping secret. Patrice Cormier-Hamilton explains that "When Claudia destroys her white doll with its glassy blue eyes, she demonstrated pride in her identity and the ability to understand, to some degree, the repressive values pervading her black community" (121). In appreciating her own self-worth, Claudia has the strength to damage the doll, an action that represents what her ideas of self-worth do to the pervasive societal ideas of beauty. In acting on her feelings, she diminishes the power of society. Trinna S. Frever writes that this is the "longing of the girl character, woman author, and/or woman reader for an image that is more fully made in her own image, rather than as an outside culture would make her" (136). Claudia wants to alter society to include her, not change who she is to fit into society.

However, while Claudia may destroy her own dolls and protect her self-image, she alone cannot destroy what the doll symbolizes, and no one is speaking up on her behalf. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The adults in her life are outraged over her destruction of the dolls. They intend to give her a gift, something they never received as children, but they fail to realize that a model of white beauty is not what she wants or needs. They do not ask her what she wants. They fail to communicate with her and fall into the stereotypical assumptions.

Society's images pervade other types of media as well, and the girls are surrounded and silenced by this media. Under its influence, they are forced to keep quiet about their own beauty and self-worth. This influence can be seen in the image of Shirley Temple that Pecola loves. Pecola is especially preoccupied with the image of Shirley Temple on a mug. Morrison writes, "She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" (19). Pecola has accepted society's judgment of Shirley Temple as ideal and, as she can never look like her, wants to be close to her in any way possible. The novel goes on to say that Pecola was "fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (23). Pecola drinks three quarts of milk in order to spend more time with the picture of society's ideal beauty. Gibson writes, "If she drinks enough white milk from the chalice, she may become like the stuff she imbibes and as well become like the image adorning the container itself" (23). Pecola literally internalizes the dominant view of beauty. Kuenz concurs saying, "interaction with mass culture for anyone not represented therein, and especially for African-Americans, frequently requires abdication of self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another" (422). Society has taught Pecola that to see herself as beautiful, she must be someone else, someone more like Shirley Temple. Debra T.

Werrlein explains that "Morrison points to the particular predicament of black *girls* in a white nation. For power they need beauty, and for beauty they need whiteness" (63). Since Pecola cannot obtain "whiteness," she is denied power.

Pecola repeats her attempt to consume beauty by eating Mary Jane candies. In order to become more like Mary Jane, a blonde, blue-eyed little girl on the candy wrapper, Pecola buys and savors them as a treat. When her anger over being slighted is too weak to endure, she turns to the candy for strength. She tries, in a startlingly literal way, to internalize the beauty that would guarantee her a place in society and end her isolation. While Claudia gets angry and destroys images that belittle or deny her, Pecola absorbs them. No one is educating the girls on their value as people, and they are left simply to fail by the standards of society.

Like Pecola, the community absorbs and perpetuates the ideal of society. In doing so, they put into practice the repression of society. They keep quiet about their own feelings and adopt the dangerous views that deny their worth. The black community, repressed by society, in turn represses its members who fall short of their standards. (Morrison will further explore this chain of repression with the town of Ruby in *Paradise.*) These standards and the practice of keeping quiet in society are in turn absorbed by Pecola and Claudia's community. The community's silence is particularly difficult for Pecola and the reader because the community is so important. Claudia observes, "Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on" (17). Claudia knows that the community must "consolidate" to survive. The community members can share strengths and weaknesses and so help others and receive help in turn, but Pecola is denied this consolidating membership within her community. Miehyeon Kim explains that Morrison is "highlighting the interaction between the black community and its individual members" (109).

In Pecola’s case, interaction is denied. Instead of being accepted as a member of the community, she is used by it to make them feel better.

Claudia observes that “Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information” (10). It is this lack of communication and information that will make these girls susceptible to the harmful standards of society. The girls desperately need instruction from their community and their parents to counteract the messages they are receiving from society. Claudia further comments that “We didn’t initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions” (23). She does not say that the adults answered the children’s questions or even that they, as children, asked questions. This environment of silence within the community allows the prevailing white standards to continue unchallenged. Kathleen Woodward claims that “the girls are attuned to the moods and emotions that envelope them, but because of their young age they do not understand” (218). As children, they can sense that there are problems and inconsistencies within their community, but no one explains to them what is happening or what it means. They are forced to wonder and speculate on their own in silence.

As narrator, Claudia is using her own family to represent the general conduct of the black community. The confusion brought on by silence can be seen in the novel when Claudia is sick. Claudia remembers, “My mother’s anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness” (11). Her mother does not communicate what is really causing her anger, and as a child, Claudia misunderstands. In adulthood, Claudia will come to realize what her mother was doing, but Pecola will never understand such subtleties of anger within her own dysfunctional family as her development will be tragically stunted. She will never receive the benefits of being able to look back with a mature perspective. Besides the lack of communication between Claudia and Mrs. McTeer, the reader gets the image of keeping quiet with Mr. McTeer. Morrison writes, "he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat . . . and teaches us how to rake, feed, and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring" (61). Their father is teaching them how to maintain the fire, but he is also teaching them to keep quiet. The girls have internalized this practice of silence as demonstrated when Mrs. McTeer is angry about Pecola drinking so much milk. Claudia and Frieda feel bad for Pecola, but they do not stand up for her. They have learned that their role in the community is one of silence.

Pecola's lack of information causes trauma in even natural events, as seen when she begins to menstruate. Pecola is afraid that the blood means she is going to die. No one has explained to her how her body works. This is just another example of her confused body image. What should be seen as natural is frightening to Pecola. Pecola is so scared and confused that she begins to cry. When Mrs. McTeer finds the girls, she thinks they are misbehaving and begins to whip them. At first, she does not listen to Claudia's protests. It is important to note that Claudia is the one who speaks up to defend their actions, for we can see that she is, in a small way, beginning to understand the consequences of silence. When Mrs. McTeer finally listens, she realizes her mistake and "Her eyes were sorry" (31). Later, in one of the few scenes where Pecola is shown in a positive interaction with anyone in her community, Claudia can hear her mother laughing with Pecola. When the girls are in bed that night, Pecola, in one of the most troubling lines of the novel, asks, "how do you get somebody to love you?" (32). Pecola has no personal experience with love and is merely trying to understand why. Gibson says, "Nearly everything that happens in Pecola's life demonstrates to the reader and to herself that nobody loves her" (26). She has received no indication of affection or love from any source.

The lack of love Pecola faces is a community-wide problem, and Morrison accentuates the importance of community through her narrative technique. The gossiping voices of community members provide not only information but also context. In discussing the causes of the break-up of a marriage, one of the women begins, “Did you hear . . .?” (13). The conversation continues, “What they going to do about Della? Don’t she have no people? (14). Fortunately for Della, she does have family to care for her. Morrison provides a contrast to Della in the character of Auntie Julia. Julia is described as “still trotting up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself” (13). Kuenz contends that the reference to Auntie Julia “suggests that the town has an undiagnosed and unexamined history of producing women like Pecola, that her experience—and the extremity of it—is not an isolated instance” (429). Pecola is not the first to meet this sorry fate, and if the community continues to keep quiet, she will not be the last.

This gossipy conversation about failures within the community comes too late to be of any benefit, and the reader will see this pattern repeated with Pecola’s misfortunes. When Pecola’s situation becomes known, it is talked about as a scandal, but Pecola’s only friends, Claudia and Freida McTeer, are not told about it directly. Rather, they are left to overhear adults gossiping about it. Moreover, the adults are merely talking about what they think happened, and not why such a thing was allowed to occur. They are placing blame without accepting that they may have played a part in Pecola’s undoing. Claudia remembers, “Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires.” (15). By saying that it “retires,” she is suggesting that before they get to a meaningful discussion of events, they back away. Their failure to address what has happened creates a public secret. Pecola’s pregnancy is known to her community, but it is not openly acknowledged or dealt with. Jane Bakerman explains, “For the community, Pecola’s madness, coupled with her family history, excites scorn rather than sympathy” (548). Claudia and Frieda are embarrassed, hurt, and sorry for Pecola, but seem to be the only ones to react that way. Claudia releases her feelings through a burst of short thoughts: “After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away” (204). After the initial gossip, they resume their pattern of keeping quiet. No one speaks up for Pecola or even speaks to her.

Pecola’s community in the form of her school contributes to her belief that she is not valued. She is denied a voice in school as the teachers largely ignore her, and she is forced to sit alone while the other children sit in pairs. Pecola realizes that her teachers “tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (45-46). In this way, her mistreatment is institutionalized and sanctioned. By accepting society’s standards, the community is perpetuating them. The children pick up on this and copy the behavior modeled for them in which abusing Pecola is acceptable. Claudia recounts an incident when “A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove” (65). Here Pecola is defined as a victim. She has become what her community needs her to be. Morrison writes that the boys’ behavior is a reflection of their own “smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness” (65). They are taking out their own feelings of anger and frustration on Pecola. Cormier-Hamilton notes, “in ostracizing Pecola for looking black and having a black family with black mores, the boys censure their own cultural identities” (116). Their community has taught them not to value themselves, and they absorb this value system and impose it on Pecola in turn.

Pecola soon encounters another community member who belittles her. Morrison writes, “This disrupter of seasons was a new girl in school named Maureen Peal. A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back” (62). Her description as a “disrupter of seasons” depicts her as unnatural. She is disrupting the carefully preserved self-image of Claudia and destroying the fragile self-image of Pecola.

Maureen's experience at school is the reverse of Pecola's. Whereas Pecola is avoided by her teachers and taunted by her classmates, Maureen "enchanted the entire school" (62). Notably, other black girls defer to her which indicates that they too have accepted the community's standard that she is better because she is lighter-skinned. Even these other black girls keep quiet about the unfair standards. Werrlein writes, "Significantly, Morrison attributes Maureen's power not just to lightness, but to its beauty" (63). In this community, beauty requires light-colored skin.

Frieda and Claudia try to find fault with Maureen to lessen her power but secretly want to be her friends. Claudia remarks, "but I knew it would be a dangerous friendship" (63). Claudia knows it would be dangerous to her own self-image to accept the white ideal. Pecola, however, embraces the idea that acceptance is connected to beauty. Bakerman says, "Because white children appear to be beloved by both white and black adults, Pecola determines to achieve beauty and acceptance by acquiring blue eyes" (543). In an example of her deference to Maureen and the standards she represents, during Pecola's confrontation with Maureen, "Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears" (72). Pecola concedes her inferiority and tries to retreat within herself.

The black community's acceptance of white ideals and subsequent repression of Pecola is seen by her interaction with a black woman, Geraldine. Geraldine has been brought up into a life where she must keep herself secret. She hides what she is taught are her failings, which she sees personified in Pecola. Like many others in the community, Geraldine has accepted the white ideals and is constantly trying to keep quiet about her blackness. Morrison writes, "Here they [women like Geraldine] learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave" (83). By using the word "they" Morrison is indicating that Geraldine is a type rather than an individual. She represents all the members of the community who choose to keep silent about their individuality and conform to impossible standards. She is learning and perpetuating the lesson of how to behave taught to her by her community who in turn, learns from society. Cormier-Hamilton writes that "In *The Bluest Eye* there is a palpable condemnation for African Americans who sacrifice vulnerable members of their community to attain the benefits of assimilation into white society" (118).

Geraldine abandons her community for her own advancement, and the community does not condemn this but rather rewards her. Christopher Douglas writes, "Geraldine can't change her race, but she can try to change her culture" (144). Just as Pecola wishes to change how she is seen, Geraldine recognizes that she cannot change her color but can change how she is perceived. When Geraldine is angry to find Pecola in her home, Morrison writes "[Geraldine] had seen this little girl all of her life" (91). However, she does not see Pecola at all, but merely the community's stereotype. Geraldine, like Mr. Yacobowski, judges her simply by the standards of society.

While Geraldine looks at Pecola with disdain, Mr. Yacobowski hardly sees her at all. In the scene with him, Pecola is literally silenced, speaking not a single word even in response to his questions. Pecola sees in his eyes "The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" (48). By the standards of his community, the little black girl is invisible to the white shop owner. Morrison writes, "At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (48). Even though she is just a child, Pecola realizes something is wrong. She mistakenly assumes it to be her, and no one offers her an alternative. Pecola knows that "The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (49). Pecola is a young girl, with a largely undeveloped character and knows that only her status as an African-American is solidly formed. She deduces that this is the problem. Werrlein explains, "Pecola learns the paradoxical necessity of erasing herself if she hopes to mature into a politically visible subject" (64). She cannot exist as she is and be accepted in her community.

Pecola is not accepted by society, or her community, but perhaps most critically, she is rejected by her own family. Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, have both suffered in their own right but rather than help Pecola overcome her own trouble, they take their pain out on her. The people she should be able to turn to for affirmation and affection reject her as everyone else does. Cholly and Pauline have been silenced in regards to their life experiences and so they cannot listen and understand Pecola's life. Their family becomes trapped in a cycle of secrecy and silence. They felt unloved and unworthy by outside standards and in turn, apply those same standards to their daughter. They deny her a strong voice because they were denied one. They cannot discover the secret that Pecola's beauty, and indeed their own, has become.

From a young age, Pauline has felt excluded from society, and she has internalized the standards that exclude her until she defines herself and others based wholly on a system that dismisses her. As a girl, Pauline injures her foot and is left with "a way of lifting the bad foot as though she were extracting it from little whirlpools that threatened to pull it under" (110). This is indicative of how she sees her place in the world. She is under constant threat of being pulled under. Pauline remembers good times from her childhood associated with color. She recalls the yellow of her mother's lemonade, purple from berries, and green junebugs. She even says, "I could feel that purple deep inside me" and "all of them colors was in me" (115). All of these positive experiences are a part of her, yet she is unable to overcome the black and white movies that communicate a standard of life that she fails to achieve. As a child, Pauline showed a tendency toward order and would carefully arrange things, allowing her to have a measure of control over something in her life. Her family was careful to let her patterns remain, and if they occasionally messed one up, were quick to help her fix it. Pauline does not recognize this act as affection and instead focuses on how she is the only child without a nickname. As with the colors, she ignores the positive influences and concentrates on the negative.

When she marries and moves north, Pauline feels herself to be isolated, in large part because she has never learned how to cross the barriers of silence that were erected during her childhood. She observes, “It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people” (117). Pauline is not welcomed into the community. No one reaches out to her, and she grows lonely. Morrison explains, “She was still no more than a girl, and still waiting for that plateau of happiness, that hand of a precious Lord who, when her way grew drear, would always linger near. Only now she had a clearer idea of what drear meant” (118). Pauline is merely a girl losing her innocence when she is forced into the harsh realities of the world with no one to guide her, a struggle she will in turn force on her daughter. No one has warned her of the challenges she will face, and no one steps forward to tell her how to survive in the north. Delashmit explains, “Because the black culture does not embrace Pauline and strengthen her black identity, the prevalent white ideals of beauty, order, and general “rightness” assume a dominant role in Pauline’s life, and later in Pecola’s” (14). Without another set of standards on which to judge, Pauline is left with what confronts her which is the white standard of beauty. The black community cannot accept Pauline, just as white society cannot accept them. Since Pauline has no alternative role models to base her values on, she is susceptible to the most prominent images.

The breaking point comes when Pauline loses her tooth, a loss representative of her experience of silence. The novel reads, “the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place” (116). Here, Morrison is ostensibly talking about the tooth, but the metaphor suggests that what happens to the tooth parallels what happens to Pauline herself, and indeed to her daughter Pecola. Both have a weakened or nonexistent root system with family and community. The conditions of society allowed the setting, or community, that permitted the existence and suffering of Pauline and Pecola.

Pauline comes to accede to the white ideals she sees around her largely because she has nothing else to turn to. She begins to equate money and beauty with happiness. When speaking of the white family she works for, she says, “You’d think with a pretty house like that and all the money they could holt on to, they would enjoy one another” (119). She thinks that because they have money, they have no excuse not to be happy. She also implies that they can enjoy their family because they have money, which suggests that, because she does not have money, she does not enjoy her family. Morrison writes, “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought,” and “In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (122). Because no one has taught her differently, she believes that there is only one kind of beauty and that it is required for happiness. Since she cannot fulfill the requirements for this narrow definition of beauty, she is a failure. This beauty scale “was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (122). This is the scale on which Pauline grades herself and her daughter and by which they both fail.

Pauline's complete indoctrination is cemented by her relationship with the Fishers. Here, she finds everything society has taught her to desire and her community has left uncontested. She keeps her personal life secret in order to create a neat, ordered, albeit false, world. Delashmit claims, "When Pauline embraces the white family she works for, especially the little white girl with blue eyes, to the extent that she neglects her own family, blue eyes become for Pecola a metaphor for her mother's love" (14). Pecola sees and feels the rejection by her mother and recognizes the implied rejection of society. If her own mother does not love her over the little white girl then no one will. Kuenz explains that Pauline's job with the Fishers is so important to her because it "provides her with the semblance of acceptance and community she cannot find or create in her own home and neighborhood" (425). With no connection to her own family or community, she clings to the only connection she has. This connection to the Fisher family provides her the order and power she can get nowhere else. Morrison writes, "the creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers" (128). She can only get respect through her connection to the white family. She never even thinks of demanding it for herself. Werrlein states, "histories of suffering not only debilitate parents, but turn them from nurturers into oppressors" (61-2). While there is some evidence that Pauline was nurtured as a child, she feels the oppression more strongly, and that is what she will enact in her relationship with her daughter. When Pauline finds her daughter lying on the floor, unconscious after being raped by her father, Pauline beats her. She cannot comfort and nurture her. Pauline can only survive in the neat, ordered, controlled, world she has created at the Fisher's so she reacts with violence when her family threatens her safety.

While Pauline has come to rely on her role with the Fishers to define herself, she also needs Cholly's sins to make her feel superior. They repeat the cycle of silence in which they live, and just as the community uses Pecola, Pauline and Cholly use each other. They both take out the anger they feel at being marginalized and silenced on each other. Their relationship devolves into violence as it is the only way they know how to handle their anger and frustration. Cholly will eventually turn this violence onto his own daughter. Speaking of Cholly and Pauline, Morrison writes, “Hating her, he could leave himself intact” (42). By displacing his self-hatred onto his wife to survive, Cholly mimics the town’s actions towards his daughter.

Like Pauline’s, Cholly’s childhood was not without affection. While he was abandoned by his parents, he was rescued and raised by his Aunt Jimmy. He had a family with Aunt Jimmy, and he also had the benefits of a male role model in Blue. Morrison writes, “Cholly loved Blue. Long after he was a man, he remembered the good times they had had” (134). The novel particularly recounts a shared moment between the young man and his mentor. They share the heart of a watermelon in a scene that Cholly recalls fondly. Although Cholly has these early, positive experiences and influences that connect him to others, as in Pauline’s case, these influences are not enough to counteract the depersonalizing influence of society.

Whereas Pauline’s critical moment is the loss of her tooth, Cholly’s is a much more painful experience in which he falls back on the cycle of silence. Faced with the loss of his Aunt Jimmy, and thus his home, Cholly is also confronted with society’s negative view of who he is. In the same day he must come to terms with the loss of his family and connections and his introduction into violence and self-hatred, all while still a boy. After Jimmy’s funeral, Cholly goes off with a few others about his age. He ends up alone with Darlene. Cholly’s first sexual experience is interrupted and corrupted by a group of white hunters who essentially force Cholly to rape Darlene. Morrison writes, “There was no place for Cholly’s eyes to go” (148). This recalls his daughter Pecola’s failure to disappear due to her eyes. Neither can hide their eyes nor change how they are being seen. Woodward, in reference to Darlene, points out, “her instinctive reaction is to hide her eyes as a way of shielding herself from the shaming eyes of others. It is as if she cannot see anything, then perhaps she herself cannot be seen" (221). During this episode, as he will again, Cholly places his hatred not on the white men but on the black girl. He blames Darlene for what has happened to him as he will blame Pecola for what has occurred in her life. Even after he has left his home, he cannot forget what has happened and even though he keeps the secret, "the vacancy in his head was like the space left by a newly pulled tooth still conscious of the rottenness that once filled it" (150). Morrison uses the tooth imagery here to further connect Cholly's experience with Pauline's and to express that there is no way to get rid of his pain. Cholly turns his hatred against the person who "bore witness to his failure . . . .The one he had not been able to protect" (151). He is unable to save either Darlene or Pecola, and instead of hating himself or the system that created the situation, he manages his pain by transferring it to the young girl.

Cholly goes in search of his father and meets further rejection. In a description that evokes images of Pecola, Morrison writes, "Cholly sat. He knew if he was very still he would be all right. But then the trace of pain edged his eyes, and he had to use everything to send it away" (156). Like Pecola, he is trying to make himself disappear and fails because of his eyes and the psychological vulnerabilities of sight. Woodward states, "Morrison takes care also to underscore that Cholly never reveals his shame to any one. He does not acknowledge it. He does not speak it" (222). Cholly is keeping quiet about his experiences that have almost destroyed him. In doing so, he limits (by his own example) his daughter's ability to overcome similar experiences.

As an adult, Cholly cannot reconcile the past he has kept secret with his current life in order to raise a healthy family. He soon grows distant from his wife and his family dynamic devolves into violence. Likewise, he has no meaningful connection to his children. Morrison writes, “As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment” (161). His lot in life is illustrated by the scene in which the Breedlove family has a new couch delivered. Upon arrival, the couch is already damaged but “The store would not take responsibility” (36). No one in his life, including Cholly himself, has taken responsibility for the damage they inflict. They remain silent about damage done to them and damage they inflict on others. Again, Morrison uses the image of the tooth to describe the couch, saying it was “Like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body” (36). In much the same way that Pauline spreads her pain over a broken tooth (that to her means ugliness) to her children, Cholly spreads the pain of his ineffectuality to his family. In this portrayal of Cholly, Werrlein claims, “Morrison suggests that familial “pathologies” do not simply spring from individual shortcomings” (59). Cholly is reenacting his own traumatic experiences in his family life. He is completing another phase in the cycle of silence and violence. He was denied a sense of self-worth and cannot direct his anger and frustration to the source. His solution is to silence his family in turn to relieve his own feelings.

Cholly allows his past to ruin his relationship with his daughter. Upon seeing her in the kitchen, Cholly questions her misery by wondering, “Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdend—why wasn’t she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation” (161). He senses that he is partly to blame for Pecola’s pain but is unable to break his own silence and channels his regret into violence towards her. Cormier-Hamilton asserts, “Thus Cholly’s deranged act of love produces yet another terrifying, brutal blow in Pecola’s young life, finally compelling her into madness” (120). Cholly feels persuaded to reach out to his suffering daughter but has never been taught how to be a real parent. Cormier-Hamilton continues, “Morrison does not exonerate Cholly Breedlove” but “she presents some possible explanations of circumstances stemming from his environment that may have contributed to his actions and his nature" (119). While holding Cholly responsible for his own actions, Morrison carefully introduces the conditioning factors to explain to the reader that Cholly is a product of his environment and to provide an overall picture of how that environment was allowed to exist. The reader can understand his motivations without excusing the behavior.

As an adult looking back, Claudia says, "Public fact becomes private reality," (188) and this accurately describes what happens to Pecola. What should be openly discussed in public, is not, and turns into a private hell for Pecola. The public fact of the white standard of idealized beauty becomes her personal reality. Bakerman notes, "there is no one to explain this point to Pecola. Her parents, Cholly and Pauline, have accepted the idea that they are ugly and in doing so have come to hate one another" (544). Pecola's parents cannot explain how society's and their community's standards are pervasive, because they do not know themselves. Like her father before her, Pecola is left on the trash heap, but in her case, there is no one to rescue her. Woodward points out that both "Cholly and Pecola cannot narrate what happens to them" (235). They share this silence. Her society, community, and family, has left Pecola with no way to accept herself as she is. Morrison writes that Pecola, "restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance" (43).

Ultimately, her methods of endurance are not strong enough for her survival. She cannot overcome the secrets in her life. Only through the fantasies of insanity is she able to reconcile her appearance with what society requires. Morrison tells the reader that "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (46). Pecola cannot change what she sees, but she can change how she sees it. Her only option is to change her perception of society or of herself. As no one has ever shown her how to go her own way against society, she is unable to alter her self-image to a positive one.

Her method is to change herself. Werrlein clarifies, “Pecola’s eyes represent her consciousness, her ability to see the “ugliness” she associates with blackness” (67). In other words, she is what she sees. Pecola attempts to change what the world looks like by changing how she looks at it. Kim describes it this way; “Morrison explores the interplay of eyes as windows for gazes from the outside and for one’s perception of the outside world” (113-14). If she were beautiful, the world would be different.

This certainly is true of Pecola as contrasted with Maureen; they do indeed live in different worlds. Maureen, who conforms to the predominant standard of beauty, is met with warmth and affection from everyone, from society, to community, to her own family. Pecola’s experience is the exact opposite; she is silenced and devalued. Pecola prays to disappear, and can imagine herself successful up until her eyes, which she believes are the most important part. She feels “They were everything. Everything was there, in them” (45). She cannot get rid of what she has seen any more than she can get rid of how she is seen. Cormier-Hamilton states, “For Pecola, beauty equals happiness, and it is difficult to fault a young girl for the misperception; certainly both white and black communities in her world seem to support the idea” (115). Pecola accurately gets the message that society is sending and receives no contradiction or even a hint of dissension. Cormier-Hamilton goes on to say that “Pecola is victimized by a society that conditions her to believe that she is ugly and therefore worthless, because she doesn’t epitomize white Western culture’s idea of beauty” (115). Pecola sees no room for difference or diversity. The white society desires to keep her race oppressed and the black community is not willing to compromise its own status to help Pecola.

Pecola connects status to the standards of beauty society perpetuates as demonstrated by her fixation with eyes as seen throughout the novel. All forms of beauty outside the blue-eyed stereotype are denied. It is no surprise that Pecola secretly longs for and is obsessed with the blue eyes that would equal her acceptance. When she is with Junior in Geraldine's house, she finds the cat and notes, "He was black all over, deep silky black, and his eyes, pointing down toward his nose, were bluish green. The light made them shine like blue ice. . . . The blue eyes in the black face held her" (90). Pecola is transfixed by the cat's blue eyes and undoubtedly can see in his face, her own. When she is being teased on the playground, it is the power of Maureen's eyes that compels the boys to stop. Morrison writes, "the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest" (66-7). Having seen their violence ebb under Maureen's beautiful eyes, it is not surprising that Pecola believes her parents would stop fighting if she had beautiful, that is to say, blue, eyes. Looking back, Claudia says that Pecola "would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (46-47). She cannot see herself for what she truly is, but will spend the rest of her life looking for eyes bluer than hers. Cormier-Hamilton concludes, "In desperation, then, Pecola creates a friend out of her imagination who will love her and assure her that she has the bluest eyes in all the world" (121). Pecola, like Wild in *Jazz*, has no voice in the novel. She does not even narrate her rape scene. The reader perceives that episode from Cholly's perspective and is left to speculate as to what Pecola is feeling and thinking. She is kept silent.

Despite her silence, the reader is able to gain insight into Pecola through her association with flowers. Pecola feels a kinship with the dandelions that everyone else views as weeds. She wonders why people think they are ugly because to her, they are pretty. She speculates, "Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon" (47). She is unable to see her own beauty, but realizes, at least in respect to the flowers, that others' views of beauty may be distorted. In her opinion, differing from convention, she gives the dandelions what she does not allow herself. Her appreciation for the beauty of the dandelions is not lasting however. After the shameful incident with Mr. Yacobowski, Pecola sees the dandelions and "A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back," and she then thinks, "they *are* ugly. They *are* weeds" (50). The dandelions cannot return her affection and she soon conforms to society's view of them.

At the end of the novel, Pecola has gotten her wish for blue eyes but at the cost of her sanity. She has become permanently silenced in society by desperately seeking to conform to its rules. Pecola observes how everyone, even her mother, looks away from her. No one can face her. They remain silent about the damage that has been done to her and simply look away. When she asks her new "imaginary" friend why she never knew her before, the friend replies, "You didn't need me before" (196). Pecola has lost all connection to society, community, and family, and only has herself left. She handles this isolation by creating someone to love her. Pecola's reasoning for why no one looks at her is that "Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced" (197). It is interesting that when Pecola finally uses the word "prejudice" it is not to describe what has happened to her and how she has been treated, but simply to explain that others are jealous and will not comment on her new eyes.

Almost immediately, Pecola begins to doubt her secret gift, as she has been taught to do. She worries that her eyes are not blue enough. What she does not realize is that her eyes will never be enough, just as she will never be enough to fulfill expectations. Claudia acknowledges, "we had failed her" so "we avoided Pecola Breedlove—forever" (204-205). Woodward agrees that Pecola is "A living reminder of the shameful failure of her community to protect her, she grows older as the years pass by. But she will never grow up. She has been irreparably stunted" (218). The community shares, in part, the blame for her fate. As long as she is out of sight, she can remain out of their minds. They will move on, but she will never overcome the damage. Claudia realizes this and says that Pecola is "among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was" (205). Pecola's beauty is wasted. Kim suggests, “Claudia, mourning for Pecola who could not survive, also mourns for her own childhood” (112). This shows that damage done to one member, affects, and hurts, all the members.

Claudia, however, is not keeping quiet; she is telling the story of Pecola, but the novel suggests that her lone voice is not enough and that it is too late to help Pecola. Claudia is not the only one breaking the silence. Her narration is supplemented by another giving the reader background information on other characters. Claudia is unable to know the entire story and fully understand the complicated motivations of others. While Claudia is speaking up, Morrison provides another narrative voice which underscores the importance of telling one’s story. If characters such as Pauline and Cholly will not tell their own stories, Claudia, with the help of Morrison’s omniscient narrator will. Dittmar mentions the power of telling and “about saying as cure. Naming her ghosts and, indeed, ours, she diminishes their power over us” (150). By telling the story, Claudia and Morrison weaken the events that caused it and perhaps give others a chance to avoid Pecola’s fate. Cormier-Hamilton sums it up by saying, “Only by understanding and accepting the past can African Americans achieve a psychological wholeness in the present and strengthen their power as a race in the future” (111). To understand how a story like Pecola’s could happen and to accept their role in such a situation, the community must talk about it and not remain silent. Silence leaves open only the options of assimilation or isolation. Claudia does not excuse herself or her community. She says they are wrong to blame the victim, thinking she “had no right to live” (206). By keeping quiet, Pecola’s community and family allow society’s narrow definitions of beauty and success to be the only ones Pecola knows. This silence, intended to preserve the community within the view of society, can destroy the individual.

III. *Jazz*: "What good are secrets if you can't talk to anybody about them?"

In *Jazz,* Morrison takes the power of breaking silence and pushes it a step further to show that the damage that silence inflicts is not limited to individuals. Silence and secrets must be overcome, even if they are well-intentioned. The novel begins like a secret, opening with the sound "Sth" (3), drawing the readers' attention, but more importantly, indicating from the very beginning that secrets are being kept. Opening the novel in the tone of sharing a secret elevates the prominence of what is unknown. The narrator, or the book itself, is not keeping quiet about events, although others may be. While the narrator is revealing, the reader must decide how much to accept and believe. However, the book indicates that even the narrator is cautious. The narrator says, "I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it's making sure no one knows all there is to know about me" (8). This introduces the idea of keeping secrets as a form of protection. Yet, in the end, in this, Morrison' sixth novel, sharing the truth is an act of strength and connection.

The novel will show how such secrets can create a distance that characters may interpret as safety, but that will ultimately end in isolation. JaeEun Yoo calls the opening "an invitation to private conversation, which conjures up confidence and intimacy between the participants" (87). She asserts that this close relationship opens the door for the reader to question and doubt the reliability of the narrator (87-8). The story is told on a very personal level in which the reader has equal standing with the narrator and so is free to doubt. In the same way, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia describes the narrator as "secretive and gossipy" (635). Veronique Lesoinne suggests that the narrator is "the collective eye/I of that community, and by extension of the whole African American community" (158). As an intimate of the community sharing its stories, the book becomes a way to make the truth known and helps its characters, even if it stumbles and struggles along the way. The keeping of secrets in the novel denies characters an understanding of their identity and in turn, their role within the community. Thus, secrecy leads to isolation and the failure to forge community bonds.

Malvonne appears early in the novel, and the secrets she keeps appear harmless at first. Morrison vividly describes Malvonne's work as a cleaning lady for an office building. Her position allows Malvonne access to many secrets. The men in the office do not feel threatened by her and so do not attempt to hide their secrets from her. She knows "who had a passion for justice as well as ladies' undergarments, who loved his wife and who shared one. . . . who fought with his son and would not speak to his father" (41). By knowing and keeping their secrets, Malvonne becomes a part of their lives, yet remains distant.

Upon finding evidence that her beloved nephew had robbed a mailbox, Malvonne keeps his secret, but also tries to correct his wrongs. She reads all the letters, thus learning more secrets about neighbors and strangers. She sends some on to their intended recipients and even advises some on their behavior. Her actions provide further evidence of her concern and desire to connect with others, but also of her distance. She wishes to help these people but is unable to offer support or advice face-to-face. She reaches out to her community, but it is through the mediation of the postal service and not first hand. Aoi Mori suggests, "Malvonne cannot function as a healthy, caring black mother in the City, where the community no longer values individuals" (321). Her interest in her community members is clear, yet her course of action is forced into a less effective channel. Mori goes on to say, "Malvonne's marginalization significantly indicates the endangerment and extinction of a healthy entity in the black community and the marginalization of women" (322). This points to the breakdown of close community ties within the large, impersonal city.

Morrison connects Malvonne's ineffectiveness with Joe's secret by having him appear with his request to rent her apartment while she is writing to urge caution in another affair among strangers. At first, Malvonne wants no part of Joe's proposal to bring a woman to her house while she is at work. Nonetheless, she soon begins to relent. She says, "Spose I tell her," to which Joe replies, "You won't" (47). He seems to already know her ability to keep such secrets. In her impotent efforts to help, Malvonne plays a role in the situation that ends in Dorcas's death. However, the narrator at one point refers to Malvonne as "the one who told [Violet] about Joe's dirt in the first place" (5), suggesting that Violet found out that Dorcas was the one having a relationship with her husband from Malvonne. The reader knows Malvonne will tell even before Joe asks her to keep the secret. Perhaps it is her way of assuaging her guilt for keeping the secret for so long, or maybe she realizes that the only way to heal their relationships is by breaking her silence.

While Malvonne helps Joe hide his secret affair with a young woman, Joe is struggling with other secrets of his own. From birth, secrets are being kept from Joe. Secrets conceal fundamental realities such as who his mother is and, in turn, his own identity. As a child, he is told his parents disappeared "without a trace." He takes 'Trace' for his last name, as it signifies the void that his parents left him. The identity of his mother haunts him. It is unclear to the reader how much Joe's foster parents or community members know about who his mother truly is. They may be keeping quiet out of ignorance, or perhaps out of a desire to protect a small boy from knowing he was abandoned by a wild woman. His mentor eventually reveals the truth. His motivation for doing so is to teach the boys, Joe and his adoptive brother Victory, a respect for all human life. He tells them that women are not prey, and even the wild woman they see on their hunts is "*somebody's* mother and *somebody* ought to take care" (175). Because Joe lacks this earliest connection with his mother, he seeks it out in others. Mbalia observes, "he craves the attention of wild young girls like his mother. Both Violet and Dorcas have traces of Wild in them" (626). Joe even admits that he marries Violet because he "couldn't see whether a wildwoman put out her hand or not" (181). He is trapped by this secret.

These secrets about Joe's identity make it difficult for him to connect with others, a problem that becomes apparent when he moves to the city. In his early life and his relationship with Hunters Hunter, Joe is connected to nature. However, as Mori observes, he "incongruously ends up selling cosmetics, a commercialized product which symbolizes the commodity culture" (323). His relationship to nature fosters a close relationship with Hunter and Victory. He neglects the part of him that is real, that connects him to others, and he becomes a part of the City. In selling cosmetics, he is selling a way to hide or alter the true self to better fit into society's aesthetic ideals. Mori makes a meaningful contrast between being alone in the country and alone in the city by saying of Joe, "country loneliness is a temporary waiting period because nature frequently rewards his patient effort with game" but "city loneliness is the endless and unrewarded accumulation of frustrated feelings" (323-4). While Joe may be solitary in the country, he is truly lonely in the City. Jeffrey Folks sees this reflected in Joe's language and understanding, saying, "The language that Joe applies to the young urban males . . . derives from his rural experience, and the language available to him is insufficient to understand his new urban experience" (155). His former life has not prepared him for the isolation he will encounter in the City.

Joe's isolation in the City is common to many of the characters, as Mori explains, "Trying to fit into urban life, they deceive themselves that the glaring city lights appease their loneliness and unconsciously repress their sense of displacement" (321). He loses his safety net of community when he moves but is so taken with the excitement that he ignores these feelings of isolation. He cannot be open with those he calls his friends. His secrets from those he should be closest to serve only to further separate him from a supportive community. He acknowledges his distance when he is looking for someone to talk to and cannot turn to his friends, Stuck or Gistan. He then recognizes that he would not be able to tell even Victory, and, as Joe says, "if I couldn't tell Victory it was because I couldn't tell myself because I didn't know all about it" (121). A few pages later he convinces himself that he could have told Victory, but the reader is left to doubt this last statement.

While he keeps secrets from his friends, he is able to talk openly with one person, Dorcas. Joe stresses his closeness with Dorcas by saying, "I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself" (123). Dorcas is young and unlike his wife or other friends, knows nothing of his past. In talking about himself to her, he is able to define himself on his own terms. Dorcas is not biased about his past. At least in her eyes, he gets to create his identity as he truly sees himself. He can tell his own version of his life by communicating his personal truth. Dorcas, also an orphan, understands his loneliness and struggle with identity. She is seeking a close relationship that she was denied when her parents died. Her aunt, Alice, is unable to form a meaningful bond with Dorcas, creating a space that Joe will fill. They are so close largely because Joe trusts her with his secrets and shares them with her, making her later rejection that much harder on Joe.

The secrets that surround Joe create in him a deep uncertainty, and he is unable to create a strong sense of self. Joe explains to the reader how he has changed into someone new seven times throughout his life. As he describes it, every time a big change came along in his life, he changed with it. His identity is not located within himself, but rather is dictated by outside circumstances. His struggle with identity can be traced back to the secret of his mother. Without knowing his identity, he is vulnerable to every change he encounters. Carolyn M. Jones writes, "Joe's numerous changes do not create a self. Instead, they deconstruct his self. He feels that he has to be new everyday to survive" (484). Before he leaves his home for the

City, Joe seeks to uncover the secret of his mother on his own. He tracks her in the woods and begs and pleads for any kind of sign or acknowledgment. He needs something, "Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing" (178). Despite his pleas, nothing is all he gets from Wild. As he searches for a sense of self, he seeks out his mother in other women. This is what leads him to Dorcas. When she abandons him for another man, Joe "cannot tolerate the feeling of being abandoned again because it too painfully reminds him of the first abandonment by his unknown mother" (Yoo 91). He is still seeking the answers kept secret to many questions. He will track Dorcas like he tracked his mother; in both cases what he is really seeking is a sense of self.

Like Joe, Dorcas is connected to secrets and a powerful scene of silence early in the novel with "the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis" (56-7). Dorcas's mother and father are among the 200 dead. Her life is greatly affected by this violence. The silent protest brings to the surface the anger and indignation that has secretly been growing. Society robbed the protesters of their subjectivity and their voices so they attempt to make a statement through silence. Folks argues that "the destructive effects of continuing to accept the conditions of speaking imposed by a colonial system . . . include a crippling alienation of self and separateness from the source of identity and creativity" (147). He is suggesting that by protesting in silence, the community is refusing to play by the rules established by those wholly outside of themselves. He interprets this silence as an act of power.

Dorcas's silence about the violent death of her parents parallels the silent protest. However, Morrison casts her silence in a much different light. In finishing the story of the riots, Morrison tells of Dorcas's mute reaction to her double tragedy: "She never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word" (57). Morrison stresses Dorcas's silence and secretiveness by repeating three times that she "never said." The child that Morrison portrays as being silenced will, as a woman, die because of this same inability or unwillingness to speak. Towards the end of the novel, Dorcas's best friend, Felice, will say about Dorcas that "she always did like secrets" (201). Michelle Loris writes, "Dorcas represents those women who submit to domination and lose their self not out of fear but out of a desire for recognition" (58). Due to her inability to make herself known, her silence, she is willing to allow others to define her and restrict her identity. Through the lens of this character, it is clear that Morrison is not viewing silence as freedom, but as a failure to communicate that ends in isolation and ultimately destruction.

The final secret Dorcas keeps results in her death, but her silence also insures Joe's safety. Joe, confusing his unknown mother and his young lover, shoots Dorcas while she is at a party with her new boyfriend. Dorcas keeps secret the extent of her injuries, insisting she will be fine and that all she needs is rest. The reader may wonder if the secret is kept out of ignorance of her true danger, or her love for Joe and a desire for him to escape punishment. At the end, however, she seems to realize a truth about herself and tries to communicate it to her friend, Felice. Dorcas has realized that Joe did love her, and she was free to be herself when she was with him. The tragedy is that she did not understand or want to be herself when she had the opportunity.

One can better understand Dorcas's tendency toward secrecy by looking at the aunt who raised her, Alice. When she was a young girl, Alice's parent's discouraged and silenced her burgeoning sexuality. They were more concerned with ensuring their daughter's respectability than with nurturing her self-acceptance. Morrison writes, "The moment she got breasts they were bound and resented, a resentment that increased to outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities" (76). Folks suggests that Alice is "the product of middle-class 'training' that is shown to be largely negative in its teaching of how to avoid the "pitfalls" of one's native language and culture" (150). Even though she tries to avoid it, she passes her training on to her niece, Dorcas. The narrator even refers to Dorcas as Alice's "own prisoner of war" (77). Never having been nurtured and protected, Alice fails to provide such an environment for Dorcas.

Furthermore, Alice silences herself in regard to her admiration for women who embrace their sexuality. She feels their behavior is inappropriate, yet envies the openness of these women. The narrator reveals that "this envy-streaked pleasure Alice closeted, and never let the girl see how she admired those ready-for-bed-in-the-street clothes" (55). She hides these feelings not only from herself, but from Dorcas too. She is unable to accept the side of her own personality that these women display so openly. Alice secretly admires these women, but she also fears them. She avoids them, encouraging Dorcas to do likewise, in the same way she avoids the armed women. Arming themselves, preparing for the difficulties of their lives, is an honest act. These women are not keeping secret the violence in their lives and in themselves, and Alice is frightened by their openness. Jones notes that "The novel is concerned with the theme of arming: of moving from the violence that wounds the self to a reconstructed identity that heals, that allows one to negotiate life in a full and vital way and to love" (481). Instead of moving through the violence to love, Alice runs from it in a world where to be unarmed "was silent or crazy or dead" (78). When she was younger, Alice's husband left her for another woman, and Alice dreams of violence against this woman. Before she acts on her craving for "the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins" (86), her husband dies. She does not come to the point of arming herself or fighting for her relationship. After the funeral, she even flees home and moves to the City.

Instead of arming herself, Alice becomes silent and removed from her community. Mori explains that "Her philosophy of survival requires indifference to others and separates not only herself but also her niece from them and the community" (325). Folks agrees that "Alice's separateness from her race is a damaging illusion" (151). She refuses to identify with those in her community and instead accepts the view of outside society in which black men and women are "embarrassing," "dangerous," and "lowdown." Suggesting a connection between isolation and fear, Mbalia writes that Alice's "fear is largely caused by the confusion which results when one isolates herself from African life and culture and when one is ignorant of African history" (631). Alice is afraid of being hurt and so isolates herself for protection but actually ends up more vulnerable as she has no one on whom she can rely. Such behavior contrasts sharply with Malvonne's. At Dorcas's wake, Malvonne attends and expresses her sympathy over the death, saying she felt "Like it was my own" (79). While Malvonne is reaching out to share in her pain, Alice keeps her distance and merely tells Malvonne to help herself to the food.

Just as secrets separate Alice from Malvonne and the community, they also separate others by functioning as a mask of unknowability. These secrets point to the impossibility of completely knowing people or their respective history. The presence and importance of these secrets show that knowing the truth is not as important as communicating. It is the sharing of stories behind the secrets that builds the community. Some of the biggest secrets both kept and revealed in the novel revolve around Golden Gray. The secrets begin with Vera Louise's pregnancy and the attendant violation of contemporary social codes. True Belle is the first to know and remains the only one outside of Vera Louise's parents. The novel says, "There was never any need to speak of it" (140). Morrison makes it explicit that the slave who fathered the child is not told of the pregnancy. This is another instance where silence leads to trouble. Vera Louise's parents send her away to protect the secret and their reputation. In the same vein, Vera Louise takes her secret with her in the form of True Belle, the only other one who knows the truth. In Baltimore, the secret is carried further. In addition to denying the identity of the father, Vera Louise denies that she is the child's mother and raises Golden Gray as a dependent.

Society’s rules would have prevented a white woman from raising her mulatto child, even in the north.

Golden Gray does not find out the truth of his parentage until he is 18 years old. Even then the narrator either does not know why it was finally revealed to him or is not telling. Golden Gray is conflicted about the secret. He tells Henry Lestroy (Hunters Hunter), “She protected me! If she’d announced I was a nigger, I could have been a slave!” (172) He understands why Vera Louise kept the secret and supports her reasoning. Conversely, upon meeting his father, he thinks, “Only now, . . . now that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence: the place where he should have been and was not” (158). He regrets the absence of his father, but the impact on the narrative structure has a broader contextual basis. His conflicting emotions and impossible circumstances are what create the complicated telling of his story.

Golden Gray’s secret opens up other secrets. The narrator is left to speculate on how True Belle reacted to being forced to go to Baltimore with Vera Louise and abandon her own family. At one point, the narrator openly confesses that she does not know the truth; “I don’t know how hard it was for a slave woman to leave a husband that work and distance kept her from seeing much of anyhow, and to leave two daughters behind” (141). Then, as will be repeated with Golden Gray’s story, the narrator offers two slightly different versions. One version shows True Belle eager and excited for a trip to Baltimore, while the other portrays her as reluctant and angry to leave her family. The narrator wants to tell the truth of the story, but it is impossible as the truth has remained a secret.

The narrator’s differing versions of True Belle’s reaction to her move north radiate out into the narrator’s inability to provide one definitive telling of Golden Gray’s journey south. The narrator first describes him as an arrogant, cold, young man more concerned about his clothes than the human suffering he encounters. Then, seemingly upbraiding herself for mistakes in the telling, the narrator provides a different version where Golden Gray is much more sympathetic and merely searching for a place he can belong. Jones explains, "the narrator does not want us to love, like, or hate him, but to understand: to see that this white-looking man with a 'black skinned nigger' father has no 'authentic self'" (488). In passages such as these, Morrison draws readers in and allows them an active role in creating the truth of the story. Jones notes, "the question of what happened to Golden Gray—that we must contemplate and narrate for ourselves" (492). Before he leaves to find his father, True Belle tells Golden Gray, "It don't matter if you do find him or not; it's the going that counts" (159). Perhaps Morrison is suggesting the same thing to the reader; which version is correct, if either even is, is not important, it is merely the telling, the communicating of experiences or secrets that is important. The reader never learns of Golden Gray's fate, but if True Belle can be believed, it does not matter because his story has been told. The facts of history can prove unknowable, but that does not mean the story should be ignored or forgotten.

In idolizing Golden Gray, True Belle starts down a path that will be harmful to many. She and Vera Louise adore and dote upon the boy. True Belle accepts society's ideals of beauty as represented by the boy. Upon returning home to save her daughter, True Belle brings this attitude to her grandchildren, notably Violet who is young and impressionable. Jones observes, "For black Americans, and for Violet in this novel, he [Golden Gray] represents a kind of internalized ideal" (489). Much like Shirley Temple represents an ideal image Claudia can never live up to, Golden Gray embodies an unattainable standard for Violet. Andrea O'Reilly claims that "Violet locates that which is beautiful and desired outside of her self" (368). In expressing love and affection for Golden Gray, her grandmother teaches her that being like him is the way to be loved. Elizabeth M. Cannon observes, "Morrison reminds us how colonized women perpetuate colonization by having the black woman Violet most admires when she is young instill in her a desire for this white beauty" (241). This image, internalized at such an early age, will color all of Violet's relationships as an adult until she is finally able to speak of her secret love for the golden boy and the shame and sense of self-deficiency resulting from such love.

Violet's early family life is troubled by silences and absences. Mori claims "neither True Belle nor her family can relate the cause of her family's breakdown to the racial and social hierarchy" (326). True Belle is taken away by her owner and returns having learned to accept white standards of beauty which she passes on to Violet. Rose Dear, Violet's mother, is unable to support the family and is evicted. She responds to this with silence. The narrator says Violet and her siblings, "never heard her say anything else in the days that followed" (98). Violet's father is also mostly absent. The novel seems to offer a vague suggestion that his political involvement is the cause for his fleeing: "His trips back were both bold and secret for he had been mixed in and up with the Readjuster Party, and when a verbal urging from landowners had not worked, a physical one did the trick and he was persuaded to transfer hisself someplace, anyplace, else" (99-100). The narrator will later refer to him again as "joining a party that favored niggers voting" (138). Where he goes and for what reason is just another of the novel's secrets. Mbalia argues that the breakdown of Violet's family reflects the breakdown of African womanhood in two respects. First, Violet decides she never wants children of her own. Secondly, she falls in love with a half-white man she has never met (629). She denies family connections and aspires to a white ideal.

From this family full of secrets and silences, Violet goes on to marry Joe and move to the City. However, "once in the City, Violet becomes more concerned with possessions than with love and communication" (Mbalia 629). Violet grows silent and isolated. She begins to keep parrots for company, one of which even says 'I love you.' Like Violet's other relationships, her relationship to the parrot is empty because, like Violet, “the parrot is also isolated and lonely” (Mori 326-27). Both Violet and the parrot are lacking any real connection to others. Mbalia explains, “as with the parrot, she thinks of Joe as hers without bothering to communicate with him” (629). Her relationship with the parrot is based on ownership, not participation. The bird does not even have a name, which is suggestive of Violet’s uneasy sense of self. She does not know who she is and thus cannot assign identity to anything else. Mori offers that “The fact that she has depersonalized the nameless bird . . . suggests the emotional hollowness of her possessive attachment to it” (327). Unlike the women that Alice secretly respects, Mori argues, Violet is armed, but ineffectively (325). She lacks any real alliances within her community or family or any strategies for coping with city life.

The distance and lack of support destabilizes Violet. At one point, she is walking along and merely stops and sits in the street. Her next breakdown comes when she tries to steal a baby. The narrator says, “quiet as it’s kept she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it” (17). Mori claims that “When she experiences a strong impulse to connect herself to the matriarchal circle, she is irresistibly compelled to make an unsuccessful attempt to kidnap a baby” (326). She wants to feel connected through a community or family, and the moment she has the baby while the child’s sister goes back inside, she begins planning on how to take care of it. She tries to think of what would work for a crib or if she has soap with which to bathe it. While there are many witnesses to her act, the novel is clear in stating, “Joe never learned of Violet’s public craziness” (22). Violet’s behavior becomes a public secret. It is known but not acted upon. While many other community members obviously know what happened, they are keeping quiet. It is a secret from the one person who should be closest to Violet. The silence could be due to the uncertainty surrounding the act of ‘kidnapping’. Violet denies that she was taking the baby and uses the fact that she left her things behind as proof of her innocence. Despite the evidence, many remain unconvinced. If people who are present are not sure what happened, how can they explain the event to Joe?

Besides sitting in the street and walking away with a baby, Violet's instability is demonstrated through her speech. What she intends to keep secret slips out unintentionally. The narrator describes Violet's incongruous speeches as "Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). She grows silent to keep these 'cracks', as the novel refers to them, secret. Her silence can be interpreted as a rebellion, as Folks claims by saying "Violet's silencing of her tongue is a defiance of those, including her husband Joe, who would have her accept the normalised condition of colonialism" (149). Seen this way, her silence is an act of defiance. However, Violet's silence is actually a result of fear. When she speaks out this way, Violet reveals her inner self and is frightened by it. She says, "I got quiet because the things I couldn't say were coming out of my mouth anyhow" (97). She recognizes that her language indicates her mental instability and is afraid of what will happen if Joe finds out the truth about her. She creates this secret out of fear in order to protect herself, but in the process, isolates herself. Mbalia makes a similar point regarding Wild in saying the character "signifies defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness, and silence—all caused by class exploitation and race and/or gender oppression" (625). Wild's silence, like Violet's, is used as a safety mechanism.

However, Wild either cannot or does not tell her own story. She is the only character from whom the reader is denied a firsthand account. One only gets her story from the outside. Like the novel itself, her truth is unknown and will remain a secret. She is defined by this wildness in a way the others are not. The reader receives no answers as to how she came to be on the road where Golden Gray finds her. She may be employing silence to help her survive, but it serves to isolate her. Alone and silent, she has no way to communicate or connect with others. She is unable to draw strength from others or to support them in turn. Mbalia notes the connection between silence and isolation; "Africans forgot the necessity of communication and they lost the value of collectivism. Silence and selfish individualism sprouted in their place" (628). She supports her claim further by saying, "a person can be remade through her relationship with the other" (639). This relationship and the chance to discover their true selves is what characters like Violet and Wild are sacrificing in their silence.

Unity, especially among women, is a necessity for the characters in the novel to let go of the secrets that hold them back and move on with their lives. This is a trait largely suppressed by society. Mori explains in regard to Alice, "Without her knowledge, the dominant society suppresses her anger and manipulatively replaces it with her hatred for the music and the drums which accompanied the silent participants of the riots and voiced their resentment, despair, and frustration (328). Having been oppressed or neglected her whole life, Alice has reason to be angry, but society mandates that she displace that anger onto her own community. Mori goes on to say, "Black women's defensive attitudes against mainstream hegemony simultaneously disclose their psychological battles with insecure feelings caused by their isolation from their original matrix" (321). Their isolation causes insecurity and leaves them susceptible to accepting white ideology in which they are worth very little.

Violet eventually seeks out a connection that will be healing in the unlikely form of Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt. The two are talking at Alice's home and Violet says, "Tell me something real. Don't just say I'm grown and ought to know. I don't. I'm fifty and I don't know nothing" (110). Violet is asking for an end to secrets and silence. She is reaching out to form a connection with Alice. Alice responds by offering to fix her coat, an act of kindness and caring. Yoo explains the significance of their relationship by saying, "Violet learns to come to terms with her past while she converses with Alice. Hostile at first, the two women first learn to tolerate the other's presence, then listen to the other's story, and finally, to see their own past objectively—through the other's eyes" (94). Through their conversations, Violet is able to come to terms with who she is. She destroys the false part of herself, and nourishes her true identity. The two women form what Cristina Sanchez Soto calls an "alternative to the traditional idea of family" which "provides a sense of community that redeems the characters from their personal anxieties" (244).

The narrator goes on to describe a new kind of silence: "by this time the women had become so easy with each other talk wasn't always necessary" (112). They are so open with each other that they are no longer forced to talk to communicate. They have moved beyond their secrets and gain strength merely by being together. Folks notes, "In the process of talking, or simply in the silent communion of sewing and ironing in Alice's company, Violet explores her own repression of her maternal instinct stemming from her determination not to repeat her mother's brutal existence" (153). Having shared their secrets, they are now able to experience a different kind of silence that is open and accepting rather than restricting and isolating.

Alice benefits in much the same way as Violet from their friendship. Mbalia notes Violet's impact by explaining, "It is Violet who teaches Alice that Wild women are 'just women, you know. Like us' (84). Conditions make women Wild. It is Violet who forces Alice to confront the Wild in her" (632). The relationship the two women share opens Alice up to a broader connection to the African American community. She is learning to see what she shares with the wild, armed, women instead of seeing them as society does. Similarly, Mori points out that "Although Alice tries to suppress her origins, she is finally able to realize the important function of the community as the source for the survival of African Americans and is thus not far away from awakening to a true racial identity" (328). In her relationship with Violet, Alice finds the strength to return to Illinois. She returns to attempt to build, with her dead husband's lover, a relationship similar to the one she formed with Violet. The narrator explains Alice is going to find the woman who may need "The cheerful company maybe of someone who can provide the necessary things for the night" (222). Mbalia supports the redemptive quality of female relationships by saying, "Sisterhoods, groups of African women bonding together, help clear things up" (632). This is certainly true for Violet and Alice. Together, they help each other 'clear up' their confusion and fear. O'Reilly insists, "Morrison argues that self-love depends upon the self's first being loved by another self" (367). Where in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is denied this 'love by another self', Alice and Violet are both able to find it. More importantly, they are able to share it. Soto argues that "the redemptive powers remain an advantage of the very small group, an individual structure inside the social collective" (244), a theme that, as we will see, Morrison expands in *Paradise*. The connections and communities the characters build may be small, but they are strong, and more importantly, they foster other relationships.

Due in part to her healing relationship with Alice that allows her to break her silence and share her feelings, Violet is able to mend her relationship with Joe. Early in the novel, the narrator describes Joe and Violet's home by saying, "A poisoned silence floated through the rooms" (5). Joe and Violet are keeping their lives secret from each other. While they may be afraid of how the other will react to their true selves, the narrator reveals many of their secrets and motivations to the reader. Loris explains that, "Fearing separation, abandonment, and her own true independence and aggression had led Violet in her marriage to a denial of mutual dependence, to a condition of extreme self-sufficiency where connection and mutuality are replaced by detachment and isolation" (57). Her silences create a distance in her marriage which mirrors the silence Joe received from his mother; as Mbalia says, "Like Wild, Violet is silent with Joe . . . . Ultimately, these silences cause Joe to act crazy just as Wild's silences did, twice shooting off a gun without meaning to do so" (628). This inability to connect with his wife drives Joe to frustration that ends in his shooting Dorcas. Joe tries to explain himself to Malvonne, saying, “But the quiet. I can’t take the quiet” (49). Joe is broken by the silence of rejection, first from Wild, then Violet, and eventually from Dorcas. In learning how to connect with herself through her conversations with Alice, Folks writes, “Violet realises that both she and Joe had imagined ‘golden’ lovers and were each, in the other’s mind, ‘substitutes’ for the other’s perfect dream” (153). By the end of the novel, they are communicating and sharing in each other’s lives. The narrator refers to this “public love,” saying, “there is another part, not so secret” (229). In sharing their pasts, they are able to share a future.

As Violet’s relationship with Alice saved Joe, so does Joe’s relationship with Violet help save Felice, Dorcas’s friend. Folks writes, “the restoration of intimacy between two persons can have meaning for an entire community, as their lives enter the communal discourse and become the subject of public comment and ‘collective understanding’” (Folks 158: Scruggs 199). The couple is now able to find their place as mentors within the community; as Mori says, “Their recognition of music promotes their contact with the community and its people” (329). In fact, when Felice first comes to visit them, she brings a record, and later they dance. It provides them a common ground on which they can connect. Violet suggests Joe buy a victrola, and Felice says she will bring some records. By this point, Violet is able to offer advice to Felice, because she “has now positioned herself as an individual agent in her life, it is possible to discuss her ‘fault’ in letting things happen” (Yoo 95). In accepting herself and sharing her secrets, Violet can help Felice do the same.

Her relationship with Violet and Joe helps Felice deal with her own secrets. Felice originally comes to their house looking for a ring her mother gave her that she lent to Dorcas. The ring was stolen by her mother and presented as a gift from her white employers. Felice knows it was stolen and, while she loves it, she acknowledges, “there’s a trick in it, and I have to agree to the trick to say it's mine. Reminds me of the tricky blond kid living inside Mrs. Trace's head" (211). Felice realizes that in accepting the ring, she is accepting a compromise. The salesclerk at the jewelry store suspected Felice's mother was stealing based on the fact that she was an African American. Her frustration at the accusation leads her to steal the ring. Felice struggles with that knowing the ring was stolen under these circumstances and that her mother then concealed the truth. After a few visits with Violet and Joe in which Violet demonstrates how to be strong and accepting and Joe really listens to her, Felice decides to let go of this secret. She plans to tell her mother the truth, saying "I'll tell her I know about it, and that it's what she did, not the ring, that I really love" (215). This mirrors True Belle's advice to Golden Gray that it is the attempt that counts. Felice loves the strength and courage in her mother that led her to act, and she loves the affection that led to the gift.

Felice is able to help the Traces in turn. To Violet, she fulfills the role of daughter. She is someone Violet can care for and take care of. Violet offers Felice profound advice from her own life by telling her she must change her life, because if not, "it will change you and it'll be your fault cause you let it" (208). Towards the end of the novel, Violet offers to do Felice's hair for her and Felice accepts, thereby accepting her role in this new sort of family. She also tells Joe the truth of what happened the night Dorcas died. Felice thinks, "when I heard he was still at it, crying and so on, I made up my mind to tell him about her. About what she said to me" (205). She is no longer keeping Dorcas's secret because she recognizes that the truth will help Joe. She tells him that her death was partly Dorcas's fault because she let herself die. She also reveals Dorcas's last words. Felice tells Joe that as Dorcas was dying she said, "There's only one apple . . . . Just one. Tell Joe" (213), suggesting that Dorcas wants the secrets to end as she knows she is dying. Her last words are about telling the truth and breaking her silence. Felice carries out this last act of honesty for her friend.

Whereas the opening of the novel introduces the importance of secrets, the ending points to the importance of speaking those secrets. The narrator says, “Talking to you and hearing you answer—that’s the kick” (229). The book itself addresses the reader in the end, essentially admitting that it does not have all the answers but desires discourse. It is doing what Morrison’s characters do, indeed as readers are instructed to do. The book is an example of the importance of communication, subordinating the importance of facts. It is not just the telling of secrets, the “talking,” that is important, it is also listening, “hearing you answer.” Building a community is an interactive process in which the telling of secrets must be accompanied by listening and understanding. A process of engagement shatters isolation and makes relationships possible. The narrator goes on to say, “but I can’t say that aloud” (229). It is a book that shows the importance of community connections, but it must be people that create these connections. The truth of the story is open to interpretation. *Jazz* provides no clear answers and even offers multiple possibilities. In this way, truth is in the act of telling and retelling and goes beyond a mere recitation of facts into an engaging discourse with others.

Jazz is full of secrets and silences. Everyone, including the narrator, keeps secrets for reasons ranging from protecting themselves or others to guarding against the uncertainty of the truth. However, the characters gradually learn to build connections and relationships within their city community. They tell the secrets that separate and isolate them. They form small groups in which they feel safe enough to reveal their secrets and their true selves. As Dorcas herself asks, “What good are secrets if you can’t talk to anybody about them?” (189)

IV. *Paradise*: “Every true thing is okay.”

In *Paradise,* as in *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*, Morrison shows the danger of remaining silent and the healing available for those willing to break that silence. However, in *Paradise*, healing extends beyond individuals or small groups of people. *Paradise* broadens the idea introduced in the earlier novels, repeating the phrase, “quiet as it’s kept” to signal the deeper insights to come. This later novel suggests how the revealing of secrets can save an entire community, not just a few relationships. Through creating a space at the Convent, the women there earn to connect to each other. The town of Ruby is left with the potential to accept the lesson of the Convent women and strengthen their community.

Paradise opens with a secret that Morrison keeps from the reader. The reader is left ignorant, but the characters are all aware. Unlike other secrets, this one hides a tragic but ultimately insignificant fact, not something vital. The secret that is never revealed is the identity of the “white girl.” The very first line in the novel reads, “They shoot the white girl first” (3). This is a very enigmatic opening line, but the persistent reader will learn who ‘they’ are and even their motivation and justification for the attack. The identity of the first victim is never revealed; which of the Convent women is white is not key to the story.

Many critics agree that this secret is Morrison’s way of deemphasizing race. Channette Romero argues, “by keeping this information ambiguous the text asks readers to believe that race need not be the most salient category for grouping and understanding individuals” (419). Peter Widdowson adds, “That the identity of the white girl in *Paradise* remains a mystery merely emphasizes that here it is gender rather than race which is the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilizing change” (329). The women make no distinction among themselves, for the Convent is an unofficial refuge with no ties to any religious order or any other source of authority. Morrison keeps this secret from the readers to inform them that the race of the woman is not significant, at least at the Convent. It also sets up a contrast to the strict racial coding of the town of Ruby.

To help understand the town of Ruby, the reader is given much of its history. Yet what the townspeople choose to tell only serves to highlight what they are keeping secret. They repeatedly and ritualistically tell the story of their exclusion while keeping silent regarding their own adoption of exclusionary practices. As the novel says, "Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many" (189). Their disallowing is the defining moment in their history, as Seongho Yoon explains, "In their migration of hardships and exclusions, the families went through a formative experience when they were 'disallowed' to settle by the light-skinned people of the town of Fairly, Oklahoma" (68). Rather than learning acceptance of others from their own rejection, the founders of Ruby internalize and reverse their exclusion. In their town, they idealize dark skin and villainize light skin. Romero writes, "these people internalized the shame and hatred they experienced and, through storytelling, passed on a determination to their descendents to become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors" (418). The community tells and retells this story, but not for the purpose of sharing or healing. The story is retold to isolate and elevate their own community. It also serves to keep the sting of the wound fresh, even for those who did not experience it directly.

The sanctioned telling of the town's founding requires the silencing of all other voices. With time, the story has taken on more power and influence. As Rob Davidson observes, "Ruby's elders have converted the narrative of the Disallowing into political dogma, an ideology that allows them any measure of terror or violence so long as it defends (what they deem) the town's common interests" (360). It has moved past a unifying shared history meant to connect them as a community and has become a principle of exclusion. This principle of exclusion, first intended to keep others out, soon turns in upon the townspeople, and as Kim observes, "Ruby's strong separatism based on the memory of the rejection fosters exclusion within the community itself" (117). It is no longer enough for the world to fill the role of outsiders. They must create outsiders within their own community.

Due to the disallowing, the practice of exclusion creates a blood rule in Ruby. While not exactly a secret, it certainly remains unspoken yet enforced. In the "Patricia" section, it is referred to as the rule "nobody admitted existed" (195). The rule demanded racial purity by their own standards and excluded marriage with outsiders. Candice M. Jenkins explains, "part of the community's subsequent bond was based in their adherence to a retaliatory 'blood rule,' which demanded that 8-rocks marry only other 8-rocks rather than introduce any white or part-white genes into their families" (276). White or light skin signifies racial impurity or racial mixing. In Ruby, individuals who violated the rule would be punished in various ways. An easily recognizable avenue of punishment is the children's Christmas play in which the story of the Disallowing is conflated with the nativity story. Linda J. Krumholz notes how this "makes Ruby's history a sacred text of community martyrdom. . . . Thus the play performs an historical erasure that reinforces the authority of the families currently in power while it masks its own revisionary processes" (29). The community leaders bar those families whose members are deemed to have violated their blood rule from the children's parody of the founding of Ruby.

Several community members have faced punishments of this kind. Though serious, the punishments are often veiled and never openly acknowledged as the result of breaking the blood rule. Menus Harper brings a light-skinned woman home to marry and is pressured into calling off his relationship. He is distraught and turns to alcohol, causing him to default on his mortgage. Roger Best is another who violates the rule. His light-skinned wife, Delia is allowed to die in childbirth. Delia's daughter and granddaughter then carry the burden of violating the blood rule. In his relationship with Consolata, also called Connie, Deacon Morgan, one of the town leaders, violates the standards, but his transgression goes largely ignored because he soon ends his relationship. All of this is done silently and privately; as Melanie R. Anderson concludes, “This strict control over the citizens of Ruby is enforced silently yet dangerously by the ruling eight-rock elite” (313).

The men control Ruby and are willing to use violence to keep their community “pure” in accordance to their secret blood rule. In this instance, the preservation of secrets leads to actual violence. The community of Ruby is based on the exclusion of what the men decide is impure, or not like them. Katrine Dalsgard writes, “the nation’s ideal desire to build a perfect community necessarily implies a violent repression of what it constitutes as its imperfect other” (241). Unwittingly, the leaders of Ruby are practicing the same pattern of exclusion to which they once fell victim. They were denied entry into the town of Fairly due to skin color, and they in turn ban individuals from their own community based on skin color. Krumholz explains, “The men are blind to the ways that their hidden laws of racial purity, masculine dominance, and economic competition replicate the society they mean to escape and repudiate” (24). The men of Ruby rely on their isolation and purity for protection at the same time they practice exclusion and violence on their own community members.

The use of isolation and silence for protection from the outside becomes, at times, extreme. The people mistrust anyone outside of their own circle. This mistrust is demonstrated when they discover a dead family in a car outside of town. The community of Ruby does not contact the authorities because in their view, it is none of their concern what happens to those outside of their community, and they do not wish to be involved or implicated. Lone is the one to report it to the town when she goes looking through the fields “because they were full of secrets” (272). The town must decide what to do about the car full of bodies. The novel says, “The problem was whether to notify the law or not. Not, it was decided” (273). Their silence and failure to contact the outside authorities will be repeated after the massacre at the Convent, as will Lone’s speaking up. Lone, as her name suggests, is the only one willing to take a personal risk to break the silence in which the town has enshrouded itself. The incident with the dead family is also used to justify the attack on the Convent. The men, searching for reasons to attack, suggest that the women were somehow involved in these deaths. In this instance, they do want something to be done about the deaths. They do not believe the women could be so close and not know. However, they themselves are not that far away and choose to ignore the situation.

In order to maintain control and power, the men of Ruby must control the women in their community. The secret of their power is their inclination and ability to silence the women. The women must be silenced to maintain the status quo in which the men have complete control. Kim argues that “Morrison shows that the Ruby men’s desire for permanence, perfection, and security only leads to repression of differences and oppression of women in the community” (125). To maintain the purity of their community, the women’s sexuality and reproductive possibilities must be controlled, or as Yoon says, “Given the desire of Ruby men for racial purity, everything that troubles the New Fathers must come from women” (73). One troubling scene that illustrates the conflict over women’s sexuality and repression is where Reverend Misner attempts to mediate a meeting between the Fleetwoods and the Morgans. The meeting is ostensibly about the Morgans’ nephew K.D. slapping Arnette Fleetwood. Unbeknownst to Misner, Arnette is pregnant with K.D.’s child. The pregnancy is kept secret from him and from much of Ruby to protect the reputation of the families. Most problematic is Arnette’s absence. Her future is being discussed and decided, and she has no voice in the conversation. Her father sums up her place in the community clearly by saying, “I’m her father.

I'll arrange her mind" (61). Arnette is expected to fulfill any agreement reached by the men. Yoon explains, "In Ruby, where authentic blackness plays an important role in determining how each citizen and family is ranked, women hold the key to a racial purity that can be *imagined* and maintained only through legitimate heterosexual reproductive relationships" (73). Another notably absent figure is Arnette's mother who would be expected to fill the role of advocate for her daughter. Mrs. Fleetwood is upstairs tending to the sick children. Misner visits her in the sick room upon his arrival but she is not invited to participate in the decision-making process. Magali Cornier Michael observes, "Misner's meeting thus reinforces the dogmatic patriarchal structure of the town in which women are denied a voice and, indeed, remain possessions of men that must be protected and negotiated by men" (162). While a woman, Arnette, is at the center of the problem, no women are present to decide on a resolution.

While the men of Ruby fill a protective role in regards to the women of Ruby, they have no such feelings for other women. Their repressive influence leads the women of Ruby to keep secrets that support the men's self-righteous view of their role. It is when the women at the Convent stop keeping secrets that they become a problem that must be eliminated. Part of their motivation in founding Ruby is to create a safe place for their wives and daughters; a place where "Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey" (8). In a sense, they are protecting what they view as their own property. These are the same men who make the decision to hunt and kill other women. However, they make an important distinction between the women of Ruby and outside women. Their women are not "slack and sloven" (8). Their women are controlled by a patriarchal society, unlike the free, unprotected women of the Convent. The difference is an important one, regarding which Krumholz notes, "This distinction between good and bad women allows them [the men] to scapegoat the women of the Convent, to see in these women an insult" (24). Like Pecola is made a scapegoat for her community, the town of Ruby uses the women of the Convent in the same way. They blame the women in the Convent in order to cover up their own failures. The men are offended and confused by women who do not want or need the protection and guidance of males.

The men's inflexibility and rigid adherence to tradition can be seen in the conflict surrounding the oven. Morrison complicates this symbol by giving it its own secret. The inscription on the Oven is no longer completely legible, and thus the entire meaning of the symbol is unknowable. The resulting uncertainty opens the meaning of the Oven up for debate, something the leading men will not accept. Early on, the Oven is described as almost a sacred symbol. The founders of Haven, the predecessor to Ruby, "put most of their strength into constructing the huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (6-7). The key to the Oven's power and decline can both be found in that passage. As long as the Oven had a concrete purpose, nourishment, it was a valuable symbol. However, once it lost that function and became a mere monument, it lost its relevance and significance to the people of Ruby. As times change, a communal oven is no longer needed, but the men hold fast to the symbol of their creation. The women however are said to resent the effort and space required to move it. Soane Morgan, wife of one of the town's leaders, thinks how the Oven is "A utility [that] became a shrine" (103). Critic Peter Kearly echoes the women's feelings when he writes, "The Oven is made into a static symbol worth more than the very people who use it, a symbol people will die for rather than a symbol that can be changed so that people won't have to die" (11). Upon arriving in Ruby, Gigi (Grace) sees people gathered around the Oven and thinks it is a barbeque grill. Like the other women, she recognizes the usefulness of the object but does not see it as anything more.

The mystery regarding the Oven's words creates dissent within the community. The women have already learned the hollowness of the Oven, and the young people soon do the same. The Oven becomes a center for conflict as Yoon explains, “It begins to lose its influence as a functional, unifying part of the town as the younger generation voices radically different views about the wording of the Oven’s inscription” (71). The leading men are interested in preserving the status quo in which they have all the power. The youth want to shift some of that power to themselves. Davidson points to the crux of the matter in writing, “neither group knows for certain what the original message was” (358). No one knows the true words. The men think they are protecting its integrity, and the youth think they are adapting it to be more relevant. The secret has been lost with previous generations.

The women of Ruby, as citizens of this new community, are described as “free and protected” (8), yet the reader is left to question the mutual existence of these two categories. Their protection involves strict limitations, set rules of conduct, and requires their silence regarding many things. Krumholz explains, “the protection of women has often justified the oppression and possession of women” (24). They may be safe from outside harm, but they are left even more vulnerable to pain inflicted from within their own community. For the most part, the women have accepted the structure of their community; as Michael observes, “Most women do not openly critique or challenge the status quo established and enforced by Ruby’s patriarchs, because they do not want to endure the town’s censure” (165). The women have seen how the town’s censure takes the form of exclusion or banishment and wish to avoid such punishment.

While the women may outwardly accept the men’s dominance, they do not necessarily believe it is justified. However, they keep quiet about their dissent. As Davidson argues, “women frequently construct competing versions of Ruby’s history, though they hide them from the men” (361). This is seen in the example given above of the women’s resentment toward the Oven. It can also be seen in their reaction to Delia Best’s struggle. Delia, a light-skinned outsider, has serious complications with the delivery of her child. The women, who couldn't drive, begged their husbands to go for help to save Delia's life. No one went, and Delia and her child died. The fact that the women spoke up and asked the men to go, and that Dovey Morgan went walking door to door trying to find help, shows that the women did in fact see things differently. Dovey's search for help will be repeated when Lone tries to find someone to stop the men from attacking the Convent. As Michael writes, "Ruby's women not only are more inclusive of others than are their male relatives but also demonstrate in their actions and thoughts the absurdity of exclusivist notions of community" (164).

In describing the town, the men see Ruby as a place where "A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear" (8). The veracity of this statement is denied by Sweetie Fleetwood's nighttime walk, which is a walk neither of freedom nor of peace. Sweetie is afraid that if she follows the pattern her life has been taking and goes back to bed, she will never wake up. The only way for her to survive is "not to do something differently but to do a different thing" (125). Sweetie realizes the secret that the town does not know; that change is necessary for survival. Kim points out the significance of Sweetie's destination upon leaving her house for the first time in six years; "She has not received any help from the male members of her family but only from her mother-in-law or occasionally from her sister-in-law. She feels isolated and needs solace from others, and the Convent is the only place she can go" (119). As the town has failed her, she goes looking for comfort beyond its boundaries.

However, after Sweetie returns to her senses and goes home, she knows she cannot explain to the men why she had to leave. Her pain and frustration is silenced by the pressure of the community. Kim explains Sweetie's response by saying, "Sweetie, being unable to express the burden she felt by her sick children's demands and suffering, only reports that she heard children's cries from the Convent" (125). She also claims the women tried to poison her. Sweetie is unable to accept her own need for escape and unable to express this need to others. Her lies give the men another grudge against the Convent women when in reality they provided the only safe refuge for Sweetie.

The Convent becomes a refuge for Arnette as for Sweetie, though she too will deny it. It is in speaking of Arnette that Morrison uses the phrase "quiet as it's kept." The passage reads, "Somebody beat up Arnette. The Convent women, as folks say? Or, quiet as it's kept, K.D.?" (195-6). The reader can reach the reasonable conclusion that it was in fact K.D. The Convent women, while at times violent with each other (Mavis and Gigi), have never been described as violent towards others. They have been victims of great violence themselves. On the other hand, the novel provides evidence that K.D. has slapped Arnette on an earlier occasion. Thus, it stands to reason that the community is keeping quiet about the true identity of Arnette's attacker. This is less about protecting K.D. and more about avoiding confrontation with the town's powerful leaders. No one wants to challenge the Morgans' reputation or upset the delicate balance of power in the town.

Besides being beaten, Arnette is also at the center of another major secret in the novel. Her second dangerous secret involves her pregnancy. As a young, unmarried woman, she knows the town will not welcome the news. As critic Elina Syri explains, "since the conservative, religious community of Ruby rather pretends to be unaware of the pregnancy, Arnette ends up going to the Convent seeking for help and there delivers a baby which soon dies as a result of her attempts to induce a miscarriage" (152). The fact of her pregnancy, as Syri suggests, is known but kept quiet. Misner, who is called in to mediate not knowing of the pregnancy initially, later thinks of it as a "public secret about a never-born baby" (145), suggesting that while the pregnancy is known, it is not handled openly. Arnette is silenced and, in doing so the town prevents her coping with the secret that will exact a heavy toll. Arnette, scared, runs to the Convent claiming, as Connie remembers, “You have to [help me]. I’ve been raped and it’s almost August” (77). Connie, the leader of the Convent refuge, acknowledges that only part of that was true. The mention of the specific month recalls the confrontation between the Fleetwood and Morgan families as described a few pages earlier. Steward Morgan asks if Arnette will be ready for school in August, a veiled reference to her pregnancy. It seems that Arnette’s plan to be ready by August involves getting rid of her baby. In claiming she was raped, Arnette denies responsibility and portrays herself as a victim. She is the one who will try, and succeed, in getting rid of the baby. Her violence against her own body causes the baby to be born early, and it does not survive. While she is the one responsible, she will later blame the women at the Convent for the baby’s death as she avoided blame for its conception.

Although she is Arnette’s best friend, Billie Delia has a very different relationship with the women at the Convent. While Arnette uses her time at the Convent to cover up her secrets and avoid responsibility, for Billie Delia it is a chance to discover her true self. Ruby views Billie Delia as “the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second” (59). This is an untrue assumption based on an incident from her childhood and her light skin. The town judges her character not on her behavior but on her heritage which violates their blood rule. Her rejection by the town complicates her relationship with her own mother, who sees her daughter through the distorting lens of Ruby’s eight-rock standard for dark skin. After a violent fight with her mother, Billie Delia seeks refuge and escape at the Convent. Unlike Sweetie and Arnette, however, she appreciates the understanding and help she receives from the women. She stays about two weeks and “what she saw and learned there changed her forever” (152). She learns acceptance and compassion. She gains the strength during this stay to escape a town that will never accept her and begin making her own life. Knowing it as a place of refuge, Billie Delia is the one to take the run-away Pallas to the Convent.

Many of the town's secrets are revealed through Billie Delia's mother Patricia Best, who is the daughter of Delia and Roger Best. Pat is the perfect character through which to reveal the town's secrets because she is simultaneously persecuted by the blood rule and persecuting others. Reverend Misner, as an outsider, observes how the town behaves differently toward Patricia's father Roger Best. He at first guesses this strange behavior toward the family is connected to Roger's role as mortician, but, after questioning Pat at the Christmas program, realizes it comes back to the blood rule. As Kim points out, "the logic of exclusion which has forged Ruby's communal identity also applies to the insiders" (117-18). After her talk with Misner, Patricia is troubled and questions her father directly about the importance of skin color in Ruby. Her father denies that it plays an important role, although he has been a victim of the town's censure ever since he brought Delia home.

Like her father, Pat keeps quiet, but she also keeps extensive records. A schoolteacher, Pat leads her students in a research project to create family trees. It starts out innocently enough, but Pat is so intrigued by the family relationships, and their implications, that she begins to search deeper into the secret history of Ruby. Not surprisingly, this creates problems with the adults when they realize what she is doing; "Parents complained about their children being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets even" (187). The families wish to protect their secrets, but Pat continues to speculate on the information she has been able to gather. She seeks out documents, but as the community is reluctant to share personal information, Pat makes notes on her own insightful speculations. Davidson points out the importance of Pat's narrative approach by saying, "In Ruby, all communal history is patriarchal and rigidly controlled. As a woman, then, [Pat] must pursue the project as an exercise in personal historiography" (363). It is important that Pat, who simultaneously fills the role of both outsider and insider, is the one to keep a secret record of the town. She has knowledge of how the town operates and access to some information. However, she also has what she refers to as the "required emotional distance" (188). Lacking close bonds within the town, she can see the marginalization of women and the power of the elite eight-rock families. While Pat is an astute observer, she maintains the town's secrets.

Despite her complicity in keeping the town's secrets, she is troubled by the fact of her mother's death. Michael writes that Pat knows, "Marginalization functions as a form of violence when Delia dies because no one will get her the medical help she needs" (158). Like Dorcas in *Jazz*, Delia dies needlessly because help does not arrive. However, the ambulance does not come to help Dorcas because she is black, whereas the men of Ruby will not get help for Delia because she is light skinned. Both forms of prejudice end in death. Jenkins writes, "it is the men of Ruby, its economic, social, and political leaders, who overrule the women and allow Delia to die" (278). Despite knowing how Ruby treated her mother, Patricia allows the town to damage her relationship with her daughter: "Pat realized that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow" (203). Pat has internalized the town's mistrust of light skin and projects this onto her own daughter. Patricia is one of the few residents who can see the danger of their situation. Perhaps because of her dual role as community member and outsider, she sees they have only the past. She asks, "why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by" (161). Ruby is living by the rules of the past and failing to create a path towards the future. Pat can see this but is unable to act upon it. In the end, she destroys all the information she has collected about Ruby, continuing her father's practice of silence.

While Pat is viewed as an outsider due to her heritage, K.D., despite his uncertain identity, is automatically accepted as a leading male because of his connection to the Morgan family. For K.D., and in a broader sense for the youth of Ruby, the future is uncertain because they have no stable identity. Their community has been built on stories in which they play no part. While K.D. seems to have a firm place in the ruling elite in Ruby, his identity is never revealed. The reader never learns his true name. Pat reveals that his last name is Smith, but his father is not a member of the tight community. Pat wonders, "who was that boy Ruby Morgan married? An army buddy of her brothers, it was said. But from where?" (191) The father is a mysterious figure whom K.D. never knows. The boy's mother, Ruby, also dies, leaving K.D. a young orphan to be looked after by his Morgan relations. Like Joe Trace and Golden Gray in *Jazz*, K.D. struggles with the mystery of not knowing his parents. K.D. has no connection to his past and his true identity. He loses the connection to his last name and is assigned a new first name. The reader never knows his given name, but does see the scene in which, as a child, he wins a horse race. After the race he is known as K.D., short for Kentucky Derby. Thus he is assigned a new identity. He no longer carries the identity he was born with, but is appropriated by the Morgans, suggesting an uncertainty regarding this character. K.D. is in line to run the bank, which would give him much power and influence, but he seems uncertain of himself, frequently doubting himself and his role. Early in the novel, during the massacre, he is seen to question his own authority. He is present at the Oven when the decision to attack is made, but he is not one making the decision. The novel tells how his uncle told him to get his rifle, "Which he did, but took the palm cross too" (18). He appears conflicted but follows order and does not act on his own.

Moreover, K.D. is silenced and forced into a passive role in what should be one of his most important relationships. His relationship with Arnette is subject to interference by the town and his uncles as Kearly explains; “K.D. is made to carry on the race-based mating tradition of a community he does not have a real biological connection to other than uncles that force his actions through the power of their anti-white convictions” (11). Arnette pursues him and he gives in; this interlude provides vulnerability to manipulation and his inability to take control of his life. Upon finding out about her pregnancy, he reacts immaturely by slapping her. During the meeting with the Fleetwoods, Misner, and his uncles, K.D. is mostly silent, accepting instructions and orders from others. He does not attempt to speak up for himself. In a town where family identity is everything, K.D. loses his connections to his immediate family and is forced into a role that he is not strong enough to resist.

Another secret that Morrison leaves unanswered for her readers is the presence of two mysterious men who befriend Dovey Morgan and Connie. Both come at times when the women need comfort, and neither the existence nor presence of either is ever confirmed. This uncertainty, along with that of the Oven’s meaning and the fate of the Convent women, suggests that some things in life are unknowable. The successful characters, the ones who can practice acceptance and move on, must learn to reconcile with this uncertainty. Connie, sobering up after a long intoxication, sees a man who claims to know her. He is described as having tea colored hair and green eyes, just like Connie. He is wearing a cowboy hat which connects him to an earlier scene in Connie’s life, when Connie and Deacon Morgan are having a sexual relationship. During that affair, they meet in an old, burned out house, where the smoke left an image of a man, with “sturdy cowboy legs” (234). This smoke image is referred to as the cowboy again a few lines later.

Interestingly, this scene also connects Connie’s mysterious friend to Dovey’s. The novel describes another smoke image in the house by saying, “Near the pointing man, faintly etched on the ocher wall, was a girl with butterfly wings three feet long” (234). Before her mysterious friend first appears, Dovey sees “Butterflies. A trembling highway of persimmon-colored wings cut across the green tree-tops forever—then vanished” (90-1). This connection of images is reinforced by the fact that both women greet a strange man as a friend. Dovey indeed looks upon her mysterious friend as a confidante and advisor. Susan Neal Mayberry writes of Dovey’s relationship with this man, saying, “The unexpected visits of her friend serve to console her at the same time they encourage her to debate both sides of unanswerable questions that block her sleep” (569). With her friend, she is free to discuss issues bothering her in ways she cannot with her husband or other members of the Ruby community. Connie’s friend, although the reader is only told of one visit, serves as a guide as well. These relationships parallel the open relationships in the earlier novels between Joe and Dorcas and between Violet and Alice. Mayberry writes, “The cowboy in her has shown Connie how to use her feminine weapons of food, talk, and grace to save herself and her girls” (574). Connie is comforted and amused by his appearance and after meeting him, she is able to help the other Convent women overcome their traumatic pasts. Romero takes this mystery one step further in connecting these two men to another that appeared to the founders of Haven, suggesting, “The text is ambiguous about whether this ‘walking man’ is the same as the mythical figures who appear generations later, one in overalls to a Ruby woman, Dovey, another wearing a cowboy hat, mirrored sunglasses, and a green vest to Consolata” (424). While the secret of their existence is never revealed, they appear as harbingers of success and comfort.

These mysterious friends do not supply the only supportive relationships in the novel. The women who come to live at the Convent have come from very different lives but are able to connect. Despite their differences, Syri explains, “for the Convent women the ‘common tie’ is not a singular event, or the same experience for each of them, they have all been traumatized” (147). They are all escaping a world where they have been hurt and silenced. They are seeking a place where they can be safe and speak of their trauma, as Anderson explains; "Abused and outcast women are silent, social ghosts haunting the margins of society, but within their marginality these characters can discover a power that is healing but not socially accepted" (308). The women remove themselves from the society that will not allow them to speak of their experiences. The Convent, outside of society, is the ideal place for them to find their voice and the courage to use it; as Connie tells Mavis when she first arrives, "In this place every true thing is okay" (38). Here they are allowed to be themselves and be honest about their experiences, even if those experiences are violent or upsetting. They find safety in a community of women, but as Kearly notes, "these women are not anti-male; they are survivors of exclusion from control over how experiences are remembered and survivors of exclusion from resources for living" (13). Like Violet and Alice in *Jazz*, they find comfort and acceptance in their relationship.

Despite their desire to escape from this silencing of society, the Convent women do interact with the community of Ruby. They sell produce they raise and even form friendships, mostly with the women. However, the men have had some contact with the Convent, though these relationships are veiled in secrecy. Menus went there to stay a while when he needed to sober up and recover after being forced to give up the woman he loved. Deacon and K.D. have both had sexual affairs with Convent women. Widdowson explains this complicated dynamic by saying, "The Convent is a kind of informal refuge for damaged women who have drifted there by a series of fortuities, and who have an intimate, if tense, relationship with the town-dwellers" (314). This complex relationship can be seen in the episode where the Convent women attend the wedding of K.D. and Arnette. They are invited due to Soane Morgan's friendship with Connie. However, the townspeople are disgusted by their behavior which they view as wild and inappropriate, and they ask them to leave.

The novel introduces many more secrets surrounding the Convent women. These secrets provide a common ground and explain why the women seek out the Convent as a safe haven. Each woman deals with secrets and struggles with the truth. Mavis, the first to arrive, is fleeing an abusive husband and possible prosecution over the death of her infant twins. During an interview with a reporter, Mavis tries to protect the violent secret of her abuse. In effect, she is protecting the man who abuses her. The novel says that in dealing with her husband, "Mavis chose silence" (26). In her fragile mental state, Mavis begins to suspect her remaining children are in collusion with her husband to kill her. The truth of their complicity is undermined by a later meeting between Mavis and her daughter Sal in which Sal seems to truly care about and miss her mother. Gigi, the next to arrive, is looking for a rock formation her boyfriend Mikey told her about but that she never finds. She is running from a memory of a "boy spitting blood into his hands," (64) an incident that was silenced by society and the media. Seneca has been abandoned by her sister who is secretly her mother. She is then sent to live in a foster home where she is sexually abused by an older child. When she tells this secret, she has to move to another home. She learns to hide the violence done to her and deals with her pain by cutting herself. This becomes her own secret to keep. Pallas, the last to arrive, is also hiding her own secret. Neglected by her father and betrayed by her mother, she runs away and is attacked. The novel suggests, but never actually says, that she was raped. When Pallas arrives at the Convent with the help of Billie Delia, she is still not able to reveal the secret of her pain; "She had not been able even to whisper it in the darkness of a candlelit room. Her voice had returned, but the words to say her shame clung like polyps in her throat" (179). All the women have been the victims of violence and have been silenced.

Connie, who fills the role of spiritual leader for the women, has come from a similar background. The reader learns that Mary Magna has saved her from orphanhood and sexual abuse; “One of the reasons she so gratefully accepted Mary Magna’s hand, stretching over the litter like a dove’s wing, was the dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to” (228). Connie, described as having tea colored hair and green eyes, as Michael writes, represents the blurring of racial boundaries and the “absurdity of attempting to construct fixed racial identities” (171). Yet, racial blurring, represented by Connie, is exactly what the town of Ruby avoids. Visiting the town on the day of a celebration, Consolata identifies and connects with the black skinned inhabitants of Ruby; “Then a memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart. . . . Consolata knew she knew them” (226). It is partly due to her perceived racial impurity that Deacon’s affair with her is so dangerous to the town. Jenkins notes the importance of Connie’s race by saying, “in the mixed-race, black-identified character of Consolata, the text offers an alternative conceptualization of black identity, one that is more capable of accommodating the physical and cultural aspects of this so-called racial ambiguity” (288). Deacon is secretly attracted to the very thing to which he is publicly opposed. He desires Connie’s racial ambiguity, but cannot accept her crossing the proscribed gender expectations. When Connie becomes the aggressor in their relationship by biting Deacon, as Syri notes, she “obviously breaks the rule of femininity identified with passivity by taking an active role in her relationship with Deacon” (146). It is after this incident that he breaks off their relationship. This sequence of events provides another example of how the women learn to keep quiet because when they, like Connie does here, express themselves openly, there are undesired consequences.

When her relationship with Deacon ends, Connie re-devotes herself to her first love, Mary Magna. When Connie can no longer keep her alive, Anderson writes, Connie “lacks connection to her past, and according to society, she does not exist, since she has no insurance or identification number” (310). Like K.D., she has lost her connection to her identity. However, while K.D. never matures enough to claim an identity for himself, Consolata learns to accept herself physically and emotionally and passes this on to the other women living with her.

Even before her breakthrough, Connie was able to see the other women for who they really were. She looked at them and “saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying” (222). Always perceiving them for their true selves, she recognizes the part they keep secret from everyone, often including themselves. Yet it is not until after a dark period of her own that she gains the strength to help them. During this dark phase, when she keeps herself drunk in the cellar, she even wishes the women dead. Seeing herself reflected in the mysterious stranger allows her, as Mayberry writes, to “embrace her self . . . she must look kindly on her own sins if she is to provide tragicomic consolation to others and go on living well” (573). After a period of mourning and drinking, Connie emerges from the cellar and meets the cowboy who is a reflection of herself. She then greets the other women saying, “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (262). Connie is claiming her identity and her power at the same time she offers to share it with the others. Anderson writes, “Connie has emerged from an erasure of identity to an awareness of purpose” (311). Her role in consoling the women is contained in her very name, ‘Consolata’ (Mayberry 570). Anderson explains how she “becomes a more mature spirit-guide with one foot in the real and another in the beyond” (309). Having accepted herself, she can lead the other women to the same peace.

The key to the healing process that Connie leads is the sharing of secrets. The women not only tell each other about their painful pasts, but they also empathize with one another. Romero explains this process by saying, “Loud dreaming does not demand that these women deny their past traumas of differences. Instead, it encourages them to confront them, acknowledge them, and to recognize similarities between their own and others’ experiences”

(418). Connie has them lie on the floor as she traces outlines of their bodies. These outlines serve as a way to think about themselves and express themselves. Michael explains, “the women’s ability to communicate to each other their harsh pasts is a direct function of their immediate shared experience of the unnatural confinement of their bodies on that floor, which reflects the parallel confinement of their bodies by the dominant patriarchal culture at large” (172). They share their current physical confinement which gives them a platform of shared pain to connect them and open them up to sharing their past pain. As Romero writes, “Not only is Consolata teaching the other women not to separate the body from the spirit, but also she is urging them not to separate women into categories either” (417). This echoes Violet’s teaching Alice that all women are “just women, you know. Like us” (*Jazz* 84). Soane learns this lesson, perhaps too late, and tries to communicate it to her sister Dovey by saying about the Convent women, “These are women, Dovey. Just women” (288). By connecting their physical selves with their spiritual selves, they are able to see their connections to others as well. The novel describes painful scenes from the women’s pasts in which the collective “they” has replaced the singular “she,” indicating that they are no longer alone. The secrets of their traumatic pasts have been shared, and through sharing, overcome.

This release from their secret pain has changed the women. At the end of the section entitled ‘Consolata’ in which the healing takes place, the focus of the novel shifts. At this point, the novel imagines how a hypothetical friend from Ruby, as an outsider, would view the change. The Convent women’s new calm self-possession is contrasted with the mention of a few citizens of Ruby: Sweetie Fleetwood, Pat Best, the Poole boys, and Menus Harper. The contrast is significant, as Romero points out, because “the women’s ability to come to terms with their pasts exposes the failure of the citizens of Ruby to confront their own traumatic histories” (419). The hypothetical friend “might realize what was missing: unlike some people in Ruby, the

Convent women were no longer haunted" (266). While the Convent women are able to share their secrets and their burdens, the town members of Ruby, despite a common background, turn inward and protect their secrets.

It is in part this difference that drives the men to attack. The peace of the women at the Convent only serves to point out their failings. Unable to accept their own faults and failings, they scapegoat the women for all that has gone wrong in Ruby. Romero explains, "Silencing these women provides an outlet for the anger that the townspeople have for their own static lifestyle as they deny and cover over Ruby's limitations" (419). Their list of grievances mislays blame and even creates some fictional stories. The women are accused of kissing, fighting, growing marijuana (all true, but irrelevant to life in Ruby), and the more serious charges of poisoning Sweetie, causing the illness of the Fleetwood children, starting the fight between Apollo and Brood, beating Arnette, and administering abortions (which are invented charges). The women are also illogically blamed for the accidental death of the family that froze to death in a car. The men know that some of these accusations are outright lies, in some cases prompted by their own fear, but they cannot tolerate the truth that they bear the responsibility for the decline of their town: as Krumholz writes, "The attack on the Convent, on the evil without, is in fact an attack on the perceived evils the New Fathers cannot accept within themselves and their town, evils they project outward" (24). Their act of violence is a way to act out frustration born of their human failures and the town's decline.

One of the biggest secrets in Ruby, and in the novel, is what happens during the massacre. Many of the men involved are creating their own version to make themselves look better. None of the men want to be portrayed as villains attacking unarmed women, though that is exactly what happened. Secrets are still being kept within the town of Ruby: as Dalsgard writes, "the Rubyites subsequently attempt to fill the gap with a host of incomplete, mutually conflicting, and rarely disinterested explanations. . . the story of the massacre emerges as intangible and not susceptible to one final meaning" (243). The existence of conflicting stories shifts the balance of power in Ruby. Symbolized by the Oven shifting and sinking, the town lacks a unifying narrative about what happened out at the Convent. Anderson explains, "Unlike the single, town-approved message concerning the Disallowing and the communal Oven, no one has the correct tale" (316). This suggests that the town may open up to various interpretations, becoming less restrictive and oppressive. The youth of Ruby seem to recognize this and have painted the new slogan, "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" on the Oven (298).

More important than the secrecy regarding the men's actions that day is the mystery of the fate of the women. Consolata finds the first woman shot lying on the floor and the novel says she "begins to step in, deep, deeper to find the pinpoint of light" (289). However, it is never revealed if Connie uses her powers of 'insight' or 'stepping in' to save the woman. Mysteriously, no bodies are found, even though there are witnesses to some of the women getting shot. The novel repeatedly mentions the lack of bodies, leaving the fate of the women unknown. Dalsgard observes the significance of this; "In relation to Ruby, the absence of the women implies that the story of the massacre—and hence the story of the community as a whole—is rendered impossible to close" (243). Because their fate denies easy answers, the town of Ruby is not quick to put this strange interlude in their past. It will remain with them.

A lasting impact can best be seen in Deacon Morgan. In his role as one of the town leaders and organizers of the massacre, Deacon witnesses as much of the truth as anyone. However, he has special insight because of his earlier relationship with Consolata. He alone of the men is described as showing remorse. The novel says, "his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, defenseless, the different" (302). Dalsgard suggests that Deacon is "undergoing the same kind of self-scrutinizing process as the women at the Convent" (245). Like the women at the Convent, he has begun sharing his secrets. Deacon seeks out Reverend Misner and begins telling him how he became the man he is, giving the reader hope that the town of Ruby, as led by Deacon and Misner, will follow the example of the Convent women in recognizing that secrets lose their ability to inflict pain when shared.

The final secret of the novel revolves around the reappearance of the women in the end. Widdowson declares, "Another of *Paradise*'s unresolved puzzles is what exactly they return *as*: ghosts, or human beings who somehow survived the shootings? What is certain, however, is that they do indeed *return*" (333). While the reader gets another glimpse of the women that confirms that they do carry on, like the citizens of Ruby, the reader is left with great uncertainty. They return in various places and with various people, and as Romero writes, "It is significant that each appears . . . not perfect, but flawed, still carrying the external wounds, scars, and shaved heads from their experiences at the convent. What they no longer seem to be carrying is the internal resentment and pain they experienced prior to their 'loud dreaming' sessions" (423). Their healing process has had a lasting impact which they in turn pass on to others. Mavis visits her daughter, Gigi visits her father in prison, and Pallas and Seneca both appear to their mothers. While this uncertainty denies a sense of closure, the women continue with some form of existence. The reader receives no answers that provide a clear conclusion to the novel. The final scene seems to show Connie resting in an unknown yet peaceful place, preparing to shoulder "the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (318).

Paradise, Morrison's last novel to date to repeat the phrase, "Quiet as it's kept" deals with secrets. However, it offers redemption through the telling of these secrets. The women at the Convent and certain members of the town of Ruby have learned that there is a form of salvation in revealing their secrets. This sharing can save their whole community.

V. Conclusion

The idea of secrets being kept and told is of great thematic importance to Morrison and can be seen in much of her fiction. My focus here has been on novels that repeat the haunting phrase “Quiet as it’s kept” over a span of almost 30 years but the listening reader can hear secrets echoing and reechoing throughout Morrison’s canon. Toni Morrison is best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved,* and thus it offers a telling example of the centrality of secrecy and community to her thinking. While the phrase “Quiet as it’s kept” does not appear in this novel, Morrison foregrounds themes of keeping quiet and secrecy. The novel revolves around a powerful scene of keeping quiet. Schoolteacher is coming to collect Sethe and her children as his property according to the Fugitive Slave Law. The community, resentful over an extravagant party the previous day, does not warn the family that they are in danger. The men come to capture the family, and in her desperation, Sethe kills her daughter rather than allow her to be taken back into slavery. The community views the party celebrating Sethe’s safe arrival as flaunting Baby Suggs’s special status. Despite the fact that the entire community contributed to the dinner, they do not focus on the unity the feast symbolizes but instead on an imagined division. Jesser explains, “This generation of food, brought by the whole community and eaten to excess by the whole community, suddenly becomes a source of violent reaction, forcing a breakdown in solidarity” (335). This breakdown in solidarity leads them to leave a member of their community vulnerable and unprotected as they choose to keep silent rather than warn Baby Suggs and Sethe of Schoolteacher’s approach. This failure to speak up and warn Sethe, leads in turn to a further weakening in the community. In allowing harm to come to 124 Bluestone, they damage the center of their own lives. As Baby Suggs’s home, 124 is a thriving community center where people come to share messages and their lives. In keeping quiet and letting it be destroyed they turn insiders into outsiders. Scruggs attempts to explain why the community failed to act: “Why no one took responsibility for warning them involves a complex knot of motives: fear of the whites, envy of Baby Suggs’s relative comfort, the fact of Sethe’s being a newcomer, and the ‘reckless generosity’ of the party celebrating Sethe’s reunion with her family” (103). The community allows their envy to overcome their community ties. At that moment, their differences are foregrounded and their commonality is minimized. Jesser writes that Sethe “has been betrayed not only by the evil of white people and the world they rule, but also by the pride of her own people, who turn their backs and worship false idols” (337). The horrible death of the child and the community’s failure to prevent it cause Baby Suggs to stop preaching. She too loses her connection to those around her, while the community loses her powerful influence of love and self-acceptance. In this way, they pay for their silence with increased isolation. When Sethe returns from jail, the isolation continues. Jesser notes, “[Sethe] is ostracized because of the actions she takes in the face of the assault that was in some part enabled by the community’s failure to include her” (336). The community shuns her even though they played a role in her actions.

Likewise, the public secret, a central motif in the novels featuring the phrase “Quiet as it’s kept,” forms another organizing point in the novel. In *Beloved*, the public secret is Sethe’s killing her child, and it is being kept quiet by the community. Paul D is the only one from whom this secret is being kept. The community maintains its practice of avoidance regarding the occupants of 124, including Paul D when he moves in with Sethe and Denver. Paul D struggles with the haunting presence in the house and does not understand its power because the community has not told him about what happened. Paul D, better than anyone else in the community, knows Sethe’s past and could understand why she would refuse to let her children return to slavery. Stamp Paid finally tells Paul D what Sethe did showing Paul D a newspaper article to support his story. Stamp later regrets telling this secret because he feels he did not consider Denver and how Paul D's subsequent leaving might hurt her. At this point, Stamp begins to re-identify himself and the women in 124 as members of the same community. In speaking with Ella, a neighborhood woman, he leads her to do the same. Ella, who has long shunned Sethe, begins to see what they have in common and this leads her to reach out and help rid Sethe of Beloved. It is when the community stops keeping quiet and begins to communicate that they are able to strengthen themselves and each other. As Scruggs says, "Collective understanding grows most often from the communal exchange of stories, information, facts and theories" (122). They must share their personal stories to know each other and identify with each other. In doing this, they become a true community. Due to this healing, Sethe and Paul D are able become a family. Scruggs explains, "the community of two that Sethe and Paul D form has a significance for the larger community as well" (122). They are able to be open with one another about their shared and separate pasts. In this respect, 124 is once again a leading example of a healthy community.

From *Beloved*, the reader can see that Morrison is exploring the destructive power of secrets and, conversely, the healing power of communicating those secrets. The issues she deals with in *Beloved* appear, sometimes more subtly, in *The Bluest Eye, Jazz,* and *Paradise.* However, the careful reader will be warned of the important role of secrets by the phrase, "Quiet as it's kept." This phrase acts as a signal that many secrets are being kept from the reader and characters alike. To fully appreciate these novels, one must be aware of the implications of keeping quiet and what comment Morrison is making on such behavior.

While the phrase, "Quiet as it's kept" does not appear explicitly in *Beloved*, many ideas and problems it suggests do. *Beloved* shares these ideas and problems with the three novels in which Morrison does use the phrase. These novels all share a sense of danger or failure created and preserved by silence. They also share the common idea that this silence can be broken and overcome. Secrets create boundaries between those considered insiders and outsiders. Communities of various sizes are created when people stop keeping quiet and start sharing in each other's lives, thus turning the outsiders into insiders. As Morrison suggests, the absolute truth of what they try to share may be unknowable, but it is the act of opening up and telling one's story that will bridge the gaps of silence. The healing power lies in the act of communication and connection. In this respect, the novels all feature a fight against isolation and a struggle for identity. The characters must discover or create a self-identity in order to share it with others and form protective relationships. Lacking this strong sense of self or community, the characters are left to accept and accommodate outside standards that deny their value as human beings.

The secrets being kept in the novels are often about violence, and at times, violent measures are used to protect and preserve these secrets. Denver keeps the secret of what she believes is Beloved's true identity and only grows concerned when Sethe begins to suffer. The characters must either speak out and stop this violence or share the stories regarding violence to strengthen their connections. At the conclusion of the novel, the narrator repeats, "It was not a story to pass on" (274-275). This line can be interpreted as Morrison encouraging readers to share their stories. Readers are instructed to pass this story, and their own, on to others. Keeping quiet leads the characters in *Beloved* to harm, but in speaking their secrets, they are able to connect and overcome their traumatic pasts.

The idiomatic phrase "quiet as it's kept" thus acts as a signal not only that secrets are being kept, but also that they play a major thematic role. What characters are keeping secret reveals what they value, and how we see and judge these characters reveals what we value. Morrison is using all three novels to test and push the strength of community created by breaking the silence. As time and her writing progress, Morrison sees more hope and power in sharing secrets.

She begins in *The Bluest Eye* with one lone voice speaking out. This act, while it involves only one, is still strong enough to help that one. In relating her own experience and that of Pecola, Claudia is able to recognize the need for community. Pecola is living in a world in which she is judged and rejected on three levels; that of society, community, and her own family. Society equates power and happiness with light skin, something Pecola does not have and cannot attain. Her community adopts the standards of larger society, and instead of acknowledging what they have in common with Pecola, they highlight the differences. The most dangerous rejection comes from her parents, who are repeating their own cycle of repression. Both of her parents have led troubled lives, but rather than guide Pecola through her difficult childhood, they neglect and abuse her. Pecola, with no alternative, accepts the message that in order to be loved, she must be different. She lacks any positive way to recreate herself outside of insanity. Pecola, being denied a sense of belonging, is left isolated. The only self-identity she can construct in this isolation, that of insanity, will only serve to separate her further from a much needed community connection. Claudia is one witness willing to speak what she has seen, and in her Morrison places hope for survival.

In *Jazz,* the refusal to keep quiet and to keep secrets is further developed. This time Morrison extends the healing power of community to include more than one. Several characters including Joe, Violet, Alice, and Felice, are able to share their secrets and create relationships that empower them. Speaking up and sharing one's stories is an act of strength and protection. The characters must struggle against the isolating environment of the City. They must reach out to each other to communicate their true selves. In doing so, they are able to create and understand their own identity. Morrison makes the danger of secrets and isolation clear when, in *Jazz,* the result is death for Dorcas. Likewise, she stresses the healing power of relationships. Whereas Dorcas's silence ended in her death, the other characters' community building ends in renewed life. In this novel, Morrison is stressing the act of sharing itself over the fact of the secrets. The factual truth of the stories pales in comparison to the importance of the telling. The truth may be uncertain or even unknowable, but when it is discussed openly among friends, it loses the power to isolate and hurt. In telling their stories and sharing their secrets, the characters in *Jazz* are able to come to terms with parts of their past they might not understand. The healing power lies in the willingness to speak and to listen.

In *Paradise*, Morrison takes the idea she has been experimenting with one step further. This time an entire community is keeping secrets that must be overcome. The men of Ruby use violence to maintain their power and perceived purity. However, it is in sharing stories of such violence done to them that the women at the Convent are able to form a community and create their own source of power. The strict rules in Ruby deny members a space to create their own identity, thus preventing them from forming strong community ties. This is why the men are so frightened by the strong community created at the Convent that they feel compelled to destroy it. While *Paradise* ends somewhat ambiguously, Morrison has destabilized the controlling power of silence and created an opportunity for open communication. There are even signs that this opportunity will be seized. Again, as with *Jazz*, the emphasis is not strictly on historical facts. The novel makes clear that such facts, like the inscription on the Oven or the fate of the women, are often unknowable. What is certain is that there is a community created when isolated individuals come together and share their own secrets.

Characters in all three novels struggle with isolation created by secrecy. By withholding parts of themselves and their personal stories, they are unable to truly identify with a community. They are unable to recognize shared experiences because they keep silent about their true selves. They cannot be understood by others if they do not make the effort to be understood. This isolation enforced by silence is often a result of a weak sense of self. Morrison shows several characters struggling to define themselves. Frequently, as with Pecola and Dorcas, they fail and resort to judging themselves by outside standards. Others, like K.D., Joe, and Cholly, struggle to find an identity because they lack the basic connection to their own parents.

Keeping quiet denies individuals the chance to explore and build their own sense of self and thus find their place within a community. The resulting isolation leaves communities weak, and this weakness leads to both greater conformity to outside standards and punishment for those who fail by such standards. The phrase points to secrets, but it is not the secrets that turn out to be important. What Morrison is writing about is the process of sharing secrets and the space this opens up to create a sense of self and community. In all of these novels, as in *Beloved,* secrecy is a complex concept, one that highlights not only the destructive power of withheld information within individual novels and in Morrison's body of work but also its vital place in story-telling itself. As both characters and author "pass on" the stories that have been kept quiet, insisting on confronting truths that challenge individuals' and communities' carefully preserved but precarious equilibria, Morrison forces us to confront our own complicity in historical silencing. Morrison invites her readers to experience the liberating power of that other quietness, that other silence of engaged reading that investigates all human secrets of life and history.

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