The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison’s Paradise

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Unlike Beloved (1987), the first volume in Toni Morrison’s loose trilogy of novels charting the history of African Americans – and an instant entrant to the contemporary canon – the third volume, Paradise (1998), has not been given the hagiographic reception the Pulitzer-Prize-winning earlier novel was treated to. Nor, as yet, has it received the critical attention devoted to both Beloved and the second volume, Jazz (1992). Apart from some heavyweight early reviews, especially in the American press (not all favourable, by any means), and a few scrambled “first-off” essays since, a novel which strikes the present – admittedly white, male, English – critic as raising contentious historical and political issues in a most powerful and complex way has been met with relative disregard. Why?

Perhaps it is simply too soon. Or perhaps it is the very complexity of the novel as a reading experience which diverts attention from the fact that Paradise is a deeply polemical book in terms of race, gender and American history – although a first reading of Beloved when it was first published was scarcely a straightforward affair. Paradoxically, too, the later book has similar features to those admired in the earlier one: an initially puzzling but ultimately vindicated disturbed chronology; a

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refusal to accept crude ("black and white") binaries and stereotypes; destabilizing strategic thematic ambivalences; mysteries and uncertainties which are never cleared up. But in Paradise, these tropes have moved up a gear so that the complexity of the narrative itself may cause readers to underestimate the force of what they are reading. This is by no means a criticism of the novel: for it is only by way of the continuous interpenetration of past and present, and the contorted interrelationships among and between the communities in the novel, that Morrison's political positions can be articulated. To write history as fiction in the way Morrison chooses to is, in Thomas Carlyle's words, not to write a "linear narrative" of a sequence of events, but to try and capture the "solid action" of the "Chaos of Being" (Carlyle [1830] 1971: 55) which is any given moment of experiential life in time – the infinite determining past bearing down like a cone with its point on the present. What this article will attempt to do, therefore, is to trace the connecting narrative filaments across the novel in order to bring into view the structural positions informing it.

Paradise is primarily concerned with two contiguous communities: the town of Ruby and a decaying mansion seventeen miles north known as the Convent. Ruby is an exclusively all-black town in Oklahoma, created in 1949 by fifteen families of African Americans whose ancestors have been in America since the mid-eighteenth century and who have had a long history since struggling to protect their freedom, including being rejected by other black townships they had wished to join (this, the "Disallowing," attains mythic status in the historical memory of the elders). An earlier "free" black town, Haven, has gone into decline, and the descendants of the original families migrate still further west to establish Ruby, taking with them the communal oven built by the men for the group (the "Oven" becomes a central symbol for both community and novel). 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. Each section of the novel is named after one of the women in the story (e.g. "Seneca," "Lone"), the exception being an un-named coda to the final chapter. One of the initial difficulties of the book is that the reader does not know to whom the names of the sections refer, and in some cases – "Grace" ("Gigi"), "Divine" ("Pallas") – the name of the character is not the one they are generally called by in the text. Nor does the reader know how the section relates specifically to the named character: in the first section, for example,
one is not aware that the *town* is called Ruby, nor, until much later, why it is so named.

Into these individualized sections are woven multiple further stories—of other characters, of communities and of nation—often in a long historical perspective. A problem on first reading the novel, then, is working out both who the characters are and how they relate to each other. None of them are named in the opening chapter, and in subsequent ones they are introduced in passing and without explanation, often by nicknames or abbreviated first names. Only by working backwards and forwards across the entire text is it possible to establish, for example, that two of the most significant male characters are the Morgan twins, Steward and Deacon (Deek); that they are the grandsons of Big Papa (aka Zechariah [Black] Coffee [or Kofi]) and the sons of Big Daddy; that Steward is married to Dovey who has no children; that Deek is married to Soane (Dovey’s sister) who has had two sons killed in Vietnam, and a third child lost during pregnancy; that Ruby, the twins’ sister, who married a young man killed in World War II, gives birth to Coffee Smith who is never called anything other than “K.D.” (after the Kentucky Derby race he wins as a child), and then also dies (her name is given to the town); that K.D., therefore, is the twins’ nephew and only heir; that he finally marries Arnette (after a long-drawn-out fling with Gigi), and has a son with her by the end of the novel; that Arnette is the daughter of Arnold Fleetwood and Mable, and the sister of Jefferson who is married to Sweetie, one of whose sick children, Save-Marie, has died and is being buried in the final main section. This may seem like plot-rehearsal, but, while the novel’s detail is precise, and precisely construable as above, it is scattered throughout the text, often in tiny unexplained fragments. The same is true of most of the other main “town” characters, as it is of distinguishing the Convent women from each other, and establishing exactly what their histories are.

The necessity for such detailed excavations of the text simply to establish what is going on is compounded by its contorted chronological structure. The striking opening line of the novel—“They shoot the white girl first”—and other parts of the first section are not explained, referred to again, or completed, until the penultimate main section (“Lone”), and then not fully or certainly (we never discover which of the women “the white girl” was, or whether the women were actually killed or not). It is as though Morrison wants to set up a terrible moment in time (early July 1976: the “present” of the book, and—pointedly as we shall see—the bicentenary of the Declaration of Independence), when “They” (who?)
shoot several woman, and then to spend the rest of the novel explaining how this could come about. How could a group of nine upright, god-fearing black men in 1976 reach a position where they could gun down in cold blood a group of defenceless damaged women *because they were women* (the men are “alert to the female malice that hides here” [Morrison 1998: 4; all further page references are to this edition]), and not because they were, for example, white? And if this shooting *is* explicable, can it then be excused?

In effect, what *Paradise* represents is an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective. The novel, in other words, is a black history of the USA from just before its founding moment (the earliest date mentioned three times [99, 278, 284] – is 1733). This bears out Morrison’s statement in an interview with Carolyn Denard while she was still writing the novel: “For me, in doing novels about African-Americans, I was trying to move away from the unstated but overwhelming and dominant context that was white history and to move into another one” (Denard 1998: 4–5). In an early review of *Paradise*, Patricia Storace holds the realization of this project to be the novel’s great achievement. Responding to Morrison’s identification, in *Playing in the Dark*, of “the four-hundred-year-old ... overwhelming presence of black people in the United States,” which American literature and history have consigned to “hover[ing] at the margins” (Morrison 1992a: 5), she says: “*Paradise* ... draws that black presence forward from the margins of imagination to the center of American literature and history” (Storace 1998: 64). In place of the expected story of specifically black experience as “a shadowy adjunct to the ‘real’ normative story of national life,” “the official national founding myth [of America’s white ‘Fathers’] is a shadow of [African Americans’] own, in a community where shadows are not dark, but white” (ibid. 65). Hence, Storace concludes: “Morrison is relighting the angles from which we view American history, changing the very color of its shadows, showing whites what they look like in black mirrors” (69).

In order to set some co-ordinates for reading *Paradise* as a black [in]version of American history, I include here a brief table of key dates/events to which the novel alludes directly or indirectly:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1754–63/1756–63:</th>
<th>French and Indian War/Seven Years War</th>
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<tr>
<td>4 July 1776:</td>
<td>Declaration of Independence</td>
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1861–5: American Civil War
1863: Emancipation Proclamation
1865–77: Post-bellum period of "Reconstruction"
1914–18: World War I
1919: "Red Summer of 1919" (ferocious attacks on blacks, including ex-soldiers, by whites across the USA)
1939–46: World War II
c.1947–54: Civil Rights Movement: rise, zenith, decline
1963: President John F. Kennedy and Medgar Evers assassinated
1965: Malcolm X assassinated
1968: Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinated
1972–75: Watergate and President Nixon's downfall
4 July 1976: Bicentenary of Declaration of Independence

The novel's own complex historical chronology is wrapped around these events, and it is possible to ascertain, by detailed cross-textual detective work, just how extraordinarily tight and precise this chronology is. For example, we can work out that "the Disallowing" occurred in 1890 (189, 193, 194–95), resulting in the foundation of Haven the same year (the "Oven" is new [6]). We know that Steward and Deacon are married in 1949, and that in mid-August the fifteen families move from Haven to "New Haven" (16–17); that in 1952, their sister, Ruby, dies, and that the new town is renamed after her (17, 113). However, many of the novel's "dates" are not given explicitly on the pages cited, but have to be deduced. For instance, we can work out that Mavis arrives at the Convent in 1968, since on p. 25, we are told that her Cadillac is "'A '65'" and that "'It's three years old'"; as she immediately afterwards starts the journey which ends at the Convent, we know that she arrives there in 1968; and on p. 101, where "1968" is explicitly mentioned, Soane remembers in passing that "A girl with a broke-down car was out there that day." By the same process, we can ascertain that in May 1971 Gigi arrives at the Convent (76–77); that K.D. slaps Arnette (pregnant), who later goes to the Convent and "loses" her baby (61, 249–50); that in October 1973 Seneca arrives at the Convent (114) and Billie Delia visits there too (152). In April 1974, Billie delivers Pallas to the Convent (175–76) and K.D. and Arnette's wedding takes place. In March 1973,
K.D. and Arnette’s baby is due (190–91), and in July, K.D. has a “4-month-old” baby (278); the same spring, Pallas’s baby should be born (but see below). In early July 1976, Lone overhears the Ruby men and drives out to warn the Convent women; the following morning, the shootings occur: “so [Mavis] was there in 1976 ... On that July morning” (49). K.D. has a “16-month-old baby” (299–300), so Pallas’s baby, Divine, should now be 14–15 months old; in November, it is the funeral of Save-Marie (296), and Jean “finally bump[ed] into [Seneca], in 1976” (316).

However, one telling oddity in this fragmented but otherwise exact chronology must be noted here: roughly a year appears to be missing from it (spring 1975 to July 1976). The crucial evidence for this is that the “Lone” section clearly has to be taking place on the night before the shootings and on the July morning itself in 1976. We gather that Lone had been seventy-nine in 1968, but the narrative then says: “Now, at eighty-six ... ” (270–71) – which surely makes the present year only 1975. Furthermore, Pallas is definitely pregnant in 1974/5, but is described early that July 1976 morning as “delivered of a delicate son” (283), which suggests a more recently born baby (3–4 months, if born spring 1976) than the 14/15-month-old one the novel’s “missing year” implies. A speculative explanation for this anomaly may be that, late on in writing the book, Morrison realized the pointedness of setting the shootings in the Declaration of Independence bicentennial year, and changed its end-date without adjusting all of the immediately preceding chronology. For in her 1998 Denard interview, and with the novel as yet unfinished, Morrison says: “It stops in 1975” (Denard 1998: 12; my emphasis). The novel as published is emphatic that the July events take place in 1976.

What I want to extrapolate from this chronology is that the novel is a fictional intervention in contemporary American historiography. While still writing it, Morrison said: “I want to suggest something about negotiation that is applicable for the 90s. There are a lot of ... people for integration, people against integration, who are still out there. These are current issues, and people change their minds on them a lot” (Denard 1998: 13). The novel may be read, therefore, as:

i. a history of African Americans from the end of World War II to July 1976, and more specifically from the mid-1960s to 1976 – the period of political assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, Civil Rights and black activism. As in Beloved and Jazz, Paradise reflects on the experience of black Americans “claiming ownership” of their theoretically “freed selves” (Morrison 1987: 95) in a period of rapid change.
ii. a history of freed blacks from the end of the period of “Reconstruction” (1877) through to 1976, and therefore of the way their subsequent history is a history of the failure of Reconstruction. Significantly, 1976 is also the year nominated by the historian, Manning Marable (1984), as pivotal in the decline/demise of the Civil Rights Movement, itself now known as the “Second Reconstruction.”

iii. ending as Paradise does in early July of the year of the bicentennial celebrations of the Declaration of Independence, a history of the failure of that Declaration so far as the African American population is concerned, if no other.

iv. a black sub-textual invocation of the Pilgrim Fathers, and then the Founding Fathers (not Mothers, let it be noted). Morrison’s “Old and New Fathers” rereflect the American Dream – seeking a pure polity and freedom from a corrupt past in the Promised Land/New World of the West – and its failure.

v. contained within these other histories, a “herstory” of women’s position within patriarchy. When an interviewer asked Morrison: “Paradise has been called a ‘feminist’ novel. Would you agree with that?” she replied: “Not at all. I would never write any ‘ist.’ I don’t write ‘ist’ novels.” ‘Why distance oneself from feminism?’ ‘In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can’t take positions that are closed’ (Jaffrey 1998). While understanding why Morrison the novelist might want to “distance herself from feminism,” it is arguably this history and this politics which are at the centre of the novel, and the ones which are not closed off by failure at its end.

These various ‘histories’ are conveyed to us within the novel’s own encapsulating narrative history: of the experience of a group of African Americans from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, of how Ruby got to be, and how it got to be as it is in 1976.

Perhaps the easiest way of opening up these narratives is to map the fictional “history” onto the “real” history. Let me quote two key passages from the novel:

They had served, picked, plowed and traded in Louisiana since 1755, when it included Mississippi; and when it was divided into states they had helped govern both from 1868 to 1875, after which they had been reduced to field labor. (99)

Descendants of those who had been in Louisiana Territory when it was French, when it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812. Who spoke a patois part Spanish, part French, part English, and all their own. Descendants of those who, after the Civil War, had defied or hidden from whites doing all they could to force them to stay and work as sharecroppers in Louisiana. Descendants of those whose worthiness was so endemic it got three of their children elected to rule in state legislatures and county offices: who, when thrown out of office without ceremony or proof of
wrongdoing, refused to believe what they guessed was the real reason that made it impossible for them to find other mental labor. Almost all of the Negro men chased or invited out of office (in Mississippi, in Louisiana, in Georgia) got less influential but still white-collar work following the purges of 1875 ... But they alone ... were reduced to penury and/or field labor. Fifteen years of begging for sweatwork in cotton, lumber or rice after five glorious years remaking a country. ... In 1890 they had been in the country for one hundred and twenty years. So they took that history, those years, each other and their incorruptible worthiness and walked to the “Run.” Walked from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma and got to the place described in advertisements ... only to be shooed away. (193–94)

Morrison’s families, in other words, are descended from free blacks who were “in Louisiana since 1735.” Louisiana was a French colony from 1699 to 1763; in 1750, its colonial population was around 10,000, made up of Europeans and Africans – both enslaved and free (Milner et al. 1994: 107); it was ceded to Spain in 1763; was returned to France by secret treaty in 1800, and then sold by the French to the United States of America in 1803 for $15 million (the “Louisiana Purchase”). The “French and Indian War” (1754–63), the American dimension of the European “Seven Years War” (1756–63), was fought principally between France and Britain as the last of their colonial wars for control of North America. After serious setbacks, especially in 1755, the British were finally victorious, and, at the Treaty of Paris (1763), gained Canada and all territory east of the Mississippi from the French. The significance of the date 1755 for Morrison’s novel, therefore, would seem to be that, at that formative moment when British power was being established in North America, her “worthy” families were already present as free people in a French, then Spanish, then French again, then American regime, but never in a British one: that is, as “Founding Fathers” with just as much longevity and independence as their white soon-to-be-American counterparts.

Thus the ancestors of Morrison’s families on 4 July 1776 should have been entitled to benefit from the proclaimed principles of the Declaration of Independence – most famously, those enshrined in the sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Even at that point, however, the presence of slavery in the newly created republic gave rise to concern among the new Americans in respect of the Declaration, but, as the history of the next century proved only too clearly, such principles did not apply to those who were not white – especially in a Southern slave-owning state like Louisiana. That free black men in early
July (the Fourth?) 1976 could act in the way they do in Paradise is surely Morrison’s fictional reflection on the United States’ failure to implement the Declaration’s principles in respect of a large proportion of its people. This view is expressed more explicitly in Playing in the Dark: “What was distinctive in the New World was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment” (Morrison 1992a: 48). Had the history of African Americans been different from the start, the novel seems to imply, then that event in 1976 might not have occurred. But that is only half the story, since the Declaration’s central “truth” is “that all men are created equal.” However unintended, the gendering of that “truth” also becomes a central issue in Paradise, as we shall see.

In Morrison’s brief history of her families above, the next key moment is that period of national rebuilding between the end of the Civil War (1865) and the withdrawal of Federal troops in 1877 known as “Reconstruction.” It can be no coincidence that the “present” of Paradise lies between 1865 and 1876: in other words, precisely 100 years after Reconstruction – just as the novel “celebrates” the bicentenary of the Declaration. The American historian, Eric Foner, observed in 1990 that “the political, economic, and particularly the humanitarian goals of Reconstruction of course failed of achievement. They necessarily remain, however, a critical part of the nation’s agenda. ... Scholars ... have yet to assess fully the significance of Reconstruction’s failure” (Foner [1990] 1997: 4, 8; my emphases). But he also points to how, since the 1960s, earlier myths about Reconstruction had been revised and reversed, leading to “a new agenda for Reconstruction study ... noting the continuing relevance of Reconstruction issues to American society” (ibid.: 4). My italics here are intended to suggest that Morrison’s Paradise may itself be a contribution to that contemporary historiographic project, for what I want to argue is that the novel is about the “failure” of Reconstruction and the catastrophe it became for black people: not directly, by exploring their denial of rights and their suffering of racism, but because that failure somehow “explains” the shootings of early July 1976. Not for nothing is the novel’s present set in the key years of the “Second Reconstruction” of the Civil Rights Movement. What Paradise does, in effect, is to align the two Reconstructions by erasing the 100 years that separate them through its obliquely defamiliarizing narrative medium, and thereby makes an intervention in what Foner has called “America’s Unfinished Revolution” (Foner [1988]).

Implemented by Congress in 1865, Reconstruction aimed at
reorganizing the Confederate states as a means towards readmitting them to the Union, and at defining the ways in which whites and blacks could live together in a non-slave society. But the “Black Codes” passed by many Southern state governments in 1865 and 1866 effectively reintroduced laws which replicated the earlier slave laws. These, however, had the result of ushering in “Radical Reconstruction,” whereby Congress approved the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which gave African Americans the rights and privileges of full citizenship, and in June 1866 also proposed the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship to black males and guaranteed that all federal and state laws would apply equally to blacks and whites. The Fifteenth Amendment (1869) prohibited states from infringing suffrage rights for racial reasons, and the Enforcement Acts of 1870–71 gave the federal government power to protect the civil and political rights of former slaves against acts of violence. However, we may notice in passing that for post-bellum Americans, black suffrage meant black male suffrage, since the Fourteenth Amendment had introduced the word “male” into the Constitution for the first time – in effect, sanctioning the denial of suffrage for women (white or black); while the Fifteenth Amendment compounded this by not referring to gender at all, thus permitting states to deny suffrage to women. The results of this inequality may be seen in Ruby in 1976, too – obliquely signalled, perhaps, by the fact that one of the first two American women’s rights conventions in 1848 was held at Seneca Falls.

After the Civil War, then, African Americans experienced a period when they were citizens who could vote, acquire their own land and seek their own employment. Constitutional conventions were called in the defeated states, and huge numbers of freedmen attended them between 1865 and 1868. These helped rewrite Southern state constitutions and other laws to replace the Black Codes, and African Americans were elected to important posts, becoming Senators and Representatives, lieutenant governors of states, state secretaries, treasurers and judges. Therefore, when Morrison writes that her families’ ancestors had “helped govern both [Louisiana and Mississippi] from 1868 to 1875” (99) and had been “elected to rule in state legislatures and county offices” (193), she is again grounding her novel firmly in lived history. Most importantly, perhaps, for my attempt to indicate the specific historical burden of Paradise, African Americans, in their deep politicization during Reconstruction, challenged the nation to realize the full implications of its democratic creed – not least, by continually invoking the Declaration of Independence. Frederick Douglass’s address, “What to the Slave Is the
Fourth of July?,” was a key statement here; speaking on that day in 1852, he had asked:

Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? ... This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. ... America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. (Douglass [1852] 1998: 1824–5)

In "The Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century," Leonard I. Sweet gives an account of the terrible irony of this day “when blacks became most conscious of the contradictions of American creed and deed” (Sweet 1976: 264). Significantly, it was only during the mid-1860s that black Americans celebrated the 4th July “as a day of honor rather than hypocrisy”; but even so, Sweet says, “the message remained the same: the revolution begun in 1776 was incomplete until blacks shared equal rights and privileges with other American citizens” (271–72, 273). In other words, as central reference points in black politics, the Declaration and Reconstruction are intimately wedded together, so that the conjunction becomes doubly telling between Morrison’s present setting of her novel in bicentennial 1976 and the historical matrix for the creation of Ruby being Reconstruction and its aftermath. Ruby in 1976 bears witness to Douglass’s prophecy that America “solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.”

In the 1870s, Northern whites began to lose interest in “Radical Reconstruction,” and in 1877 the last Federal troops were withdrawn. By the end of that year, white Democrats held power in all the Southern state governments, and thereafter the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were effectively nullified in the South. It was in this immediately post-Reconstruction period that Morrison’s blacks were once again dispossessed and disenfranchised (“thrown out of office ... following the purges of 1875” [193]). A mockery was made of Reconstruction’s high ideals of equal citizenship, and with its demise, Foner argues, African Americans’ conception of rights turned inward: “Assuming a defensive posture, blacks concentrated on strengthening their community and surviving in the face of a patently unjust political and social order, rather than directly challenging the new status quo” (Foner [1988] 1999: 429). As a description of Haven and then Ruby in Paradise, this could scarcely be bettered.

Apropos, a further historical phenomenon that Morrison bases her families on is the “Exoduster” movement. Southern blacks had been migrating westwards throughout the 1870s, but by 1879, with
Reconstruction clearly in ruins, thousands more from Louisiana and Mississippi, full of religious fervour and fear of white vengeance, began the trek to Kansas and other more westerly states, including Oklahoma. Perhaps the most famous of the "Exoduster" communities was Nicodemus in northwest Kansas (mentioned in a list of such black towns on p. 108 of *Paradise*). However, harsh farming conditions and white resentment caused them to fall into decline, so that, while Morrison's "exoduster" town, Haven, has two churches, a bank, schoolhouse and five stores in 1910, by 1934 it is "dying" (15). In 1949, after World War II and the realization that on demobilization the 700,000 blacks who had fought for their country would be spurned just as comprehensively as before (108), Morrison's fifteen families move even further west to create the absolute stronghold of purity, Ruby — named after Steward and Deacon's sister who dies because no medical attention is available to her: "No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them... She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse... had been trying to reach a veterinarian" (113).

What the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population: it is at once the extreme of an enforced siege or ghetto mentality and the extreme of a cherished racial separatism. In this respect, Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America (the failures of the Declaration, Reconstruction, twentieth-century reforms), and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honour (a triumph of the Exoduster spirit). But the latter, as reflexes of the former, come with a price, too. Morrison's explorations of the American experience, black and white, are never without their ambivalences. Indeed, we might note in passing that, while whites are the determining context for Ruby, they are by and large a determinate absence (represented only by the phrase "Out There"): "Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled" [16]). Instead, the focus is exclusively on black experience, on black racism (the "Disallowing," the intolerant purity of the elite families), on black (especially patriarchal) prejudice. While Reverend Richard Misner's view of the town's males — "They think they have out-foxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him" (306) — implies the macro-structure which has ironically created Ruby in the first place, the Convent shootings in 1976 locate the tragedy squarely in the black community: "their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph," so that Ruby,
“deafened by the roar of its own history,” has become “an unnecessary failure,” too (ibid.). The ironies and ambivalences multiply here: a triumphant history of repelling racial injustice and violence has resulted, by way of its own virtues, in a situation which “imitates” the one it has been escaping from. In her interview with Denard, Morrison comments: “it makes them very isolationist. ... What I explore [is]: How you can make a liberationary gesture and how it can make you end up as the world’s most static conservative” (Denard 1998: 12). As Missy Dehn Kubitschek has neatly put it: “In its critique of Ruby, Paradise confronts one of African American culture’s most sacred cows, the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved of white oppression” (Kubitschek 1998: 179).

Thus, Morrison on the one hand offers a specifically black history, pointing to the culpability for it of white America’s “failures” to apportion basic civil rights equally, whilst simultaneously celebrating that history’s achievements and identifying its own failings. But, on the other, she seems to be offering a general history of America from the re-angled perspective of black experience; as she notes in Playing in the Dark: “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness – from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth-century self” (Morrison 1992a: 65). The history of black America over two hundred years, in other words, is the history of America over that period – and especially of the “failure” of its founding principles. Neither is this just a history of the way white America has treated black Americans: at a more allegorical level, it is indeed a history of the whole American experience. The original Pilgrim Fathers were surely themselves Exodusters escaping European shackles, as later were the new America’s Founding Fathers (Morrison pointedly calls her original leaders Big Papa and Big Daddy, the “Old Fathers” [6, 99], and her current ones the “New Fathers” [18, 194–95]). But the dispossession of Native Americans of their land by the white settlers tainted the purity of the dream of independence and equality from the start. Pointedly, then, the land for the original (black) community of Haven had belonged to “the old Creek Nation which once upon a time a witty government called ‘unassigned land’” (6); and when Big Papa identifies it as indeed their “haven” – “‘Here,’ he said. ‘This is our place’” – the narrative interjects: “Well, it wasn’t, of course. Not yet anyway. It belonged to a family of State Indians ... ” (98–99). And the continual movement west in search of a greater, purer freedom (echoed by the New Fathers’ move from Haven to Ruby) is the stuff on which the American Dream is founded – and then founders.
Furthermore, the pride of the Ruby elders in their ancestral stock, their religious attitudes, their patriotism (at Steward’s home “his American flag flew on holidays” [88]), their belief in the law of the gun, their capitalist ventures in banking and property ownership, their patriarchal sexism (“‘I’m her father. I’ll arrange her mind’” [61]), and their inverted racism (Steward says of Roger Best’s light-skinned “wife of racial tampering” [197], “‘He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind’” [201]) – all replicate the conservative values at the heart of white America. Ruby is not just an isolated black small town – “deafened by its own history” – but America at large by the end of its second century of independence, where, as Misner muses, “The future panted at the gate” (306).

In presenting the ironic ‘paradise’ of Ruby as a microcosm for her black history, Morrison focusses the present of her novel on the ten years or so from the mid-1960s to 1976. This is the period of Vietnam, Watergate, the assassinations of John F. and Robert Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and, in particular, of the acme of the “Second Reconstruction”: the Civil Rights Movement. Earlier non-violent direct action met with violent white reaction, and this subsequently led to the increasingly assertive and potentially violent strategies of black activist and separatist movements like the Black Muslims, “Black Power” and the Black Panthers, and to the “long hot summers” of urban rioting across the country between 1964 and 1968 which culminated in the transnational riots that erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King in May 1968. The final report of the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders in March 1968 had warned:

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal .... What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it. (Quoted in Henretta et al. 1997: 948–99)

1968 is at the centre of the modern period Paradise covers, and Morrison could well have had the above comment in mind when she began to create the past and present of Ruby. For, despite legal reforms in civil and voting rights, deep-seated structural inequalities and abuses persisted, as did the conflicting debates and strategies for change within black communities. Morrison’s novel, then, focusses on the unresolved question of what the future holds in store as the moment of “Second Reconstruction” wanes. It can surely be no coincidence that Manning Marable’s influential book also identifies 1976 as the point at which “decline” turns into “demise”
(Marable 1984: chs. 6, 7), and predicts that a “Third Reconstruction” will
need to arise “to fulfil the lost promises” of the first two (xi–xii, 212).

I will suggest later in what form Morrison may envision such a
possibility, but her primary aim is to show how, in this turbulent period,
radical change is entering even the statically pure, time-warped “ghetto”
of Ruby. Central here is Revd Misner, who arrives in Ruby in 1970,
having been “jailed with thirty-eight others in a tiny cell in Alabama”
(205) during a Civil Rights demonstration, and who wonders, in 1974, if
“the times [have] finally gotten to him”:

Was the desolation that rose after King’s murder ... just now washing over him?
Or was it the calamity of watching the drawn-out abasement of a noxious
President? Had the long unintelligible war infected him ... Everybody in his
high school football team died in that war. Eleven broad-backed boys ... Or was
it Ruby? (160)

However, Ruby itself is “infected” by the times: Deek and Soane’s
sons have been killed in Vietnam late in 1968; a Black Power sign, “the
fist, jet black with red fingernails, [has been] painted on the back wall of
the Oven” (101); “since the murder of Martin Luther King,” the
younger generation are “looking for something” (117), and are clearly
“infected” by the assertive ideology of the new black activist movements
(104). Two scenes in particular, both involving Misner – who supports
the radical young people, but who is presented by the novel neither as
necessarily right nor as an authoritative narrative voice – indicate the
complexity of Morrison’s grasp of the political dilemmas traversing black
communities as the third century of “Independence” dawns. The first is
the debate about the partially erased inscription on the Oven. The elders,
who want to retain the past-determined status quo, read it as static
command: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow”; the young, who want to
grasp the power for change, as active injunction: “Be the Furrow of His
Brow”. Deacon claims that the young cannot know or respect the
meaning of the Oven in the way that the descendents of the ex-slaves who
originally made it do. Misner responds: “‘Seems to me ... they are
respecting it. It’s because they do know the Oven’s value that they want
to give it new life.’” Deek replies:

“They don’t want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into
something they made up.”
“It’s our history too, sir. Not just yours,” said Roy.
“Then act like it. I just told you. That Oven already has a history. It doesn’t need
you to fix it.” (86)

What is at issue here is a theme Morrison had centred Beloved on: not just
the fact of being freed from slavery, but what one does with the “freed self”: simultaneously, of not forgetting one’s history and of not being imprisoned by it in a way that blocks the future. Hence the wonderfully ambivalent final refrain of that novel: “This is not a story to pass on / This is not a story to pass on” (275; my emphases). The realist in Morrison does not resolve the dispute about the Oven’s words, since both positions obtain in Ruby in the 1970s – the “deafening roar” of the past and the future “panting at the gate” locked in tense conflict. However, a telling reflection of Misner’s, echoing that refrain in Beloved, clearly implies that living solely in/on past [hi]stories impedes constructing a future: “But 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; my emphasis). Equally, as we shall see, the novel as a whole neither endorses Ruby’s endemic violence, old or new, nor black separatism, old or new, in proffering the possibility of a transformed future.

The second scene is a related discussion between Misner and Patricia in December 1974. Pat needles Misner by seeming to criticise his Bible class: “‘More like a war class. Kind of military ... ‘No budding Panthers?’” (207). But even she, the secret historian of the Ruby families, who understands how exclusive their intra-racial racism is, is held in the grip of the past: “Negro history and lists of old-time achievements were enough for her but not for this generation” (209). What Misner believes is that the young “want to know about Africa ... Africa is our home” (209–10). But Pat refutes this “sentimentality” by asking: “is it just some kind of past with no slavery in it you’re looking for?” Consequently, the Beloved debate reopens:

“Why not? There was a whole lot of life before slavery. And we ought to know what it is. If we’re going to get rid of the slave mentality, that is.”

“You’re wrong .... Slavery is our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa.”

“We live in the world, Pat. The whole world. Separating us, isolating us — that’s always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future.” (210)

Once again, the novel does not side with either Misner’s dream of “a true home” to be rediscovered at some pre-historical time, “past the whole of Western history” (213), or Pat’s “real” history of slavery and its aftermath. But what it does seem to confirm is that the purity, exclusivity, intolerance and isolation of Ruby is a kind of living death: “Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic. As long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality” (217).
This appears to be the principal position the novel takes up: whatever the cost, separatism is not a solution – for blacks or whites; and Civil Rights must mean the political negotiation of a full place within mainstream society. But Ruby, “immortally” frozen in its own stasis, has no politics because the very conception of change is a contradiction in terms: the town is ideal because it cannot change, and it cannot change because it is ideal. What Ruby does have, however, is an overriding ideology, which is flagged by Pat as her chapter ends and which announces a second – but to my mind, primary – position Paradise occupies. For the purist leaders, ‘The generations had to be not only racially untampered with, but free of adultery too” – “Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women” (217). What is at issue here, in addition to race, is patriarchy.

For above all, Ruby is a patriarchy. While racial exclusion is responsible for bringing the town into being, and while the events of early July 1976 are indeed an indictment of the “failures” of white American democracy, they are overdetermined by a sexual ideology which is not circumscribed by race. Hence the telling subtlety of that opening line of the novel: “They shoot the white girl first,” where the emphasis falls not, as might be expected, on the word “white” – but on “first.” This suggests that while the men do indeed distinguish the women by colour, it is not colour which is their true animus – since “first” implies that they are going on to shoot other women who are not white. Rather, it is that they are all women. Morrison has said about this line: “I did that on purpose … I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn’t matter” (Gray 1998; she had used a similar trope in her only short story, “Recitatif” [Morrison 1995], where the racial identity of the two female protagonists is also never revealed [see Morrison 1992a: xii]). That the identity of the white girl in Paradise remains a mystery merely emphasises that here it is gender rather than race which is the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilising change.

What the Convent women partly represent is “Out There,” or Misner’s “the whole world” which the exclusive paradise of Ruby must perforce “live in.” The Convent’s apparent separation from, but contiguity with, the town underpins this paradox. The women come from all over the States and from diverse backgrounds: Mary Magna, who, as mother superior of an order of missionary nuns, rescued Connie from sexual abuse as a street-child in a South American city, and smuggled her
into the USA (223, 228). Mavis, from urban Maryland, has suffered violent sexual abuse by her husband, and her four-month-old twins, Merle and Pearl, have suffocated in the family Cadillac. Gigi, a sassy sixties girl, has a father on death-row, a grandfather “in a spiffy trailer in Alcorn, Mississippi” (257) and an unreliable boyfriend also in jail, and has been involved in a race riot in Oakland, California. Seneca, whose teenage mother deserted her in a government housing project in 1958 when she was five (126), also has a no-good boyfriend in jail, and has been picked up for sex by a well-heeled woman before arriving at the Convent. Sixteen-year-old Pallas has a wealthy Tulsa entertainment lawyer father preoccupied with litigation, and a divorced artist mother in New Mexico who has sex with Pallas’s boyfriend in her view (169), and has been seriously assaulted before being taken to the Convent (253). Social flotsam and jetsam the women may be (the Ruby men see them as “detritus: throwaway people” [4]), but the one thing they have in common is mistreatment by a society largely governed by male prerogatives, so that the Convent is truly a retreat for them: “The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too” (177). It is from a world which throws up such victimized but liberated women that the “unadulterated and unadultered” Ruby must be protected. But, as John Donne so famously said, “no man is an island” – and he might have added: “no woman either.”

For the traffic, of various kinds, between Ruby and the Convent is longstanding and continuous. Townspeople buy produce there (the novel is full of food/women associations); Deacon has had a fierce sexual relationship with Connie back in 1954, just as his nephew K.D. has an obsessive one with Gigi in the early 1970s; Menus dries out there after heavy drinking (165, 277–78); Soane invites the Convent women to attend K.D. and Arnette’s wedding party in April 1974, which they do in carnivalesque spirit. But it is the women of Ruby who have the most contact with their sisters in the Convent. Soane, Deacon’s wife, who knows about his and Connie’s affair, has had a miscarriage in November 1954 after a visit to the Convent in which she has sought help to abort the child she is carrying as a strategy for rescuing her husband from Connie (239–40, 102). And she continues to visit Connie, partly out of sisterly friendship and partly to procure the herbal “preparations” she needs to sedate her (100). Arnette gives birth to a child there in August 1971, and returns again on her wedding night in April 1974 in order to find out what happened to it (179–80; what did happen to it is one of the novel’s unresolved mysteries: did it die, or did it survive and the women keep it?).
Sweetie, Save-Marie’s mother, has visited it in a distraught state in October 1973 (114), while Billie-Delia retreats there in the same month after the fight with her mother (202): “What she saw and learned there changed her forever” (152). Lone, the old midwife and wise woman, visits regularly, and it is she, on the night before the fatal events of July 1976, who goes there to warn the women of the Ruby men’s plot. Lone’s reflections establish the point:

it was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men. ... Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. Out here ... women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the pedestrians. ... But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women’s. (270)

The oblique irony of this passage simultaneously implies the mechanistic dominance of the men driving there for solace of one kind or another – a dependence which later helps fuel their hatred of the Convent women – and the spontaneous complicity of women in trouble with their “throwaway” sisters when the only succour is that which other women can give.

But change, independence and liberation are not solely represented through the presence of the beyond-the-pale women of the Convent. Even more significant are the inner distancings from, or resistances to, their menfolk amongst the Ruby women themselves. Because Morrison remains a realist – even at her most radically “magical” (although she repudiates the description “magical realist” [Gilroy 1993: 181]) – she presents the wives and daughters of the main families as, of course, complicit in the general ideology of Ruby: conservative, god-fearing, respectable, proud. “Free and protected” (8) – a wryly ironic phrase – under Big Papa and Big Daddy from the beginning, the modern women of Ruby are, nevertheless and in covert ways, not entirely in thrall to patriarchy. Thanks to modern labour-saving household appliances, they have won “the garden battles,” turning their dirt yards into gardens full of flowers and vegetables. The childless and passive Dovey Morgan prefers staying in the house in town on her own rather than returning to the farm with Steward (elsewhere the novel notes: “worse, women who chose themselves for company” [276]); and she is visited there by a male fantasy figure. Soane Morgan, who has sought an abortion at the Convent, shows support for the women there after the shootings: while her sister calls them “‘whores ... that’s what Steward say,’” Soane remarks, “‘These are women, Dovey. Just women’” (288). While
compiling her genealogical history of the fifteen families, Pat Best — herself excluded from the Ruby elite because of her light skin-colour — becomes infuriated, not so much by this kind of racism as by the patriarchalism of the community:

It had reached the point where the small m period was a joke, a dream, a violation of law .... Who were these women who, like her mother, had only one name? Celeste, Olive, Sorrow, Ivlin, Pansy. Who were these women with generalized last names? Brown, Smith, Rivers, Stone, Jones. Women whose identity rested on the men they married. (187–88)

The women in Ruby are “just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise” (201–2). Nevertheless, they have a very different attitude to the Oven than the men, resenting the time and space devoted to its transportation from Haven to Ruby. Soane muses: “A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine.” (103).

Of course, after the shootings, the older women have not really been liberated, readily falling into line with the community in defence of itself against the outside world: “every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation” (297). With the bodies of the Convent women “disappeared,” and the threat of an intrusive white law thereby diminished, the townspeople believe “God had given Ruby a second chance” (297–98). The younger generation of the genetically “pure” is being groomed for the future (not a reassuring thought):

Arnette and K.D. were building a new house on Steward’s property. She was pregnant again .... Steward, insolent and unapologetic, took K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making his nephew and the sixteen-month-old grandnephew rich (thus the new house), casing K.D. into the bank. (299–300)

So the community closes ranks, and the future — in Morrison’s bleak view of modern America, even when from a black perspective — is apparently one of the status quo redivivus.

But the novel offers two — related — alternative possibilities for a different future: one “realistic,” the other “magical.” Billie Delia represents the first of these. “What she saw and learned” on her visit to the Convent had “changed her forever” (152); she leaves home and Ruby; gets a job in a clinic in Demby 90 miles away (202); changes her name from Billie Delia Best to Billie Cato — hence taking back her light-skinned father’s name in order to forge a new identity free of black racism;
is the one who takes Pallas to the Convent after her assault; and understands, at Arnette’s wedding, that the feuding between the town males (including the liberal Misner) is “about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares” (150). Like Denver in *Beloved*, who breaks free of her past by leaving her spellbound home and entering mainstream society, articulated in her grandmother’s words: “‘go on out the yard. Go on’” (Morrison 1987: 244), Billie is the young woman who seeks independence in society at large; and both must surely represent Morrison’s view of where the future lies.

The second “future” the novel proposes is conjured up by the “marvellous” disappearance of the Convent women’s bodies (and of Mavis’s Cadillac) after the shootings, and four of the women’s reappearance in the untitled coda to the novel (Gigi, Pallas, Mavis and Seneca). 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 – with Gigi, significantly, in army gear and “packing [a gun]” (310), Pallas carrying a sword (311), and Mavis laughing at the fact that her ex-husband’s new wife also “packs a gun” (314). The novel ends with what seems to be an amalgam of the “dead” women of the story cradled in visionary bliss by Connie’s mysterious dream-figure, Piedade: “Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (318). This is surely Morrison “thinking beyond, feeling beyond” (Williams [1970] 1974: 77) the determinate realistic present by employing, as she so often does, a counter-realistic “magical” strategy. Ruby, and everything it represents about modern America, is not yet susceptible to transmogrifying change, but there has to be the hope that racism and patriarchy – that deadly duo – can be overthrown. And what Morrison seems to be saying is that if there has indeed to be a successful “Third Reconstruction,” as Manning Marable predicts, then it will be women who bring it about.

Some critics have been unconvinced by this idealistic visionary ending, but the real ending, it seems to me – that within the realistic discourse of the novel – has occurred some pages earlier with Billie Delia on the final page of the last main section (“Save-Marie”):

Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return? When will they reappear … to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? … A backward nowhere ruled by men
whose power to control was out of control ... who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metalling their nails, filing their incisors – but out there. Which is to say she hoped for a miracle. (308; my emphases)

The supernatural coda ends the novel on a note of upbeat fantasy and beguiling mystery, but the true message is that it is in the hands of young women like Billie Delia, just emerging in 1976 from their constraining chrysalis, that the possibility for change resides. The wry narrative voice knows that what Billie is hoping for is indeed “a miracle,” but it still allows her to ask “when” – not “if” – the women will return, and she recognizes that they are “out there” – not in the exclusive sterility of a paradise like Ruby, which has turned inward because of the other feared “Out There,” but in “the whole world” which one must “live in.” The politics of Morrison’s history/herstory are complex and radical, the novel excoriating both the failures of American democracy since Independence in terms of its black citizens, and its black citizens for imitating their white counterparts by engaging in a reverse separatism and patriarchal oppression. And, as the “Second Reconstruction” of the Civil Rights period loses its momentum by 1976, the novel points to the possibility of Equal Rights, driven by the new women’s movements, as the way forward to a transformed future society. To deny, as Morrison has, that this is not a “feminist” novel is understandable – it is so much more than the polemical statement of an “-ist”; but the disavowal is also disingenuous, since the fundamental politics of Paradise, if not abstractly feminist, are surely “womanist” in at least one aspect of Alice Walker’s definition: “Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, and women’s emotional flexibility ... and women’s strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist ... ” (Walker [1983] 1985: xi–xii).

References


