

## The “Trick” of Narratives: History, Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

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History was someone you touched, you know, on Sunday mornings or in the barbershop. It’s all around you. It’s in the music, it’s in the way you talk, it’s in the way you cry, it’s in the way you make love. Because you are denied your official history you are forced to excavate your real history even though you can never say that’s what you are doing.

James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

The oral or folkloric sign, which is an integral part of Toni Morrison’s aesthetic, once again becomes a crucial aspect of her latest work. Morrison’s *Paradise* is an imaginative discourse on the oral-written interface in African American culture. In earlier novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, memory is the interpretive sign. In *Paradise*, however, memory is interrogated as Morrison presents a slice of African American experience centered on the (ab)use of memory. This interrogation focuses on a community’s response to oral and written history. In some ways, *Paradise* is a demonstration of Morrison’s awareness of the complex nature of the African American historical experience, an experience that she is reluctant to represent in binary terms (that is, black/white, written/oral). Driving the narrative is a performer interested in representing the lore of her community’s history, playing to the strengths of that community, but also remaining critical of certain aspects of that history. Morrison operates within the African American folkloric medium and invests the historical

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<sup>1</sup> The epigraph is taken from Baldwin’s interview with *The Black Scholar* (Baldwin 1989:150).

contents of her narratives with a mythic dimension.<sup>2</sup> The implication is clear: the resistance to empiricism and linearity, which defines mythic “truth,” is coupled with the representation of African American reality. As Morrison explains elsewhere, black reality involves “the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other” (1984a:342). The result of this coupling is a dynamic narrative vision capable of depicting black history without a betrayal of the deep oral roots of that history. *Paradise*, I would argue, marks Morrison’s clearest delineation of the uses of memory in representing the black experience in America, both as an alternative to the privileged medium of writing and to the hegemonic power conferred on written and lineal history. The novel goes beyond celebrating the centrality of memory to black consciousness evidenced in *Beloved*; it delves into the very process of narrating what is remembered in order to reveal the myriad of interests that shape this narrative. At the end, the notion of a communal narrative generated by a common response to a past is seen as the catalyst for the various narrative performances that compete for acceptance in the novel.

### **Sites of Memory, Sites of Contest: Rethinking Memory and History**

A clarification of the use of the term *memory* is necessary. Memory is part of what defines the human consciousness, and I do not wish to fetishize its presence in Morrison’s narratives. To remember or to forget, Matthew Hugh Erdelyi writes, are the two “contradicting tendencies of memory” (1996:15). In this essay, however, I find the French historian Pierre Nora’s description of memory very useful, especially in the way he sets it off against history: “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name,” he argues. “It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” Conversely, history “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (1994:285). The problem with history, one would surmise, is its need for exactitude (“reconstruction”), a need shunned by memory.

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<sup>2</sup> Peterson argues that Morrison’s notion of history is unconventional, attributable to her “improvisational exploration of alternative concepts and forms for reconstructing African-American history” (1997:202).

However, Nora complicates the difference between memory and history by arguing that in our modern times what we call memory is actually history. The kind of environment in which “real memory” operates—spontaneous and unself-conscious—has been dislodged, he states, “under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility” (284). The emergence of several voices or groups, especially those hitherto silenced by hegemonic history, and the occurrence of radically transformative world events, have created an age wherein what is remembered is not left to chance and spontaneity. The expression, “Never again,” commonly tied to the Jewish Holocaust, for example, becomes an injunction for the group, indeed the world, to etch this particular event in memory. What is remembered assumes orderliness and specificity that bring memory under the province of history. Thus, to use the Holocaust example, that singular historical event becomes a “*lieu de mémoire*,” a site of memory “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of history in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (284).

The Middle Passage and plantation slavery remains a traumatic historical event, which resonates in and influences African American political and cultural consciousness. The will to remember that period, especially when the ramifications of the experience still exist, constitutes black racial memory. What Morrison does is to transform that memory into a literary metaphor that best conveys the unique position and experience of the African American. In this typology, memory is not an “art,” as Frances A. Yates’s *The Art of Memory* suggests, but an eruptive force that the African American writer harnesses in order to present a counter-American narrative. In fact, it is more appropriate to refer to the kind of memory present in African American narratives as “counter-memory,” which George Lipsitz defines as “look[ing]” to the past for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives” (1989:162). One problem with Lipsitz’s definition, however, is that the history he identifies as emanating from this counter-memory is still lineal, even though he sees it as “supplying new perspectives about the past” (*idem*). Morrison’s conceptualization of memory manifests itself in oral histories, that is, histories that her characters assume responsibility for telling, though the narratives collapse into one extended and convoluted narrative of the community. The disruptive effect of these histories on the American Narrative is a direct consequence of their non-linearity. In his study of social memory, Paul Connerton notes that oral histories by an oppressed group produce a different type of history that runs

counter to the structure of the dominant narrative (1989:19): “The oral history of subordinate groups will produce another type of history: one in which not only will most of the details be different, but in which the very construction of meaningful shapes will obey a different principle. Different details will emerge because they are inserted, as it were, into a different kind of narrative home.”

The narrative principle that informs Morrison’s novels is oral, and the stories she tells are so composed within a different frame of memory that her coinage, “rememory,” which is featured significantly in *Beloved*, becomes a conscious attempt to distinguish her own conceptualization. Sethe explains rememory to her daughter Denver as a phenomenon that has a life of its own outside of events, places, and people (1987:36):

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.

Rememory becomes a present thought of a past, solidified in an image kept alive by its capacity to be evoked or re-enacted by virtually any member of the community. Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home does not exorcise the ghost of the harrowing life at the plantation—an experience that assumes a physicality with the appearance of *Beloved*. Together with Paul D, life at Sweet Home is relived and made part of the impetus for living.<sup>3</sup>

In her essay, “Memory, Creation and Writing,” Morrison accentuates the act of memory as living tissue in the community’s sense of being when she asserts that “memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (1984b:385). The above statement points toward an important aspect of her conceptualization: remembering as a conscious act. To dwell on a past that the dominant narrative has tried to erase through contrived history is both an act of resistance and a process of communal

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<sup>3</sup> April Lidinsky vigorously discusses the collectivity of rememory in this novel. Beyond the connection Paul D and Sethe make through their common experience, Lidinsky notes that communal rememory also “dissolves power’s vertical compartmentalization of knowledge, temporality and identities” (1994:207).

validation. Thus, Aimable Twagilimana's statement that rememory is "an activation of the past, to the time of stories told by mothers and grandmothers, to the middle passage, and even to Africa, the land of origins" (1997:103) proves a valid amplification of Morrison's position. For what she does is to establish rememory as the mediation between the oral storytelling practices of the ancestral land and New World black experience.

It would seem that memory, as an eruptive force, when expressed on a purely oral basis, is a weapon of choice for an oppressed community interested in dislodging the lineal and exclusionary narrative of the dominant agent. *Song of Solomon*, for instance, is predicated on a dismissal of the written and lineal paradigm for perceiving history; the history of Solomon and his family, which later regenerates Milkman, derives its force and significance from the conscious effort of the ancestor's children to preserve his existence in their memory. Even when Pilate sings a disembodied and mutilated part of the narrative without much meaning or context, as agent Smith contemplates a suicide dive, the text retains an enigmatic or riddling quality that is explicated by the questing Milkman. The song is, to borrow Nora's term, a site of memory. The novel makes the case that a marginalized group preserves its identity through the agency of memory and folkloric traditions.

Yet the oral transmission and preservation of a community's history has its pitfalls. At its core, *Paradise* interrogates the neutrality of memory in fashioning the narrative of the community's past, more so when what is remembered serves to perpetuate a patriarchal order. Let me suggest that the novel is a logical progression of the kind of "aesthetic ideology" on which novels like *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* are based. That is, whereas the earlier novels seem to draw their "truth" from the extent to which the characters and authorial voices relate to black oral traditions, *Paradise* refuses to accept the affirming value of orality at face value. The novel presents a conflict between one group's "duty-memory" (Nora 1994:292), that is, the group's resolve to remember their past in a certain way as a matter of duty, and another group's determination to experience that past in a liberating manner. This conflict between the older men and their children runs alongside the novel's focus on the lives of the women at the Convent in the present. Unlike the absence of a single version relating the founding of Haven and Ruby (even though the Morgans insist there is one), the reader is privy to the circumstances of the women's arrival at the Convent. From Mavis, who runs away from a threatening domestic space, to Gigi, who searches for (and later abandons) an elusive rendezvous with her jailed boyfriend, the narrator focuses on the process of the women's acceptance of each other under the tutelage of Consolata. It is almost as if their lives, accounted for in the

present, repudiate the fetish the men have made of their communal memory. If this appears to be a negation of the argument in the previous novels, it is because Morrison, as an artist with a role similar in some ways to that of the African oral artist, resists the temptation to fossilize her position. As varying and sometimes contradictory as some of her statements during interviews are, Morrison is more interested in whatever tradition each generation of her characters adopts as a conduit for attaining agency.

### **Memory as a Trace: The Making of a Patriarchal Narrative**

Set in mid-1976, amid the national trauma following the Vietnam War, *Paradise* presents the gradual death of Ruby, a community of fiercely proud black people, due to the refusal of its patriarchs to excise the cyst of an isolationism related to the circumstances of Ruby's founding. Around 1889, nine freed African American men, their families, and some strays from Mississippi and Louisiana band together in search of a settlement site in the Oklahoma Territory. They reach a town called Fairly, a settlement of fellow African Americans, and appeal to be allowed to join them. The request is rejected; the citizens of Fairly provide the migrants with victuals and ask them to move on. The migrants are quick to identify the cause of the rejection, later to be known as the Disallowing, as color. While the people of Fairly are lighter-skinned, the patriarchs and their families are darker. Stung by this rejection, they travel without stopping until they establish their own community, which they call Haven. Haven thrives for decades but later suffers during the post-World War II depression. Descendants of the founders embark on another migration to a better land and Ruby, named for the woman who apparently died as a result of the demanding trek, is founded.

Ruby, an isolated town, "ninety miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety miles from the nearest badge" (13), is incidentally about 17 miles from an old and obscure building housing a Catholic institution, Christ the King School for Native Girls, which the citizens of Ruby simply refer to as the Convent despite the bold sign announcing its official name. Now in disrepair and no longer a school house, the Convent is inhabited and governed by the Mother Superior and her ward, Consolata (Connie), an orphan whom the nun has adopted. The Mother Superior dies at the beginning of the novel. Devastated by her death, Connie allows the Convent to sink further into ruins while turning it into a haven for women with various troubled histories. The persons and events in the Convent intersect

to form the narrative of *Paradise*.

As leaders of the community, the men of Ruby maintain cohesion amid the growing dissent of the younger ones and the women by insisting on a particular narrative about the founding of the community and its predecessor, Haven. This narrative, incidentally, is far from written; it is a history kept alive in the memory of the older members, especially as remembered by the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan. Not only are the brothers the grandsons of Zechariah Morgan, known in Ruby's lore as Big Papa, the legendary leader of the first settlement at Haven, but they are also the most prosperous members of Ruby. "The twins," the narrator comments, "have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not. And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the *controlling* one [emphasis mine] told them by their grandfather" (13). Deacon is also described as possessing a "total memory" (107).

In this sense, the novel opens up its argument; while the twins' recall capacity during oral recountings of Ruby's history follows the trajectory of remembering "things they witnessed and things they have not," the narrator nevertheless notes their insistence on a controlling narrative. Despite the disruptive or non-linear dynamic of memory, especially in an oral performance medium, the Morgans' position points to a harnessing of what is remembered into what is literally a master-narrative. The implication is that what is remembered and at the core of Ruby's "nationalism" is a narrative of bruised male ego and a vengeful determination to reclaim it. This implication validates Cynthia Enloe's argument that "nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (1990:44). There is also a class factor involved. The enormous economic power and social influence wielded by Steward and Deacon Morgan lead to a process of consciously choosing what they remember, and what they compel their fellow citizens to remember, about the principles and beliefs on which their community is founded.

In *Paradise*, the oven symbolizes the strategy of substituting what is otherwise a transgressive narrative medium for a coherent and "conservative" one. As Steward remembers the event, it was Big Papa who prompted the men of Haven to build a cook oven. This facility not only served as a "community 'kitchen,'" but was in fact a gesture of the men's pride "that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman's kitchen or nursed a white child" (99). Steward clearly favors this lofty reasoning for his grandfather's act even though Steward equally contemplates that "[m]aybe Zechariah never wanted to eat another stick-roasted rabbit, or cold

buffalo meat” (99). The obvious appeal to the male ego that informs the making of the oven assumes an emblematic distinction when the twins and thirteen other families begin a fresh journey from Haven to Ruby, carrying the oven with them. Once reassembled on the new site, it becomes the community’s meeting place and the men from the leading families confer on it the status of a totem.

However, a conflict between the younger sons of Ruby and their fathers arises over the correct words Big Papa had inscribed on the iron lids of the oven. Were they “Be the Furrow of His Brow” or “Beware the Furrow of His Brow”? During its transport from Haven to Ruby, the letters of the first word in the meaning-laden statement had fallen off the oven, leaving a gap that the two generations would contend to fill. The conflict over the missing word is at the center of a three-sided dialectic among controlled memory, the written word, and an unfettered “true memory.” Though both sides understand the pronoun “His” to refer to God, the disagreement concerns the relationship of this powerful and fearsome God to His people, the black people of Ruby. The fathers vehemently declare that the statement is an order; hence the word is “Beware,” for “God’s justice is His alone” (87). The younger generation, on the other hand, sees the message on the lid as a motto challenging the people to be “His instrument, His justice” (87).

The unspoken ideological argument is that the older generation of the Morgans, who insist on retaining the isolationist and patriarchal order instituted by the original freed men, desire to use the oven as an instrument of social cohesion. The power and reverence for God that they argue the words on the lid represent is a ruse for the unchallenged authority they demand. The interpretation by Harper Jury, the son of one of the founders of Haven, reflects this unspoken bias: “It says, ‘Beware.’ Not ‘Be.’ Beware means ‘Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it’” (87). Deacon Morgan says categorically, “Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built” (85). His brother Steward also wonders what the founders “would think of those puppies who wanted to alter words of beaten iron” (99). For the older men, the oven is the solidification of a remembered past.

There is an irony in the disagreement that divides Ruby in two, and it does not lie in the elliptical life of the words on the oven. The irony is that the critically ambiguous words of the patriarch, which have become “worn letters” (6) on the oven, betray one primary virtue of writing—permanence, an ability to “preserve the word from vanishing” (Biakolo 1987:88). In contrast to Walter Ong’s assertion that the written word has the “potential of

being lifted and placed on different places, or being resurrected" (1977:156), the written words on the lid of the oven disappear, creating a rift among Ruby's inhabitants. The irony deepens when, in order to prove their own version of the missing word, the twins and the other men call on Esther, the 80-year-old sole surviving member of the Haven settlers, to tell the community what she remembers about the word on the oven. The young people ridicule what they call Esther's "finger memory," peeved "at the notion of remembering invisible words you couldn't even read by tracing letters you couldn't pronounce":

"Did you see them?" asked the sons.

"Better than that!" shouted the fathers. "She felt them, touched them, and put her fingers on them!"

"If she was blind, Sir, we could believe her. That'd be like braille. But some five-year-old kid who couldn't read her own tombstone if she climbed out of her grave and stood in front of it?" (83)

In the heated debate, the fathers invoke the authority of a living witness to validate their interpretation of a text that not even the testimony of a witness can validate. Like the elder Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon* who is betrayed by the power of literacy, Esther's memory and belief in the infallibility of the written word is vitiated by her inability to read. Whatever she thinks she remembers, contrary to the thinking of the men who depend on her testimony, cannot be so easily traced on the impersonal contours of the engraved words—a point the sons emphasize.

The misalignment between what is remembered and what is traced and felt on the fingers marks a paradigm shift that *Paradise* problematizes. The missing letters constitute a problematic space in which Morrison interrogates the permanence or durability of the written word or documented history. Yet she points to the potential of oral histories, even when recounted by someone who "felt them, touched them, put her fingers on them," to be channeled toward a political end. In *Song of Solomon*, there is no obvious special interest within the black community to preserve the story of Shalimar in a particular way (even though the village belle, Sweet, would sarcastically ask Milkman, concerning his great-grandfather's flight, "who'd he leave behind?") (1977:328). What is embedded in the communal consciousness in the earlier novel is both the affirmation of the story of the ancestor and the presence of dissenting or disinterested voices, like Susan Byrd's and Sweet's, who are at liberty to question the usefulness of the Shalimar narrative. In *Paradise*, the men are determined to submerge the

compositeness of communal memory<sup>4</sup>—the missing letters on the iron lid of the oven—in favor of an orchestrated narrative that kills the creative force of the community represented by the imperative verb, “Be.”

The leading men of Ruby nurture and retain memory of their humiliation by fellow black men, albeit of a lighter complexion; not content to found a place of their own, they build one that resists any dissent and any form of freedom not made in their own image. In this way, the novel raises a pertinent issue concerning the limits on the use of the memories of the past. Is what is remembered to be a furrow, an impediment to the creative conscious of the present, or a catalytic agent capable of transforming the present? The Methodist priest Richard Misner, a non-native and the rallying point for the younger people, perceives the trouble with Ruby’s sense of its past (161):

Over and over and with the least provocation, they [the citizens of Ruby] pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and greatgrands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates.

It is not that the older men do not have stories of themselves to tell; they have fought as American soldiers in foreign lands, and their courageous decision to move away from Haven to a new land could well translate to stories of heroism. The reason for their silence about themselves is that the Morgans and the other men who share their vision of a community recognize the power of the oral tradition, the political and religious power that a mythic narrative of the past has for coercing conformity.

### **“Nobody Knew”: Ordering Memory in Performance**

Yet *Paradise* is far from being a single narrative about Ruby. Events—past and present—constitute keenly agonistic spaces for narrative performance by the key characters. Three main levels of narration operate in the novel: the twins’ recollections provide one layer of account; the voices

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<sup>4</sup> Connerton (1989:16-17) suggests that members of a community form communal memory through the interlocking of individual histories.

of Patricia Best, Dovey and Soane Morgan (the two sisters who are married to the twins), Consolata, and Lone DuPres make up varying degrees of a counter-narrative to the twins'; and, finally, an authorial voice acts as the reader's interpreter. Among the three perspectives, the authorial voice constantly redirects the reader to composite narratives. This practice enables the reader to witness the partial or even dubious manipulation of a received tradition by the performing characters. As readers we are in the presence of story-making, but like the characters in the novel we are denied the privilege of omniscience. Nobody knows. Thus, the narrative structure effectively exposes the impracticability of the kind of narrative that the Morgans and the men want to foist on Ruby.

Different narrative moods distinguish the men's narrative from the women's. The Morgan twins' recollections are evoked with a masculine sense of infallibility; they have no reason to doubt the stories their father, Rector, handed down to them. Besides, some of their claims of authority rest on their personal recollection of events. More significantly, the brothers promote their personal memory as representing the community's. Such an enormous leap from the private to the public is achieved with rhetorical forcefulness. One striking example of the twins' controlling performance occurs at the same venue where Esther's "finger memory" is ridiculed. Irked by the young people's boldness in questioning their elders' reverence of the oven, Deacon responds with characteristic specificity, calling on his colleagues to bear witness (85-86, my emphasis):

*They [the founding fathers] dug the clay—not you. They carried the hod—not you. They mixed the mortar—not a one of you. They made good strong brick for that oven when their own shelter was sticks and sod. You understand what I'm telling you? And we respected what they had gone through to do it. Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men—men, hear me? not slaves, ex or otherwise—the bricks those men made. Tell them, Sargent, how delicate was the separation, how careful we were, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Seawright, you, Harper, you tell him if I'm lying. Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us.*

While Deacon recounts what is evidently communal lore, the institution of the oven, we observe a gradual shift from representing the efforts of the patriarchs ("they") to courting the solidarity of his fellow men ("we"), and finally to resting the weight of his entire speech on the action of him and his brother Steward. Deacon does not make a distinction between received tradition and his own personal narrative; for example, he was not at the oven-making ceremony to know the specifics of the construction—digging

the clay, carrying the hod, and so forth. But the reference is necessary in order to reinforce the events in which he is a participant and, now, the narrator.<sup>5</sup> This performance strategy is not lost on Royal Beauchamp (Roy), one of the leading speakers for the youths, who retorts to charges that his peers want to kill the oven's value in this way (86): "It's our history too, sir. Not just yours." Deacon's act is a powerful appropriation of communal history that relies on realigning the key parts of that history to serve the speaker's purpose.

The founding of Haven is remembered and narrated in mythic proportions. This is not surprising; the narration is from the subject position of Steward who "remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told" (95). After the Disallowing, and in righteous anger, Big Papa, who is lame, urges the people on an uninterrupted trek. On the third night, while the other trekkers are resting, Zechariah takes his only son, Rector, far into the woods to pray. In a scene reminiscent of Christ's intense emotional torment in the Garden of Gethsemene,<sup>6</sup> Zechariah remains on his knees, "hum[ming] the sweetest, saddest sounds" in prayer (96), while Rector, like Christ's disciples, cannot keep up and apparently falls asleep. Big Papa's reported opening words of prayer are striking: "My Father, Zechariah here." It echoes the intimacy with God that such biblical figures as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Christ experienced. In Gethsemene, angels minister to Christ to strengthen Him for the journey to the cross. As for Big Papa and Rector, they hear thundering footsteps and then "a small man, seemlike, too small for the sound of his steps," wearing a "glistening white" shirt appears (97). Zechariah's foot is miraculously restored, and from that point the small man, seen by only Zechariah, leads the families for twenty-nine days until he brings them to the appointed place, preceded by a supernatural sign. Like the ancient Israelites who were led through the desert by fire in the night and cloud by day, Zechariah follows behind the loud footsteps of the unidentified man.

The Disallowing is Ruby's unifying narrative (189): "Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them."

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<sup>5</sup> See Bauman 1986:espec. 49-52 on the narrative practice described here. The fact that Bauman's analysis pertains to oral storytelling seems to further vindicate the appropriateness of applying a performance rhetoric in interpreting Deacon's speech. Morrison, too, suggests such a connection by including gestural and emphatic phrases in the twin's story.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46.

Further on, the narrator remarks: "Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many." The unspoken rule not to have any dealings with white people or with blacks with lighter skin emerges from such encounters (189): "Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion."<sup>7</sup> The deep-seated hatred for persons of mixed-race, however, creates a rupture in an otherwise morally persuasive narrative, in that the hatred accounts for the efforts of the leading families to tactfully erase some details of the original persons who began the journey to Haven and, later, to Ruby.

The men of Ruby nurture and retain the memory of their humiliation. They give the incident a name of epic dimensions—the Disallowing—which they use as an instrument for silencing or ostracizing members of the community who are not as dark as those members of the founding families. Patricia Best, the counter-narrative performer in the novel, aptly calls the core families, "8-rock. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines" (193). Memories of images of their ideal black women also cast a long shadow over their standards of what is acceptable conduct for women. This shadow is the instigator for the mid-July 1976 attack on the women living in the Convent. The five women there not only live an uncensored life, but are also free of male control (177): "The whole house [the Convent] felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too." The xenophobic attitude of the men and their repulsion of the women in the Convent are projected as justified because of the twins' biased rendering of a communal narrative.

### **Patricia Best: Performing Counter-Memory Through Writing**

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<sup>7</sup> At the Disallowing, the people of Fairly refused the trekkers residence but provided them with supplies and money to aid them on their journey. The men, in their pride, left the items where the offer was made and continued on their journey. What the men do not know is that the women sneaked back to gather the food to feed their little children to save them from starving to death. As readers, once given this information, we realize that this is a rupture of the master narrative, or rather, that there exists an alternative narrative, surreptitiously stored in the memory of the women. This narrative remains silenced; yet since half of the members of the 8-R (the women) know it, this alternate narrative has the potential to disrupt the men's narrative.

Set against the endorsed oral and remembered history of Haven and Ruby is a counter (documented) text being assembled by Patricia Best, a school teacher and daughter of Roger Best, one of the nine cofounders of Ruby. Both father and daughter, as well as Patricia's daughter, Billie Delia, are treated as outsiders and morally tainted persons because Roger broke the unspoken code by "marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering" (197). From her forced position as an outsider among her own people, and given her limited influence as a woman in Ruby's patriarchal society, Patricia initiates an unraveling of the common ancestral narrative as peddled by the powerful male authority in Ruby. Rather than rely on the remembered accounts—known in detail only by the men and performed by the children in place of the nativity story—Patricia chooses to assemble a counter narrative based on written evidence (188):

The town's official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches, had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories. Pat had wanted proof in documents where possible to match the stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted—freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance. She alone could figure out why a line was drawn through Ethan Blackhorse's name in the Blackhorse Bible and what the heavy ink blot hid next to Zechariah's name in the Morgan Bible.

The written records sought by Patricia present another instance of the novel's parodying of the written text. As the instrument of state power, the written word is the preferred medium for the preservation or execution of authority in the public domain. It is retrievable, "citable," and carefully composed with an eye to its relevance to and applicability in the future.

Patricia's historical credo, on the other hand, is based upon the intimacy of the written word. Far from the public space where the patriarchal narrative holds sway, the personal names on books—those blotted or crossed out, and the individual histories of their families that Patricia's young students produce—are the narrative strands that she uses to question and undermine the master narrative. Moreover, her historical process provides a space for "de-inking" the blotted names for a more expansive and embracing narrative of the founding of Haven and Ruby, a narrative in which the lives and contributions of other citizens who have

been excluded from the “official story” are included.<sup>8</sup> Of those disadvantaged persons, the most visible (by their invisibility) are the women, known only by their first names and by their affiliation through marriage to the 8-rock families. Pat, contemplating the fate of her mother, Delia, and other women who had died, wonders (187-88):

Who were these women who, like her mother, had only one name? Celeste, Olive, Sorrow, Ivlin, Pansy. Who were these women with generalized last names? Brown, Smith, Rivers, Stone, Jones. Women whose identity rested on the men they married—if marriage applied: a Morgan, a Flood, a Blackhorse, a Poole, a Fleetwood.

It is significant that in representing the history of her own family in the project, the third person point of view disappears, giving way to Patricia's first person journal entry as she addresses her parents (196-202). This is the only place in the novel where first person narration is sustained, highlighting Patricia's manipulation of the individualistic act of writing in drawing meaning out of the experiences of her parents.

Patricia's genealogical tree therefore restores the several branches that have been pruned in order to feed a sexist vision. For example, the blotted name beside Zechariah's in the Morgan family Bible belongs to Tea, Zechariah's twin brother, and Zechariah's name at birth was Coffee (302). Tea's name is erased as an external act in the process of obliterating his memory as the one who “quite reasonably” complied with the command of two drunk and gun-toting white men to dance. Zechariah had refused and

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<sup>8</sup> The conflict between Patricia's efforts to account for those whose names have been erased from the history of Haven/Ruby seems to validate one of the “disputes” in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend* (1998). The book continues Lyotard's discourse on the dialectics of “master” narratives and “local” narratives, here configured as conflict between “little stories” and “History.” Using the cultural practices of the Cashinahua, Lyotard states (155): “The little stories received and bestowed names. The great story of history has its end in the extinction of names (particularism). At the end of the great story, there will simply be humanity.” In other words, it is in the interest of a hegemonic power to suppress dissent through the elimination of narratives that challenge its authoritarianism. Patricia's action of writing a different narrative falls within Lyotard's argument that “the perpetuation of narratives of origin by means of repeated narratives” is the key to the consolidation of political power (147). But so much has changed since Lyotard's definition of these terms that they have almost become opprobrium in contemporary usage. I believe that Morrison is aware of this change, and that is why she pursues Patricia's agenda guardedly.

was shot in the foot for his disobedience.<sup>9</sup> Ashamed of his twin brother's ready compliance, he invited two other men and together they gathered other families for the trek that led them to Haven, leaving Tea behind. Tea's name is blotted out because his act of obliging the white men with a dance is antithetical to the 8-rock's narrative that they have never bowed to any white person. Nor have their wives. Also, it enhances the process of mythologizing Zechariah as a combined Moses and Christ figure. Similarly, Patricia's performance reveals the lie in the men's aversion to whiteness; they had no problems in using Delia's light complexion to gain access to places from which they would have otherwise been barred (200).

The unraveling of such repressed histories as Zechariah's twin cannot compare with the greater significance that the resurrection of the women's names has for understanding the major sources of conflict in the novel. Women in *Paradise* are the wise silent observers of the men and their puny emotional outbursts. The women see through the hypocrisy and shallowness of the men's thinking, thereby projecting visions of another world, another black world, where the benefits of emancipation have not been still-born or thwarted by the foolishness, acrid hatred, and meanness of their men. While the male founders of Ruby fight doggedly to protect their narcissistic sentiments about their community, and in the process suppress dynamic social forces, the women are perceptive enough to discern the conflicts and dismiss them as mere egotistical sallies.

Consider Dovey, Steward's wife. Alone and thinking about the meeting of the older men and their children about the original words on the iron lids of the oven, she ponders with Christian philosophical flair (93): "Beware the Furrow of His Brow?' 'Be the Furrow of His Brow?' Her own opinion was that 'Furrow of His Brow' alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross." Dovey's meditation articulates the novel's larger argument. At first appearing passive, her words are remarkably postmodernist and radical by their resistance to specificity. They are calls for each generation to interpret its past in the manner relevant to it, rather than be slaves to the past.

Except for advocating Dovey's opinion, there is no clear indication about the veracity of the source of the conflict. In Patricia's version, the

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<sup>9</sup> Even this piece of information is inconclusive. In Patricia's view (189), "his [Zechariah's] foot was shot through—by whom or why nobody knew or admitted, for the point of the story seemed to be that when the bullet entered he neither cried out nor limped away." This is yet another example of the novel's careful presentation of composite opinions that show the elusiveness of a single version of communal memory.

words are a “conundrum” deliberately wrought by Zechariah with utmost linguistic ambiguity (195):

“Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” in which the “You” [understood], vocative case, was not a command to the believers but a threat to those who had disallowed them. It must have taken him months to think up those words—just so—to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but slyly not identifying the understood proper noun or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen or to whom. So the teenagers Misner organized who wanted to change it to “Be the Furrow of His Brow” were more insightful than they knew.

Impressive as Patricia’s semantic analysis is, the novel does not allow the reader to surrender to any single perspective on meaning. In the case of the vexatious words, earlier on in the novel, one of the unidentified men who attack the Convent expresses doubts about the source of the words attributed to Zechariah Morgan (7): “It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged.” It is clear here that whatever greatness Zechariah’s children and grandchildren attribute to him is not shared by the entire community, not even among the men who accompany the twins to the Convent.

In Ruby, the past remembered by a select few has degenerated into a cold, oppressive ideology of intolerance. Delia Best, Patricia’s mother, dies at childbirth because her 8-rock neighbors would rather watch her bleed to death than invite a white doctor into the community to save her. Worse still, her death would mean the elimination of what they consider a blot on Ruby—a light skin complexion. Concealed within the genealogies of many of the leading families are cases of incest committed in order to avoid marrying into a non-8-rock bloodline (196). Following the attack on the women at the Convent and the consequent communal shock and embarrassment at the incident, the closed world of Ruby falls apart. The young people represent this anomie by attacking the words on the oven (298): “No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffiti on the hood of the oven now was ‘We are the Furrow of His Brow’.” It is a tragic epitaph for a grand nationalist design, which in its attempt to express the dignity of a community exchanges that vision for a narrow and constricted one.

## A/Lone Voice

It is perhaps in Lone DuPres that Morrison imbues the most penetrating understanding of the hollowness of the men's thinking. She is one of Ruby's oldest citizens, the only midwife and a reputed seer who actually "practices." Like Patricia, Lone is part of the community and yet lives as an outsider who in her ruminations perceives the rapid changes occurring in Ruby. As a little child Fairy DuPres, a teenaged member of the original pilgrims, rescued her. Fairy had found her sitting alone by the door post of a hut, half-starved, with her mother dead and lying in the hut. Against the urging of the men, who felt they did not have enough food to feed another hungry mouth, Fairy refused to abandon the baby and named her Lone because of the circumstance of her rescue.

Although it appears that Lone's interventions at critical situations in the novel are merely coincidental, there is a strong suggestion that she is like the biblical lone "voice of one crying in the wilderness."<sup>10</sup> She is the only person in Ruby who understands the troubled lives of the women who eventually wander into the Convent. She alone understands the haven the women find there. On the night of the nine men's pre-dawn attack on the Convent, Lone stumbles into their conspiracy and rushes to tell the women at the Convent about the plot. But they do not believe her and, desperately, she drives back to wake up her fellow villagers to dissuade the men from carrying out their plan. As she drives from the Convent back to Ruby in her worn single-headlight Oldsmobile, she thinks about the significance of the road (270):

it was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost . . . women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women's.

It is this accurate understanding of the fate of the women in her male-dominated society that compels her to try, though unsuccessfully, to stop the men.

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 40:3.

More significantly, Lone is the only character who divines the real reason behind the men's attack. At their nocturnal meeting, the men allege that the Convent women are polluting the moral atmosphere of Ruby by their apparent amorous or amoral lifestyle. It does not matter that, unbeknownst to all the men but Steward, Deacon Morgan had in the past had a passionate tryst with Consolata. The men accuse the women of infanticide, mass murders, and the seduction of Ruby's young ones. Lone reverses this grievous narrative by helping the reader make connections with incidents narrated earlier that expose the falsehood of the men's allegations. That the nine men choose to act from sheer ignorance and pigheadedness is one of the high points of this novel; what is frightening is the dangerously sexist underpinning of this misconception. The men consider their impending aggression against the women as a moral necessity (276): "these here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in Church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel that they ain't thinking about one either. . . . They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families." Lone rightly understands the men's actual grudge is that the Convent is a "house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company" (276).

As Lone eavesdrops on the men's secret meeting, she critiques the narrative the men have chosen to believe to justify their invasion (275): "Here, when the men spoke of a ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove." Lone's observation touches on the central argument of the novel. The men refuse to see the unwinding threads of Ruby's society and fixate instead on the sentimental value of a controlled memory of their past. They are determined, as they rampage the Convent, "that nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). In their misguided representation of themselves as defenders of their society's ideals, they are portrayed as dangerous zealots who cripple the promise of an otherwise lofty enterprise.

Unlike most of Morrison's previous novels, in which she focuses on individuals and their relationship to the community, *Paradise* can be read as a narrative on Ruby. The conflicts in the novel are related to the charting of Ruby's destiny based on how the people perceive or are led to perceive their past and its relationship to their well-being. The "total," domineering memory of the Morgans is pitted against the cold and guided written document of Pat Best. But the presence of Lone DuPres suggests that Morrison's view of this African American society cannot be so easily

perceived through such a straight-laced binary exposition. Lone, the rejected midwife, feared because of her spiritual powers, is the one character who “know[s] something more profound than Morgan’s 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).

*Paradise* is perhaps Morrison’s clearest articulation of the fallacy in attributing any form of narrative—oral or written—to either the oppressed or the oppressor. What she suggests is that these positions (subject and form) are not permanent. Between the blacks in Fairly who turn away their darker-skinned freed men and women, and the men of Haven who try to erase the presence of the Bests because of their color, there is no difference. What unites them is power. The oppressive role oral narrative plays in *Paradise* confirms Kerwin Lee Klein’s argument in his critique of Lyotard’s conceptualization of the terms “master narrative” and “local stories.” According to Klein (1995:297), “no special way of telling can guarantee that today’s local narrative will not become tomorrow’s narrative master. Virtually overnight, the chanting of subaltern protest may modulate into the crack of the historical whip.”

The men’s fossilization of Ruby’s history through their selected memory recall is rejected because it delegitimizes parallel narratives in the rapidly changing fortunes of Ruby. Significant as orality is in the African American aesthetic, *Paradise* rejects this particular performance by the men by revealing how dangerously malleable the spoken text can be. After the attack on the women, several versions—or “editions,” as Pat Best calls them—of what actually happened emerge. Again, it is Lone who is “unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good” (297). She sees how relatives of the men involved, with their varying exculpatory versions, “supported them [the versions], enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation” (*idem*). This is one place where Morrison, with an unflinching gaze, shows us the making of an oral narrative and the challenges it poses to a Grand Story. No one in Ruby is able to explain the mysterious disappearance of the Convent women—both the murdered and the survivors; nor does Morrison assist the reader.

Like the oral tale whose first teller or “author” can hardly be identified, the truth about the fate of the women will never be verified. The narrator consciously leaves the women’s disappearance and their later “manifestations” on the mythic plane. Lone refers to the various versions of the Convent attack as “altered truth,” but reading the uses the men have made of the event’s mystery solidifies the novel’s argument about the capacity of the spoken word to authenticate power. Conversely, the

incomplete endorsement of the alternative represented by Patricia Best's genealogical tree project is based on its similar inability to account for the whole truth. Conscientious as she is in accounting for every person in *Ruby*, she cannot avoid the trappings of individuality that writing fosters, as she adopts a more intimate perspective in representing the lives of her parents. No wonder that, in a strange twist of events, Patricia throws the entire project into a fire. Morrison directs her artistic vision to the unknown quantity in African American experience, the "trick" of life that defies any unitary narrative.

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