Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

Now hear this and, beyond all doubt, believe it:
the good of grace is in exact proportion
to the ardor of love that opens to receive it. (Dante, *Paradiso* XXIX)

I once was lost but now I’m found,
Was blind but now I see. (‘Amazing Grace,’ spiritual)

In the novels of her trilogy, *Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise,* Toni Morrison uses repetition with a difference to create multiple versions of stories, to revise dominant history, and to represent processes of healing, transformation, and insight.¹ In *Beloved,* the former slave woman Sethe’s freedom from the past comes not when she crosses the Ohio River, nor when her desperate and murderous act takes her beyond the reach of slavery. The potential for freedom comes from a ritual repetition of the trauma itself, this time with a significant difference; she aims her weapon not at her own children, but instead at the white man who threatens her children. In *Jazz,* the entire plot, structured like jazz music, repeats with a difference when the murderous triangle of Joe, “Violent,” and Dorcas is transformed into the familial love of Joe, Violet, and Felice. The repetition of the story with a significant difference also forces the narrator of *Jazz* to reconsider assumptions. Morrison’s recapitulation of the murder scene in *Paradise* again employs the narrative trope of repetition with a difference; the novel also contains numerous doublings of scenes, characters, and points of view that generate a constant process of repetition with a difference for the reader. But in *Paradise,* Morrison also considers what the danger of repetition without difference might be; what happens if difference is rejected in order to maintain the utopian harmony of paradise? The irony of *Paradise* is that repetition without a difference maintains itself through rigidity and exclusion and thus destroys the ideal it seeks to preserve; an unchanging *Paradise* inevitably loses its paradisiacal nature.

In *Paradise* Morrison guides the reader into the volatile conjunction of race and gender; within it she constructs a process of revelation or insight that is best understood not as an unveiling but as a vision of the many veils of history, ideology, and desire through which we see the world. *Paradise* begins on the significant date of July 1976 as nine men from Ruby prepare to kill five women who live in the nearby Convent. The Morgan twins, Deacon and Steward, epitomize unified authority; they share one memory, one purpose, and one belief until the murders that July day divide them. They interpret the words inscribed on the sacred Oven according to their privileged relationship to the originator of the inscription: “The twins believed it was when he dis-
covered how narrow the path of righteousness could be that their grandfather chose the words for the Oven’s lip” (14). As the men stalk the unarmed women, Morrison makes abundantly clear the dangers of both narrow interpretations and a belief in one’s own righteousness. The description of the women at the end of the first chapter clarifies the irony of the men’s actions:

Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game.

God at their side, the men take aim.

For Ruby. (18)

From the men’s perspectives, the women, like Eve, embody a loss of innocence and an ejection from the Garden of Eden, the earthly Paradise, a loss the men fear and wish to prevent. But as hunted does anointed with “holy oil,” the women are also Christ-like sacrificial victims and the men their executioners. In a further irony, the men’s act of hubris exceeds Eve’s original sin; while Eve succumbed to the desire for divine knowledge, the men of Ruby act as if they actually know God’s will. The men become what they wish to destroy, and thus they destroy their Paradise.

As the women leap and the men take aim, Morrison freezes the action; she will return to this moment in the eighth and penultimate chapter after the histories of the people of Ruby and the Convent are told. Between the first account from the men’s perspectives and the later account from the women’s is the space of insight, of new knowledge, the potential for a work of art to change the way we see. Morrison calls this insight “grace” in the chapter by that name. When Connie discovers Gigi’s given name is Grace, she says, “Grace. What could be better?” and Morrison writes:

Nothing. Nothing at all. If ever there came a morning when mercy and simple good fortune took to their heels and fled, grace alone might have to do. But from where would it come and how fast? In that holy hollow between sighting and following through, could grace slip through at all? (73)

The description of mercy and fortune taking flight recalls the doe-like running women, the “bodacious black Eves” caught in mid-leap and arrested there for 250 pages. Morrison’s novel occurs in “that holy hollow between sighting and following through,” as the men take aim but have not yet fired.

The text of Paradise expands that moment into a space of insight, revision, and grace, a grace period for the reader. The leaping women signify a new point of departure, a leap out of the known into new possibilities of representation and imagination.

Twice in the 1990s Morrison has intervened in public political discourse; she edited essay collections on the Clarence Thomas hearings and the O. J. Simpson trial and thus brought progressive race and gender critiques to these media spectacles. In both cases, calls for truth and law invoked by political institutions and the dominant media were thoroughly obfuscated and frequently polarized by racial and gender representations. In Paradise Morrison completes her trilogy by confronting contemporary race and gender representations and challenging declarations of truth and law. In an essay titled “Home,” Morrison discusses her approach in Paradise: “Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary” (8-9). In Paradise Morrison confronts the racial imaginary in its inseparable connection to gender, class, and sexual relations, and she engages with contemporary feminist, black, and postmodern theories of representation in her literary choices. Morrison moves readers “outside established boundaries” of thought by posing a multiple or nomadic subjectivity against a fixed and unified subject position, by displacing whiteness and the power of the white gaze without reifying blackness, and by creating an artistic practice that brings about insight.
In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison confronts both the ubiquitousness and the intransigence of racial representations in literary works, an awareness that informs her own attempts “to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (xi). In “Home,” Morrison adds to these ideas, describing her work in *Paradise* as battling “the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in race language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable” (7). To do this, Morrison embarks on what seems to be a contradictory project, “to see whether or not race-specific, race-free language is both possible and meaningful in narration” (9; my emphasis). Through language that “emphasize[s] racial specificity minus racist hierarchy in its figurative choices” (8), Morrison tries to create “a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent” (9). Morrison calls this imaginary place “home,” and she sets it in contrast to the prison house of language, the “racial house” which, like the “master’s house” in Audre Lorde’s essay of that name, is a linguistic and discursive construct that “reproduce[s] the master’s voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father.” Morrison’s desire as an author is to create “an open house” or “transform this house completely” (4).

Morrison’s figures of house and home refer to linguistic and imaginary constructs that reside in the space of the novel. In *Paradise*, Ruby and the Convent represent these conflicting ideas of house and home. The all-black town of Ruby is the home of safety and freedom described in Morrison’s essay, the place where a woman can walk alone at night “on out, beyond the limits of town, because nothing at the edge thought she was prey” (*Paradise* 9); it is “a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent.” The Convent, on the other hand, exhibits the imprint of the “master’s voice” and the racist and violent history of the United States. An embezzler’s house shaped like a bullet, the Convent’s first incarnation represents the brutality and paranoia as well as the economic and sexual domination that characterized the European conquest of the Americas. The Convent’s second life as a Catholic school for Arapaho girls describes a quieter but equally insidious colonizing tactic of religious domination, sexual repression, and cultural demolition through forced removals and education. But in *Paradise* Ruby comes to exemplify the dangers of home based on sameness, unity, and fixity, whereas the Convent becomes an “open house” where women of unidentified race convene, move through, and transform the layers of historical accretion.

The all-black town of Ruby is created in 1952 as a repetition of the founding of the all-black town of Haven in 1890. The New Fathers of Ruby attempt to reconstruct the town without any difference from the (remembered and idealized) original Haven created by the Old Fathers sixty years and two generations earlier. The New Fathers, led by the aptly named Morgan twins, Steward and Deacon, consider themselves the “rightful heirs” who “repeated exactly” the founding of Haven in Ruby (113). As an outsider who has come to Ruby, Rev. Richard Misner speculates that “rather than children, they wanted duplicates” (161). In order to reproduce exactly the previous Haven, the fathers of Ruby must control interpretation, “revise” the historical record, and reject their children’s questions and challenges as heresy.

Morrison calls the need to create a home an “anxiety of belonging” peculiar to the rootlessness of modernity; she writes that “the overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the
world: slavery” (“Home” 10). The New Fathers of Ruby counter the “anxiety of belonging” by establishing a town based on racial and gender ideals that instigate processes of exclusion and othering. For example, the name of the town captures the men’s ideal of women that underlies their dream of paradise. Ruby is named for the sister of Deacon and Steward who died there; Ruby describes woman as both enshrined jewel and dangerous sexuality. The twins’ shared memory of nineteen Negro ladies in summer dresses as a nostalgic and idealized vision of womanhood contrasts sharply with Steward’s memory of his desire to punch a black prostitute (Paradise 110, 279, 95). This distinction between good and bad women allows them to scapegoat the women of the Convent, to see in these women an insult that “call[s] into question the value of almost every woman [they] knew” (8). The desire to protect women is laudable, as Morrison shows in her lovely evocation of women out walking at night in complete safety. But the protection of women has often justified the oppression and possession of women. Similarly, the need for an all-black town as home and protection against “Out There . . . where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose” (16) is compelling, and Morrison supplies the history to support this course of action. Nonetheless, as Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanthy write, “There is an irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place from which to speak, within which to act, and the awareness of the price at which secure places are bought, the awareness of the exclusions, the denials, the blindnesses on which they are predicated” (206). The men are blind to the ways that their hidden laws of racial purity, masculine dominance, and economic competition replicate the society they mean to escape and repudiate. The attack on the Convent, on the evil without, is in fact an attack on the perceived evils the New Fathers cannot accept within themselves and their town, evils they project outward. “Most scary things is inside,” Consolata tells us directly (39).

The women of the Convent carry no ideals of family or society in their wanderings, but together they tackle the anxiety of belonging and create an open house by challenging the social and historical strictures that surround them and by confronting the scary things inside themselves. The women enact the novel’s potential to dislodge the reader’s “racial imaginary” by exemplifying a nomadic subjectivity. In Nomadic Subjects, Rosi Braidotti describes the nomad as a strategic fiction that provides a figure for a heterogeneous, changing, and transgressive subjectivity. The nomadic subject, according to Braidotti:

- does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity. (22)

Braidotti proposes that nomadic subjectivity should “be taken as a difference within the same culture, that is to say within every self” (13). She describes nomadic subjectivity as a philosophy and practice of “as if,” a parodic and utopian strategy that dismantles dominant representations and “open[s] up in-between spaces where
new forms of political subjectivity can be explored.” (7). The nomadic subject counters what Braidotti calls the “phallogocentric symbolic,” a philosophical system she denounces in impassioned prose:

A heap of rabble, calling itself the center of creation; a knot of desiring and trembling flesh, projecting itself to the height of an imperial consciousness. I am struck by the violence of the gesture that binds a fractured self to the performative illusion of unity, mastery, self-transparency. I am amazed by the terrifying stupidity of that illusion of unity, and by its incomprehensible force. (12)

Throughout Paradise the men are associated with phallogocentrism, with fixed authority, unitary meaning, and individual acquisition and control, while the women are associated with movement, multiple meanings, and shared labor and goods. Nonetheless, the greater insight of Misner and Deacon Morgan by the end of the novel indicates these gender divisions are not biologically determined. The women of Paradise test the limits of racial and gender representations. As Carole Boyce Davies writes, “Migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of the dominant discourses” (37).5

In Paradise, struggles over interpretation, in some ways the novel’s central drama, have a generational component, but they also reflect a clear gender division. The struggles over the control of meaning are focused on the Oven and its cryptic and damaged inscription. The Oven, the communal hearth and site of community baptisms, is a wonderfully mutable symbol of the divine and material worlds. The Oven has clear associations with women in its womblike attributes and as a communal cooking area presided over by women. But Morrison makes the Oven symbolize both male and female, womb and phallus, a “flawless designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done.” The Oven is both object and subject, passive and active, womb and mouth, head and heart; it is “round as a head, deep as desire,” with the sacred and disputed words on the “Oven’s iron lip,” “at the base of the Oven’s mouth” (6-7). But transferred from Haven to Ruby the Oven loses its functions both as common cooking area and as the site of baptisms. Deacon’s wife Soane remembers the women’s resentment when the men insisted on transporting the oven to their new home: A “utility became a shrine (cautioned against not only in scary Deuteronomy but in lovely Corinthians II as well) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self” (103-04). The Oven represents the dangers of utility made sacred, of useful choices repeated and sanctified as law, of necessity redefined as piety.

The words on the Oven are the focus of furious battles of interpretation that demonstrate the conflict between the authority of the New Fathers and the rebellion of their children.6 Dovey, Steward’s wife and Soane’s sister, thinks about the inscription that “specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross. Wasn’t that so?” (93) The men (like Steward and Deacon) tend toward fixity and authority of meaning whereas the women (like their wives, the sisters Dovey and Soane) tend toward indeterminacy and fluidity of meaning. The kinds of paradise or haven embodied by Ruby and the Convent are similarly gendered: The New Fathers of Ruby want a paradise of continuity, stability, and immortality, whereas the women of Ruby and the Convent envision a haven of travel, transformation, birth, death, and rebirth.

Gender differences are explained in a few ways. Patricia Best, schoolteacher and secret historian of Ruby, derives from the town’s hidden history the desire for pure African “8-rock blood” and “Immortality,” and thus,
she concludes, “everything that worries them must come from women” (217). Pat’s daughter Billie Delia believes that the community battle “was not about infant life or a bride’s reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals” (150). Pat Best’s observations suggest that women, as mothers and potential mothers, have a natural connection to birth (and all the dangers of difference and “tainted blood” that reproduction brings) and death, and thus women embody the threat of change to men. Billie Delia suggests that women also represent men’s power and control to other men. Gender differences also arise from men’s use of women to symbolize national or community values, an historical tendency seen, for example, in the conflations of rape with the attack on national borders. Women are less likely to distance themselves from their lived experience to the extent necessary to give the sign of “woman” a primarily symbolic status.

Morrison, like Dovey, does not attempt to nail down the answers to the nature of gender, race, humanity, or divinity; instead she tries to open them up, to challenge simple or singular definitions. One way she does this is by stripping down, multiplying, and opening up the central symbol of Christianity, the cross. Misner appropriates Christianity for African Americans by envisioning a black Christ (146). But Morrison goes further; she envisions the symbol of the cross with no man, no human figure at all. At the Convent altar two men, a father and son, see “the outline of a huge cross . . . . Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus” (12). Morrison opens up this space to reimagine ideas of sacrifice and redemption, but also to reexamine the ideas embodied by the cross itself as a symbol of doubleness, of human and divine love, of multiplicity and movement rather than purity and singularity, “parody of human embrace” (146).

In the chapter titled “Divine,” the novel’s characters battle over the meanings of the cross in relation to love and divinity. At times in the novel Morrison refers playfully to this conjunction. For example when Gigi (aka Grace) hears the name of Pallas’s mother, Divine Truelove, she asks, “She a stripper?” (181), and it is the character of Mikey Rood who leads Gigi on her quest for a perpetual sexual embrace (64). The relationship of divine love and power to humans is also central to the dispute over the Oven’s words, whether they should be “Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” (86-87, 195), “Be the Furrow of Her Brow,” (159), or “We Are the Furrow of His Brow” (298). In the “Divine” chapter, Misner has a central explanatory role in this argument when he officiates at a wedding at Ruby. Another minister preaches that “love is divine only and difficult always” (141), which infuriates Misner. Misner angrily casts aside his own sermon and silently holds up the cross, willing the congregants to “see” the meaning he sees in the cross, to see that “God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and die knowing it. . . . not only is God interested in you; He is you” (146-47). Misner’s attempts to connect human and divine love seem to be sanctioned by Morrison. But as Morrison moves the narrative perspective around the room, the congregants “read” the cross in much different ways, as the sign of shame, loss, or power.

The speculations about the cross culminate with Steward Morgan’s thoughts; he looks at the cross and remembers his father’s story about a town called Pura Sangre. “At its northern edge was a sign: No Niggers. At its southern edge a cross” (153-54). Since that disillusioning moment, Steward has seen “crosses between the titties of whores; military crosses spread for
miles; crosses on fire in Negroes’ yards, crosses tattooed on the forearms of dedicated killers,” and he concludes that “whatever Reverend Misner was thinking, he was wrong. A cross was no better than the bearer” (154). While the reader might agree with Steward, his memories prove ironic. The reader discovers in the next chapter that Steward was at the forefront of the New Fathers’ efforts to maintain “pure” African blood; when years earlier a Ruby man brought home a lighter-skinned wife, it was Steward who said, “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (201). His rejection of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and any connection to Africa further emphasizes that this impulse is just another assertion of sangre pura.

Steward’s desire for purity of race, sexuality, and Christianity leads to the scapegoating of the women of the Convent, the construction of the other as the impure that must be destroyed. Morrison rejects Steward’s dismay over the multiple meanings of the cross, but she also cautions against the appropriation of the cross for any purpose, especially its use as a sign of the purity and righteousness of a select group. Morrison uses multiple interpretations to counter the ideal of purity, to reconstruct the cross as a symbol of the embrace of difference. Morrison conveys this through another symbolic use of the cross: The street names of Ruby are named after the Gospels on one side of town; across the dividing road the street names change to Cross John, Cross Luke, and so on. Morrison reconfigures the cross as a crossroads, a place that signifies movement, change, conjunction, meetings, and choices. Redemption is not simply a matter of faith and righteousness; it is a dynamic process of moral choices made amidst uncertainty.

In Ruby, the attempt to retain an ideal of purity and righteousness, to repeat the past without change, creates the greatest changes of all: Communal spirit shifts to individual acquisitive-ness, old interpretations and memories are authorized to squelch dialogue and dissent, and values rigidify into repressive dogma. In the desire to repeat the past exactly, to make it sacred law, the New Fathers become what they had shunned. In the end of the novel, after the murders at the Convent transform him, Deacon feels “long remorse . . . at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different” (302). Misner ponders this:

They think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. . . . How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it. . . . How can they hold it together, he wondered; this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? (306)

The story of an oppressed and imperiled people seeking to create a safe haven based on an earlier model, a people who inadvertently become somewhat like the original oppressors, can be read as a contemporary critique of numerous nations, including the state of Israel, and certain concepts of black nationhood. The example of the New Fathers of Ruby challenges models of black nationhood based on the centrality and sanctity of manliness and fatherhood. In “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense,” Wahneema Lubiano argues that conflations of black and patriarchal power become a form of black self-policing for the dominant white state, that they replicate white systems of power and oppression, that, as Misner concludes, “they think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him” (306). Ruby exemplifies the dangers of home structured on national identity and fixed ideals. By the end of the novel the central functions of the sacred Oven have shifted to the Convent, where the women cook together and dance in the
baptismal rain. Morrison’s redemption of the Convent, the palimpsestic “racial house,” suggests that the hard work of dismantling racial ideological, linguistic, and psychological “architectures” is necessary to create an “open house” and the possibility of home.

Morrison also dismantles racial ideology in Paradise by deconstructing whiteness without reifying or sanctifying blackness. Whiteness has long had the power in United States literary and media representations to establish itself as an invisible normative perspective and a “universal” gaze of judgment. In her essay “Unspoken,” Morrison emphasizes the important work of first sentences in her novels. The first sentence of Paradise works in a number of ways to engage and disrupt the reader’s imaginary. Morrison begins, “They shoot the white girl first” (3). By remarking upon and marking the white girl in this sentence, Morrison creates a charged racial and gender scenario that potentially reinforces the dominant imagination. A scene of black men killing a white woman conforms to hundreds of years of representations, sustained by contemporary media, in which black men are alternately faithful servants or violent, oversexualized animals preying on white women (Morrison Birth x-xi). From the Lynchings of black men on false charges of rape to the recent trial of O. J. Simpson, these perceptions have powerful effects. But Morrison evokes this scenario to confront and dispel these racial representations.

At the same time that the first line conjures up this familiar racial representation, it also works against it by releasing the novel’s perspective from the universal gaze of whiteness. By specifying the white girl, Morrison has reversed the accepted racial logic in which blackness is the exception and whiteness the norm. By calling her “the white girl” Morrison makes whiteness the exception, and thus she constructs the invisible and “universal” point of view as not-white. But the exceptional status of the white girl amid black perspectives does not reify blackness and black judgments because Morrison does not identify the white girl. Thus Morrison’s construction of a nomadic subject also destabilizes racial identity among the four women—Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas. In a strategy Morrison used previously in her sole short story “Recitatif,” the reader’s foothold in racialized judgments is undermined and the reader’s stereotypical assumptions destabilized. Mavis is a failed mother who mistakenly kills her babies in an attempt to please and avoid being beaten by her male lover. Grace embodies and expresses female sexual desire and desirability. Seneca, abandoned by her mother and abused in a string of foster homes, mutilates herself to express her “anxiety of belonging.” Pallas is the poor little rich girl whose parents’ and lover’s betrayal is followed by rape. These women are on the road, and their racial identities are also mobile, unfixed, unresolvable.

Finally, the effect of this is not only to challenge the reader’s assumptions regarding blackness and racial stereotypes. The mobility of racial marking takes away from whiteness any meaning or gaze of its own. Whiteness loses its potency, its power of judgment, but the nomadic circulation of whiteness and blackness among the women prevents blackness from replacing whiteness as gaze and judgment. Thus Morrison opens up the bounds of the racial imaginary without substituting one fixed system for another, without reproducing the “white man’s law” of the racial house.

I have argued that Morrison creates a grace period, a space of insight in the novel, and that insight is brought about by repetition with a difference, a shifting and multiple subject position, and the destabilization of racial identity. But insight has special meaning in Paradise; it is the word used to describe the healing process Consolata,
the longtime resident of the Convent, learns from Lone, the elder midwife of Ruby. Lone teaches Consolata to raise the dead by “stepping in” to people, as Lone calls it. Raised by nuns at the Convent, Consolata feels the practice is unholy, and she feels more comfortable describing it as “seeing in,” the gift of “in sight.” Morrison expands on Consolata’s gift of “in sight” when Consolata begins teaching the other women at the Convent, and they gain insight into themselves. She instructs them to paint around their naked silhouettes and then lie in them, where at first “they wriggled in acute distress but were reluctant to move outside the mold they had chosen” (263). As they explore and express in paint their inner selves, “with Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother . . . they altered” (265). The women gain insights through painting; readers can find insight in Morrison’s novel. When reading a novel a reader, like Consolata, “steps in” or “sees in” to another and thus may discover new thoughts, new possibilities of knowledge or action, and new ways of understanding what is within oneself. Readers “raise the dead” insofar as the dead characters on the page come alive within the reader. Misner preaches that “what is sown is not alive until it dies” (307); like the five women who live on after their deaths at the end of the novel, the characters must be reborn in the reader’s life and imagination to effect the world.12

Despite these examples, Morrison demonstrates that art is not necessarily created to bring insight; art can be used to reinforce blind acceptance of the status quo. In Paradise the school Christmas play becomes a secret conveyance of the ruling beliefs of Ruby. The story of the Nativity is intertwined with a significant event in Ruby’s history dubbed the Disallowing. The historical rejection of the Ruby ancestors from other black communities after Reconstruction because of their darker skin is reenacted as the rejection of Joseph and Mary on their way to Bethlehem. Instead of three wise men, the number of wise men correlates to the number of founding families in Ruby, but the number changes when a family falls out of favor with the ruling elite of the town. The conflation of stories dramatized by the children’s play makes Ruby’s history a sacred text of community martyrdom, and as a sacred text the story is God-given truth. Thus the play performs an historical erasure that reinforces the authority of the families currently in power while it masks its own revisionary processes. In this case an artistic representation is meant to foreclose historical knowledge and relations of power.

Through her art, Morrison attempts to reveal the invisible presences of history, subjectivity, and divinity. History is inscribed as the invisible repercussions of the past in the present, such as the “lingering inheritance of racial slavery, the unfinished project of Reconstruction” (Gordon 139). In her novels, Morrison exposes the hand of the past in contemporary political, geographical, economic, and social relations, and in the more deeply hidden psychological, emotional, and spiritual lives of slavery’s inheritors. But, as Avery Gordon argues in her discussion of Beloved, Morrison also teaches the reader to see the invisible structures of ideology and power described by Marx and Freud, structures that interpellate us and resist our attempts to change ourselves and the world. Morrison exposes these structures in part through history. The Convent itself represents history as a densely layered palimpsest, a history simultaneously hidden and revealed. The Convent is thus also a metaphor for Morrison’s novel and for her trilogy, in which she adds layers of revelation and revision onto an historical text whose original is as irretrievable as the burnt pages of Patricia Best’s historical accounts.

The past also lives in the present through literary and artistic texts. In Morrison’s trilogy, Milton’s Paradise
Lost is rewritten as an alternative North American history; the New Eden is lost through the founding fathers’ original sins—the murder of the indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans—and through the very desire to relinquish history, to erase knowledge of the past. In Paradise, one can see Dante’s Divine Comedy, Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, stories of origins, migrations, and the writing and interpreting of Laws, the Gospels, as well as African creation myths of “Paradise Lost” of the Nuer, Tutsi, Lugbara, Dinka, and Yoruba people, rewritten from African American perspectives.\textsuperscript{13} Morrison’s literary dialogue with these sacred and canonical texts both reveals their power in the present and loosens their grip as unquestioned truth and supreme knowledge.

Besides seeing the past in the present, insight requires an inward vision and the ability to see the self in the other and the other in the self. Clearly the lack of this kind of insight motivates the men of Ruby to scapegoat the women at the Convent. The perception of the self in the other creates common ground; the perception of the other in the self creates new possibilities for self-knowledge. These forms of knowledge are intrinsic to many reading experiences, in which by “stepping in” to the characters on the page one gains insight into the other and the self. Wolfgang Iser argues that this is the basis of fiction’s transformative potential, that “the removal of [the subject-object] division puts reading in an apparently unique position as regards the possible absorption of new experiences” (66). According to Iser, reading literature can create an opening for the other which exposes readers’ unconscious ideological assumptions and enables them to “reread” themselves in the world.

Finally, insight involves a perception of the divine, the spiritual presences, the ancestors who abide with us, the “rememories” that live around us, the unknowable that we must try to know while we accept the limits of our knowledge. Morrison does not attempt to define divinity. Nonetheless an invisible force that is not history, ideology, or subjectivity, that is perhaps most closely akin to imagination, is a vital component of the insight needed to open up vision. When Morrison portrays the women of the Convent as living presences after they have been murdered, Morrison requires of the reader an act of imagination and an acceptance of something more than or outside of our comprehension of life. The women’s appearance—after the nine chapters named after women—in the final unnamed section symbolizes their rebirth. Just as in their leap at the end of the first chapter, the women have moved beyond the boundaries of representation into new possibilities of knowledge and imagination.

In Paradise, divinity is figured not as a singular truth but as a dynamic process of insight, which combines an apprehension of the invisible or inexpressible forces with a process of reading that “open[s] up in-between spaces where new forms of political subjectivity can be explored” (Braidotti 7). Divinity is in excess of representation; it provides a way out of ideology and the limits of representation for the readers and for certain characters in the novel.\textsuperscript{14} After the women of the Convent are presumably killed and mysteriously disappear, Misner and Anna Flood go to the Convent, where she has a vision of a door and he of a window. The questions they avoid, Morrison writes, are “what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?” (305). This vision of other-earthly possibilities is reinforced at Save-Marie’s funeral “when [Misner] bow[s] his head and gazes at the coffin lid [where] he sees the window in the garden, feels it beckon toward another place—neither life nor death—but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had” (307). Deacon also gets intimations of this other place when he looks in
Consolata’s eyes before Steward shoots her: “He longed to know what she saw, but Steward, who saw nothing or everything, stopped them dead lest they know another realm” (301). For Anna Flood, Misner, and Deacon otherness now represents insight, the possibility of new thoughts and realms to explore. Morrison indicates the presence of spiritual meaning and mysteries without trying to “nail down” their significance; she opens the doors of possibility and opens windows onto new visions, while also demonstrating the limits of human vision, knowledge, and judgment.

In Paradise insight is a process by which the novel can teach readers to see beyond the visible, to see the veils of history, ideology, subjectivity, and divinity that shape one’s vision. What Satya Mohanty writes about Beloved applies to Paradise as well: The novel urges readers “to pay attention to the way our social locations facilitate or inhibit knowledge by predisposing us to register and interpret information in certain ways. Our relationship to social power,” he continues, “produces forms of blindness just as it enables degrees of lucidity” (74). Morrison’s ideal methods for teaching her readers are best expressed by Lone when she describes God’s methods:

Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity’s sour juice and paid attention to His world. (273)

This is as close as Morrison gets to playing God. Rather than thundering messages in the reader’s ear, she tries to teach the reader to see differently, to see what is not visible but is readable only through signs and the openness to perceive them. Like Lone’s God, Morrison liberates the reader by granting insight, by teaching the reader to see the unseen signs of historical, psychological, spiritual, and economic forces, to enable readers to read the world and their positions in it in new ways.

At the end of the novel the people of Ruby must contend with mortality, knowledge of their own good and evil, and the uncertainty of truth exemplified by conflicting accounts of the events at the Convent on a July day. Like the Biblical loss of Paradise, this is figured as a fortunate fall from the narrow path of righteousness, from a safe and exclusive home to an unsettling and demanding open house. Today, many people wax nostalgic over an idealized past when knowledge, law, and morality were clear. Morrison unmasksthe nostalgia for such black-and-white truths as a desire for the “good old days” of white racial domination, male privilege, and class conflict. In Paradise Morrison transforms piety from an image of rigid adherence to the law to Consolata’s imagination of Piedade, the lost mother, the singing woman consoling her on the ocean shore. Morrison challenges the old pieties while she offers her readers consolation; she guides her readers to a new place, a new vantage point, in hopes that we too will “shoulder . . . the endless work [we] were created to do down here in Paradise” (318). Morrison’s paradise is not a peaceful utopian moment of eternal sameness; it is a complex, dynamic, and challenging process in which insight informs action and responsibility.

1. Repetition with a difference is the basis of a Freudian concept of healing in his Introductory Lectures, of Marx’s famous words about tragedy and farce in the Eighteenth Brumaire, and of Adrienne Rich’s feminist concept of “re-vision” in “When We Dead Awaken,” but it also has particular implications in black culture and literature. James Snead argues, in “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” that European cultures have attempted (with limited success) to discard connections to cyclical rhythms of nature in order to embrace Hegelian beliefs in history as Progress. Snead
describes black culture in terms of what he calls a "third option" to this duality, "the notion of progress with cycle, 'differentiation' within repetition" (65). Amiri Baraka similarly designates black aesthetics in music as "the changing same," a phrase adapted by Deborah McDowell to describe relational processes in black women's literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., appropriates Freud's concept to theorize "repetition with a black (signifying) difference" as a central trope by which black language arts play against dominant representations and black literature uncovers repressed black history.

2. In a similar vein, Jill Matus argues that "in this novel Morrison is interested in what the dreams of paradise tell about the dreamer. She shows how much is revealed about a people, its history and culture, by what kind of paradise it envisions, whom that paradise includes and excludes, and where it is to be found" (156).

3. In "Home," Morrison uses a long quote about Ruby from Paradise to describe her idea of home. The version in the essay has some variations from the novel, and it ends a little differently: "On out, beyond, because nothing around or beyond considered her prey" ("Home" 10).

4. Braidotti adds that "the nomadic subject, however, is not altogether devoid of unity; his/her mode is one of definite, seasonal patterns of movement through rather fixed routes. It is a cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, rhythmical displacement" (22).

5. In Black Women, Writing, and Identity, Davies proposes a similar construction of a "migratory subjectivity" in which "the subject is not just constituted, but in being constituted has multiple identities that do not always make for harmony.... Migrations of the subject refers to the many locations of Black women's writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated. Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or 'sub-alternization,' but in terms of slipperiness, elsewherefulness" (36). Davies' choice of the term migrant has specific applications to black women: It represents the historical migrations of women of the African Diaspora, it connects African Caribbean women to African American women, and it focuses on process and movement rather than origins and identity.

6. Justine Tally adds an important dimension to this discussion; she writes, "This struggle over the text inscribed on the Oven can be interpreted in light of the debate over the 'canon' versus 'multiculturalism'" (53).

7. Mary Layoun analyzes ways that women are used to represent nationhood and the effects of these representations on women.

8. Of course, this is also the story of the United States and the "New World." Justine Tally discusses black nationalism more extensively in relation to the novel (71-73).

9. In the preface to Playing in the Dark Morrison writes: "Neither blackness nor 'people of color' stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because 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; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (x-xi).

10. In work such as Morrison's Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, bell hooks's "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," and Henry Giroux's "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness," the function of whiteness as an historical, literary, and political construction is analyzed. These authors argue that an awareness and reconceptualization of whiteness as a construct is necessary for the transformation of representations and relations of race and power.

11. J. Brooks Bouson describes these women as "culturally powerful and shaming images" (206).

12. Patricia Storace describes Morrison's relationship to the reader beautifully: "For Morrison, the reader is not dealt with, in the unwitting manner of so many novelists, as the author's creation, a blank recipient, but as a parallel subject of the story, a living being who is dreaming, lying, empathizing, choosing, and struggling for some approach to truth as she reads. The new relationship Morrison is attempting to create with the reader is an invitation, too, to search for a new kind of critical language, one capable of describing the way a reader reads a book while simultaneously reading herself, of expressing a more experimental, dynamic relation between [sic] perception, knowledge, and uncertainty than traditional critical decorum allows" (69).

13. Benjamin Ray writes, "One prominent myth, found throughout Africa, tells of a primordial separation between the sky and the earth and between God and man. The primary theme of this myth is its statement about the nature of the human condition. It explains the origin of suffering, illness, death, and separation from God in terms of a sky/earth polarity" (32). While the general outlines of
these myths have a great deal in common with the Biblical story of Genesis, both the details of the stories and how they attribute responsibility for this separation differ from the Judeo-Christian story and from one another. Missy Dehn Kubitschek also describes Paradise as a revision of a number of classical epics and an engagement with epic themes such as "the founding and downfall of civilizations" and "humanity's place in the cosmos" (182-83).

14. My ideas here derive from Luce Irigaray's Speculum and Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," in which language and representation are part of a phallic economy, and thus femininity is associated with all that is in excess of representation, including certain kinds of poetic, erotic, and prophetic utterances.


—. "Home." Lubiano, House 3-12.


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