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Locating Paradise in the Post–Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory

This article attempts to “locate” Toni Morrison’s Paradise in the post–civil rights era by identifying its place within contemporary discussions about African American culture and the civil rights movement’s legacy. Paradise is but one instance of an ongoing conversation among critical race theorists about the possibility of social, cultural, and legal reform. In the twenty-eight-year period between the publication of The Bluest Eye (1970) and Paradise (1998), the civil rights movement declined as a contemporary social force. By the early 1980s, critical race theory emerged and began “uncover[ing] the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestation of racism” (Crenshaw et al. xxix). The 1990s brought groundbreaking books that developed critical race theory and blurred disciplinary boundaries to demonstrate how discursive spheres have been racialized, gendered, classed, and sexed (Bell, Delgado, Guinier, hooks and West, and Williams). Due to its engagement with critical race theory, Morrison’s novel translates paradise from a universalized concept that transcends race, class, nation, and gender toward a smaller, more local, and more “manageable” version.

Paradise exemplifies and contributes to these new discourses on race and otherness by narrating the complementary histories of an all-black town (named Ruby) in rural Oklahoma and the nearby

Home is not a little thing.

Toni Morrison, Paradise
convent that became a refuge for young women. The stories ultimately come together at the conclusion of the civil rights movement when the men of Ruby attack the “Convent Women” to drive them off and/or kill them. Through these interwoven stories, Morrison describes how the idealization of whiteness haunts the Convent and Ruby (spaces seemingly free from racism and white people), and how racial identity is always gendered and gender identity always raced.1 By situating the novel in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Morrison captures the shift from the civil rights movement to the post–civil rights era, in which the realities of racial integration and gender equality, as putative paradises, were first being examined. Morrison insists that there can be no simple escape from the effects of race, racism, gender, and sexism without some sort of decolonization.

In *Paradise*, Morrison portrays how African Americans have houses, but not homes. Haven, this group’s first settlement, and then Ruby fail to live up to their names because racist and sexist ideologies do not respect the borders established by the townspeople. These communities based on a utopian ideal are not homes because the racial ideologies that the inhabitants of Ruby sought to escape follow them within their hearts and minds. As in much of Morrison’s work, racist ideologies transform “domestic” sites into racialized spaces due to the racism and sexism built into their foundations. *Paradise* thus testifies to the difficulties of building a real home within the racialized soil of the United States.

In her nonfiction writings, Morrison has explored how an unspoken African American presence haunts American literature

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1. Michelle Wallace has argued that black nationalist discourses have overlapped with dominant ideas to separate race and gender as distinct subject positions or categories of analysis. She points out that this separation “makes no sense in terms of the material reality of representations of ‘race’ in American culture, which has always been profoundly entangled with issues of gender, sexuality, and the female body” (109). Wallace’s observations prefigure, but accurately characterize, Morrison’s own approach to the interface between race and gender. What neither Morrison nor Wallace explicitly states is that legal discourse is part of the reason why race and gender must be thought separately in American culture. While race and gender are each protected classes under the Fourteenth Amendment, a claimant must choose whether race or gender is the main cause of oppression to have an actionable claim. Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that legal discourse must take note of what she calls “intersectionality,” or the idea that people hold multiple identities simultaneously, and that multiple factors can cause discriminatory behavior (“Mapping the Margins” 337).
(“Unspeakable Things” 210, 212). Thus the very foundation of Morrison’s fiction, the discipline of literature, is marked by racialization. These racializations come to shape how scholars and students understand literary texts, including her own. Morrison has argued that “[f]or the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a new white man” (Playing in the Dark 14–15). Her interrogation of literature’s foundations suggests that perhaps other disciplinary tools, methods, and concerns may be useful in uncovering the effects of literature. To do justice to Paradise, students of Morrison must not use the tools of the literary tradition to limit the meaning of her work. While at work on Paradise, Morrison stated in a speech that “[i]n the novel I am now writing, I am trying first to enunciate and then eclipse the racial gaze altogether” (“Home” 9). In that same speech, she characterized her entire oeuvre as seeking a way “to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home” (“Home” 5). In defining her project in Paradise and her career in these terms, Morrison announces her attempt to put critical race theory into the form of an allegorical novel and carves out a central role for writers and artists within post–civil rights era cultural criticism.2 Morrison also suggests that critical race theory is necessary to get America’s house in order and make it a home for all people.

Because her literary and critical efforts have aimed at the cultural effects of unconscious racialized and gendered thinking, perhaps Morrison should be considered a critical race theorist, despite her status as a literary figure. Though generally identified with legal scholars of color, critical race theory, because of its interest in racist cultural practices, habits, and rituals, refers to more than the legal studies writing of Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Derrick Bell. Scholars from a wide range of disci-

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2. James Baldwin points out the possible error of making protest the organizing principle of African American literature. Baldwin writes: “[T]he avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed. They are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility. It is, indeed, considered the sign of a frivolity so intense as to approach decadence to suggest that these books are both badly written and wildly improbable. One is told to put first things first, the good of society before niceties of style or characterization” (14). Morrison’s work, however, avoids the pitfall of placing intention or politics over literary style. If anything, Morrison’s attention to style and aesthetics may cover over the strong political undercurrents of her work.
plines who challenge the way disciplinary formations reinforce the importance of race without mentioning it can also be considered critical race theorists. Educational institutions including the academic disciplines of law, literature, history, and philosophy offer only a temporary reprieve from the effects of race, since even these institutions may be built on a racialized foundation. Despite recent efforts to revise reading lists and course requirements in English and other academic departments, disciplinary-based scholarship still remains rooted in specific historical and theoretical frameworks that cannot easily be transferred to race-conscious modes of inquiry.

Like critical race theory, Morrison’s novel suggests that a transcendent, overarching paradise free from racism and sexism may not exist, but discrete theories, methods, and strategies may prove useful in pushing American culture to a better place. Morrison specifically disavows a grand theory of utopia, despite the seemingly Edenic title of Paradise. In fact, she used “War” as the working title for the novel, and only upon the advice of her editor changed it to Paradise (Mulrine 71). The actual trajectory of the novel suggests a movement from a raced and gendered cultural war to the hope of creating an earthly paradise. It is for this reason that the novel opens in dystopia, deferring and thus detouring any concept that readers may bring to the text about the meaning of paradise: “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time” (3). This opening offers a poetic of displacement, turning the putative home of paradise into a nightmare, with six words, bullets really, that shoot holes into its imagined perfection.

3. Other scholars who might be included in this expanded sense of critical race theory are bell hooks, Cornel West, Ana Castillo, and Gerald Vizenor. These writers and thinkers not only explore the effects of racism but engage in writing practices that contest the form in which “academic” work should be presented, forms that may perpetuate racism in the university and beyond.

4. Critical race theory has shifted race-based criticism from exploring only one aspect of difference (race) to a mode exploring how various social hierarchies (gender, class, sexual orientation) intersect within power relations. This multilayered approach has revolutionized the study of difference within the academy.

5. Morrison argues that a focus on home transforms the effort of healing “away from an impossible future or an irretrievably and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (“Home” 4).

6. Morrison has explained about the novel’s beginning, “I wanted to open with somebody’s finger on the trigger, to close when it was pulled, and to have the whole novel exist in that moment of the decision to kill or not” (qtd. in Mulrine 71).
Ruby, and more broadly the United States, is depicted as a house divided against itself. Critical race theory offers a mélange of theories, methods, and analysis from a range of disciplines, including law and literature, to imagine a better future.

The Legal Foundations of *Paradise*

*Paradise* begins in de(con)struction. What literally is destroyed is the Convent, dispersing its inhabitants, but the novel also works on a more metaphorical level, deconstructing the ideal of paradise. In my reading of the novel, paradise constitutes another name for home, a place that provides safety and nurturing. This interpretation, however, would connect Morrison to critical race theorists in only a peripheral way. Rather, what links Morrison to the merging of legal, cultural, and literary discourses is how she situates her story within legal history. The paradise that Morrison examines is the direct product of the juridical discourse on equality and freedom that enabled and limited the changes of the civil rights movements.

The names of places in *Paradise*—“Convent,” “Haven,” and “Ruby” suggest a respite from what lurks beyond their borders—cannot be understood without reference to legal discourse. The nation’s laws are never physically present in the novel. Unlike most stories about westward movement and the settling of the “frontier,” no sheriff, deputy, or military personnel represent, in flesh and blood, law and order. Instead, the people of Haven and Ruby, who are running from that very legal order, bring it with them unconsciously as psychic scars and emotional wounds. The novel thus explores neither legal institutions nor the struggles of legal decision-makers, but the ideology of whiteness that dominates American culture—even historically marginalized people.

The novel quickly moves from the opening shots to the founding myths of the towns and the Convent, and from the contemporary struggle within Ruby to its roots in the act of self-creation. The origins of Haven and Ruby betray their names because the metaphors of sanctuary are never quite realized. Haven is established in 1889, at the moment when Jim Crow segregation was establishing itself as the rule of law. By 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States
legitimated the burgeoning practice of “separate but equal” in its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Haven believed “Booker T. solutions trumped Du Bois problems every time” and prided itself on its ability to sustain itself economically (*Paradise* 212). The segregation deemed lawful in *Plessy* became a perverse law for the men of the putative Edens of Haven and Ruby. The Disallowing, the exclusion of others from a “black town,” became the mythic foundation that necessitated the isolation of Haven. The town accepted and tried to make good on the *Plessy* court’s argument that social equality is not required for achieving the Constitution’s promise of freedom and equality.

But the isolation of Haven, prescribed by Booker T. Washington and endorsed by the *Plessy* court, proved vulnerable. The Great Depression and World War II demonstrated little regard for the boundaries established by the people of Haven. When the town’s principal leaders returned from the war, they “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 strategy of black uplift through political and economic (but not social) equality did not realize the town leaders’ goal of cultural transformation.

So they moved again, “deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made” (16). They founded Ruby, next to the already-established Convent. As much of the African American community had begun to challenge racial exclusion, the town’s attitude toward integration hardened. The town turned further inward. Steward Morgan, one of the leading patriarchs, “called Thurgood Marshall a ‘stir-up Negro’ for handling the NAACP’s segregation suit in Norman” (82). Connie, the putative leader of the Convent by the 1970s, remembers the building of Ruby from the perspective of those living in the Convent: “It was 1954. People were building houses, fencing and plowing land, some seventeen miles south of Christ the King [the name of the convent]” (225). The date on which this far-off, ostensible paradise was built is significant. As the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision—the case that seemingly signified a major shift in legal thought on racial equality—came down, the town further isolated itself. In describing the genesis/genealogy of the town, Morrison identifies one response to the changing
landscape of race relations from the Emancipation through Brown. She does not examine the response of the town in isolation, however. The story of the Convent, which ultimately closes as a result of this period of social change, offers a counterhistory to that of the town.

The tension between Ruby and the Convent erupts after the “successes” of the civil rights movement. The present time that the novel narrates is 1976, after the peak of the civil rights movement. The inhabitants of Ruby and the Convent must negotiate the shifting landscape of race relations. Rather than offer a simple good town/bad town antithesis, Morrison draws a complex set of relations of desire between the two, with each pole of the binary harboring a range of people, all conflicted in different ways. No simple resolution can be achieved. Morrison has explained that “the whole novel exists in that moment of the decision to kill or not,” rather than in any false synthesis or resolution (qtd. in Mulrine 71). She creates this seeming lack of resolution because struggles over racial healing persist in contemporary culture and continue to haunt contemporary discussions about race. The present time of the novel corresponds in a rough way with the time when Morrison began her career as a writer. In and around 1962, Morrison began writing the novel that would become The Bluest Eye. Morrison has described this period in the history of the United States as a “great social upheaval in the life of black people” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things” 218). Other than Tar Baby, Paradise is the only novel Morrison has written that takes place during her adult life. Why does Morrison return to this formative period in her career as a writer to explore the theme of paradise? Can her critique of beauty in The Bluest Eye, rooted in the dominant metaphors of sixties reform movements, elucidate her discussion of home in Paradise? How do the cultural tensions of the late 1960s and early 1970s inform Morrison’s engagement with critical race theory and their reconstruction of legal discourse?

Deconstructing the (Post-)Civil Rights Era,
Deconstructing Paradise

References to the events and cultural politics of the 1960s permeate Paradise. The novel’s first reference to the sixties is suggestive of how Ruby’s leaders understood the period: “[T]here are strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1968
calendar, large X’s marking various dates (April 4, July 19); a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered” (7). The intruders perceive the calendar marking the murders of Martin Luther King and of two Black Panthers as just another strange artifact possessed by the Convent women. By linking this calendar with the letter’s “satanic message” as part of the room’s contents, Morrison suggests that the men of Ruby cannot distinguish between significant political disputes and an unreadable text, which in turn implies that they cannot differentiate what King and the Panthers each represent. Similarly, the clenched fist (with red nails), signifying black power (but with a difference), marks the Oven and constitutes an affront to the path taken by Ruby’s leaders (101). The irony of the furor caused by the black fist is that Ruby built itself by keeping the outside world, especially whites or light-skinned blacks, out. This exclusion, however, could not keep at bay the racist ideology that necessitated this isolation.

Morrison emphasizes how the social changes of the 1960s clash with the social and cultural sensibilities of the residents of Ruby. The loss of Deacon and Soane Morgan’s children in the Vietnam War testifies to a tremendous fear of these social changes.

Like a fool she [Soane] believed her sons would be safe [in Vietnam]. Safer than anywhere in Oklahoma outside Ruby. Safer in the army than in Chicago, where Easter wanted to go. Safer than Birmingham, than Montgomery, Selma, than Watts. Safer than Money, Mississippi, in 1955 and Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963. Safer than Newark, Detroit, Washington, D.C. She had thought war was safer than any city in the United States.

(100–101)

The social and cultural transformations in the United States present an ideological battlefield that seems more dangerous than the snipers, landmines, and guerrilla warfare in Vietnam. In the present time of the novel, this warfare has not yet ended. The conversation between Pat Best, the would-be town historian, and Reverend Richard Misner, a veteran of the war for civil rights, exposes the tensions of the period. At the heart of this conversation is the role and purpose of education.7 For Misner, education must be more than just

7. Paradise describes Pat Best’s research in the chapter titled “Patricia” (185–217). After attempting to write the history of the town, only to meet incredible resistance, Best ultimately burns her notes: “It began as a gift to the citizens of Ruby. . . . Not anymore. . . .
“the periodic chart of elements and valences” (209). Education must provide the tools for psychic survival. Misner chastises Pat’s faith in “molecules.” Pat Best responds by criticizing his Afrocentrist view of the world. Misner replies, “Africa is our home, Pat, whether you like it or not.” Pat contends that Misner just seeks “some kind of past with no slavery in it.” Misner answers: “Why not? There was a whole lot of life before slavery. And we ought to know what it is. If we’re going to get rid of the slave mentality, that is.” Pat fires back, “Slavery is our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa” (210).

Their conversation ends with a discussion of home. Pat Best, ultimately, defends Ruby more vigorously than she realizes, arguing: “This is their home; mine too. Home is not a little thing.” The irony of Best’s defense of Ruby is that she and her father have never been fully accepted because of her father’s decision to marry from outside the community, to a woman who failed to meet the town’s “eight-rock” standard of racial purity. Misner retorts:

I’m not saying it is. But can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don’t mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get.

(213)

A page earlier, Misner contemplates how this era will be remembered:

Twenty, thirty years from now [these words are uttered in the present time of 1975], he thought, all sorts of people will claim pivotal, controlling, defining positions in the rights movement. A few would be justified. Most would be frauds. What could not be gainsaid, but would remain invisible in the newspapers and the books he bought for his students, were the ordinary folk.

(212)

Things got out of hand when she asked to see letters and marriage certificates. The women narrowed their eyes before smiling and offering to freshen her coffee. Invisible doors closed, and the conversation turned to weather” (187); “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” (188). For a sense of Reverend Misner’s involvement with the civil rights movement and the scars it left, see page 205.
In the heated discussion between Misner and Best, Morrison attempts to vivify the individual and communal struggles that shaped the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Rather than craft a myth of the civil rights movement's leadership, Morrison portrays the battles for psychic freedom that the civil rights movement fought (much as Jazz describes the jazz age without any overt references to the music of that period). To understand the civil rights movement as only a movement for equality in education, accommodations, and voting without an accompanying cultural change mischaracterizes the challenges that the movement brought. While structural changes in social organization were crucial, they could not completely dislodge the racist culture of the United States.

When Morrison began to write in the early to mid sixties, relatively little scholarship addressed African American culture or other historically marginalized peoples and cultures. Hence the opening words to her first novel are “Quiet as it’s kept” (Bluest Eye 9; Paradise 196). In her early novels, Morrison gives voice to those people whose thoughts, feelings, and emotional lives had been elided in the writing of American history. For Morrison, only fiction, the act of imagination, can complete that which has been displaced under the names of literature and history (“Site of Memory” 111–12). Paradise tells the story of the inner life of events that have become larger than life and have been subsumed under the names of heroes like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The institutionalization of civil rights heroes displaces the inner struggles that many others fighting in the movement may have felt and reduces a mass movement to the actions of a few great “men.”

The institutionalization of the civil rights movement has occurred in a number of places or discursive spheres. Martin Luther King’s birthday is a national holiday. The face of Malcolm X now graces a postage stamp. There is a certain irony to these things, even if they are welcome changes. Toni Morrison has won the Nobel Prize for Literature, ensuring that she may be the one African American writer that many students read in their American literature classes. In legal discourse, the legacy of the civil rights movement may be similarly troubling. The civil rights movement, with its victory in
Brown and other landmark cases, offers an example of legal discourse responding to injustice and U.S. society seemingly becoming more just. The “lesson” of these cases is that legal discourse can successfully respond to injustice, which in turn allows lawyers, judges, and laypeople to bask in the warm radiance of the rule of law. Such a lesson neglects to examine the ways that law may have enabled the injustice in the first place and continues to establish the conditions for racial hierarchy. Isolation and de facto segregation, whether “self”-imposed (under the rubrics of choice or desire) or legally imposed, do not lessen the importance of race in social relations. Where legal discourse has successfully intervened is in cases of outright, unrepentant, conscious racism.

Contemporary legal doctrines developed in response to the conscious (primarily southern) racism rampant during the formation of the civil rights movement prove to be of little value in remedying current effects of race and racialization on social relations. The institutionalization of equal protection has meant that only deviations in the nature or extent of racism are noteworthy, not those acts or decisions that maintain the social importance of race. A 1996 case exemplifies how legal discourse has interpreted socially constructed situations as inevitable and unremarkable facts of nature. The federal government charged Christopher Armstrong and several others with the possession of and intent to sell crack cocaine. As part of their defense, Armstrong argued that the prosecution was illegal because they were selectively prosecuted based on their race. (Armstrong and the others identified themselves as African Americans.) They brought evidence that the FBI only conducted sting operations in places with a large minority population, such as Compton, California, where Armstrong and the others lived, and that African Americans were disproportionately arrested, charged, and convicted with crack cocaine offenses even though African Americans constituted a minority of drug users. They also noted that crack cocaine penalties were significantly harsher than powder cocaine sentences (under which mostly whites were sentenced).

For a nearly unanimous court, Chief Justice William Rehnquist argued, “The claimant must demonstrate that the federal prosecutorial policy ‘had a discriminatory effect and that it was motivated by a discriminatory purpose.’” In order to prove “motivated by a
discriminatory purpose," Armstrong had to show that "similarly situated individuals of a different race were not prosecuted" (U.S. v. Armstrong 1487). In other words, unless it can be shown that prosecutors selected the defendants for prosecution because of their skin color, any apparent racism is deemed incidental. The Court did not address the attack on drug use as a veiled attack on low-income, inner-city youth of color. Because the Supreme Court viewed the Armstrong case through the prism of individualism (that is, individuals make decisions based on fully conscious motives and reasons unaffected by cultural factors or social relations), social science data about the practical effects of the War on Drugs proved irrelevant.8

Morrison responds to this kind of legal thinking in Paradise by exploring the normative assumptions that people use to view the world around them. In the Armstrong case, Chief Justice Rehnquist relied on the assumption that motivation is the result of conscious individual choice. Critical race theory has interrogated this assumption of legal discourse. Charles Lawrence, a leading critical race theorist, has argued that "equal protection doctrine must find a way to come to grips with unconscious racism" (323). According to Lawrence, the problem facing the United States in the post-civil rights era is the persistence of unconscious racism—racism that is nonintentional, rooted in a person’s narrative assumptions about the world. Lawrence begins his article with a series of anecdotes that illustrate how "a good, liberal, white person" perpetuated racist stereotypes and racial hierarchy in subtle but nonetheless effective ways (323).

Morrison's novel is about the transformation of the racist house that is the United States and the attempt to imagine "the concrete thrill of borderlessness" ("Home" 9). Race, particularly how it manifests itself in cultural practices, functions as a border, as a limit. The border of race exists in our mind because it is people—African Americans, indigenous persons, Latinos, and whites—who have

8. See Lawrence and Peller for examples of critical race theory’s explanation for how legal discourse has failed to address the way racialization has shaped American social relations.
filled the concept of race with meaning. It is people who have ascribed a race to everything, including food, music, geography, and literature. The concept of race has enabled a complex mapping of social and cultural geography. The Disallowing works in the novel to demonstrate how geographic boundaries hold a racialized meaning. (In the Armstrong case, the Supreme Court did not think it relevant that the FBI had chosen to focus its drug interdiction efforts on Compton, then a primarily African American and Latino city.) The Disallowing specifically relates how black towns had excluded the founding families of Haven because they were too black and too poor. This border between light- and dark-skinned black constituted an internalization of the system of racial hierarchy established by whites. Morrison explains, “The horror of whites was convulsive but abstract” (Paradise 189). Whiteness, the abstraction and ideal, became an internalized border within African Americans that established itself in towns named “Fairly.” (Fairly white?) The future members of Haven saw that “[t]he sign of racial purity that they had taken for granted had become a stain” (194). Blackness, too, became a sign. Black skin, untainted by the sexual conquest of whites, signified too much blackness, an authenticity that could not conform to the demands of whiteness idealized.

In seeking to dismantle the hold of the unspoken ideal of whiteness, Morrison has offered her approach to blackness:9

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; villifying whiteness rather than reifying it.

(Playing in the Dark x-xi)

That Morrison refuses to “romanticiz[e] blackness” and would prefer to “demoniz[e] it” constitutes a stunning frustration for those who would like to read her as an African American writer who only celebrates blackness. In her fiction and criticism, Morrison seeks to

9. Morrison’s reading of Moby-Dick informs my discussion here: “we can consider the possibility that Melville’s ‘truth’ was his recognition of the moment in America when whiteness became ideology” (“Unspeakable Things” 214).
challenge dominant assumptions about race (and its relation to gender). The example of the Armstrong decision demonstrates what happens when blackness is considered as an essence only, rather than an abstraction that gets mapped onto the world and onto specific bodies. For Rehnquist and the other Supreme Court justices (and by implication legal discourse), how blackness gets mapped onto geography, clothing, and drug consumption is irrelevant to the deployment of police force. The Supreme Court refused to examine the complex factors that shape why drug policies are implemented, against whom those policies are enforced, and how race “infects” our thinking. This refusal to examine the metaphors and images that gave the War on Drugs its life neglects how race (and class and gender) may be crucial to how criminality is figured.

When read against the work of critical race theorists such as Patricia Williams and Richard Delgado, Paradise offers a complementary analysis of the psychic effects of the civil rights movement. The litigation and political activism that sought to bring equality among people have created a new set of problems. The tensions in Ruby result from the changing meaning of race in the post-civil rights era. Town elders, particularly Steward Morgan, do not see integration as a viable solution to the problem of racism in the United States, because undoing the racial rules of Ruby would unravel the meaning of gender and sexuality as well, turning the social order of Ruby upside down. They distrust Misner’s solutions to racial and social conflict and express horror and outrage at the Convent’s strategies for coping with racism and for decolonizing their minds and bodies. Ruby’s leaders could not see the possibility of real synthesis and negotiation between social institutions and cultural practices. In other words, the very core of Ruby’s community, the rhetoric and rules of eight-rock, comes to symbolize what haunts their community.

The problem of Paradise is how to live in a world where formal racist barriers have been dismantled. Morrison shares a vision and a strategy for social justice with legal writers who see that the battle must now turn to the psychic and cultural effects of race. For the power of race as an organizing force in social relations and as a psychic wound remains. In the novel, the people of Haven sought to rebuild paradise in 1951. Despite their attempt to move away from
their past, they could not escape its trauma. The Convent, the
town’s double, haunts the community precisely because the fears
and psychic wounds that they brought with them get mapped onto
the Convent and onto women in general. It is not just any women
who become the primary object of contempt, but the women of
the Convent. Besides being “free” women and, in the minds of the
town, wild, they are in the process of decolonizing their minds.

Interestingly, it is Consolata who offers the path toward decolo-
nization. Unlike the eight-rock who claim racial purity, Consolata
constitutes the path of negotiation and hybridity. Mary Magna
“kidnapped” Connie from Latin America: “By anyone’s standard
the snatching was a rescue, because whatever life the exasperated,
headstrong nun was dragging [her] to, it would be superior to what
lay before [her] in the shit-strewn paths of that city” (223). Connie
herself is “saved” from the poverty of colonialism by a missionary
who takes her back to the “home” country. Raised by Catholic nuns,
Connie “hardly noticed the things she was losing” (242). Only later
does Connie develop a strategy to negotiate the trauma of her past
and overcome her alcoholism. Compared to Deacon’s, and by
implication Steward’s, “total memory,” the members of the
Convent have developed a viable strategy for working through the
racialized and gendered violence of American history (107).

For Connie, “[t]he first to go were the rudiments of her first lan-
guage. Every now and then she found herself speaking and think-
ing in that in-between place, the valley between the regulations of
the first language and the vocabulary of the second” (242). Such an
observation may suggest that Connie has “lost” access to her native
tongue and cannot claim racial or ethnic authenticity. Morrison,
however, links this loss of language with gaining special, magical
abilities. It is this loss of language that precedes her being “tricked
into raising the dead” (242). Soon thereafter, Lone begins to teach
Connie magic (244). Lone, too, is known as a healer and midwife
within Ruby (270–73). Like Connie, Lone does not know her history
and has been seemingly cut off from her people. Nonetheless, she
possesses healing powers. “[S]he [Lone] did know something more
profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best’s history book. She
knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the ‘trick’
of life and its ‘reason’ ” (272). Sitting near a sod house where her
mother died, Lone was found during the 1890 trek to Haven. Fairy DuPres insisted that they take her with them, and she successfully persuaded the townspeople to adopt her (190). Though Lone was never fully accepted and never married into the families of Haven and Ruby, Morrison suggests that her healing powers endure because healing the wounds of racism and sexism is linked to forgoing essentialist theories of identity. Thus Lone occupies an interstitial space within the racial hierarchy established by Ruby and possesses the relative freedom to transcend the very hierarchy that strangles the town.  

The attack on the Convent coincides with the women’s effort to decolonize their minds. This decolonization begins with a pronouncement from Connie: “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (262). In this passage, Connie renames herself Consolata, which constitutes an effort to make herself anew and cast off the colonialist gaze that has marked her body and mind. When she offers the women of the Convent the choice of healing themselves or leaving, the women choose to stay: “[T]hey could not leave the one place they were free to leave” (262).

10. My reading of Morrison’s use of Consolata as the figure of healing illustrates Homi Bhabha’s understanding of the potentially liberatory effects of “hybridity” and its connection to “thirdness.” Bhabha defines hybridity as “the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). . . . It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (112). Hybridity is thus primarily a temporal intervention that unmasksthe historical creation of subjectivity. Bhabha’s approach is linked intimately to a geography of difference as well. For Bhabha, transformation also involves “the problem of signifying the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the ‘in-between’ in the temporal breakup that weaves the ‘global’ text” (217); hence transformation must combine both spatial and temporal interventions into discourse. Connie’s efforts at decolonization represent an attempt to resignify identity in time and space.

11. Frantz Fanon describes the goal of colonial domination as the changing of the colonized’s conceptual framework for understanding their relationship to material conditions. As Fanon and postcolonial critics who have followed him have realized, the process of decolonization may continue long after the physical presence of the colonizer has been removed. The colonization of the symbolic realm may continue indefinitely. The challenge for the postcolonial is to transform the symbolic realm that founds their social institutions (51–54).
Decolonization begins by redefining the body and the mental constructs that give the body meaning. Ordering the women to undress and lie on the floor, Consolata traces each body’s silhouette. These silhouettes become receptacles for all of their negative thoughts, thoughts that previously had been directed against themselves. Rather than internalize the pain or punish themselves with various forms of self-mutilation, the women can examine that pain and mark it on an image instead of on themselves. “[U]nlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). The methodology of this decolonization runs counter to the strategies adopted by the people of Ruby. Rather than locating equality in economic self-sufficiency and peace in self-imposed isolation, the women of the Convent require a spiritual revolution as well as an economic one. Derrick Bell notes that in Morrison’s *Beloved* the turning point of the novel occurs when Denver overcomes her fear of white people who “whipped her mother while she was pregnant and crippled her grandma” and gets help for herself and her sick mother (29). A similar situation is described in *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, physical isolation and running away—no matter how they are justified—cannot substitute for healing the psychic wounds inflicted by racism and sexism. Morrison suggests that the Convent’s methods of decolonization represent the best strategy for individual and communal healing, even if Ruby’s men impede its full realization.

Purging the taint of racism and sexism from the self cannot be accomplished by adopting racist and sexist institutions. Adoption of such institutions may only further silence the colonized. This may be the lesson of the writings of critical race theorists in the post–civil rights era. In fact, Michael Omi has argued that “the significance of race in American life has expanded and the racial dimensions of politics and culture have proliferated” since the civil rights movements (183). Existing institutions and established strategies in the fight for civil rights may have changed over time into unproductive methods for realizing the goal of equality.

Despite the seeming success of Ruby, the ghost of racism still haunts the town. The relative financial success and the safe streets come at a mental cost to its inhabitants. Morrison explores what happens when those ghosts manifest themselves. The elders of
Ruby must choose to isolate themselves rather than allow the changes of the civil rights movement to alter Ruby forever. Either choice involves a certain amount of "madness." I call this "madness" because allowing change to happen means giving up something by which a person identifies him- or herself. Such a change would alter the identities of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and white Americans. In this sense, the ideology of whiteness haunts the town of Ruby. The idealization of whiteness cannot be eradicated, even by shunning those members of the community who break the racialized rules that govern marriages in Ruby. "Whiteness" may rule the town without the presence of white people.

Healing Racial Psychosis? A Look to the Future

Morrison has argued, "The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis" ("Unspeakable Things" 214). The structure and narration of *Paradise* emphasize severe fragmentation of the self. In discussing Morrison’s artistic development, in an essay written before the publication of *Paradise*, Barbara Christian argued that Morrison relies on a communal protagonist that exists in tension with individual characters in the story (30–31). Christian’s analysis is particularly prescient because *Paradise* may constitute a further development or a culmination of Morrison’s endeavor to write communal subjects. *Paradise* narrates the inner life of almost an entire town. In telling the stories that these characters tell themselves, Morrison offers the same stories from multiple and contrasting views. The novel, as a whole, is necessarily fragmented in its telling, because the madness of whiteness idealized produces a community that is fragmented yet clinging together in a pathological embrace that chokes the breath from the community. The individual chapters, each named for a different woman, accentuate the multivocal qualities of the narrative. Each chapter narrates a different story that makes sense only in relation to the other chapters. Individually each chapter may be incomprehensible. The fragmentation of the text thus repeats and reinscribes the fragmentation of the communities of Ruby and the Convent.
The doubling of Steward and Deacon Morgan also illustrates the fragmentation of self by emphasizing the double bind of identity categories such as race. If blackness is an immutable part of one’s identity (Steward Morgan may exemplify this), then change is impossible. If black identity is constantly under revision, then communal life may be impossible, because its foundations are constantly in flux. This may be part of what troubles Deacon Morgan at the novel’s closing. Ruby never finally arrives at paradise because the foundations for communal solidarity are always shifting and contested. The continuing enigma for scholars and activists is to overcome the limitations of current theories of identity that confuse a racist house with a home. By offering a series of particular narratives to represent the whole of Ruby and the Convent, Morrison examines both what they are and what they may become. This methodology enables her to stress how the post–civil rights era necessitates revising strategies for representing communal and individual identity.

The opening of the novel offers a riddle whose answer is never fully revealed. “They shoot the white girl first” (3). The question of who got shot first organizes the reading of the novel for many readers. A more appropriate question may be, Why shoot the white girl first? The next two sentences seemingly offer the answer: “With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here” (3). This answer is correct in its way, yet simplistic. Why shoot the white girl first? It is not just a body that is being demolished, but whiteness idealized. The men of Ruby seek to destroy whiteness by eradicating the presence of a body onto which they have mapped whiteness. In a conventional sense, there may be no “white girl” at the Convent. The whiteness may exist only in the imaginations of the men of Ruby, and thus her actual identity is irrelevant. In addition, the reference to whiteness may be a red herring that obfuscates the intraracial battles the novel describes, especially as racialization infects gender relations.

Destroying whiteness idealized and the illusory utopia of a multicultural society without conflict may be the project of critical race theory in the post–civil rights era. Integration, the strategy preferred by legal discourse, or self-imposed isolation, the strategy of Ruby, may attack the consequences of racism without challenging
its foundations: how whiteness pervades standards of merit, value, beauty, and worth. Michael Omi has argued, “In the post–civil rights era, such a progressive racial politics needs to reassess the adequacy of the original civil rights vision to deal with contemporary patterns of inequality” (185). For Omi, what must be contested is racialization, “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (179). Shooting the white girl first may have meant killing the person who represented whiteness because of her cultural practices and identifications, rather than her skin color. They did not wish to destroy the body, but her spirit and what it represented. To a degree, the bodies of the women of the Convent became the surfaces on which all the fears of the town materialized.

In her article “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor,” Wahneema Lubiano argues that racialized metaphors, such as “Black pathology” or “Black criminality,” created and maintained by the legal decisions of the State, explain how the world works (74). These metaphors produce racialized narratives that circulate within legal and literary discourses and inform cultural practices. As Lubiano and Omi argue, the United States authorizes these metaphors or racializations by recognizing them as legitimate through legal discourse. (Again, the Supreme Court’s implicit endorsement of the premise that most drug use occurs in communities of color in Armstrong is illustrative of this.) The story of the attack on the Convent (an attack on their own idealization of whiteness) ends on an ambiguous note. The residents of Ruby work together to keep the spirit-murdering of the Convent a secret, for they know “that lawmen would be happily swarming all over town (they’d killed a white woman, after all), arresting virtually all of Ruby’s businessmen.” Long after the events, the residents of the town wondered “if white law should, contrary to everything they knew and believed, be permitted to deal with matters heretofore handled among and by them” (298). In this story, law (and by implication, the fictions and metaphors on which it relies) remains corrupted by whiteness idealized. The people of Ruby want to live in a paradise untainted by

12. For an extended discussion of “spirit-murder” and its impact on legal discourse, see Williams, “Spirit-Murdering.”
the burden of this ideal but cannot loose themselves from its strangling grip. Reverend Misner muses: “They [the people of Ruby] think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them” (306).

Morrison, however, does not condemn the efforts of the townspeople as a foolish endeavor. Misner, an idealist minister who may represent the aspirations of the civil rights movement, chooses to remain in Ruby because “there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people” (306). What is needed is a spiritual rebirth in which the metaphors, fictions, and narratives based on the idealization of whiteness that founded the community are revis(ed). From the first sentence on, the novel displaces its readers. “They shoot the white girl first” (3). Morrison rips the reader from wherever she is and places her smack-dab in the middle of a violent dismantling of a convent. Each chapter, by following the trajectory of individual women characters, displaces the narrative that has come before it. The overlapping narratives thus reproduce the layers of memory that haunt any effort at social reform and social justice. When Charles Lawrence opens his groundbreaking critical race theory article on unconscious racism with an anecdote about his kindergarten teacher reading the book Little Black Sambo to a classroom of mostly white students and Lawrence, this memory may be precisely the type that Morrison evokes (317). Saving ourselves from these haunting memories is a pressing and necessary endeavor. These memories cannot be simply wished away. They need to be worked through and ultimately displaced. In Paradise, Morrison tries to displace her readers, while working through the psychic structures and emotional investments that led Ruby to destroy the Convent. While the fears are real and need to be addressed, Morrison demonstrates the potentially destructive consequences of mapping those fears onto particular bodies.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the themes that Morrison explores are those that have engaged many scholars of color over the last twenty years. This is not to say that her writing is not creative, beautiful, and original. Rather, my goal is to establish the relationship between text and context. I place Morrison, and Paradise in particu-
lar, in an ongoing conversation about the status of rights in the United States. During the 1990s, this discussion moved increasingly to the psychic effects of racial hierarchy. Critical race theory is the interdisciplinary movement that seeks to develop a rights analysis that can challenge a wide variety of seemingly innocuous cultural practices that maintain the ideological importance of race. This movement transcends essentialist or crude understandings of race that fail to explore how race gains meaning and currency in everyday life.

Unlike the NAACP litigation strategy, which assumed that the dismantling of overtly racist political practices and social divisions would lessen the importance of race, critical race theory explores how the idea of race infects common interactions, even among people arguably of the “same race.” In these common interactions, blackness, brownness, or whiteness idealized can hide in unconscious choices, mannerisms, or expressions. In her work, Morrison’s attention has increasingly turned to the unconscious effects of race and racism. *Beloved* explores how race, racism, and racialization affect a mother’s love for her children; *Jazz* examines race’s impact on romantic love; and *Paradise* analyzes how race infects the bonds that connect a community. Within each of these contexts, race turns a putative home into a racist house and converts love to hate. Only by working through racism is hate contained and love made possible once more. Through these explorations of love, Morrison demonstrates that legal discourse’s normative assumptions about human behavior fail to account for psychic investments within a society where the social construction of race touches on everything, even love.

The problem of finding/making a home is another name for negotiating the process of self-creation. Critical race theory has sought to make explicit the violence of legal and literary subjectivity, especially in their relation to race and gender. The founding fictions of these discursive spheres offer a promise of equality, neutrality, and beauty that they cannot keep. Critical race theory has been the post–civil rights era’s response to this failed promise and a demand for legal recognition that race, racism, and racialization are not always fully intentional acts or processes, but by-products of a society with a particular history and culture of race.
Morrison’s *Paradise* examines why law and literature remain racialized, even after the civil rights movement and an uneasy “home” for “raced” people. Reverend Misner muses, “Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, 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” (306). Through Misner’s voice, Morrison comments on the limitations of how dominant social institutions, including law and government, incorporated the values and ideals offered by the civil rights movement. *Paradise* attempts to revise those ideals on a smaller, more personal scale that encourages individual change as part of a greater social change. The building of paradise, the building of a home, cannot be complete without dealing with the memories of racism and how those memories continue to haunt institutions and cultural practices. This work, however, requires a personal decolonization as well as social and legal reform.

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