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Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

Rob Davidson

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin (258)

With the publication of *Paradise* in 1998, Toni Morrison completed a trilogy of historical novels that began with *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). Broadly speaking, Morrison’s trilogy is concerned with “re-membering” the historical past for herself, for African Americans, and for America as a whole: *Beloved* reconsiders the periods of Emancipation and Reconstruction, *Jazz* reconsiders the Harlem Renaissance, and *Paradise* is principally concerned with the Vietnam and civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the most important concerns in the trilogy is the “use value” of narrative. Storytelling is historiography in Morrison’s fiction, and in each novel she carefully examines the role of narrative in the reconstitution of both the individual self and society at large. But Morrison’s method and focus for her project have evolved and widened over the course of the trilogy. *Beloved* and *Jazz* are principally concerned with the process of the individual reconstitution of the self, most notably for the characters of Sethe, Paul D, and Violet and Joe Trace. In *Paradise*, Morrison no longer concentrates on the individual process of reconstitution. While the individual process is still important—and intimately related to the communal—Morrison is more interested in assessing the role of
narrative in the community as a whole. The protagonist of *Paradise* is, in fact, the community of Ruby, Oklahoma—including the rag-tag band of Convent women who live on its fringes.

This essay will focus on the Ruby-centered narratives in *Paradise*, which focus on the patriarchy and emphasize a rigidly controlled communal historiography predicated on the subordination of the individual to the group. Steward and Deacon Morgan—Ruby's recognized leaders—employ, enforce, and defend this communal narrative. The “Patri-cia” section of *Paradise* then offers a complex counter-reading of Ruby's patriarchal historiography. The essay will conclude with a consideration of how the town as a whole narratively responds to the Convent massacre, and how that event impacts the patriarchal structure of the town.

\[\text{Isolated from the outside world, its very existence predicated on racial separatism, Ruby, Oklahoma, is experiencing growing pains in 1976. The descendants of its founding fathers—the 8-rocks, as Patricia Best Cato calls them}^{2}\text{—control every essential aspect of the town, from the general stores to the banks. Deacon and Steward Morgan are twin brothers at the heart of the patriarchal system that has governed Ruby since its founding. Descendants of one of the original founding fathers, they are deeply engaged in preserving their idea of what Ruby should be. Their motivations are not solely—or even principally—moral or idealistic. Rather, the Morgans zealously desire to preserve the status quo, which means to preserve their power.}\]

Ironically, neither Steward nor Deacon Morgan have any children. Steward and Dovey are infertile, while Deacon and Soane's sons died in Vietnam. Their nephew, K.D. Morgan, is “their hope and their despair” (55)—the sole male heir to the Morgan fortune and power. In the opening pages of the “Grace” section of *Paradise*, the Morgans and the Fleetwoods meet at the Fleetwood house to discuss a problem: K.D. has struck his girlfriend, Arnette Fleetwood (daughter of one of the town's most prominent families). The men want to settle the problem on their own terms. In Ruby no outside judicial force is wanted or needed. The men like to believe a woman is safe enough to walk around the town at night unescorted because “Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was
prey" (8). Given the violent opening section of the book, that line is savagely ironic.

Of course, no women are present when the men discuss K.D. and Arnette. The men have, however, called in an outsider to negotiate a truce: Richard Misner, Ruby's Baptist preacher, whom the Morgans consider a potential threat. His socially progressive ideas are part of the problem, but to the Morgans, the real threat is that Misner “could encourage strange behavior; side with a teenage girl; shift ground to Fleetwood. A man like that, willing to throw money away, could give customers ideas. Make them think there was a choice about interest rates” (56).

To the elder Morgans, K.D.'s brashness presents less a moral problem than a threat to the status quo. The need to call in an outsider like Misner to negotiate between the 8-rock families weakens the Morgans' position. Despite the moral talk in the heated exchange at the Fleetwood house, the Morgans want, above all else, to remain in control. When the verbal negotiations begin to stall, Misner unwittingly threatens the status quo by asking K.D. why he hit Arnette: “He expected this forthright question to open up a space for honesty, where the men could stop playing bear and come to terms” (59). Jeff Fleetwood, Arnette's father, curtly responds: “We don't care about why.... What I want to know is what you going to do about it?” (60).

The unspoken answer to Misner's question concerns the “open secret” of Arnette's pregnancy (K.D. is the father, of course). There is a silent consensus not to broach that topic, but to quickly conclude the negotiations. K.D. agrees to apologize, and the elder Morgans promise to assist with Arnette's upcoming college expenses. When Steward asks if Arnette might not change her mind about going to college, Jeff snaps, “I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind” (61). At the first mention of college, Steward asks when school begins. Told it starts in August, he asks if Arnette will be ready by then. The subtext is, as I read it, that Steward is contemplating when Arnette's baby would be due. When Jeff Fleetwood vows to arrange his daughter's mind, the suggestion may be that he will get her out of town in time to spare the town any disgrace.3

The exchange in the Fleetwood house exemplifies how things work in Ruby: the town elders negotiate on behalf of the younger men and all the women. Deals are cut in the back room, and a blind eye is turned toward unfortunate accidents like Arnette's pregnancy. Above all else, the
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8-rocks want to preserve the town’s stability, and, of all the elders, the Morgans are most interested in preserving the status quo.

The hierarchy demonstrates its power again in the “Seneca” section, when the older and younger males discuss the Oven—a centerpiece of the town carried from its original site in Haven, Oklahoma, to the town of Ruby. The Oven’s motto has been partially erased or broken; the younger generation wants to update it to read “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” whereas the older generation wants to preserve the original version, “Beware the Furrow of His Brow.” Interestingly, neither group knows for certain what the original message was; the elders are relying on the memory of Esther Fleetwood (86–87). The heated exchange—again moderated by Richard Misner—is telling. Deacon Morgan fiercely condemns the younger men: “Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. . . . They dug the clay—not you.” Misner’s response indicates his sympathies: “Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It’s because they do know the Oven’s value that they want to give it new life.” Royal Beauchamp seconds the sentiment, claiming, “It’s our history too, sir. Not just yours.” Deacon curtly responds, “That Oven already has a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it” (85–86).

The scene exposes competing concepts of communal historiography. The older generation is firmly committed to its extant narrative. As they understand it, the story includes every fact about how the 8-rocks got to Haven and the meaning of that ordeal. They are loathe to change it. Misner and the younger generation want to rewrite the extant narrative. For them, history is open and dynamic.

The debate surrounding the Oven’s motto involves not merely a question of authority, but also one of authorship. E. L. Doctorow reminds us that

There is no history except as it is composed. There are no failed revolutions, only lawless conspiracies. All history is contemporary history, says Benedetto Croce in History as the Story of Liberty: “However remote in time events may seem to be, every historical judgment refers to present needs and situations.” That is why history has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another. The act of composition can never end. (160–61)
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The younger generation of Ruby wants to do precisely that—rewrite history. Again, the real issue for the Morgans is power, which the older men will not give up. When the youths claim that changing the motto to “Be” would reinforce the idea that “We are the power,” the older men cry blasphemy and Steward Morgan ends the debate with a blunt threat: “If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake” (87).

In *Paradise*, every potential threat to the status quo becomes an emergency for the Morgans and their sympathizers. It may be something as commonplace as a car full of white teenagers whistling at young girls; in this case, the gun-toting men of the town surround the offenders and wordlessly bully them into leaving (12–13). When the threat becomes more palpable, as with the younger men who seek to assert themselves by reinscribing the message on the Oven, the older men threaten them verbally. And as the assault on the Convent demonstrates, to preserve their power the older men are capable of terrible violence. Walter Benjamin writes:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. (259)

This captures the essence of the Morgan mentality: the perpetual “state of emergency” is one of their chief tactics for retaining power, as it justifies—in their minds, at least—practically any course of action.

Of course, the Morgans are not merely brute terrorists. Their strategy for maintaining their position can be more subtle: they understand, on some level, the power of narrative to establish moral authority, and this is why communal historiography—that is, a tightly controlled version of the town’s history—becomes paramount. As the Oven debate shows, when anyone challenges the elders’ position, the elders offer a recitation of communal history, because the community’s extant historical narrative recounts a long history of terror and abuse—from the hor-
rors of slavery to the modern-day exodus known to the residents of Ruby as the Disallowing—and this narrative serves as a justification for their "state of emergency." *Paradise* foregrounds this strategy in its opening section:

The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not. . . . And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather—the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves. (13)

The "controlling" story is the Disallowing—the story of how 158 freed black slaves left "Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes" (13) in 1890 and at every stop were turned away by whites, by Native Americans, and by fellow blacks for being "too poor, too bedraggled-looking" (14). Morgan historiography is based on memory and oral history. Apart from family Bibles, few or no documents record town history, which is passed down orally from father to son.

Morrison takes great pains to establish the legitimacy of the "state of emergency" that Ruby believes in; historically, there is cause for it. But Morrison also refuses to idealize this approach; she understands that such militant defensiveness carries the potential for abuse and corruption. Whatever the valid historical reasons for Ruby's defensiveness, they do not justify the quasi-fascistic impulses of men like Steward Morgan—to say nothing of the assault on the Convent.

Ruby's elders have converted the narrative of the Disallowing into political dogma, an ideology that allows them any measure of terror or violence so long as it defends (what they deem) the town's common interests. The ironic final sentence of "Ruby" underscores this point: "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18). Linda Hutcheon writes:

I ideology—how a culture represents itself to itself—"doxifies" or naturalizes narrative representation, making it appear as natural or common-sensical . . . it presents what is really *constructed* meaning as something *inherent* in that which is being represented. (49)
This point calls to mind Patricia Storace's astute observation that the men of Ruby seek "the perpetual overarching authority of the creator at the moment of creation" (66). Understandably, Deacon and Steward Morgan—and the other men of their generation—desperately want to be the authors of their own history. Their history, however, becomes a closed book, not a text to be rewritten—or, for that matter, reinterpreted—with each generation.

The men of Ruby believe unfailingly—dogmatically—in their own constructed history; but the moral basis for this belief has eroded, and the elders now cling to it less for moral reasons (though they freely employ the rhetoric of morality) than for a brute desire to preserve their powerful position at any cost. Musing on the debate over the Oven's motto, Steward Morgan admits that

Personally he didn't give a damn. The point was not why it should or should not be changed, but what Reverend Misner gained by instigating the idea. . . . He wondered if that generation—Misner's and K.D.'s—would have to be sacrificed to get to the next one. (94)

Not only individuals but whole generations may be sacrificed to an inflexible history. Steward "remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told . . . ." (95).

If the patriarchs of Ruby are overly rigid in their adherence to their version of history, the women are not. *Paradise* complicates every version of history it presents, continually urging broader contexts that undermine and problematize the conservative approach of the men. History is obviously gendered in *Paradise*. Not surprisingly, then, women frequently construct competing versions of Ruby's history, though they hide them from the men.

For example, Dovey Morgan feels that arguing over the Oven's motto is pointless. "Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing meaning down, was futile" (93). Soane Morgan goes even further, believing that

Minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value. What was needed back in Haven's early days had never been needed in Ruby. . . . The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it. . . .
Oh, how the men loved putting it back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted. A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine. . . .

The most radical reconsideration of patriarchal history in *Paradise* is articulated by Patricia Best Cato in the “Patricia” section, which includes a reconsideration of the most treasured of all the patriarchal grand narratives: the Disallowing.

Philip Page argues that Toni Morrison’s novels are postmodern, not in the sense of extreme self-referentiality or in the mockery of narration, but in their privileging of polyvocalism, stretched boundaries, open-endedness, and unraveled binary oppositions. In her novels, time is nonlinear, the forms are open, multiple voices are heard, and endings are ambiguous because Morrison insists on the necessity of continual and multiple reworkings—for characters, narrators, author, and readers. Forming an identity, authoring a text, telling a story, and reading or listening to a text must be ongoing, not fixed in time, place, or position. Since wholeness is illusory and division is endemic, one must explore the fragmentations through multiple visions.

Rafael Pérez-Torres presents a similar argument. He defines *Beloved* as a postmodern novel on the grounds of its use of pastiche, in which “Numerous voices retell the same event, each from different perspectives, none taking precedence over the others” (106). This process, one of “repetition and variation” (107), is “the primary strategy of Morrison’s text” (104).

Morrison employs this strategy of pastiche, or “repetition and variation,” in “Patricia,” one of the most fascinating portions of *Paradise*. Patricia Best Cato is Ruby’s self-appointed local historian, who collects and records the town’s various family trees. But the townspeople resent her prying questions and shut “Invisible doors.” The instinctual defensive-ness of her fellow townspeople prompts Patricia to abandon “all pre-
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tense to objective comment.” Rather, “The project became unfit for any eyes except her own” (187). In Ruby, all communal history is patriarchal and rigidly controlled. As a woman, then, she must pursue the project as an exercise in personal historiography. This is a familiar theme in Morrison’s work, and it is of central importance to *Paradise* (though it is more directly addressed in the Convent-centered narratives). Ultimately, however, Patricia’s exercise in personal historiography proves to be of limited use.

Patricia’s failure contrasts sharply with similar situations in both *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Mae G. Henderson analyzes Sethe’s “reconstitution of self” and suggests that this process—the construction of identity, rather than the discovery of it—is central to Morrison’s artistic vision in the novel. Morrison continues to explore this issue in *Jazz*. In that novel, Violet demonstrates “literary archeology” at work—“the imaginative and reconstructive recovery of the past” (Henderson 66). Violet, if she is to survive, must do what Sethe has to do, namely, “liberate her present from the ‘burden of the past’ . . . reconstitute the past through personal narrative” (72). More specifically, Violet, like Sethe,

must imaginatively reconstitute, or “re-member,” her history “in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for [her] and their significance” . . . it is the (re)configuration of the past which enables one to refigure the future.4 (73)

The question of agency is crucial in this process. Alice Manfred tells Violet Trace that there is no use in remaining passive, a victim of her deranged thoughts regarding her husband Joe and his adulterous affair with Dorcas. “Nobody’s asking you to take it,” Alice says, “I’m saying make it, make it!” (113). Violet and perhaps Sethe—and the women of the Convent—learn this assertion over the past, this command of the facts and the willingness to manipulate them.

Patricia Best Cato is not as successful in her attempt at literary archeology, and it is worth thinking carefully about the reasons why she fails. One reason, of course, is gender. Patricia is investigating a rigidly patriarchal system that, as we have seen, constantly invokes a “state of emergency.” Fiercely defensive of the status quo, the town shuts its “invisible doors” on Patricia’s project. But she persists. Poring over old family trees and finding countless women with “only one name” or “women with generalized last names,” Patricia realizes that, in Ruby, a woman’s
identity “rested on” the man she married (187). She is interested in the gaps and omissions left by the patriarchal version of history:

The town’s official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches, had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories. Pat had wanted proof in documents where possible to match the stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted—freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance. (188)

Patricia’s “free and insightful” interpretation of facts is essential to the historiographer openly seeking a fresh viewpoint on old ideas. Linda Hutcheon holds that

Historians never seize the event directly and entirely, only incompletely and laterally—through documents . . . [and] texts . . . History does not so much say what the past was; rather, it says what it is still possible to know—and thus represent—of it. (87)

In her reconsideration, Patricia must inevitably reread the Disallowing—and how that defining series of events has continued to shape the Ruby of 1974 (the date of the “Patricia” section). Patricia believes the rejection by fellow blacks is the great unspoken, unacknowledged keystone of the town’s identity and definition of self: “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many” (189). That there could be a color line in the black community must have come as a shock to the original 8-rocks: “Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves” (194). For Patricia, it follows that this realization becomes the foundation of the town’s isolationism and its desire to keep family lines and racial stock “pure.” In a world where both lighter-skinned blacks and whites despise the darker-skinned blacks, the 8-rocks never feel safe.

But must this always be the case? Patricia wonders why the men who left to fight in World War II—a group that included Steward and
Deacon Morgan—did not end the “state of emergency” upon their return:

[I]t could have been over and done with. Should have been over and done with. The rejection, which they called the Disallowing, was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn’t it? Oh, no. Those that survived that particular war came right back home, saw what had become of Haven, heard about the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy—and recognized the Disallowing, Part Two. (194)

The “state of emergency” that prompted the men to move from Haven to Ruby has persisted to 1976—along with the attendant prejudices against both outsiders and lighter-skinned blacks. Patricia’s deduction of this fact prompts a chain of realizations. For example, she intuits the true reason behind Menus Jury’s chronic drunkenness—Menus returned from the Vietnam war with a woman he loved, but the town collectively “[forced] him to give back or return the woman he brought home to marry,” a “pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia” (195).

Patricia’s speculations carry profound personal implications; in a letter to her father, she realizes why the town has distanced itself from the Best family: “They hate us because she [Patricia’s mother] looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter” (196). This realization offers a cogent explanation for why the town ostracizes Patricia’s daughter, Billie Delia. Billie Delia is denigrated not for the stated moral reason—an innocent childhood event of dropping her britches in public when she was three years old (150–51), which led townspeople to label her a “loose woman”—but for the unstated reason: she is light-skinned. Ironically, Billie Delia is considered a loose woman when, in fact, she is still a virgin, “untouched” at Arnette’s wedding (151). Arnette Fleetwood, the “racially pure” daughter of Jeff Fleetwood, is in fact pregnant outside of wedlock, yet the town supports her because she is dark-skinned. Skin color trumps morality every time in Ruby.

For Patricia, the implications of the town’s racism are profound. Patricia once struck Billie Delia with a pressing iron, and had
missed killing her own daughter by inches. . . . Pat realized that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. . . . The question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her.5 (203).

The answer, sadly, seems clear, though Patricia doesn’t wholly realize its implications until the Christmas pageant, an event that will also articulate the limits—and ultimate failure—of Patricia’s personal and communal history projects.

The highlight of the annual Christmas pageant, a dramatic reenactment of the Disallowing, conflates the town’s modern exodus with the story of Christ’s birth: an obvious attempt to secure a spiritual and religious foundation for the community. During the pageant, Patricia and Richard Misner engage in a debate about historicism. Misner has been using his Sunday school classes as a forum for introducing new ideas to the community: “Unlike most of the folks here, we read newspapers and different kinds of books. We keep up” (208). And Misner promotes an open forum: “Isolation kills generations. It has no future” (210). He is progressive, open-minded, and sincerely concerned with the civil-rights struggles of the era. He presents an African-oriented cultural view that, given Ruby’s hyperdefensive stance, is not well received by the town, including Patricia. Confronted with the “radical” views of an outsider—outsider and enemy “mean the same thing” in Ruby, she tells Misner (212)—Patricia reverts to isolationism, rejecting a pro-Africa agenda and insisting that “Africa doesn’t mean anything to me. . . . Slavery is our past” (209–10).

Frustrated with Ruby’s isolationism, Misner asks Patricia to imagine “a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home.” Like other Ruby residents confronted with prying questions, she is evasive and curt: “You preaching, Reverend” (213). Offered the world, she chooses Ruby.

But it is Misner’s simplest question—why seven families are represented on stage during the Christmas pageant, rather than the nine original founding families (211)—that has the most impact. Patricia realizes that as certain families have married outsiders and brought in lighter-skinned blacks, they have been quietly removed from the reenactment—written out of the town’s 8-rock history. Emboldened by her discovery,
Patricia finds the courage to question her 8-rock father, Roger Best, noting that “the holy families get fewer and fewer. . . . It was skin color, wasn’t it? . . . The way people get chosen and ranked in this town” (215–16). Roger’s response—like Patricia’s in her conversation with Misner—is again typical: a curt denial followed by a long silence.

Patricia is obviously at the edge of some revelation: she has discovered—and even dared to articulate—the town’s racism. But what Patricia does next is one of the most ambiguous and problematic gestures in this complex novel: she burns all her research, her letters, and her town history project. While this makes her feel “clean” and prompts her to laugh (217), as the project burns to cinders, she realizes again that the Morgans are in charge of Ruby, and muses on the bizarre fact that no one ever dies in—that is, within the town limits—of Ruby:

Did they [the Morgans] really believe that no one died in Ruby? Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. 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.

Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women.

“Dear God,” she murmured. “Dear, dear God. I burned the papers.” (217)

Is Patricia lamenting her impulsive act or celebrating it? The reader can imagine either or both. In the reading I prefer, Patricia realizes that her role as a woman has a certain potential power in “worrying” the Morgans, and that she has erred in burning the manuscripts because now she has no textual proof for her claims. Patricia’s act completely undermines her position as a textual historiographer of Ruby; the town will henceforth have an oral history rigidly controlled by men.

Of course, Patricia’s work has ultimately been a historiography of the self and has led to new knowledge of her position within Ruby’s hierarchy. But as we saw in her exchanges with both Richard Misner and her father, Roger Best, Patricia doesn’t want to push too hard or venture too far from the “official history.” Burning her work ends her project of personal reconstitution.

Perhaps the most plausible explanation for this act comes from the example of Patricia’s daughter, Billie Delia: if one does not agree with
the official history and politics, the only option is to leave town. And that is too dear a price for Patricia to pay. This is why Patricia is so surprisingly different from Sethe, Violet Trace, and the women of the Convent. In the character of Patricia Best Cato, Morrison creates a female character who fails at—or defensively backs away from—the liberating process of reconstituting the self through "literary archaeology."

The final example of communal historiography in the Ruby-centered narratives comes in "Save-Marie," when the townspeople are trying to make sense of the men's brutal massacre at the Convent. Within a week of the event, there are "two editions of the official story" (296). In the first, the nine men tried to talk to the Convent women and urge them "to leave or mend their ways," and violence somehow followed. In the second, five men—Steward, Deacon, and K.D. Morgan; Sergeant Person; and Wisdom Poole—went to the Convent with the intention of evicting the women, while four others—Harper and Menus Jury and Arnold and Jeff Fleetwood—followed, trying to restrain the other five. When the Convent women responded with violence, one of the five men shot and killed the white woman in a fit of anger. Again, greater violence somehow followed (296–97).

The first version, of course, is the Morgan rendition; it is predicated on solidarity and common purpose. The second version—authored by the Fleetwoods and Jurys—demonstrates crevices within the 8-rocks. Patricia Best Cato, however, has concocted three more, unofficial, versions. The women were killed

(a) because [they] were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because [they] were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (c) because [the men] could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and also what the "deal" required" (297)

Of the five posited versions, the last squares with my thesis in this essay: that the 8-rock men—who intimidate and threaten their own townsfolk into submission—execute the Convent women not for moral reasons but as a show of strength. They assert themselves so that Richard Misner and the younger generation—and any would-be upstarts, like Patricia Best Cato—understand who is in charge. While I think this is a
compelling explanation, one must admit that no single explanation can satisfactorily explain the assault, which, in the complex weave of Paradise, results from mixed and sordid motives.

Richard Misner tries unsuccessfully to sort through the various versions to get at the truth. There are simply too many versions of the event: “Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, 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). This period of exponentially multiplying versions of the assault is Ruby’s most postmodern moment. As Linda Hutcheon notes, “What is foregrounded in postmodern theory and practice is the self-conscious inscription within history of the existing, but usually concealed, attitude of historians toward their material” (74). This “self-conscious inscription” motivates each family to change the story as they tell it “to make themselves look good” (Paradise 297). Hutcheon, quoting Barbara Foley, argues that

The postmodern situation is that a “truth is being told, with ‘facts’ to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts.” . . . In fact, that teller—of story or history—also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (58)

For Lone DuPres, this communal process of “enhancing, recasting, [and] inventing information” is dispiriting: “she became unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good.” She refrains from openly criticizing her neighbors, however, because she sees a potential for rebirth. Remembering that because the bodies of the slain women all mysteriously disappear no one feels the need to call the (white) police into the town, Lone decides “God had given Ruby a second chance” (297).

Deacon Morgan does his part to satisfy the town’s need for penance. While his brother, Steward, remains “insolent and unapologetic” (299), Deacon walks barefoot (he is customarily seen driving his luxury sedan) to Richard Misner’s house, of all places, where he indirectly confesses to his adulterous affair with Connie Sosa, one of the murdered Convent women (though he will not name her). Deacon also relates to
Misner the story of his twin grandfathers, Coffee and Tea, who were held at gunpoint by whites and ordered to dance. One brother, Tea, danced. Coffee, who refused to dance, was shot in the foot. As a result of the incident, Coffee never again spoke to his brother. Deacon admits to Misner that he is unsure which brother is at fault: the brother who danced to save his feet or the brother who defiantly took the bullet but chose to lose a brother. Misner, understanding Deacon’s tale as an indirect plea for guidance, urges Deacon to forgive and to love Steward. When Deacon says “I got a long way to go, Reverend,” Misner assures him “You’ll make it. . . . No doubt about it” (303).

The implications for the Morgan twins’ tight grip on the town seem obvious: there can never again be complete consensus between the brothers: “the inside difference was too deep for anyone to miss” (299). Sensing this fissure in the heretofore united front of the 8-rock leaders, the citizens openly criticize some of the men. Wisdom Poole, for example, is harshly chastised for the massacre:

> Seventy family members held [Poole] accountable . . . for scandalizing their forefathers’ reputations, giving him no peace or status, reprimanding him daily until he fell on his knees and wept before the entire congregation of Holy Redeemer. (299)

Deacon’s and Wisdom’s public displays of regret seem to satisfy the town; people are loathe to call the police into Ruby, anyway, as it would only stir up trouble.

While *Paradise* concludes before we can see the long-term aftermath of the massacre, Richard Misner articulates his final thoughts on Ruby. Misner inwardly chastises the town for thinking “they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. . . . Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it.” Nevertheless, Misner decides to stay in the town, “among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people” (306). The ending suggests, perhaps, that there is hope yet for Ruby—that the town has indeed been granted a second chance, as Lone DuPres guessed.

If there is hope that Ruby’s patriarchs can change, it most certainly resides in the town’s reborn son, Deacon Morgan. Deacon’s change is as close as Morrison allows any male in the novel to a sense of the individual reconstitution of the self—a process reserved in Morrison’s fiction
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primarily for women like Sethe and Violet Trace, though some men, like Paul D and Joe Trace, also experience the process. In Ruby, only Patricia Best Cato experiences a limited version of it; the women of the Convent do experience it, albeit too briefly.

Nevertheless, the individual reconstitution of the self is crowded to the margins of *Paradise* by a broad, messy picture of a community. In Morrison's earlier fiction, an individual's personal reconstitution always occurs outside the framework of the larger community. In *Beloved*, Sethe has the advantage of the relative isolation of 124 Bluestone road; in *Jazz*, Violet Trace retires to Alice Manfred's apartment for time away from the loud world; in *Paradise*, the women have the Convent, literally on the fringes of polite society. Patricia Best Cato's biggest obstacle, perhaps, is that she has no safe zone, no refuge. As a citizen of Ruby and the daughter of an 8-rock father, she has no place to hide. And patriarchal society strictly enforces rules for women; the Morgans do not hesitate to respond forcefully to perceived threats—be it Menus Jury's light-skinned fiancée or the Convent women's alleged immorality.

Patricia Storace suggests that Morrison's novel functions as both "a serious work of fiction" and a parable, and argues that

*Paradise* is a novel about pioneers laying claim to a country, and, less explicitly, about the ways in which possession of this country has been extended and justified through stories, stories kneaded strongly into the image of the country itself, so that the story of its claiming almost irresistibly evokes images of white founding fathers. (64–65)

Storace is correct to point to the form of the parable; *Paradise* is, on the broadest metaphorical level, a provocative allegory of nationhood. *Paradise* opens in July of 1976—the bicentennial of the United States. It is no coincidence that the angry group of men hunting down the Convent women are the descendants of the founding fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma. And it is no coincidence that these men are black, and that the first woman they kill is white. When one reads the novel allegorically, as a reconfiguration of the founding of the United States, Morrison's vision of totalizing patriarchal historiography takes on double weight. And this vision is worth heeding as the United States enters the next millennium.
Notes

1. In contrast, the Convent-centered story lines emphasize matriarchy and privilege personal historiography (the individual reconstitution of the self). Unfortunately, a full investigation of this subject is beyond the scope of this essay. In some sense, my focus goes against the spirit of the novel. Morrison has taken great pains to weave all the story lines of Paradise together, creating a patchwork narrative that demonstrates the ways lives overlap and entangle in any community.

2. The term 8-rock refers to “a deep deep level in the coal mines” (Paradise 193).

3. It therefore follows that it is Arnette who shows up at the Convent on the final page of the “Grace” section, claiming that she’s “been raped and it’s almost August” (77). The narrator’s comment—“Only part of that was true”—suggests that Arnette is looking for someone to help her abort her baby, and that she hopes claiming to have been raped will inspire the Convent women to help.

4. Obviously, the Convent in Paradise is a site for female reconstitution, both spiritual and communal. Despite radical isolation and occasional infighting, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas experience a rich sense of sororitas which, under the guiding hand of Consolata and her “loud dreaming,” leaves the women “altered,” calmed, and “no longer haunted” (265–66) by their troubled pasts.

5. The line distinctly echoes Steward’s earlier thought about sacrificing Misner’s and K.D.’s generation “to get to the next one” (94)—and the chilling effect is the same.

Works cited


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