

*African
American
Review*

Indiana State University

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Source: *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Fall, 2005), pp. 415-430

Published by: St. Louis University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033672>

Accessed: 06/01/2010 12:14

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Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

In *Paradise* (1998), the third novel in Toni Morrison's historical trilogy that includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), Morrison continues to unearth key moments in African American history to explore the complex origins of black identity and community. Like *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* invokes and examines traumatic histories. While these earlier texts contain only glimpses of strategies for dealing with painful pasts, *Paradise* presents a fuller account of healing individual and collective historical trauma. This novel distinguishes itself from the earlier texts in this trilogy by making religion and spirituality central to questions of history. By highlighting the historic importance of Christianity for mainstream American and African American nationhood and community building, *Paradise* opens up the possibilities it contains for healing the traumas and injustices of this painful history. More than her previous novels, *Paradise* seems written in response to the failures of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalist Movement to bring about full equality and social justice for all Americans, what Martin Luther King, Jr., envisioned as the "beloved community."

In *Paradise*, Morrison uses a multiplicity of religious beliefs to ground a new politics for post-Civil Rights America. The text performs what Stuart Hall has called an "articulation," a contingent connection "between ideology and social forces" that reorganizes elements of cultural practice in a "new discursive formation" that has the power to enact cultural change (Grossberg 142, 143). Hall argues that some contemporary social movements have effectively used religion to construct a useful narrative "to connect the past and the present," to help a people articulate in new ways "where they came from with where they are and where they are going" (Grossberg 143). *Paradise* attempts to enact a similar cultural transformation by using the religious and spiritual beliefs of black women and men to rearticulate (African) American history and nation building in the hopes that this rethinking of the past opens up the possibility of reimagining the future. The text extends the project begun in *Beloved* and *Jazz* of invoking traumatic histories, by using religion and spirituality in innovative ways that attempt to heal the pains of this history. To enact cultural healing, the novel encourages its readers to reimagine more inclusive, accepting communities that disrupt the violent exclusions that characterize both mainstream American and traditional African American conceptions of race, history, and nation.

Paradise does the work of rearticulating African American conceptions of nation building by recounting the violent history of the citizens of Ruby, an all-black town in rural Oklahoma. Ruby is made up of descendents of former slaves who sought to

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leave behind the racial and economic oppression they experienced during slavery and Reconstruction. The citizens of Ruby guard against further oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behavior that refuses to allow any new ideas, beliefs, or ethnicities to interfere with their sense of racial pride and community. The male citizens of the town begin to feel threatened by the alternative sense of community offered when a group of women of different economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds start to gather at a former convent 17 miles outside of Ruby. These women willingly accept into their house individuals who have been marginalized by the rigid code of behavior in Ruby: adulterers, unmarried pregnant women, alcoholics, and women fighting with their husbands or other authority figures in the community. These women also work collectively to heal the violent traumas of their own lives under the instruction of a former Catholic nun, Consolata, a woman who speaks to multiple deities, reads minds, and raises the dead. The town leaders are outraged by the idea that these women live without men or the Christian God in their lives. The novel opens with a group of men from Ruby barging into the convent and killing the women. In the novel's climax, these women, including two who are pronounced dead by multiple witnesses in the text, escape into "another realm," a spiritual door/window in the sky. However, rather than remain in this other realm, several of the women return to try materially to "right the wrongs" of their lives.

Religion and Healing

The accepting, non-institutionalized spirituality that the Convent women practice is juxtaposed in the text with the exclusions of institutionalized religion, particularly Christianity. *Paradise* suggests that

Christianity works to divide individuals from each other and their world. The text is critical of normative Christian traditions for contributing to the subjugation of women. Even though Ruby is a small town, it has three separate Christian churches. Although the text details the various fights and "irreconcilable differences" amongst Ruby's different Christian denominations, what unites them is their misogyny and decision to kill the Convent women (9). Morrison writes, "[M]embers from all of them merged solidly on the necessity of this action. Do what you have to do. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue" (9-10). The text makes it clear that gender oppression occurs not just in Ruby's Christian churches but is historically integral to Christianity: in one scene, Gigi, one of the Convent women, discovers the painting of the Roman Catholic Saint Catherine of Siena. The painting depicts a woman on her knees, breasts on a serving platter, with a "knocked-down look," an "I-give-up face" (74). In this worldview, a woman is granted sainthood and considered valuable only if she is completely servile and disowns her sexuality, as symbolized by presenting her breasts on a serving platter.

Morrison also critiques in *Paradise* normative Christianity for constructing dualisms that disconnect its practitioners from each other, the world they live in, and their bodies. Lone, Ruby's sole root worker and midwife, first expresses this view when she brews Consolata a root tea to help her deal with the symptoms of menopause. Although the tea makes her feel better, Consolata complains that "she did not believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice," that "faith [in Christianity] is all I need" to live (244). Lone argues: "You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from his elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world" (244). The dualisms found in

normative Christian traditions between the material and the spiritual, humans and nature, are replaced here with a more balanced, connected worldview. Here individuals and their deity are connected to “earth, air, water” and seen as existing alongside and in conjunction with the natural world, not above and transcendent to it.¹ This scene implicitly critiques the normative Christian worldview of a paradise that exists separate from the earth, where individuals are not encouraged to connect with the earth as eventually they will leave it for another, far superior place. Also implicit here is a critique of the Christian view that humans have a stewardship over the earth and therefore are necessarily superior to “his elements,” the very materiality of this world.²

Through Consolata’s spiritual growth and eventual acceptance of Lone’s beliefs, *Paradise* endorses a more connected view of the earth. Consolata begins to teach the other women at the Convent the importance of connecting the material to the spiritual, the body to the soul. When speaking about the sensation of feeling bodies connected to one another, she states:

My bones on his the only true thing. So I was wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

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. The text critiques normative Christianity’s traditional separation of women into Good Woman/Bad Woman categories in which the sacrificial Virgin Mary reigns over the sinful Eve.³ This hierarchy disrupts the thinking of the Ruby men who tell themselves they are protecting the women of Ruby by killing the Convent women. These men, convinced that “God [is] at their side,” label the Convent women

“Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” and “take aim. For Ruby” (18). This supposed act of “protection” is a further regulation, an exhibition of power that proclaims the consequences of challenging male authority. This exertion of patriarchal control defines who and what is Good and Evil, which women are Mary, which are Eve. It divides women from each other and their bodies. Thus, the text suggests that patriarchy and normative Christianity are predicated on these dichotomies and divisions.

Consolata’s teachings attempt to implement a new, more accepting form of religion that focuses on the communal worship of a multiplicity of beliefs. She speaks to multiple deities and combines the Catholic precepts of service and love with the African American womanist traditions of root working and conjuring that she learned from Lone. In addition to Catholic and womanist traditions, Consolata also draws on Candomble, a religion from her native Brazil that combines Catholicism with African spirit worship. As Brooks Bouson points out, Candomble nature gods, *orixas*, are associated with the natural elements (earth, air, water) that Consolata must embrace to avoid the dualisms of normative Christianity (Bouson 238).⁴ Drawing on these multiple deities and natural spiritualities, Consolata teaches the Convent women to connect to the natural world and each other by eating a meatless diet, allowing the rain to help cleanse them of their traumas, and most importantly, participating in “loud dreaming” sessions (264).

Reminiscent of Felice, Joe, and Violet, characters in *Jazz* who narrate their pasts to each other in an effort to heal, Consolata teaches the women at the Convent to share their experiences and suffering with each other. In both texts, traumatized individuals are encouraged to participate collectively in healing themselves through confronting and narrating their pasts. In addition, like *Beloved*’s Baby Suggs’s instructing the former slaves in the

clearing to love their flesh, the Convent women are also encouraged to love, reclaim, and reconnect with their own bodies. The "loud dreaming" sessions bring together strategies found in Morrison's earlier texts to create a holistic spiritual method for healing the women's minds and bodies: "[I]t was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale" (264). Because all of "their bodies ache," there is no one voice of authority here. Because each woman has experienced violence, humiliation, and trauma, each gains the power to make connections between the speaker and her own tale. The women are able to heal each other collectively by first articulating their traumas (both verbally by narrating their experiences and non-verbally by painting them onto their templates) and then learning to recognize and love the connections between them. Eventually, "accusations directed to the dead and gone are undone by murmurs of love" (264). The women change. They become more "sociable and connecting," they appear "calm" and have a more "adult manner" (266). "[U]nlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" by their individual histories (266). Loud dreaming does not demand that these women deny their past traumas or differences. Instead, it encourages them to confront them, acknowledge them, and to recognize similarities between their own and others' experiences. The more accepting, inclusive spirituality that Consolata advocates helps these women to overcome their own personal traumas and to create a more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusions of Ruby. If history is a "wound," as Nancy Peterson proposes (1), Morrison provides readers with a way to heal the traumas of history through a spirituality that connects mind, body, and nature.

Race and Community Building

In *Paradise*, Morrison uses the novel genre to point out the power that stories have for community building. The women at the Convent learn to heal themselves through confronting and sharing stories of their traumatic pasts, using narration as the means of reconnecting to others and the natural world. Unlike the women in the Convent, however, the people of Ruby continue to be haunted by stories of their past traumas, particularly the story they relentlessly repeat and have symbolically named The Disallowing. After migrating west from Louisiana to escape persecution at the hands of white Americans, "fair-skinned colored men" refused to allow this group of ex-slaves to enter into their all-black communities because of their poverty and dark skin (194). These people internalized the shame and hatred they experienced and, through storytelling, passed on a determination to their descendants to become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors. The Disallowing becomes the "controlling" story of these people's lives, the "story that explained why neither the [ex-slaves] nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). Not only do the citizens of Ruby dislike additions to their community from a family who did not participate in the original migration from Louisiana, they also dislike any person with less than a "blue black" skin tone (195).

The reactionary isolationism of Ruby's "Blood Rules" is juxtaposed in the text with the acceptance of multiple ethnicities at the Convent. The Convent includes African American women from different communities and class backgrounds, Consolata from Brazil, and one white woman. The text also sympathetically connects these women to the oppression and traumas experienced by the American Indian women who formerly attended Catholic school

at the Convent. The reference to the one white woman in the first sentence of the text—“They shoot the white girl first” (3)—suggests that religion and indeed race itself are significant. Although many critics have speculated about which Convent woman is white, 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.⁵ Not every black character in the text acts exactly the same way. Similarly, the one white woman in the Convent does not act so differently from the other Convent women as to indicate dramatic categorical difference. The dichotomies and divisions privileged in Ruby based on race, class, and gender are not privileged in the Convent or in the text itself. However, to avoid simply replacing the divisions of patriarchy and normative Christianity with its own, the text complicates the absolute dichotomy between Ruby and the Convent. There is significant movement of characters (both male and female) in the novel between the two spaces so that both spaces remain permeable and changeable in varying degrees. To avoid a division based on gender, *Paradise* assures readers that not all of the men of Ruby agree with the town’s leaders’ decision to harm the Convent women (284). Although the novel complicates the dichotomy between Ruby and the Convent, it clearly privileges the nurturing, inclusive, communal space the Convent that has become by the end of the text.

Paradise asks us to look closely at what happens to a religion and a community founded on principles of exclusion. In her interview with James Marcus, Morrison states: “Our view of Paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people—chosen by God, that is. Which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people. That’s the nature of Paradise: it’s really defined by who is *not* there as well as who is” (1, original italics). This distinctly

Judeo-Christian view of paradise as the isolation of its god’s “chosen people” from the non-righteous drives the community building of both Haven, the first all-black town created by these settlers, and Ruby. What begins as economic autonomy and localized political power becomes degenerating isolationism. Creating an all-black town becomes less about safety in numbers and more about a community viewed as separate and special only as long as it remains racially and economically distinct. Reverend Misner states: “Isolation kills generations. It has no future” (210). Thus, the text suggests that a town or belief system that allows no difference, new ideas, or new members is bound to destroy itself from within. The resentments against the rigid code of behavior established by the wealthiest patriarchs of Ruby have built up so greatly that the town needs an outlet for its hostility.

That the women at the Convent become a convenient scapegoat because their acceptance of different ideas, behaviors, races, and ethnicities while retaining economic autonomy calls into question the necessity of Ruby’s rigid code of behavior and politics of exclusion. 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. 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. These women have seen the people of Ruby at their weakest: as adulterers, drunks, liars, would-be murderers of unborn children, and men expressing emotional needs and sexual desires not fulfilled or endorsed by their belief system and rigid code of behavior. Mostly, however, the town’s leaders are fearful because these women “don’t need men and they don’t need God,” at least not the patriarchal Christian God that these men follow (276). The Convent women learn to empower themselves without needing to adhere strictly to male

patriarchal control or a rigid belief system predicated on division and hierarchy. They offer an alternative to the way history, community, and individual identity are constructed in Ruby, an alternative that allows for individual and group differences and change. The very existence of this alternative exposes the sterile and isolationist view of life and community in Ruby and within normative Christian traditions.

American History and Nationhood

The novel broadens its critique of communities based on the principles of isolationism and patriarchy by making Ruby a microcosm of America. The connection between Ruby and America is made explicit in the novel when it links the history of the citizens of Ruby to the history of the United States. Peter Widdowson discusses how the chronology of *Paradise* reflects key dates in American history. Chronologically, the narrative begins by telling the stories of freed black slaves in 1755, just before “the founding moment in American history” (Widdowson 316). The novel further alludes to the creation of the Declaration of Independence, the American Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, World War I, the attacks on blacks (including ex-soldiers) during the summer of 1919, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy (Widdowson 316-17). The text offers an alternative to official American history here, a history that is more inclusive of remembered black experience. Beginning the chronology in 1755 and setting the main action of the text in the Bicentennial, July 1976, urges readers to consider how closely tied these characters are to the values and exclusions

used to create this nation. Readers are encouraged to see how little national values have changed in 200 years, how tied these characters (and all Americans) are to an uncritical repetition of originating narratives based on exclusion and violence.

In an attempt to disrupt the narratives of progress and Manifest Destiny privileged in official American history, the text reinserts material, dismembered bodies back into the narrative, describing the starving, injured, and dead bodies that suffered to construct this country. The citizens of Ruby and their ancestors recount these historical events as events lived and experienced by their physical bodies. Slavery is remembered as the “brutal work” of field labor required to ensure that “none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman’s kitchen or nursed a white child” (99). The migration West after Reconstruction that failed to bring about equality is expressed in the conditions of walking children’s feet and the pain in older men’s knees (95, 96). The creation of an all-black town is remembered as bodies that “dug the clay,” “carried the hod,” and “mixed the mortar” to erect their first structure (85). The attacks on blacks in the summer of 1919 are present in the bruises and spilled blood of an anonymous black woman and Elder Morgan (94). The prohibition against alcohol in 1920 is recounted in a story about Big Daddy, “one of the few able bodies” sent to retrieve supplies when the citizens of Haven were struck by the 1919 influenza epidemic (153, 198). World War II is remembered as hands that learned “how to tie an army tie” and “how to pack a bag” (110), Vietnam as necks of dead high school boys that once held dog tags and dismembered black and white bodies that “did not lie down; that most often flew apart” (34, 112). The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy are literally embodied in the lines that Seneca cuts onto her arms with razor blades when she learns of the tragedies (261), while Oakland’s race riots are

present in the image of a young boy catching blood in his hands after being shot by police (170). Official American history diminishes or erases completely these bodies in its ideal narratives of progress. When Gigi reads the newspaper after living through the Oakland race riots, she learns of "Over a hundred injured" but "no mention of gunfire or a shot kid" (170). Maimed and murdered black bodies are either not deemed "news" important enough to report or, if reported, then only as necessary casualties in constructing an exceptional, superior nation. *Paradise* attempts to reinsert these bodies back into a national history, to re-member them, and to suggest that they were sacrificed and erased for a concept of nationhood.

The text critiques the way that African American communities continue these exclusions and violent marginalizations. Building on the well-known idea that mainstream American concepts of nationhood are predicated on the idea of "American exceptionalism," Katrine Dalsgård argues that the black national community continues many of these exclusions. Dalsgård recounts how, based on the early persecutions and later financial successes of Puritan life, Americans tend to see America as "endowed with a special moral responsibility" that puts it in a "superior position in relation to the rest of the world" (Dalsgård 234). Dalsgård argues, however, that Morrison is not merely critiquing official American discourse in *Paradise*, but pointing to the ways that ideas of American exceptionalism are present in African American discourse as well. She states that Morrison does not "assume the position of a black outsider," suggesting that "if only African Americans were allowed full and equal participation in the American nation, the nation would indeed be in a position to redeem its paradisiacal promise" (236). Instead, "taking as her starting point the idea that the African American community lives its own version of the exceptionalist narrative,"

Morrison exposes the ways that this ideal is "inevitably intertwined with a violent marginalization of its non-exceptionalist other" (Dalsgård 236, 237). The construction of an ideal community or nation based on separateness and distinction demands that there be those who will be viewed as inferior and, consequently, either oppressed within the community or violently excluded from it.

In her portrayal of Ruby, Morrison depicts an African American community predicated on principles of separateness and superiority. Even though Ruby is a town where a "sleeping woman could always rise from her bed" and walk around town safe in the middle of the night because "Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey" (8), the text critiques the sacrifices and exclusions that were made to ensure this apparent safety. Although this all-black town was originally established to protect fully African Americans' civil rights, the town leaders wind up killing and oppressing women, deliberately setting high interest rates that divide town members by socioeconomic class, and punishing individuals without "blue black" skin. Reverend Misner states, "They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause" (306). *Paradise* urges a scrutiny of the African American concepts of belief and nation.

In addition, *Paradise* locates the origin of principles of exclusion in the creation of the black national community during the "Exoduster" Movement, the historic black migration out of the South in 1879. Newly freed African Americans migrated in large numbers to Kansas, and later Oklahoma, because of the failures of Reconstruction to bring full equality, political rights, and safety to African Americans.⁶ The Exodusters hoped

that leaving the South and establishing more than 60 all-black towns would guarantee them safety, land, education, and full access to voting. The language of the Biblical Exodus story—in which the Judeo-Christian God frees his chosen people (the Hebrews) from slavery—was used to create a sense of commonality amongst the settlers rooted in a shared history of slavery and the desire for a future free from oppression. Eddie Glaude argues that the appropriation of Exodus symbolism in 19th-century America by African Americans provided a vocabulary and narrative to imagine and articulate the idea of a black national community that stood in opposition to mainstream American constructions of nationhood (62). Glaude argues that the word “nation” in the political rhetoric of 19th-century African Americans was “not used to indicate something that actually existed in the world” but instead to designate a “set of common experiences and relations in an effort to combat American racism” (62). Although the black national community was constructed in opposition to the exclusions of mainstream American constructions of nationhood, its appropriation of the Biblical Exodus narrative brought with it a “rearticulation of the ideology of chosenness” (Glaude 81). Feminist theologian Delores Williams exposes the exclusiveness and violence promoted by the idea of “chosenness” in the Biblical Exodus story. She argues that although African Americans focus on the liberation of the Hebrew slaves to indicate the Christian God’s dedication to freedom, the Bible shows Hebrews keeping slaves in accordance with their god’s will (21). Williams asserts that the symbolic accounts of Hebrews in the Bible oppressing women and other non-“chosen” races led to the collusion of black Christian churches with the African American community in

Morrison uses a multiplicity of religious beliefs as a basis for new politics for post-Civil Rights America.

oppressing African American women and other peoples they considered marginal (148-49). Although originally framed in opposition to mainstream American principles of exclusion, violence, and oppression of the non-exceptionalist “Other,” the black national community’s sense of “peopleness” is symbolically predicated on similar principles.

The Exodusters’ all-black towns historically repeat these symbolic exclusions and oppressions. Although rarely mentioned in Morrison criticism, Norman Crockett’s historical account of *The Black Towns* (1979) seems to have heavily influenced the fictional portrayal of Ruby in *Paradise*.⁷ In a passage markedly similar to an opening passage in *Paradise*, Crockett describes the all-black towns as “a social paradise with freedom to walk the streets” for “ten miles in any direction” without fear of persecution or harm (Crockett 185).⁸ However, such safety and sense of well-being are predicated on internal divisions based on class, skin color, and gender. Crockett describes how, like the Morgans in *Paradise*, the wealthiest individual in these all-black towns, “in most cases the banker,” held considerable power over the finances, morals, and behaviors of the other town members and even over the Christian churches, whose ministers, like Reverends Misner and Pulliam in *Paradise*, were often perceived to be fighting amongst themselves (51, 56, 57, 65, 67). Because many of these towns were settled by a few large families, social status was determined by one’s relation through blood or marriage to the most prominent families (Crockett 49, 64). These towns were, in the words of one black town resident, “‘hellbent on keeping whites out’” and even persecuted individuals within their communities with light skin color (Crockett 47, 69). Like Pat Best in

Paradise, one light-skinned Exoduster described purposely selecting a dark-skinned wife so his children " 'wouldn't have to go through all that mess. . . . It was hell!' " (Crockett 69). Crockett argues that these all-black towns ultimately destroyed themselves from within because the isolation from whites made "black-town citizens rigidly hostile and defensive," ripe for internal resentment and division (185). In its portrayal of Ruby, *Paradise* suggests that until it comes to terms with its traumatic past, a community created in opposition is destined to repeat exclusions similar to those of the community it is reacting against. The portrayal of the "peace" that the women at the Convent are able to achieve by acknowledging their past traumas suggests a belief that more enabling identities and communities can be constructed around spiritual connections and affiliations, rather than on divisions predicated on race and gender.

Morrison's Paradise

*P*aradise constructs a more ideal view of community not predicated on Biblical traditions of exceptional, isolated communities. The text views "paradise" not as the transcendent realm of normative Christian traditions, but as more flexible, inclusive communities on earth. To avoid the exceptionalism it critiques, *Paradise* provides multiple ways for creating these paradisiacal communities. The final page of the text provides one view of paradise through its representation of what lies beyond the spiritual door/window in the sky. Although not specifically geographically located, this paradise is "down here" on earth, made up of natural water and sand but also "sea trash" where "Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal" and a "dead radio plays the quiet surf" (318). This paradise is recycled from the broken and the discarded, a place

where the spiritual intermingles with the material. The text allows the reader to see the "sparkle" of this discarded "trash" while acknowledging the "endless work" that will be required to make it anew. This paradise is different from the normative Christian heaven because the rest experienced here is temporary, transitory. This "paradise" involves "endless work" to be done not on some transcendent plane, removed from the earth, but instead "down here" in building more benign communities (318).

The idea of work is essential to understanding the text's view of beloved communities. Although the final page of the novel tells us that Consolata has remained resting with the mythical figure Piedade, the other Convent women have already begun the "endless work" necessary for creating and sustaining a paradise. This "work" is different for each of them, yet involves materially appearing before their still living family members. It is significant that each appears after death 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. By connecting these women back to their families, the text makes it clear that these women are not denying their personal histories; simply, their past pain no longer has the degenerating effect it once had. *Paradise* suggests that the individual and communal acknowledgement of past histories and the recognition of others' similar traumas frees humans to move on, to focus on the endless work of healing and community building.

However, the text has left the specifics of this "moving on" decidedly ambiguous. It is unclear whether it will involve armed struggle with the weapons that some of the Convent women are carrying after their deaths. There is no final closure here, either with the Convent women and their

families or with the novel's view of what creating beloved communities entails. Instead, we have individuals attempting to come to terms with their own individual histories alongside temporary, fleeting moments of connection with others. Work is required not only of the characters, but of the readers as well. It is up to the readers to determine how these actions relate to the possibility of creating more permeable, inclusive communities and how this version of paradise relates to the other methods of achieving paradise found in the text.

Reverend Misner offers another example of how to construct an alternative paradise here on earth when he decides to not give up on Ruby. He believes that "there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people" (306). He recognizes that since several of the townspeople collectively confronted the town's leaders' actions, Ruby will change and become more inclusive and that at least one member of the community, Deacon Morgan, has sought his help in doing so. Misner's idea of paradise, while different from the abstract one that includes Piedade in the final page of the text, also revolves around the idea of work. Misner believes that Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross changed the relationship between god and humans from "CEO and supplicant to one on one" in which humans are pulled "from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives" (146). In this view of paradise, it is up to humans to play the "principal role" in their own lives, to learn to "respect—freely, not in fear—one's self and one another" (146). Learning to respect and empower oneself and the world is crucial since "not only is God interested in you; He *is* you" (147, original italics). As in the more abstract paradise involving Piedade, it is individuals who offer salvation to themselves, who must work to save themselves and their world

from the violent, destructive tendencies of their nations and communities.

Lone offers yet another view of how gods relate to building more sustaining communities. She describes her deity as "a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid attention to His world" (273). Her idea of god teaches individuals to see and interpret the signs of their salvation for themselves. Zechariah, the original patriarch of this community of exiles, holds a similar view of his god. He states, "He is not going to do your work for you, so step lively" (98). The "He" to whom Zechariah refers is ambiguous. Although Zechariah is a Christian who names this "He" "God," he also follows the instructions and thundering footsteps of a mythical "walking man" (97-98). 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 (90-92), another wearing a cowboy hat, mirrored sunglasses, and green vest to Consolata (251-52). Though Morrison is describing multiple belief systems and ideas of gods and paradise in this text, the principle that ties them all together is the idea that because deities are just as immanent as humans, it is up to humans to think, work, and provide the means for saving themselves and the earth.

It is significant that the text's view of paradise does not transcend history. In *Beloved* Morrison articulates the devastating consequences of a community's trying to "pass on," or deny, its collective history before coming to terms with it. *Paradise* includes many versions and methods for creating and sustaining beloved communities. Some of these methods are abstract and mythical, such as the mythical return of Consolata and Piedade in the conclusion. However, some of the novel's views of paradise are directly located within history, such as Reverend

Misner's continual attempts to connect the citizens of Ruby to the struggles going on in black communities all over the country. At the end of the text we are almost assured that the days of Ruby's isolationism and removal from history are over: "Roger Best will get his gas station and the connecting roads will be laid. Outsiders will come and go, come and go, and some will want a sandwich and a can of 3.2 beer. So who knows, maybe there will be a diner too. K. D. and Steward will already be discussing TV" (306). Even if readers had not received this assurance that Ruby will soon be located within history, the text itself is located in US history.

Paradise points to the necessity of a complex dialectical relation with history, a relation that requires at once an immediate, intense connection with the historical and the material and a meaningful connection with the spiritual and the mythical. Thus, the text does not privilege either method for creating beloved communities over the other. It suggests the importance of holding both of these methods open as a means of creating an earthly paradise, of keeping one eye firmly rooted to the local/material/historical and another looking beyond to the spiritual/mythical/imaginative. It is important to view neither of these methods as transcendent. Even when looking beyond to the spiritual, the novel includes the "sea trash" and personal traumas of modernity. The text suggests that creating an earthly paradise is possible as long as individuals recognize the necessity of working both within and without a sense of collective history. The innovative way that Morrison represents religion in the text as both historically and culturally locatable, as well as timeless and abstract, helps to hold open this dialectic. By grounding religious belief in the material earth and bodies of African Americans and others marginalized by official American history and nation building, Morrison performs a powerful rearticulation of the past in an effort to enact future social change.

Participatory Reading and Politics

To create more inclusive communities, the characters in the novel must learn to see themselves as part of a collective history, and work against exclusive nationalisms. This expectation is required of readers of *Paradise* as well. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison states: "I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance" (341). This participatory relationship between writer and audience demands readers' involvement. Morrison argues that her novels "try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered" ("Rootedness" 341). Morrison wants readers of *Paradise* to be outraged at the death of the Convent women. Although we learn of the raid on the first page of the text, Morrison spends the rest of the novel convincing her readers of the raid's injustice. Once her readers feel this outrage, Morrison, like a "Black preacher," encourages them "to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered," to be invested in and act on social issues. As in the "loud dreaming" sessions, the text encourages its readers to "step easily into the dreamer's tale" (264), to recognize both the similarities and differences between their own individual histories and those of the cross-cultural characters. *Paradise* attempts to bring about material change by encouraging its readers to view themselves as part of a collective history of oppression and resistance that extends beyond the boundaries of

the novel, the ethnic community, and the nation-state. This method suggests that viewing and seeing oneself as part of a cross-cultural and cross-national collective history will bring about social transformation and new imaginings of community. However, Morrison is careful not to substitute herself for the divine voice of authority by offering a specific blueprint for social change. Instead, she argues that there should be "something in [a novel] that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe" ("Rootedness" 341). Rather than privileging the directives of a divine author(ity), this method empowers individuals to take greater responsibility in recognizing and resolving the problems in their communities. *Paradise* does not advocate free, floating identities, but historically and culturally locatable subjects capable of working within cross-national alliances. Rather than denying cultural differences, the alliances that the text advocates encourage individuals to recognize and accept both differences and similarities.⁹

Once readers acknowledge their historical and cultural differences, Morrison urges, they should think through the ways that they are connected, to try to imagine a more flexible, cooperative sense of community rather than a paradise based on normative Christian ideas of exclusion and superiority. She states: "I wanted this book to move towards the possibility of reimagining Paradise. The thing is, if Paradise had everybody in it, then there would be no Paradise at all—that's because we think of it in terms of seclusion. But if we understood the *planet* to be that place, then this is all there is. So why not make it that way?" (Marcus 4, original italics)

Reimagining paradise as the creation of more inclusive communities on this planet, now, asks readers to forego notions of transcendence, exclu-

sivity, and exceptionalism. Although *Paradise* begins by being firmly rooted within the African American community and Christian belief systems with which Morrison seems most familiar, by its end it has been transformed; Morrison has constructed multiple types of belief systems and faith communities to move beyond the exceptionalist discourses of mainstream American society and the African American community. Although her early works deal almost exclusively with the problems, concerns, and desires of the African American community, *Paradise* broadens its scope to construct an inclusive sense of community, an earthly paradise made up of individuals from a variety of racial, ethnic, national, and geographic backgrounds.

A Post-Civil Rights America

Paradise suggests that contemporary Americans, like the descendants of the Exodusters in Ruby, continue to follow the same flawed values and ideas of community building in the hope that eventually they will bring about the ideal utopia envisioned in the concept of American exceptionalism and later repeated in the Civil Rights Movement. However, because of the idealism and exclusion inherent in these values, they can never enact real cultural transformation. Reverend Misner argues:

Since the murder of Martin Luther King, new commandments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. It was as though something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost. That was what Destry, Roy, Little Mirth and the rest were looking for. Maybe the fist painter was looking for it too. In any case, if they couldn't find the ticket, they might break into the pawnshop. Question was, who pawned it in the first place and why. (117)

Misner argues that the changes made to post-Civil Rights America are merely “decorative” and that unless these issues are addressed eventually the anger over the continual inequality of rights will lead to the armed conflict represented by the upraised black fist painted on the Oven. This passage raises the central questions of the text: what was compromised and lost during the Civil Rights Movement, and who was responsible for this loss? The text claims that it is (African) Americans themselves who are responsible for continuing to condone inequality because their concepts of community and nation building are predicated on Biblical exclusions based, that is, on superiority and exceptionalism. Implicit in the discussion of the “fist painter,” and in the text’s critique of “8 Rocks,” is a rejection of the Black Nationalist movement. *Paradise* suggests that neither Civil Rights repetition of mainstream ideologies of exclusion nor Black Nationalist separatism are effective means of enacting racial healing and building more enabling communities.

Morrison first expressed this critique of the Civil Rights Movement more than two decades earlier in her 1974 *New York Times* article “Rediscovering Black History.” This article critiques both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalist Movement for separating African Americans from each other and their past. She claims that both movements were created in an “absolute fit of reacting to white values,” leading them into reactionary politics that devalued African American lived experience as “uneducated” in favor of either middle-class white values or romanticized notions of African beauty that focused on physical appearance rather than “intelligence” and “spiritual health” (“Rediscovering” 14). Morrison contends,

In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. And

when Civil Rights became Black Power, we frequently chose exoticism over reality. The old verities that made being black and alive in this country the most dynamic existence imaginable—so much of what was satisfying, challenging and simply more interesting—were being driven underground—by blacks. . . . In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed. (“Rediscovering” 14)

Although she acknowledges the pain and trauma of this complex history—“The point here is not to soak in some warm bath of nostalgia about the good old days—*there were none!*”—Morrison seeks to “recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks now growing up” (“Rediscovering” 14, original italics). She suggests that full knowledge of the pain and joy of the lived black experience will provide useful, less-reactionary strategies of resistance for contemporary African Americans. In *Paradise*, Morrison continues the project she began in 1974 to circumvent the limitations of both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalist Movement by invoking and examining traumatic African American histories. She shows contemporary readers a richer, less-reactionary African American past that held a “wide-spirited celebration of life and our infinite tolerance of differences” (“Rediscovering” 22). *Paradise* suggests that recovering this history and tolerance for difference will help bring about cultural transformation.

In an interview with Carolyn Denard, Morrison states that in writing *Paradise* she wants “to suggest something about negotiation that is applicable for the 90s” (Denard 11). What she suggests is that the divisions and “splits” within mainstream American and African American communities during the founding of this country, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Nationalist Movement have simply been “recon-

figured" in "much more complicated" ways in the contemporary American political agenda (Denard 11).¹⁰ Morrison implies that any social changes will be merely "decorative" as long as post-Civil Rights American political discourse and laws continue to be "seeded in Paradise," an idea that necessitates marginalization and violent exclusion of the non-exceptionalist "Other" (Denard 11).

Paradise exposes the necessity of rethinking the past and our concepts of "nation" to create more enabling future communities. These more inclusive communities are permeable and not as tied to the geopolitical borders that currently help to define "America." By making Consolata, a Brazilian woman, and her belief in Piedade central to the narrative, the text redefines "America" to include the experiences of individuals from both North and South America. The text's focus on cross-national alliances and expansive definition of "America" demands that readers abandon notions of American isolationism and exceptionalism. Rejecting traditional ideas of community building will require that Americans recognize and confront the costly sacrifices and violent exclusions that were made for America's concept of nationhood. *Paradise* offers non-hegemonic spiritual

affiliations as a way to collectively heal the traumas of this history.

The text presents the possibility that Ruby can be profoundly changed now that its members have learned to identify with the excluded "Others" and have collectively participated in confronting power. The implication is that America, the macrocosm of Ruby, can also change its view of itself and its relation to the world as long as its members participate in the "endless work" required to create and sustain more enabling communities. Reverend Misner tells us how "exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it" (306). Instead of trying to devise increasingly narrow ideas of constructing and achieving paradise, the novel asks its readers to expand their imaginations rather than contract them, to focus on connections between individuals and their world, rather than on what separates them. *Paradise* reveals the power that religious and spiritual beliefs have in constructing human communities and worldviews, but also the possibilities that they contain to generate social change and new imaginings of connections among disparate peoples.

Notes

1. This worldview has a long tradition in black women's writing. As Smith argues in her landmark 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," one of the "common approaches" found in literature by black women writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, is the way they "incorporate the traditional Black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories" (174). The "traditional Black female activities" in these writers' texts, and others by Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones, accompany powerful beliefs in healing by combining natural and spiritual remedies.

2. This normative Christian belief in transcendence and stewardship over the earth has been critiqued by a number of eco-critics and eco-feminists. Cf. White, Ruether, and Keller.

3. Consolata's teachings about the importance of not separating the body or sexuality from the spiritual are expressed literally in the decor of the Convent. Although the former nuns tried to remove from the Convent all traces of explicit sexuality leftover from the building's previous owner, a rich embezzler, curls of naked nymphs' hair are still visible beneath images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary (4). Moreover, candleholders as female torsos, nipple-tipped doorknobs, water facets and ashtrays shaped into male and female genitalia, and paintings and sculptures of nudes intermingle with images of Jesus Christ and the Christian cross in the Convent (72).

4. Bouson sees Candomble as the sole spiritual force guiding *Paradise* (209, 214). He points out that the text began after Morrison heard a false rumor while in Brazil about a convent of black nuns who were killed by a group of men because they were suspected of practicing Candomble (238).

Besides various Candomble practices, *Paradise* also references several other religious beliefs and practices. Attempts to limit Morrison's more expansive view of religion to one particular religious belief system would detract from the novel's representation of a multiplicity of enabling beliefs and ways of organizing community.

5. In *Paradise*, Morrison extends a project she began experimenting with in her short story, "Recitatif," in which she disrupts readerly expectations of race. In "Recitatif," as in *Paradise*, Morrison never clearly specifies the race of each character, teaching readers instead to focus on how women from different racial backgrounds try to survive mutually traumatic pasts.

6. For more information on the Exoduster Movement, see Glaude, Painter, and Richardson.

7. One notable exception is Peterson's *Against Amnesia* (91), which makes passing reference to Crockett without showing how indebted many of the plot points in *Paradise* are to his historical account of black towns.

8. See *Paradise* 8-9.

9. Unlike Gilroy's argument in *Against Race*, Morrison does not envision a "postracial" utopia (Gilroy 42). Although both Gilroy and Morrison present versions of cross-cultural and cross-national alliances, *Paradise* advocates creating these alliances by confronting race and its role within history, religion, and nation-building. Gilroy's renunciation of race is tied to his view of history: "There is absolutely no question of choosing now to try and forget what it took so long to remember, or of simply setting the past and its traumas aside" because of a transnational "recognition of past sufferings and their projection in public sites of memory" (335). Morrison's project in her historical trilogy, especially in *Paradise*, differs from Gilroy's by exposing the necessity of consistently addressing an official history that would like to set these "traumas aside" by erasing or diminishing the racialized bodies that suffered and died to create the American nation.

10. This critique of post-Civil Rights America is repeated in Morrison's latest novel, *Love* (2003). Through the figure of Christine, an activist in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalist Movement, the novel presents the complexity of these movements' ability both to empower African Americans and to reinstitute injustice through internalized racism and the oppression, objectification, and rape of women. *Love*, like *Paradise*, suggests that these movements failed to end injustice because they repeated the divisive and violent values of mainstream America. Speaking of the failures of these movements, Christine says that "it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder" (*Love* 185). In this way, the novel implicates the African American community in continuing its own oppression by absorbing the values of mainstream America.

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