

Morrison's *Paradise* as a Western

Of all of Morrison's novels, *Paradise* is set the farthest west, in the panhandle of Oklahoma, or as she puts it, "in the muzzle of a state shaped like a gun" (16), a location which abuts Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado. It's the study of an isolated all-black town called Ruby founded by the descendents of freedmen. And though *Paradise* is set in 1976, more than eighty years after Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of closing of the American frontier, in many ways it reverberates with profoundly Western themes of migration, violence, and opposition between civilization and wilderness and law and order.

Many critical authors have already considered *Paradise* as an exploration of the American pattern of settlement, of westward expansion encouraged by divine right. Less has been done to place the novel in respect to art of the American West and the frontier. It is my goal to establish these connections between *Paradise* and critical work pertaining to frontier history and Western mythologies in hopes that it will reveal a helpful way of examining the text.

The critic who has furthest established the Western motif is Holly Flint in her essay "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire." She argues the novel is in part a New Western history, aiming to recount the presence of non-European-Americans in the West. Flint describes in detail the Southern emigration on which Morrison's Oklahoma settlement is based. Morrison's pioneers are "modeled after black Americans who participated in the Exoduster movement" from 1877 to 1879, primarily settling in Kansas. They were named Exodusters because of their similarity to the Israelites who fled from Egypt. While

her research is illuminating, Flint suggests that the New Western approach provides a limited lens. She writes, “one must move beyond New Western history’s regionalist methodology.” She suggests that homesteading and the black exodus are indicative of the larger pattern of American colonial settlement and of the country’s imperialism. Though Flint’s further commentary is insightful, I’d like to linger on Morrison’s chosen setting. Beyond discourse on American empire, how does the Western motif add to the novel?

I’ll begin by looking at setting, how the post-frontier period allows for commentary on the persistence of community myth and how Indian claims to the country undermine Ruby’s exceptionalist history and characterize the Convent. Character archetypes also serve to depict the novel’s conflicts: the struggle between civil and savage, oppressors and victims, and men and women. Lastly, the Western legacy of violence will be considered with respect to the mythic qualities of *Paradise*’s conclusion.

Is *Paradise* really a Western?

Setting

In his survey of Western literature and film *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, a follow-up to a seminal critical work, John Cawelti establishes criteria for identifying a popular Western. His primary criteria are setting and characters. While *Paradise* clearly falls outside of what can be considered popular genre, I find the criteria a useful guide for determining the Western elements of the novel. Of setting, Cawelti writes, “the Western is a story which takes place on or near a frontier and consequently the Western is generally set at a particular moment in the past” (20). This is a problematic definition for *Paradise*. On one hand, as Holly Flint has noted, *Paradise* clearly reflects the history of the black homesteaders of the Exoduster movement. But the front story takes place primarily in the 1970s. Ruby’s residents, though isolated, have access to

modern conveniences and can drive to the nearby town of Demby for what they can't find.

However, the frontier community of Ruby's Old Fathers remains alive in the minds of the New.

Much of the history Morrison gives us on the Old Fathers westward migration comes via the reflection of Ruby's reining twin brothers, two bankers named Steward and Deek Morgan. Steward likes to roam his show ranch outside of town on horseback in the pre-dawn hours. Morrison writes, "Saddled on [his horse, Steward] rediscovered every time the fresh wonder of knowing that on one's own land you could never be lost the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklahoma" (95). Here Morrison is careful to show the recurring nature of this event by noting Steward's recollection of the past occurs "every time" he rides his horse in the early morning and also how his action permits "rediscovery." By riding his horse, Steward reenacts the migration of the Old Fathers and in so doing imparts a sense of their spirit of exploration in a new world.

At the same time Steward rides his horse, his brother Deek is out hunting for quail. Morrison doesn't show Deek hunting. Instead we learn of it through his wife Soane as she waits for him to return with his bag. Like Steward's riding, Deek's hunting is an activity which reconnects him with the Old Fathers. He too is moving about the land, and by hunting he reenacts the Old Fathers' search for food as they made their way to Oklahoma. When Deek does return the house and brings his quail into the kitchen, Soane is critical of him for not using his power as a banker to help out the needier residents of Ruby. Morrison writes, Soane "didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out. Why, for instance, couldn't Menus [Jury] have kept the house he bought?" (107). We can assume here that Deek and Steward have foreclosed Menus's home due to his failure to make payments. But Deek's hunting, although more of a hobby than a means of survival, has temporarily allowed

him to recreate the communal ethic of the Old Fathers. When he returns home, we learn that he's already given half his quail to another resident, "enough to take care of two suppers" (105). In spite of her criticism of Deek's greed, Soane senses that after his hunt something is right with him. After studying his satisfied face, she thinks "shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be" (107). So in spite of the fact that Ruby's New Fathers live in a time and place of relative privilege, their ritual reenactments keep them in touch with frontier lifestyle.

Steward's and Deek's looking back on traditions becomes a commentary in keeping with the contemporary subgenre Cawelti refers to as the post-western. Some such contemporary westerns depict "the West as pastoral tradition threatened by modernity" (113). In the twins' pre-dawn movements, their luxury is on display. Steward reflects on his own privilege in light of the Old Fathers' trials, that his ownership allows him to live without threat. Also, due to gas drilling, his ranch has been greatly reduced from its prior state: "In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk [his] land to a toy ranch, and he lost the trees that had made it so beautiful" (82). Not only has his land been diminished, but in losing its trees, it has lost its pastoral aesthetic value. Riding on his dwindling show ranch, the heroic figure Steward cuts is clearly ironic. Likewise, Soane considers Deek's hunting in light of its break from the past: "Unlike at Haven's beginning, when Ruby was founded hunting game was a game" (103). In each case, as much as the twins' reenactments of tradition put them in touch with the past, they also display their modern separation from the frontier history which defines them.

Morrison also incorporates the Western motif by placing her communities on land once part of Indian Territory. In "Tribal Paradise Lost but Where Did It Go?" Craig Womack

criticizes the limited presence of American Indians in the novel, noting that much is lost in such oversight. Womack is correct in noting the dearth of complex Indian characters, voices, and communities which would have certainly been present near Haven and Ruby. He further notes that the Old Fathers displaced of tribal peoples throws a monkey wrench into “the pot of African-American self-determination” (23). Yet he engages in his own oversight critically. When he writes that, “federal Indian policy in relation to allotment is almost never mentioned in the novel” (37), Womack passes over a significant, albeit brief moment in the text. When the Old Fathers do arrive at the spot where they’ll found Haven, Big Papa leans down to the grass and says, “Here. This is our place” (98). Yet Morrison is quick to undercut his surety. She continues, “Well, it wasn’t, of course. Not yet anyway. It belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear.” While Morrison fails to detail Indian displacement, she manages to position it at the fore by joining it with Big Papa’s resounding claim. She is both undermining the Old Fathers’ exceptionalism and suggesting that their settlement, like that of white pioneers, comes at a cost to prior residents.

While the Convent’s history as an Indian school is similarly brief, it works to align the Convent women with Native Americans, conventional frontier characters. Morrison sets out the objective of the Indian school as

an opportunity to intervene at the heart of the problem: to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption. (227)

While the effects of the Indian school (as with entire Indian school movement) are clearly destructive to Native tradition, the passage sets up parallels between Indian school students and Consolata and the Convent women. Like the students, Connie was displaced as a child (238) and comes to learn a new language (242). The Convent women too come from disparate places (though they're not taken) and go through a similar transformation in the school's building. Once Connie assumes control, she teaches the women a new way of living in the world. She alters their diets by preparing food grown at the Convent. She alters their clothing by giving them handed-down dresses and allowing them to go nude. She eventually alters their minds by helping them come to terms with their selves and harmful pasts, which is part of teaching them a new religion. In helping to strengthen them spiritually, she encourages them to relearn their native language. This is most pronounced in the case of Pallas who enters the Convent unable to speak, but eventually recovers. So although the building has its origins in a grim part of Western history, Morrison uses the history to align the Convent women with characters from Western mythology. She also inverts the transformative aspects of the two varied educations. The traditional Indian-school education was meant to separate Native students from their culture, arguably to genocidal effect. When the Convent women undergo retraining, they are separated from oppressive male-dominated environments in which they are victims. Morrison transforms a historically grim sort of schooling into a restorative one. In the former Indian school, she manages to further build upon and invert a traditional Western setting.

Characters

The second criterion of the genre Western is its cast of characters. John Cawelti writes,

three central character roles dominate the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are

above all “men in the middle,” possessing many qualities and skills of the savages but fundamentally committed to the townspeople. (29)

Superficially, *Paradise* has the first two roles sewn up. The Western’s archetypal townspeople are the citizens of Ruby and in the eyes of their protectors the outlaws are the women of the Convent. As with all Morrison’s work however, binary oppositions of good and evil never truly exist, except perhaps in the minds of her dimmest characters. The massacre recasts the New Fathers as outlaws and the Convent women as innocents. The women pose no bodily threat to Ruby. At worst they threaten the patriarchal traditions of the New Fathers, yet even that threat is trumped by the town’s generational unrest. By villainizing the Convent women, the New Fathers find a defenseless target outside the community to serve as a scapegoat for unrest within. By relying on a perspective so inherently flawed, Morrison depicts the problems of such dualistic thinking. If *Paradise* is a Western, it is one which subverts the traditional construct that there is a simple civilized goodness worth killing for. Such a subversive message is another aspect of contemporary post-Westerns as defined by Cawelti, of those which seek to show Natives (archetypal “others” such as the Convent women, I’m arguing) as sympathetic protagonists and settlers as brutes. Cawelti further clarifies that ambivalence towards Native Americans is nothing new, but the efforts to revise the history of settlement are.

As far as determining an archetypal hero, that too becomes muddy territory, which is no surprise considering Morrison’s resistance to supplying obvious protagonists. Deek Morgan may be the likeliest candidate from Ruby. Although he participates in the massacre, it is probably he who tries to stay his twin’s gun to prevent him from shooting the Convent’s matriarch, Connie. Deek had an affair with her, so he has intimate sympathies for an “outlaw” despite being committed to Ruby. And it is Deek who by the novel’s end sits down with Reverend Misner in

what appears to be the first of many confessions. Deek seems poised on the brink of learning to wrestle with the devil within, much as the Convent women had, instead of pointing his finger at other devils.

Yet the women represent settlers as well. They, unlike the Rubyites who have resided on the panhandle since 1949, perhaps better embody American pioneers. In their migrations to the Convent, the women seem imbued with the spirit of westering. In running from Maryland to California, Mavis takes pleasure in the act: “As more and more of the East was behind her, the happier she became” (33). By separating herself from the East, Mavis is akin to frontierspeople, who in going West separated themselves from secure and civilized lands. And she is not alone in her journey. On the way, she picks up many young female hitchhikers. Apparently they head her way too for “all of them told her about the world before California ... The world they described was just like her own—sad, scary, all wrong.” In their desire to make it to the Pacific, Mavis and these girls embody the migratory spirit of westersers.

The other Convent women follow a similar pattern. Gigi too is a wanderer, searching initially for a storied place in the desert. What attracts her to the fabled figure of coupling lovers there is its “moving, moving all the time,” and it makes her aware that something deeper that “she had known all her life existed ... somewhere” (64). She mirrors the figure’s desirable movement as she meanders towards the Convent. Initially, Seneca also takes to the road in pursuit of motion itself: “She preferred traveling resolutely nowhere” (138). Eventually though she too is led to her final destination by the apparently crying Sweetie, who reminds her of a heartbreaking woman from her past (126). Pallas similarly lacks direction. Her way is a “blind drive on roads without destinations” (169). When she’s later picked up and asked “Where you

headed?" she fails to respond, realizing that her vocal cords don't work (173); through this question of destination, we learn she's temporarily dumbstruck.

To put the Convent women's migrations in perspective, I'll turn to William R. Handley's discussion of post-frontier Western work of Joan Didion. Although Handley finds her critical of the contemporary West's ailing "geography of hope" (191), his analysis is helpful in understanding the modern westering that occurs in *Paradise*. He writes, "The 'quintessentially romantic' impulse behind westering and other social movements, 'the kind that recurs in times of real social crisis,' provides the thematic bridge between the 1960s and the era of the pioneer" (192). The Convent women appear to travel Didion's thematic bridge. Their migrations in part stem from the cultural unrest of the 1960s. Gigi is haunted by a disastrous political demonstration in Oakland and Seneca is a housing-project orphan. Also, the women are unwittingly in league with the feminist movement. Their escapes can be taken as active fights for equality through self-protection. Mavis flees an abusive husband, Pallas a traitorous boyfriend and a truck full of rapists, Seneca an unpleasant boyfriend and a woman who makes her a masochistic sex toy. Even overly sexualized Gigi is disdainful of the young men of Ruby for their similarity to those from her hometown, of how they share the "same haircuts, same stares, same loose hick smiles" (67). Her sexuality seems rooted less in finding a man to marry than one with which to reenact the desert Eros.

Further discussing the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Handley notes that "the teleology of Manifest Destiny has become an edgy, nameless desire without an object" (193). This same "edgy, nameless desire" could be at the heart of each Convent woman: California-bound Mavis, motion-craved Gigi, nowhere-traveling Seneca, and tongue-tied Pallas. And yet unlike the drifting hippies Didion offers as examples of doomed Western romantics, Morrison's

characters originate from dangerous places. While spurred by similar romance, the Convent women are sympathetic figures moving towards a destination of greater self-preservation. While Morrison's portrayal avoids sentimentality—the women are murdered in the end—her contemporary female pioneers are heroines to Didion's fallen societal dropouts.

To push the pioneer comparison further, it stands that the Convent women serve as archetypal Western heroes according to Cawelti, even though they have been cast as Ruby's savages and outlaws throughout the novel. They are from different places, live apart from Ruby, and worship in untraditional ways. But in the coda their ghosts reappear, some bearing arms and all returning to the communities from which they came. This suggests that through the massacre, the women have been transformed from distant "other" to the liminal role of the Western hero. They have learned from the townspeople's attack the importance of using weapons as self-protection, and their return to their homes is a kind of embrace of civilization. (I will return to the novel's conclusion in greater depth at the end of my analysis.)

Another critical lens with which to view Western character in *Paradise* is Handley's discussion of archetypal antagonists in *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Handley notes that Western literature shifted from a depiction of "Indian-as-Other" to "familiar-as-Other." One source of the shift can be found in the ethnic violence of American conquest turning inward on community and family (19). His theory resonates with Ruby's conflicts. On one hand, *Paradise* charts the destructive nature of racial exceptionalism. The Old Fathers flee the prejudiced American Southeast, only to be turned away from the black community of Fairly, Oklahoma due to the deep hue of their skin. In founding Haven, they reverse the bigotry, barring integrated marriage and disfavoring their own light-skinned residents. The New Fathers' vilification of the Convent can be taken in part as a response to the

integrated community that threatens their borders. Morrison's first line indicates a white woman resides there and Connie is of Brazilian origin.

Handley further suggests that the shift to "familiar-as-Other" carries over to marriages. Illegitimate conquest of other ethnicities develops into marital conquest in which one spouse enters the relationship without consent (20). While nonconsensual marriages do not play a major role in *Paradise*, the opposition between women and men does, so it serves to adapt Handley's construct as "woman-as-Other." Ruby is a male-dominated town. Men control political, religious, and economic affairs. In spite of their relative security, they defend Ruby and its women by carrying all the guns. In part, Ruby's developing dissonance arises from this gender inequality. One relationship in which to observe such inequality is that of Steward Morgan and his wife. While thinking of the Old Fathers expulsion from Fairly, Steward imagines a similar fate befalling Dovey:

How would he have felt if some highfalutin men in collars and good shoes had told her, "Get away from here," and he couldn't do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with the free wind blowing [his horse's] mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody. (96)

This previously noted scene is already tinged with the irony of Steward revisiting the frontier history of the Old Fathers on his toy ranch, in a pre-dawn ride that feels as unnecessarily protective as it is ruminative. Yet here the irony is increased as Steward moves himself to thoughts of violence simply by imagining a distant, storied past. His desire to "shoot somebody" foreshadows his eventual role in the Convent massacre. Steward's defense of Dovey is not limited to the recesses of his mind however. Earlier, we learn that he's installed a lock on the home she stays at in town, which she thinks to be the only door-lock in Ruby (90).

While Dovey doesn't threaten Steward, she does serve as a source of vulnerability which keeps him on guard, vulnerability that's further threatened by the presence of the Convent. After the women interrupt K.D.'s and Arnette's wedding, Lone overhears the organizing posse's litany. The women are said to have powers, are called witches, and are said to draw out the Rubyites only to return them maimed, seeping the Convent mess back into their homes and families. A repeated danger is that the women manage to survive without men. Lone sums up the posse's thinking: "The fangs and the tail are somewhere else ... in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company" (275-6). In addition to showing the men's hyperbolic vilification of the women, the scene also depicts the men's greatest fear, that women could survive without them. Such a place undermines their belief that community relies upon male-guardianship, a key component of their storied past.

Violence and Self-defense

In *Regeneration Through Violence*, his landmark study of literature of the American frontier, Richard Slotkin examines how "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5). He charts the evolution of the frontier hero as it arises from European-American settlers struggling to gain foothold in the New World and fighting with Natives to do so. Because the theme of frontier is so strong in *Paradise* and goes hand in hand with its central act of violence, I'll conclude by considering how Slotkin's paradigm informs the novel. Is Morrison subverting Western mythology or is the violence truly regenerative? Is she in some way embracing or rewriting the myth by supplanting the archetypal frontier hero with the ghost heroines of the coda?

In one sense, *Paradise* charts a succession of attempts to re-found community. The first wave begins in 1890 with the Old Fathers' exodus from the Reconstruction-era south to establish Haven (16). The second migration, to found Ruby in 1949, is recounted collectively by Deek and Steward, both World War Two veterans:

Young and newly married, they were anything but fools. Long before the war, Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. The twins stared at their dwindling postwar future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old Fathers had done.

The twins and the families who go with them in turn experience their own heyday. Though these two migrations are regenerative, they are not marked by violence. However, the seeds of violence can be found in the second migration's beginning. Morrison is careful to note that these descendents of ex-slaves are now ex-soldiers who have learned lessons about how to protect a town. One may assume that Ruby and its protection are in part built upon the New Fathers' temporary indoctrination into the American empire through their military service.

Can the Convent massacre be viewed as the beginning of a third migration? For the people of Ruby it seems not. As mentioned earlier, it does seem a transformative moment for Deek Morgan. Prior he had "never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversation had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions ... None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner" (301). Deek's new confidence in Misner suggests the town is beginning to retreat from its hard-line segregationist ways and perhaps turning toward the reverend's humanist ethic. Yet more so Deek's admissions reflect the town's realization of its vulnerability. Morrison has already clued us in to Ruby's dissolution. Homes are abandoned, residents have fallen on

hard times, the younger generation has begun to move away. The massacre at the Convent has merely hurried the process. For after the massacre, the town which hasn't experienced a single death in all its twenty-six years witnesses its first. If there can be no death in paradise, then Ruby's fall from self-entitled divinity is assured.

On the other hand, if we consider the Convent, Morrison provides hope for a regenerative outcome from the violence. It's unlikely any of the women have survived. Their fate seems sealed in the novel's first chapter when the New Fathers, having searched the building, see them running away in clear view and take aim. Yet Morrison does not indicate that they have surely died. Their bodies are never found. The last we hear of them from a citizen of Ruby is from the young woman Billie Delia. "When will they return?" she wonders. "When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison called a town? ... She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors, but out there" (308). Billie Delia's imaginings invoke Western archetypes. First she imagines the women residing "out there." It's the same term the Old Fathers used to describe the deadly prejudiced "wilderness" from and through which they migrated and in which they sought to form a safe community (16). Second she imagines the women as being of the wilderness by dressing them with war paint. Her wish that they will return to destroy Ruby recalls an Indian attack on a pioneer town. Here the women are cast as archetypal Western antagonists.

The coda however does not depict the Convent women descending upon Ruby. Rather than concentrating on a single place, each of them returns to her home, scattering throughout the nation, into the great "out there." Two of them do appear in warrior fashion. Grace is wearing army fatigues and her old boyfriend believes she's packing heat. Pallas is carrying a sword. A

third, Mavis, praises her abusive husband's new wife for carrying a gun. It seems these Convent women have been reborn as stronger martial versions of their old selves, that the massacre has imparted a new means for their survival. It's a re-visioning or inversion of the archetypal Western hero. Just as the frontier hero uses his savage violence to protect an enclave of settlers, Grace, Pallas, and Mavis return to the dangerous communities from which they fled with a new understanding of the necessity of self-defense. They are poised not to protect one town or a whole nation but simply their and other women's singular roles in it. By describing the Oklahoma panhandle as gun muzzle and the Convent as cartridge (71), Morrison suggests that the massacre propels the Convent women on this new trajectory.

In *Paradise*, Morrison reworks old literary territory of the American West, adapting archetypal conflicts between civilization and savage in a contemporary setting steeped in frontier tradition. She applies a genre often relegated to cowboys and Indians squaring off in the 19th Century to a fresh cast of African-Americans and oppressed drifting women tied to the counterculture of the late 20th. In doing so, Morrison shows the flaws of a mythology that elevates one skin hue, one gender, one creed, or even one way of living in the world by relying on isolation and violence. But in the end, she manages to both destroy the frontier myth and re-create it, by resurrecting fabled Western heroines from the mistaken acts of terribly fallen and bygone heroes.

Works Cited

- Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green St. U. Popular P. 1999.
- Flint, Holly. "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire." *Amer. Lit.* 78(3) Sept 2006: 585-612.
- Handley, William R. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 2002.
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Plume. 1999.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan U.P. 1973.
- Womack, Craig S. "Tribal Paradise Lost but Where Did It Go? Native Absence in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Studies in Amer. Indian Literatures* 21(4) Winter 2009: 20-52.