"As If Word Magic Had Anything to Do with the Courage It Took to be a Man": Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's "Paradise"
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"As if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man": Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* combines an innovative intervention in debates over the representation of black men with a critique of traditional Western notions of masculinity. In representing the struggles of African American men to articulate their masculinity under extreme pressure, the novel also enacts Morrison's own struggle to articulate black masculinity in ways that reveal problems of patriarchal concepts of manhood without reproducing racist stereotypes. By depicting black men committing brutal violence against defenseless women, *Paradise* inevitably enters into current controversies over cultural representations of African American men. However, although *Paradise* engages with many of the stereotypes of black masculinity that are central to this controversy, regarding criminality, misogyny, and violence, Morrison departs radically from the explanations for these problems that structure dominant racial discourse.

By locating these men in an overwhelmingly patriarchal community, Morrison contests the idea that black male violence stems from a dysfunctional African American matriarchal society. This concept was most notoriously and explicitly articulated in the Moynihan Report, which was largely condemned and rejected when it appeared in the 1960s. However, as Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham observe in their introduction to *Representing Black Men*, giving the example of a 1993 *Newsweek* article that traced the problems of African American society to the failure of black fathers to fulfill conventional patriarchal roles, this report's "normative premises and prescriptions have insinuated themselves in contemporary racial discourse" (xi). Morrison subverts these premises and prescriptions by representing her town's official history as dominated by individuals with names like "Big Papa" and "Big Daddy," and by two entire generations of men known as the "Old Fathers" and the "New Fathers." Almost every family in her mythical Ruby is controlled by a powerful father figure, and these men also possess hegemonic authority in the public sphere.

Even as she undermines one stereotype of black masculinity in this novel, however, Morrison may appear to endorse another. The criticisms of some reviewers suggest *Paradise* is vulnerable to the accusations of stereotyping black men as naturally, irredeemably sexist and violently domineering, accusations often leveled at recent African American women's fiction. In her tellingly titled *New York Times* review, "Worthy Women, Unredeemable Men," Michiko Kakutani accused *Paradise* of representing men as "two-dimensional cliché[s] . . . uniformly control freaks or hotheads, eager to dismiss independent women as sluts or witches, and determined to make everyone submit to their will" (2).
Accusations that Morrison stereotypes black men in this way might be contested through reference to the behavior of the female characters in *Paradise*, a number of whom demonize and even attack stigmatized Others as do the men characters. After Sweetie Fleetwood flees to the Convent to escape the arduous task of caring for her sick children, she calls the women living there “demons,” and later claims they forced her to go there (130). Similarly, Arnette Fleetwood attacks the Convent Women and blames them for the death of the baby that she herself injured through attempts to force a miscarriage (250, 197-80). However, here I argue that Morrison is focusing centrally on a black male problem in *Paradise*, but she is not condemning black men or implying that their negative characteristics are somehow fixed, naturally determined by their race and gender. Instead, *Paradise* exposes pervasive problems inherent in Western social ideals of masculinity, which impact upon African American men with particular force for historical reasons. She represents black masculinity as a discursive construct, continually shaped and reshaped by the influence of hegemonic American ideologies of manhood, the cultural heritage of African American history, and the traumatic psychical consequences of race oppression.

Central to Western notions of masculinity is the transmission of authority, social identity, and cultural heritage from father to son. Morrison’s previous novels have attested to the difficulties and disruptions that plague this process among African Americans. She depicts how slavery and subsequent racist social structures have stripped black men of paternal authority and ensured that they have not a proud cultural heritage but an unresolved and often inarticulable history of trauma and suffering to pass on. As David Marriott has written, in African American cultures, “racism is passed on from father to son like an unwitting curse: a bitterness buried yet operative between them, inhabiting the son (though he doesn’t know it), a fault line of self and identity” (96). African American patriarchy has often been the transmission of an internalized, dehumanizing racist gaze that splits and traumatizes filial subjectivity. Initially, the men in *Paradise* appear to have escaped this inheritance by establishing an autonomous, all-black community, one free from the dominating social influences of white racism. They possess a proud cultural heritage that they transmit through the generations as a central element of their children’s upbringing. However, aspects of the novel such as the sterility of Steward and Dovey Morgan’s marriage and the “damaged” Fleetwood children are obvious metaphors for serious dysfunction within this process. The men of Ruby actually pass on an unresolved trauma, an experience of dehumanizing shame that their stories of heroic achievement deny rather than work through and overcome. To return to David Marriott’s terms, the “bitterness,” the “unwitting curse” of racism is being secretly transmitted through the generations in Ruby, as powerfully and as damagingly as in normative African American cultural situations. This process has its roots in the origins of this community, and the reaction of the Old Fathers to an experience they remember as “The Disallowing.” The profound, enduring ramifications of this rejection from Fairly, an already established all black town in the Oklahoma Territory, initially seem difficult to explain; the Disallowing involved no violence or direct, explicit insult. As I will demonstrate, however, it was an intolerable experience for the men in this group because it profoundly challenged their concept of what it means to be a man, a concept grounded in white American ideals of masculinity.

Prior to their migration, Morrison’s Old Fathers typify the problematic relation African American men have experienced with hegemonic American ideologies of masculinity. The histori-
cal circumstances of 19th-century America amplified what European ideology traditionally prized as the essential elements of manhood: autonomy, agency, and power, control over one's self, family, and environment. As E. Anthony Rotundo has noted, freedom from the limitations of European hierarchies and socially defined identities led 19th-century white American men to believe they possessed a limitless capacity to invent their selves (3-4). America was perceived as a virgin wilderness, ready to be shaped by the untrammelled white male will in a way that enacted white masculinity. Morrison has endorsed this interpretation of American masculinity in Playing in the Dark, describing how “the American as new, white and male” was constituted by “autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power” (43-44).

For Morrison, a key element of this new masculinity was the subjugation of African Americans; control over men reduced to objects confirmed the “absolute masculine power of white men. Being denied all the elements that hegemony deemed essential to manhood was a traumatic, dehumanizing experience for black men: hence, Orlando Patterson’s characterization of their experience of slavery as “social death.” For them to own no property, nor impose their will on any aspect of external reality, not even their own bodies; they were totally unmanned. As important officials in Reconstruction regimes, the Old Fathers could briefly escape this traumatic objectification and conceive of themselves as men according to hegemonic American ideals of masculinity; men whose wills command respect and authority in the public sphere. But the return of white supremacy to the South strips them of this masculine power, reducing them to a shameful impotence, which they refuse consciously to acknowledge. They fiercely repress the threat to their sense of manhood posed by racist humiliations beneath an increasingly rigid facade of ideal masculinity. Morrison describes them as becoming “stiffer, prouder with each misfortune” (14). They behave with a “dignified manner” and “studied speech” that other African Americans interpret as “arrogance” (302). Their inability to acknowledge the actual, shaming impotence that racism inflicts is illustrated well by the story of Zechariah Morgan’s rejection of his twin brother, Tea, for dancing for drunken white men who threaten otherwise to shoot him. As one character eventually recognizes, Zechariah rejected Tea not merely out of disgust at his behavior, but because he feared that seeing his brother would remind him that “the shame” produced by such racist humiliations was also “in himself” (303).

For the Old Fathers, the Oklahoma Territory represents a unique opportunity to escape the dominant power of white racism. However, after migrating there, they suffer a humiliation that threatens to shatter their already fragile and embattled sense of manhood: the Disallowing. This experience inflicts such devastating shame partly because the Old Fathers interpret being classified as unworthy of acceptance into a town populated by lighter-skinned African Americans as a dehumanizing judgment on their dark skin. But the reflections of their descendant, Steward Morgan, on their inability to contest their exclusion, or even to provide their families with food and shelter, show other ways that the Disallowing traumatized these men: “It was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones. . . . Even now, in 1973, riding his own land, with free wind blowing Night’s mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody” (95-96). This passage expands our understanding of the Disallowing’s traumatic effects, and demonstrates how these effects become transgenerational. The Disallowing is also traumatic because it denies these
The Disallowing was an intolerable experience for these men because it profoundly challenged their concept of what it means to be a man.

I do not argue, however, that Paradise implies that women, black or white, are somehow less susceptible than men to the pain and humiliation of mental abuse. The experiences of some of the Convent Women demonstrate how powerfully shame and contempt can impact women. But the specific type of shame that the Disallowing engenders is far more damaging to people who aspire to conventionally masculine forms of identity than to those who do not. As Philip Weinstein has noted, because the efficacy of the will in the public world was essential to white masculine identity in the 19th-century South, “To be essentially without such power [was] to risk the loss of one’s identity” (105). In this culture, it was through gaining the power to realize one’s will in the external world that men emerged from selfless, infantile impotence and confusion into a discrete, unified “I” that speaks with authority and feels in control of self and environment (99). Thus, an experience that abrogates the will, that denies a man any control over his circumstances, can be experienced not just as a denial of masculine status but also as a shattering of human selfhood. Steward attests to this power when he says the humiliation “threatened to crack open their bones,” one of a number of images of extreme violence and bodily disintegration used in Paradise to describe the effects of the Disallowing.

Because the Disallowing possesses this self-shattering potential for the Old Fathers, they cannot honestly contemplate its effects; they can only respond with what J. Brooks Bouson calls a “shame-rage” defense (199-200). They aggressively deny the shame and self-hatred induced by this experience and deflect it onto a humiliated and excluded Other. They repeat this trauma even as they deny its effects by “Disallowing” the rest of American society. They reject and demonize it, while insistently asserting their pride in their own superiority. This reaction to trauma is exemplified by the group’s collective assumption of divinely chosen status, setting themselves above all other, less favored Americans, and by Zechariah Morgan’s individual assumption of the role of Biblical patriarch, bolstering his compromised masculinity by assuming leadership of his people. He assumes a patriarchal authority that is absolute and not reliant on recognition from other men and ideologies because it is, he insists, divinely sanctioned. Morrison depicts his vision of a divine messenger who guides the people to the site of Haven as a desperate hallucination to enable this proud denial of the shame of the Disallowing (97-98). His divinely chosen identity is another signal from Morrison of these men’s derivative conceptualization of masculinity. The Old Fathers are, on one level, a parody and a critique of America’s Founding Fathers. The discrepancy in male and female reactions to the Disallowing is immediately evident. The men proudly refuse the food and blankets that the people of Fairly offered after excluding them. But
according to the unofficial versions of town history that Patricia Best gleans from conversations with townswomen, one woman sneaked back to take this food, to give the children on their continuing journey (195).

The Old Fathers continue to react against the traumatic impact of the Disallowing through their construction of their own settlement. Steward Morgan explains how these men perceived the uncultivated Indian land on which they established Haven:

To the Old Fathers it signaled luxury—an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders. . . . Here freedom was not . . . the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king" (99)

The migrants counter internalized shame by conceptualizing the town they carve out of the wilderness as a manifestation of their true worth, their manhood, a symbol of their "soul and stature." It represents irrefutable evidence that they possess the masculine will power that the Disallowing abrogated. There exists a strong similarity between this attitude about their land and the classically American concept of masculinity that Weinstein has traced to the philosophy of John Locke. Locke rejected the idea that human identity is defined through class and ancestry. Instead, as Weinstein puts it: "Our labor, the activation of our personal resources, the goods we individually gather through such expenditure of energy; these are to be thought of (with a literalism inconceivable in the Old World) as our inalienable property, central to our unfettered, self-shaped identity" (90). Subjective identity is thus understood as enacted through the products of labor. In Haven the Old Fathers are finally free to become typical American men, who realize their masculinity through controlling and shaping their environment. They no longer rely on recognition of their manhood from a hostile society; instead, by conquering nature and shaping it to their will, they can construct themselves as "king[s]." The almost superhuman level of effort that the Old Fathers put in and the hardships they endure to establish a totally self-sufficient town demonstrate their enthusiasm for this concept.

However, Morrison is severely critical of this method of enacting masculinity. It simply represses the traumatic consequences of racist oppression, rather than working through and overcoming them, ensuring that they will persist in some hidden but debilitating form within black psychology. Beneath their external achievements, the trauma of the Disallowing remains lodged in the Old Father's minds "like a bullet in the brain" (109). Morrison draws on ideas from contemporary trauma theory to articulate how this mental state is passed on transgenerationally. Theorists such as Maria Root have suggested that:

The effects of . . . trauma can be passed down transgenerationally through stories of atrocities about what has been done to those who came before. Over time, the nature of this type of trauma manifests itself in one's reactivity to certain types of environmental stimuli, as one carries not only one's own direct experiences, but also the unresolved traumatic experiences of those who went before. (374)

The descendants of the Old Fathers are immersed from birth in the stories of community history used to transform the shame of the Disallowing into pride, and therefore they inherit the same traumatized psychological state. Stories of the Disallowing go from "tale to memory to rememory," in Kathryn Nicol's apt phrase (224). They form a personal traumatic experience for every generation in this community, compulsively commemorated and repeated. Reverend Misner summarizes this fixation:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks. . . . Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to wit,
skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. 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)

None of these stories acknowledges the shame of the Disallowing; instead, like their forefathers, these men compulsively transform “outrage” into evidence of positive, masculine qualities. Furthermore, the poverty of their own lived experiences, their presumed lack of stories to tell about themselves, demonstrates their self-alienation, their inability to contemplate themselves in ways that suggest personal shame. What Misner describes at one point as their preference for “Booker T. solutions” over “Du Bois problems” signals their refusal to accept the “double-consciousness” that W. E. B. Du Bois described as an inevitable consequence of living in racist culture (212). They prefer to seek a “Booker T.” style self-sufficiency, in total physical and mental isolation from racist mainstream culture, over an acknowledgement of the intrusion of the racist gaze into their minds.

Subsequent contacts with the outside world only reinforce these men’s traumatized need to Disallow anyone inside or outside of their community who transgresses their values and threatens to bring (further) shame upon them. In particular, the men who go to fight in World War II are horrified by the racist abuse of black soldiers, which they experience, in Patricia Best’s words as “the Disallowing, Part Two.” Thus, upon their return they reenact the Old Father’s response to trauma by moving their now failing town to an even more isolated, Western location (194). The men’s insistence on transporting to Ruby every brick of the communal Oven that the Old Fathers built in Haven as a symbol of achieved community and independence symbolizes the heavy burden of their collective history (103). Significantly, the women resent the space given to the Oven on the wagons, and are far less concerned than the men with preserving the original motto when it becomes a matter of public debate (93). This gender gap is further evidence that the long-term psychological problems generated by the Disallowing are chiefly masculine ones. During this new migration, Ruby Morgan falls ill and dies after white hospitals refuse to treat her, while a nurse is seeking a vet who will see her (113). This discrimination is another experience of dehumanizing shame with psychological effects that the men cannot acknowledge: it increases their determination to isolate their community from all potentially traumatic contact with the outside world. Steward’s aforementioned desire to “shoot somebody” when he contemplates the Disallowing is typical of the towns-men’s increasingly violent need to deny and project the traumatic shame within the history of their community (96).

In modern Ruby, the men are so focused on preserving their forefathers’ achievements that they have no personal accomplishments through which to define their masculinity. Instead, they avoid acknowledging the inherited shame of the Disallowing by defining their identities purely through the wealth and possessions that their forefathers’ achievements generate. Deacon’s journey to work in his perfectly polished sedan exemplifies this dominance:

The silliness of driving to where he could walk in less time than it took to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment... He laughed along with his friends at his vanity because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe: the magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory. (107)

In Deacon’s mind, his car symbolizes all the admirable, manly qualities that his community associates with him. It functions virtually as a manifestation,
an embodiment of his masculinity. The relation between this obsession with external signifiers of identity and inner emptiness is explicitly noted by Dovey’s reflections on her husband Steward: “Almost always . . . when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost . . . Contrary to his (and all of Ruby’s) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses” (82).

Morrison represents a range of profound social problems resulting from the hegemony of this patriarchal concept of manhood in Ruby; the “losses” that Dovey refers to include the gradual erosion of all of the positive traits that had enabled the original success of this community. Because possessions and status have become so crucial to the formation of masculine identity, the modern townspeople distrust one another, losing the strong communal bonds crucial to their forefathers’ achievements. As Reverend Misner notes, “the glacial wariness they once confined to strangers more and more was directed toward each other” (161). Consider the dispute between the Fleetwoods and the Morgans, one of the central events in the narrative present. To achieve true manhood, the men of both families believe they have to dominate the town, by possessing utmost power over the community and monopolizing the symbols of wealth and status that now determine masculine identity. This supremacy means that for the Fleetwoods, their debt and their failure to exert enough control over the women in their family to prevent Arnette’s pregnancy are deeply shameful, unmanly failings. As a community where shame has to be denied and aggressively projected outside of the self, they feel strongly inclined to externalize this shame in violence. The Morgans are similarly unable to acknowledge K. D.’s shameful behavior by and his responsibility for Arnette’s pregnancy; they rely on their wealth to conceal their disgrace. These attitudes bring the families to the verge of serious violence, causing “Jefferson Fleetwood [to pull] a gun on K. D.” and Menus “to interrupt a pushing match between Steward and Arnold” (154). Further evidence of the men of Ruby’s inability to cope with mental confusion, anger, and problems that threaten their rigid, proud self-images lies in Deacon’s reaction to the dispute over the Oven inscription. In an ominous portent of the massacre, we are told that the anger and confusion caused by the debate with the youth of Ruby “swole Deek’s neck and, on a weekday, had him blowing out the brains of quail to keep his own from exploding” (104).

Through such events, Morrison implies that instituting patriarchy will only exacerbate the dysfunctions that supposedly produce violence within African American society. She shows that men who feel insecure in their grasp on the patriarchal status of manhood will turn to violence to confirm their possession of masculine strength and power. As we have seen, the men of Ruby, like all African American men, cannot avoid internalizing the shaming racist gaze that denies their manhood. They use violence to compensate for these repressed inner doubts, to prove to themselves that they are authentic men. Although they repudiate the American government as far as possible in every other respect, the townspeople are proud of the uniforms and medals awarded to them, proof and recognition of their fearless masculinity. Steward Morgan frames and displays his honorable discharge papers (88). Jeff Fleetwood has a tendency to criticize “K. D., who had never served in the military” (156). Violence becomes a man’s basic, founding way of proving he possesses masculine willpower. Morrison shows that the practice of enacting “manhood” through exerting aggressive control over the environment can easily turn to indiscriminate violence when the will is frustrated. Thus, Jeff responds to his inability to do anything...
about the shame of his “damaged” children by wanting “to kill somebody. Since he couldn’t kill the Veterans Administration, others might just have to do” (58). Their belief in the enactment of masculinity through violence culminates in the massacre, where Morrison describes the men as: “Fondling their weapons, feeling suddenly so young and good” (285). The decision to kill and the taking up of guns enhances the men’s sense of their own manliness and power.

The men of Ruby will permit no questioning or revision of this model of masculine identity, for fear of having to consider the traumatic shame repressed beneath their rigid, idealized self-images. The differences between black men are coercively erased by this overbearing, monolithic conceptualization of masculinity. There is only one, rigidly defined way of being a man in Ruby, and men who transgress its boundaries are either excluded or recuperated, as shown through the fate of Ruby men who establish race-transgressive relationships. For example, Menus Harper is forced to give up the mixed race “prostitute” he falls in love with during military service outside Ruby, and sinks into alcoholic despair. In this way, Morrison critiques any ideology that prescribes particular, fixed, and ahistorical forms of masculine identity as the solution to the problems of African American men or as a singular “true” expression of black manhood. The Old Fathers brought along outcasts whom they discovered during their migration, yet their descendants exclude the vulnerable. Elder Morgan defended a socially stigmatized woman against male abuse, yet his brothers and their peers attack and kill such women. The dominant men in modern Ruby mask such radical discontinuities and contradictions by insistently reading back their own idea of masculinity onto town history and denying any evidence of change. In the debate over the Oven inscription, they will not even tolerate the references of the young people of Ruby to the Old Fathers as “ex-slaves”: only “men” will suffice (84-85). They reject the idea that black masculinity changes and develops according to historical conditions. Steward reflects, after this debate, that: “Had he any sons, they would have been sterling examples of rectitude, laughing at Misner’s notions of manhood: backtalk, namechanges—as if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man” (95).

The men who dominate contemporary Ruby idealize black masculinity as an ahistorical absolute, transmitted from father to son without question or revision, which Steward dismisses as inherently unmanly.

In Ruby the men’s refusal to accept the influence of historical change upon human identity is compounded by their increasing essentialization of masculinity as racially determined. The Old Fathers interpreted the Disallowing as a consequence of their dark skin. In keeping with their “shame rage” reaction to humiliation, they invert the racial hierarchy of America and redefine dark skin as a mark of racial purity and superiority. They are secretly pleased when other black towns in Oklahoma, inhabited by lighter-skinned people, fail. Just as 19th-century white male Americans reified and fetishized the combination of “pure white blood” and “biological maleness” as the essence of authentic manhood, these men make their “pure” blackness a symbol of a racially determined “true” masculinity. “Eight-rock” skin becomes the most important of the external symbols through which they construct their identity; it masks their inner emptiness and defines their self-proclaimed superior masculinity. As Reverend Misner observes, their “hard won heaven [is] defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange” (306). He assigns anyone with skin lighter than his own to these categories, and therefore regards them as less human.

Again, Morrison defines this new racial hierarchy as gendered. When Roger Best insists on bringing a mixed-
race wife, Delia, on the migration from Haven to Ruby, Steward protests: "He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind.” The women angrily reject this racist criticism: Soane and Dovey “shushed him,” and Fairy DuPres “cursed him” (201).

Furthermore, when Delia later suffers ultimately fatal complications in childbirth, the women struggle to persuade one of the townsman to get medical help, but they all refuse (197).

Through the townsman’s treatment of women Morrison critiques most powerfully the malign effects of patriarchy on African American society. The idea that true manhood involves mastery over subjugated others leads the men of Ruby to seek total mastery over the only people they are in a position to dominate: the women in their community. The fact of independent female subjectivity becomes almost intolerable for these men, who feel a need to control women absolutely to confirm their own masculine status.

Thus, at the meeting about K. D. and Arnette, Arnold Fleetwood is infuriated by the Morgan’s veiled insults about his financial and family problems, crucial indicators of masculinity in Ruby as I have argued. He responds to Steward’s suggestion that Arnette may decide her future independently, by blustering: “I’m her father. I’ll arrange her mind” (61). Women living under hegemonic male control are denied any subjective independence. At her wedding, Arnette reflects that her fiancé, K. D., is “all she knew about her self—which is to say everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Delia, no one had told her there was any other way to think of herself” (148). Only Billie Delia, daughter of a deceased father and raised by a mother marginalized because not completely controlled by Ruby men, has grown up able to conceptualize herself beyond subordinate relations to men.

Morrison shows that the men’s hegemonic attitude about women originates in their determination to escape their traditional impotence in the face of white abuse of black women. One of their central aims in establishing Haven and Ruby was to create spaces where they could protect black women. However, the importance of protecting women quickly developed into the mastery over women. This transition is clear when Steward reflects on his elder brother’s defense of a black prostitute under attack by two white men: “Steward liked that story, but it unnerved him to know it was based on the defense . . . of a whore. He did not sympathize with the white men, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own” (95). For men of Steward’s generation, the need to control female behavior, to shape them into an affirmation of black masculinity, has replaced their forefathers’ urgent desire to protect black women from racist abuse. Now only certain types of black women merit protection.

Justine Tally reads Paradise as a critique of one of the most patriarchal forms of black separatism in American society, “The Nation of Islam” (71). I find this critique particularly apt in Morrison’s representation of Ruby’s gender politics. For example, one pledge recited by the participants of the Nation’s Million Man March (1995) states: “I will never abuse my wife by striking her, disrespecting her, for she is the mother of my children and the producer of my future” (Clatterbaugh 170, italics added). Paradise responds to such ideologies by showing the inequality, oppression, and even persecution that can result from any cultural system that values women primarily for their reproductive function rather than their status as human subjects. The Ruby men’s fetishization of racial purity leads them to value women primarily for their ability to produce new generations of “eight-rock” men, and therefore to seek to maintain absolute control over their sexuality. As Delia’s mother, Patricia Best, observes: “everything that worries them must come from women” (217). Male anxieties about female sexuality and the mainte-
inance of racial purity ensure that women's lives are dominated by tasks considered to be appropriate female behavior, leaving no opportunity for immoral activity. K. D. observes that his "Aunt Soane worked like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing more lace than could ever be practical" (53). But for men like her husband Deacon, the practical worth of the task is irrelevant; he believes that an ideal society should contain: "Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks" (111).

This need for absolute control over women makes the men of Ruby suspicious and hostile towards the Convent Women, who exist beyond their control on the margins of their community. In John Duvall's words, "these women have claimed . . . the power to name and identify themselves. This is the unspoken reason for the raid on the Convent" (143). The men respond to this assertion of female agency, which challenges their concept of their own masculinity, by holding the Convent Women accountable for all the problems of Ruby. Because the Convent Women lack any public voice or power to determine how they are perceived in Ruby, they are easily molded into a scapegoat for town problems that these men cannot understand or control:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. . . . [T]he one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women. (11)

In fact, most of these "outrages" can only be indirectly connected to the Convent women, and to perceive them as the cause of these problems requires grossly distorted logic. But the men have to believe this logic to believe they can manage these problems, which mostly involve the rebellious younger generation of Ruby whom they are struggling to discipline, and thus reassert their male will power. Thus, Steward's reflections on the helplessness of his Disallowed ancestors "made him want to shoot somebody" (96). In part, then, the massacre of the Convent Women is a response to an intolerably shameful sense of loss of control over their town and its inhabitants; such shame must be resisted somehow, ultimately even by murderous violence. Morrison describes the killers as "feeling suddenly so young and good" holding their guns during the massacre, because "guns are more than decoration, intimidation or comfort. They are meant" (285). The murderous power of gun violence constitutes final, irrefutable confirmation that they possess the masculine ability to impose their will on their environment. As Patricia Best concludes, the men committed this act not just because they perceived the Convent women as "impure," but also "because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them" (297). The massacre reasserts the authority of the concept of racially pure, authentic masculinity.

The men's scapegoating of the Convent Women also results partly from their relationships with these women. Their insistence on achieving total control over women is intimately bound up with an idea of self-control crucial to their concept of masculinity. The sociologist Jonathan Rutherford has summarized the classic masculinist attitude to sexuality and femininity that is reproduced by the hegemonic culture in Ruby:

The dominant meanings of masculinity in our culture are about producing our bodies as instruments to our wills. Flesh, sexuality, emotionality, these become seen as uncontrollable forces and a source of anxiety. . . . We learn to repress them because they are the antithesis of what it means to be masculine. It's a repression that we project onto others. Our struggle for self con-
control is acted out as mastery over others. (26)

The men of Ruby aspire to a particularly severe subjugation of desire and emotion to the rational, moral will. This hierarchizing is a consequence of their continuing desire to prove their worth according to the Victorian values of the mainstream American culture that rejected their ancestors as well as of their inability to cope with shame. They act out their fierce battle for sexual self-control through a control of female sexuality. The burden of sexual morality is projected entirely upon women, a fact best demonstrated by K. D.’s refusal to accept any responsibility for Arnette’s pregnancy: he assumes no responsibility for their sexual activity (54).

At one point, Deacon Morgan recalls a boyhood memory that defines his ideal vision of femininity: “His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal” (110). He recalls a group of well-dressed, demure women whom he never knew, only witnessed posing for a photograph (109-10). For him they were purely visual, passive objects of the male gaze, not flesh-real, mobile, desiring, subjective human beings. They are an ideal, almost spiritual vision, against which Deacon measures all other women and onto whom he projects his own need for moral perfection, his sense of his own morality. The other men share this need for women to symbolize moral perfection; one killer blames the Convent Women for calling “into question the value of almost every woman he knew” (8). Rather than functioning as symbols of male moral purity, the Convent Women outrage the men by reminding them of their lack of total self-control. They have developed relationships with these women because of illicit desires, traumatic memories, and shameful experiences that are incompatible with their self-images yet cannot be entirely mastered and repressed. Killing the women thus eliminates intolerable internal shame. Deacon Morgan is deeply ashamed of his adulterous affair with the mixed race Convent woman Connie, which transgressed the racial and moral codes of Ruby. He blames Connie entirely for their affair, telling himself that she “tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things,” and thinks of her as “a joke and a travesty of what a woman should be” (279-80). By taking part in the massacre, he believes he can “erase both the shame and the kind of woman he believed was its source” (279).

Similarly, Menus Harper apparently participates to erase the shame of his alcoholism, which he projects onto these women: “Getting rid of some unattached women who had wiped up after him . . . removed his vomit, listened to his curses as well as his sobs, might convince him for a while that he was truly a man, unpolluted” (278).

The killers convince themselves so fully that all blame for their personal and community problems lies within the Convent women that they figure the massacre as a righteous, morally justified act. This construction helps explain Morrison’s initially puzzling description of the Morgan twins during the massacre as men with “wide innocent eyes” (12). “Innocent” seems a strange descriptor for men engaged in a massacre, yet Morrison later describes Steward again as possessing “innocent eyes,” despite the fact that he appears to be the more bigoted and violent of the twins (156). In fact, these descriptions refer to the type of male innocence Morrison has always condemned in her novels.7 As Weinstein has shown, innocence for Morrison refers not to a virtuous state of isolation from worldly evils, but a male fantasy of pure, unadulterated, intact selfhood and sovereign will, untainted by the intrusion of shame (130-31). This fantasy enables a denial of one’s human involvement in sinfulness, and a fantasy of the absolute righteousness of all one’s actions. Innocent people frequently harm others under the guise of righteousness in Morrison’s fiction.
just as the killers in *Paradise* justify their actions as morally necessary for the survival of their town. They perform atrocities with “the odor of righteousness,” and they murder with “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18). Their righteousness is also bolstered by the absolute moral dichotomy they perceive between themselves and their victims. They dehumanize and demonize their victims in a racialized vocabulary of white bigotry, using terms such as “venom,” “detritus,” and “satanic” (4, 7). Indeed, the men form a conventional white lynch mob in the novel’s opening scene, which lacks information about character and setting. Furthermore, their violence seems calm, controlled and planned, not frenzied or instinctual. The detail of their race shocks the reader. Morrison’s ultimate indictment of Ruby’s patriarchy is that it reproduces ideologies and practices of racist white men.

Ironically, the psychological problems that ensue from the Ruby men’s conceptualization of masculinity lead them to destroy the very community that Morrison represents as offering an escape from the burden of their traumatic past. Weinstein has remarked Morrison’s engagement with the question: “how can a black man achieve masculinity outside a white model of manhood?” (112-13) In *Paradise*, Morrison only tentatively answers this question. The main example of subjective development in the novel involves only women and their “loud dreaming” at the Convent. Nevertheless, the details of this process, the ways that these women overcome their traumatic pasts, have implications for the men of Ruby. Connie initiates the “loud dreaming” by telling the other Convent Women: “I call myself Consolata Sosa” (262). This insistence on her original, full name suggests this process will involve the rediscovery of the true self, but this self is far from the static image of discrete, unified, rational ego that the men of Ruby perceive as authentic masculinity. Instead, through an inter-subjective process, the Convent Women have to acknowledge and work through the traumatic experiences and feelings of shame and self-hatred that are ineluctably part of their deepest inner reality. They accept that the self is a fluid, mutable construct, made and remade by experiences and relationships that ultimately transcend all ideologically constructed binary oppositions. Connie deconstructs the founding binary opposition within the structure of Western thought, the Christian separation of spirit and flesh, by stating: “Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (263). Only through accepting these truths about the self, Morrison suggests, can African Americans escape the cycle of trauma and violence within their society. The Convent Women, who had been fractious and antagonistic, if only in trivial ways, become peaceful and contented.

Morrison does depict briefly and tentatively a man achieving subjective development along these lines. Ultimately, Deacon Morgan, if not his twin Steward, discovers that “backtalk,” “namechanges,” and “word magic” are integral to the courage it takes to be a man (95). Morrison inscribes black masculinity as a discursive construct shaped by words, by generational dialogues about cultural heritage. After the massacre, Deacon goes on foot to confess to Reverend Misner, to begin such a dialogue. His mode of travel symbolizes not only Christian penitence, but also his discarding of the external shell of identity symbolized by the car he used even for short journeys:

Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions. He spoke to his wife in the opaque manner he thought appropriate. None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner. His words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice black-
The arduous, painful physical effort implied in these images suggests that such "courage" is required of "men." Only by expressly uttering the traumatic and shameful memories that he and his community have repressed can he transform the hollow shell of his masculine identity into a genuine and functional expression of his selfhood. Heretofore, his method of self-definition has resulted in a life that, as Misner observes, is "uninhabitable" (302). Thus, he begins to explain to Misner the shameful details of his ancestral history that have been repressed by the insistently proud master narratives of Ruby (302). Through this scene, Morrison implies that white, patriarchal ideals of discrete, unified selfhood and the sovereignty of the will are dangerous fantasies. Black men must acknowledge that traumatic, shameful Otherness, beyond the control of the rational will, invariably lurks beneath idealized self-images. Deacon realizes that Zechariah Morgan banished his twin because "He saw something that shamed him. . . . Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself" (303). This realization implies that despite the rift that the massacre has opened between him and Steward, Deacon will not reject his twin brother in the manner of his grandfather, projecting his shame onto an external Other who can be destroyed or banished; instead he will accept the shame within himself.

In conclusion, then, on one level at least, *Paradise* intervenes in the debate on the "crisis" of black masculinity central to current African American cultural production. Paul Gilroy has criticized many of these works for identifying the black family "as the mechanism for reproducing the dysfunction which disables the race as a whole," and implying that this dysfunction can be resolved "by intervening in the family to compensate and rebuild the race by instituting appropriate forms of masculinity and male authority" (204). By contrast, Morrison implicitly criticizes those African American artists who locate the "truth" of blackness, its idealized expression, in traditional, romantic notions of the patriarchal family. Through the allegorical significance of her imaginary town, she argues that African Americans' sociopolitical problems can only be exacerbated by their own attempts to institute patriarchal forms of social organization. An unresolved traumatic African American heritage must be confronted and worked through, in ways incompatible with patriarchal forms of identity, if black people are to escape the cycles of trauma and violence that plague their communities.

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**Notes**

1. Weinstein has written that in Morrison's novels, slavery possesses a "legacy of inflicted impotence" that "may act, in a reversal of the very intention of legacies, as a disabling parental bequest, in the form of menacing cultural memories and material humiliations. Morrison attends from the beginning of her career to the repercussions of this patriarchally inflicted wound" (105-06).

2. Many critics interpret the "damaged" Fleetwood children as a genetic consequence of the practice of endogamy within such a small community. However, Tally reads K. D.'s claim that Jeff Fleetwood is angry with the Veteran's Administration (58) as possible evidence that Jeff has fathered deformed children because of exposure to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam (27). That the army might be responsible for Jeff's health problems ironically signifies on the Moynihan Report's recommendation of military service to correct the gender dysfunction that it alleges pathologizes African American families.

3. There is no direct indication in the text that the people of Fairly turned the Old Fathers away because of their dark skin, as becomes axiomatic in their official history; the rejection might have been based on their penniless and bedraggled situation.

4. See especially Patterson's explanation of how slavery inflicts "social death" by stripping men of
agency and honor, based on Frederick Douglass’s famous statement: “A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity” (13).

5. Morrison coins the term “rememory” in Beloved, where it describes, as Bouson puts it, “uncontrolled remembering and reliving of emotionally painful experiences . . . traumatic memory” (135).

6. Bouson associates Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness with the effects of shame in her book on this theme in Morrison’s fiction. She notes the similarity of Du Bois’s description of how living in a racist society compels the African American to view himself through the contemptuous eyes of the other, and the accentuated self-consciousness and vivid sense of the negative evaluation of the self in the other’s eyes that characterize the experience of shame (14). This interpretation supports the understanding of the double-consciousness induced by racism as a form of internalized shame.

7. Morrison condemns male “innocence” most explicitly and forcefully in Tar Baby, when her narrator declares: “An innocent man is a sin before God. Inhuman and therefore unworthy. No man should live without absorbing the sins of his kind, the foul air of his innocence” (243).

8. The behavior of white lynch mobs often was frenzied, as has been demonstrated. See, for example, Hale. But according to the rhetorical tropes established within American literary discourse, white violence is conventionally figured as calm and rational, while black violence is portrayed as instinctive and wild. Morrison reverses this rhetorical distinction to challenge readers’ preconceptions about the representation of race and violence.

Works Cited


