

The Contrapuntal Historiography of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Unpacking the Legacies of the Kansas and Oklahoma All-Black Towns

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Before we can agree on what the American identity is made of, we have to concede that as an immigrant settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing; indeed the battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one. This opposition implies two different perspectives, two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic.

(Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xxv)

From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain.

(Toni Morrison, *Paradise* 5)



Figure 1: “My Niece, Blanche Magee.” Photo from The Nicodemus Historical Society Collection, courtesy of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

Beginning with the founding of Nicodemus, Kansas in 1877-78 and continuing through the creation of towns such as Langston City (1890) in Oklahoma Territory and Boley (1904) in Indian Territory, there were more than thirty all-black towns established in the southern middle-west region in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The African Americans who came shared the general immigrationist view of the time: that to make a fresh start in owning land in the West was to lay claim to what seemed, after the Homestead Act of 1862, the American entitlement to liberty and prosperity. From the opening up of the “unassigned lands” in Oklahoma for settlement in the 1870s until the year of Oklahoma statehood in 1907, the African American population of the territories quadrupled, as the 16,000-19,000 Oklahoma freedmen—the former slaves of Native Tribes—were joined by more than 80,000 African American immigrants, or “state Negroes.”¹ Furthermore, most of them came from southern states, fleeing disfranchisement after the dissolution of the Freedman’s Bureau, a depression economy, and increased white violence. It is not surprising, therefore, that in her trilogy of novels encompassing the African American diaspora beginning with slavery,² Toni Morrison would situate the third novel, *Paradise*, within the frameworks of what has come to be understood as the black town movement of the American West.

What is not so easily discernible, however, is why Morrison extends the black town legacies in the imaginative direction she does, well into the post-Vietnam era. The novel depicts heavy losses in an African American community which sent several young men to fight in the war in Vietnam, losses in not only lives but also cultural cohesiveness. Morrison creates a 1970s tableau in which some key African American historical perspectives are interrogated: Booker T. Washington’s “self-help” philosophy and W.E.B. Du Bois’ confrontational politics, or isolationism versus civil rights activism; the divisive valuations of racial purity and racial hybridity, based on skin tone; patriarchal family structures thrown into relief by a postmodernist, feminist community (and vice-versa); “natural” liberties against “civil” ones; and the idea of paradise itself as a place of solace or of work, either in the hereafter or the here and now. Actually, by emphasizing the 1970s as a time of “WAR” (the original title for the novel), Morrison may very well be signifying a collision course between Black Power and Black Feminism as seen from her writerly vantage point of two decades later. Morrison herself, as an African American woman who writes some “unspoken” things about African American gender relations, had come under fire along with Alice Walker and others beginning in the late 1970s, when they were heavily criticized by African American male writers protesting their gender portrayals and their popularity as writers.

Furthermore, considering that Morrison was writing *Paradise* during the 1990s, the novel also reflects and refracts the tensions between black nationalist tendencies, from Marcus Garvey to James Cone, and what has been called black postmodernism. The black theology project of Cone and others “is a theology in crisis insofar as social and cultural elements of differentiation genu-

inely occur among African Americans, which are sufficient to call into question any reasonable assent to such ideological totalities as *the black church, the black faith, or the black sacred cosmos*,” according to Victor Anderson in *Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (103), a view which resonates well with the sacralizing practices we see practiced by the Rubyites in *Paradise*. Morrison’s novel, in fact, seems to echo these words of bell hooks:

[e]mploying a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. This discourse created the idea of the ‘primitive’ and promoted the notion of an ‘authentic’ experience, seeing as ‘natural’ those expressions of black life which conformed to a pre-existing pattern or stereotype. Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism (Morrison, *Paradise*, 28).

Paradise syncopates these tensions, musically speaking: the patriarchs of Haven and then Ruby, Oklahoma comprise the regular song-rhythm, but the five orphaned and “wayward” women at the Convent just outside of Ruby comprise the off-beat rhythm, which is actually the accented one in ragtime and jazz.³ It is this syncopation of forces—essentialist, patriarchal on the one hand, and postmodernist, feminist on the other—which keeps the Ruby community (and its hegemonic “song”) from becoming completely fossilized.

But why does Morrison have the men of Ruby shoot the Convent Women? Readers familiar with Morrison’s oeuvre see another instance of the employment of traumatic violence to clarify a community’s problems or an individual’s emotional trajectories. That, however, cannot fully account for the critique of this fictionalized all-black town in the Oklahoma panhandle. Contrary to the economic hardships faced by many of the actual all-black towns, most of which have, indeed, lost economic vitality and population. Morrison creates “Ruby” as economically thriving; nevertheless, it is clearly an imaginative extension of specific historical materials. *Paradise* explores a larger issue in African American and general American culture *through* the lens of the all-black town histories, and its critique is aimed at an out-of-control intensity of effort to memorialize the past. Furthermore, in critiquing the obsessive desire to reify the past which Ruby’s patriarchs attempt to impose on the next generation whose interests lie elsewhere, Morrison’s novel adds a third perspective to one of the trilogy’s

central subjects: the complex intersections, or cross-rhythms, of memory and desire in African American experience.

Paradise, like *Beloved* (1988) and *Jazz* (1992) before it, dramatizes the intersections of love and memory in African American experience. *Beloved* develops the experiences of African Americans during slavery and Reconstruction, especially the need both to forget past traumas in order to move on and to remember the past in order to heal. *Jazz* looks at what living through the migrations from the South to northern cities, especially Harlem, New York, might have felt like and what complexities accrue around one's sense of the past in relation to the future. *Paradise* imagines the desire for a place "out of time" or "for all time" in the utopian effort to choose your community. As historically sequenced as the trilogy is, therefore, why are the novels based so much more on imagining what happened than on the historical records of what happened? Her methodology for writing fiction is succinctly stated in an interview: "I can't trust much research when I do novels because most of the information I want is not written" (Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 176). All of Morrison's novels in some degree go beneath public discourses on African American experience; in fact, one of her works' primary signatures is an attentiveness to, as it is expressed in *Beloved*, "unspeakable thought, unspoken." She is drawn to writing about how people respond to dire circumstances because she is interested in how people process experiences "when their backs are up against the wall" (Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 145), and she trusts her imagination to move her from a little knowledge backward in time, to recover those aspects of African American life which did not survive in the histories (Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 247).

At a Princeton University Conference on "Imagining *Paradise*" in 1999, Toni Morrison questioned the audience: "Suppose . . . it turned out just like you want it? Everybody pure, strong, good, and safe. Suppose it really happened?" *Paradise* poses a general question, or challenge, as she put it: "Can we *be* the people that we rarify?" ("Toni Morrison Honored," 4). The fictional community of Ruby aspired to be just that, but whereas their success was too fragile and ephemeral, their arrogance and pride were enduring. At the risk of turning inside-out some of the salient discourses about the all-black towns, Morrison has made in *Paradise* a "cautionary tale," but one which is not formulated, as my essay will argue, at the expense of the historical all-black town experiences.

Paradise imagines how the utopian efforts of African Americans to construct spaces free of white racialized violence and discrimination intersected with the desire to own land and establish full American citizenship in the all-black towns in the West.⁴ It also delineates the excesses of nostalgia for a place "out of time" in the face of the failure of the utopian project. Clearly the ("unspeakable") deliberation which *Paradise* opens up has to do with what ("unspoken")⁵ things can happen when a folklore such as that about "Haven," the town founded in 1890 which Ruby was to replace, becomes so powerful in the minds of those devoted to it that the actual, living present

becomes a profound threat which must be eradicated:
 They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and the day has just begun (3).

The tone of this opening passage to *Paradise* is significant. The enunciations “can take their time” and “no need to hurry” along with the observation “plentiful” places to hide establish a rhetorical profile of a leisurely event, while the dramatic action happens quite quickly as the sweep through the Convent produces two dead women and three women running from the gunfire coming at their backs. A cold-blooded murder-spree suggests that something is terribly off-course here. The righteousness of the Ruby men is aimed at five women who refuse to live under the proscribed ideal of womanhood; the men see them as undermining all that they have worked for, and so they move to protect their own power to define and control the community. The opening line of the novel reveals even more about the Ruby patriarchs if it is considered in the context of Morrison’s general aesthetic interest “to make the language be both indicator and mask” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” 389), because, who *is* that white girl?

Consolata, or “Connie,” the leader of the Convent women by the 1970s, was a South American orphan who had been adopted by the Nuns who ran the Catholic school for Indian girls in the Oklahoma panhandle in the 1940s. Thirty years later, after the school had been closed and all of the Nuns but Mary Magna had gone, Consolata took in four homeless women, one by one, between 1968-74. While Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas each exemplified of what the Nuns had termed “drift” women, there are not enough racial distinctions made in the novel to decide who that “white girl” is. And that is the point; through the omniscient narrator, it is the *men’s* perception of race with which the novel is concerned. Who they deem “white” and why they do so is the first of many “clues” that racial purity is the basis of this “paradise,” a utopian space defined by who and what must be kept out.

Morrison’s chosen vantage point in *Paradise* is “post-utopian.” Marianne DeKoven’s “PostModernism and Postutopian Desire” articulates this idea in relation to *Beloved*, in which the best of times—when Baby Sugg’s home at 124 Bluestone Road was serving as a station on the underground railroad and she was preaching in the “Clearing”—is only experienced in the novel through memory and nostalgia (DeKoven, 117). Morrison’s novelistic tendency is towards what I call recuperative chronology, setting the main dramatic time of the story beyond a crucial dramatic event, and from that vantage point examining “the hows” if not the “whys”⁶ and what reverberation from the past persists. Actually, according to Morrison, the “seed” story for *Paradise’s* gunfire had nothing to do with Kansas and Oklahoma histories, but with an incident she

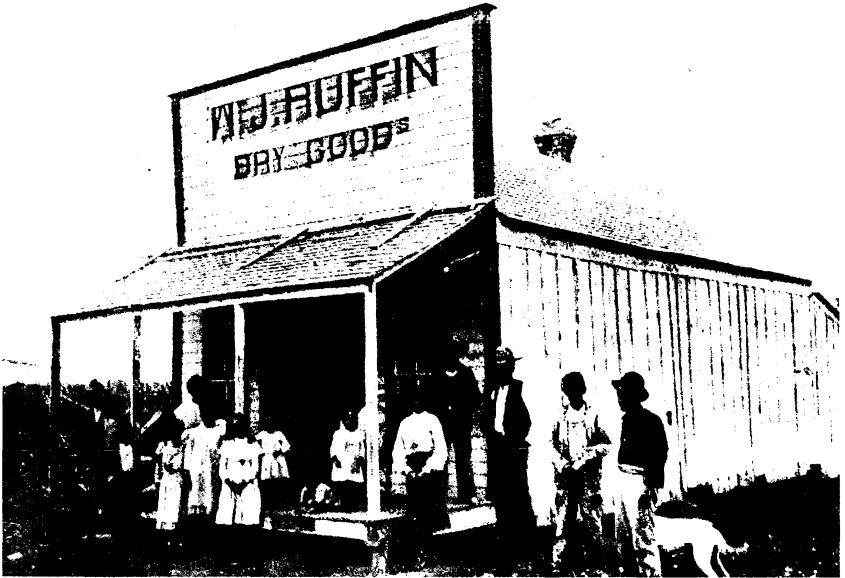


Figure 2: Store of W.J. Ruffin, Commercial Street, Red Bird, Indian Territory. Courtesy of the Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries. Twine Collection, No. 67.

heard about while in Brazil several years prior to the production of the novel: some black nuns occupying a Convent near a small town were shot by local residents for practicing what the attackers claimed were pagan rites. This story, Morrison stated, “overwhelmed” her.⁷ In a 1998 interview with James Marcus, Morrison suggests that the nature of paradise is “really defined by who is not there as well as who is,” and that her novel is “an interrogation about the very idea of Paradise” and an exploration of “the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise” (Marcus, “Interview,” 2-3).

By situating her American story within the framework of a much larger history of ideas concerning making a place in this world for a “chosen” community, Toni Morrison has succeeded in making a specific time, place, and people seem familiar, universal, and timeless. By reading the complex layers of *Paradise* intertextually with critical and popular texts concerning the all-black towns, this essay makes the argument that Morrison’s novel constructs an imaginative historiography which nevertheless yields significant perspectives for the study of non-fictional accounts—from academic to personal ones—of the intersections between race, class, gender, and citizenship; between identity and entitlement; and between community and memory.

Examining the historiographies of the all-black towns reveals tremendous variations in emphasis and interpretation, made more complex by the persistence of a set of ideas about the difficult founding, the rich development, and

ultimately the economic demise of the majority of the all-black towns. Indeed, there are multiple mythologies at work in the histories and narratives about towns like Nicodemus and Boley. On the one hand, there is the persistence of the American colonial dream of a “covenanted” community like Jonathan Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony, or Brigham Young’s Mormon utopia: to become the “chosen” people making a way to the “Promised Land.” And there is the persistence of the idea—and the practice—that the spirit of the all-black towns has not died, even if most of the surviving ones are economically depleted. Significantly, this is not merely reiterated and reinscribed in numerous books and articles written about the towns, as I will discuss in this essay, but also made manifest through contemporary social practices, such as the annual Emancipation day reunions in Nicodemus since 1877, several of which have been prominently covered in national newspapers and magazines like *The Wall Street Journal* and *People Magazine*. In the latter, the words of Veryl Switzer, whose great-grandparents were among Nicodemus’ founding families, indicate that the mythology is a living one: “Not giving up is a part of our heritage.”⁸ Even though the appearance of Nicodemus reveals that descendants of the founding families have moved elsewhere (“seems almost a ghost town,” “Big Little Town,” 103), their identities are bound to Nicodemus’ ideals; they keep in touch, attend reunions, and intermarry.⁹

One of the most consistent aspects of the historical analyses and narrative accounts of towns founded and developed by migrating African Americans is what I will call the discourse of recuperation, elements of which are contained in the following passage from Norman Crockett’s *The Black Towns* (1976):

For a brief period, perhaps only a few years, even those who left peniless and broken took with them worthwhile experiences from their years in a black town. Many had enjoyed freedom and personal dignity for the first time. More important, they had discovered for themselves that they could make it on their own without the aid or control of whites. Were they better off to have owned property, voted, and determined their own destiny and lose it all than to have never known the frustration, sorrow, and bitterness of such an experience? (188)

The discourse emphasizes a chronological drama. There is the hardship and sacrifice in establishing the town, the freedom and dignity won by doing so, and the sorrow over the demise of the community’s economic and political independence. To be sure, there were actual struggles. People camped in tents on the open plains for months while they built sod-houses, they broke land for crops which would not yield an income for another year, they eked out food and medicines from what was available to hunt, pick out of the ground, or, if funds were available, purchase from a store a day’s journey away, and after years of

hard work finally had seemed to pay off, black-town residents observed their productivity and economic growth fade away. That such efforts are frequently contextualized in heroic terms is neither surprising nor unreasonable. However, written accounts of the all-black town experience have tended towards a hegemonic discourse which conceals variations between individuals, families, and even between the different black towns themselves. In Linda Williams Reese's *Women of Oklahoma, 1890-1920*, for example, we find the thirty-one all-black towns of Oklahoma described as a unified entity: "The remnants of the black towns survived, but the dream of a separatist Oklahoma showcase—of prosperity, self-determination, and cultural pride—had ended" (183). These ideas of "remnants" and "dream of a separatist Oklahoma showcase," however, do not apply equally to all of the towns. Other examples of the recuperative discourse on the black towns are: "For a brief time" (Reese, *Women*, 183); "By the Sweat of Their Brow" (a chapter title from Jimmy Lewis Franklin's *Journey Towards Hope*); and descriptions of the migrants who were "made of sterner stuff" but whose opportunities "withered and disappeared" (Freeman 103). This language is concomitant with looking back *after* the town experiment seemed to be over (estimates as to when the movement was "finished" range from early 1900 to the 1940s). It is the language of loss, and of remembrance. In *Paradise*, Morrison will inscribe that discourse—how Haven had "shrivelled into tracery" (6)—only to deconstruct it.

Much of the conceptual basis for this recuperative gaze at the all-black towns can be traced back to the influential 1946 article by Mozell Hill, "The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement." Hill's thesis is that "most of the pioneers" of African American descent were part of the larger American westward expansion and that the black-town development constituted a specific "social movement" (257). Hill also observes that the vast majority of migrants came from the South to get away from "social unrest" and gain greater independence in the West (256). Although not his intention, Hill established an interpretation adopted by other studies when he asserted that "the all-Negro society is essentially an 'escape' society distinguished by a 'racial' ideology" (267). The career of Hill's thesis is a strong one, for several critical studies, such as those by Crockett, Reese, Franklin, Littlefield and Underhill have appropriated his sociologically-based description of an "escape" society and turned it into an interpretive analysis: how the black towns became "escapist" *after* their development in Oklahoma.¹⁰ These early historians of the all-black towns frequently repeat in their interpretations the nostalgic tones of the WPA narratives they examined. Frequently, we read about African American migrants who were unprepared to cope with racism after having the good fortune of living in an all-black town.

Crockett states that "during the early territorial and statehood years, racial hatred in Oklahoma exceeded that found in either Kansas or Mississippi" (*Black Towns*, 98), but the racial tensions in Oklahoma from about 1890-1904 were not

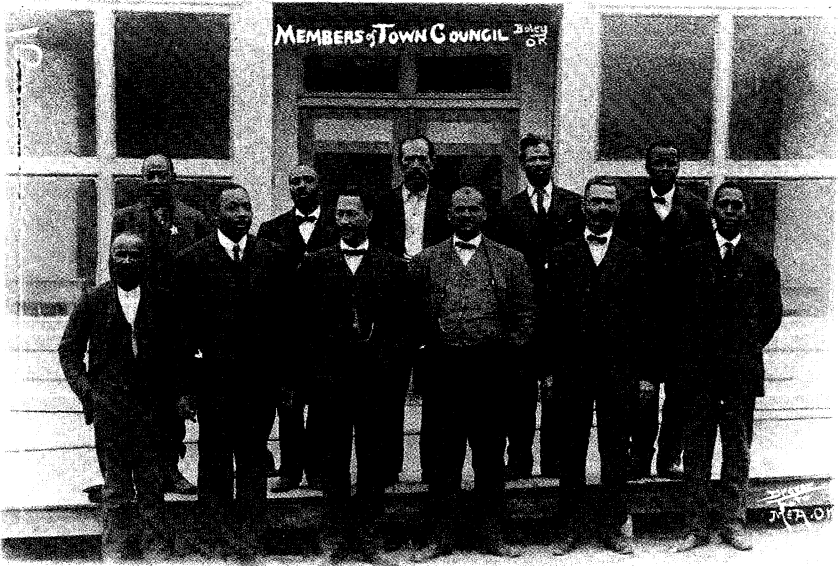


Figure 3: “Boley, Oklahoma Town Council, c. 1907-1910.” Photo by Drover Photography, McAlester, OK. Courtesy of the Archives & Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

nearly so fixed or virulent. While it is a fact that Oklahoma’s first state legislature enacted numerous Jim Crow measures in 1907, and soon after adopted a grandfather clause to disfranchise the African American vote in 1910, the tens of thousands of people who came to Oklahoma in the 1890s faced a much more fluid, though somewhat anxious, situation, and they faced it with practicality and realism as well as with hope and disappointment. There clearly were tensions among immigrant African Americans, Native Americans and Native Freedmen as well as whites over land use, but as several photographs of the 1890s in the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma and collections in The Oklahoma Historical Society show, people of all these racial makeups quite often worked and sometimes socialized together. Significantly, David Chang’s doctoral dissertation, “From Indian Territory to White Man’s Country: Race, Nation and the Politics of Land Ownership in Eastern Oklahoma, 1889-1940” (2002), demonstrates the inextricable ties in Oklahoma among the politics of race, of land ownership, and of tribal enrollment and allotment policies. For instance, although the Dawes Acts of 1887 and 1893 (allotment acts) eventually served to codify and help institutionalize racial categories,¹¹ enrollments for the 160 acre allotments did not seriously get under way until the late 1890s because of strong resistance to it on the part of the vast majority of tribal members and various tribal governments in Oklahoma (Chang, “From Indian Territory,” 77-78, 100). Therefore, while race was becoming a determining factor in

land allotments and, after Oklahoma statehood, in appropriations, voting rights, and social relations, early 1900s African American migrants had opportunities to form business and social relations with Native Americans, mixed bloods, and whites, which is how Morrison depicts the contact between African American migrants and Native Americans in *Paradise*.¹²

Kenneth Marvin Hamilton's *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915* (1991) also largely clarifies much of what now seems romanticized in previous studies: the noble-but-doomed all-black town. However, similar to the last century's (white) mythology of the "noble Savage,"¹³ this mythology, likewise, has proved difficult to deconstruct. Hamilton's research of five towns¹⁴ establishes that entrepreneurship was a major reason for town promotion, yet his argument is primarily made as a corrective to Crockett's emphasis on racial issues as the motivation for establishing all-black communities. Clearly, town speculators or promoters such as E.P. McCabe, who was involved in the settlement of Nicodemus, Kansas and who was the head promoter of Langston City and Liberty, Oklahoma, wanted people to participate in land speculation by purchasing lots (or leasing them, if the land was part of a Native American allotment) as soon as the towns were platted. Yet Hamilton makes some of the same types of errors as the other studies. While he duly notes the complex history of the creation of Boley, for example, which involved Native Americans, Native Freedmen, and Whites in plating a Creek allotment for an African American settlement beginning in 1904, his analytic method is overtaken at times by a more heroic tone. The political and economic "restrictions" of a post-Freedman's Bureau South were also "the same restrictions, however, which spurred enterprising blacks to leave" it (emphasis added, Hamilton, *Black Towns*, 5). In other words, the assumption is that only "enterprising" African Americans could take on the difficult task of founding a town in the West ("made of sterner stuff" is the phrase used by Freeman in "Kansas Homecoming," 103).

Barbara Christian, in "'The Past is Infinite': History and Myth in Toni Morrison's Trilogy," suggests that *Paradise* grew out of Morrison's interest in all-black towns in the West, and that Morrison's source was Hamilton's *Black Towns and Profit* (Christian, 4). Actually, several historical studies as well as the popular press articles on Nicodemus mentioned earlier contain details strikingly similar to some in *Paradise*.¹⁵ "Haven" is what the African American families who walked from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma decide to name their town in Morrison's work, but it is also a word found in non-fictional texts, such as in Littlefield and Underhill's "Black Dreams and 'Free' Homes: The Oklahoma Territory, 1891-94": "After 1866, there were concerted efforts on the part of blacks to make the Oklahoma Lands a haven for blacks of the United States and the Indian Territory" (emphasis added, 342).¹⁶ Actually, elements of this idea had begun to emerge in the earliest literature promoting settlement. W. L. Eagleson, the first promoter to persuade southern African Americans to move

west to Oklahoma, urged blacks in an 1889 Topeka newspaper to “Give yourselves and [your] children new chances in a new land, where you will not be molested and where you will be able to think and vote as you please” (cited in Littlefield and Underhill, “Black Dreams,” 342). Lee Merriweather, promoter and editor of the *Langston City Herald*, wrote in 1893 that “wheat is ripening so fast that farmers are cutting on Sunday” (1). The 1890 African American immigrants in *Paradise* named their community “Haven” for just such optimistic reasons, but within Morrison’s post-utopian narrative world, it is shrouded in a rather cloying nostalgia. Morrison has stated that “the complexity of how people behave under duress” is what interests her; “the qualities they show . . . when their backs are up against the wall” and the myths and narratives through which people organize their knowledge (Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 145). Thus Morrison has taken the all-black town historiographies and imaginatively infused them with even more human duress in order to explore some of the cosmological mythmaking through which people come to terms with experience.

The initial phase of town development, as I will call it, usually involved promoters who had the capital to purchase the land to be offered, the dissemination of advertisements to potential settlers, and the actual arrival and initial settling-in of the migrants. Morrison’s novel draws upon some of the historical materials concerning this phase, but she revises them significantly. The imaginative chronology of *Paradise* begins when a highly exceptional group of migrants walked into Indian Territory from Mississippi and Louisiana by way of Arkansas. Actually, many people came to Oklahoma on foot as well as by train and wagon. Newspapers from Kansas to Alabama and from New York to Texas published many announcements like the one from Crawfordville, Arkansas, March 11, 1890, describing “one hundred negroes” walking through the town with just two wagons-full of supplies “bound for Oklahoma” (Teall, *Black History*, 156). The founders of Morrison’s “Haven,” however, who included a former state treasurer of Louisiana and other prominent African Americans who had been disfranchised after Reconstruction ended, were not welcomed into already existing all-black towns, like the extended family groups did who made their way into Boley, Oklahoma. Instead, *Paradise*’s 158 immigrants, who had been “turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes” all along the way from Mississippi, were “nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 13). Morrison, in fact, reprints the caption which E.P. McCabe ran continually in *The Langston Herald* for several years in the early 1890s:

COME PREPARED OR NOT AT ALL

The colored people who are contemplating Oklahoma as their future home must come with sufficient money to take care of

themselves and families until they raise a crop or get into business for which they are adapted. . . . So come prepared to care for yourself and family by all means, and you will make no mistake; if you come penniless you must expect to get it rough, as you ought to do (McCabe, "Come Prepared," 1).

It is interesting that while most histories cite this caption, there is almost no information about how the people at whom this warning was directed *felt*, let alone what happened to them, and this is precisely where Morrison concentrates her narrative: imagination. Her immigrant band, led by Zechariah Morgan and the patriarchal heads of the other families in the group—Fleetwood, DuPres, Poole, Flood, Blackhorse, Cato, Beauchamp—were "stung into confusion" to discover that they were too poor to be admitted into "the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders" (Morrison, *Paradise*, 14). This became an almost unbearable refusal which turned into "cold-blooded obsession" as they made their way south and west of Logan County (where Langston is) into "Arapaho country" (14). After days of walking in near-starvation, they stopped and made a place, which, within two years, became "Haven."

Morrison skims over the hardships of this initial stage of town development, hardships which are perhaps most effectively documented in the Nicodemus Historical Society collection. Lula Craig's narrative, for example, contains this note about the "second Colony" of families to come to Western Kansas in 1878



St. Catherine's Catholic Church
Boley, Okla.

Figure 4: "St. Catherines Catholic Church, Boley, Oklahoma." Courtesy of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries. Sooner Catholic Magazine No. 3.

(one year after the first): “Sixty families went back to Kentucky when they saw” the flat, unbroken prairie which lay in front of them. Women who stayed were described as “crying” upon their arrivals. One woman collapsed and became ill for several days. And there had been several hundred people there for a whole year who had had it even worse, many surviving the winter in just holes-in-the-ground covered with tarps. Nicodemus stories include details about how Indians saved the first colony by giving them food in the winter, and how there was “nothing but sunflowers” where the first ones built their sod houses.¹⁷ Actually, possessing enough capital and/or supplies to last for one year until a crop could produce was seen as vital from the earliest era of settlements, which was the alleged reason why McCabe ran his warning in the *Langston Herald*. But another, if we recall Hamilton’s work in *Black Towns and Profit*, is that McCabe and other town promoters like him were worried about their profit margins.

Morrison’s treatment of this early phase of town establishment incorporates tensions over economic status and class, for the origin-story of Haven’s founding is remembered as “the Disallowing,” the experience of being refused entrance into the all-black town of “Fairly.” “COME PREPARED OR NOT AT ALL” forced the migrant families to fend for themselves, with no town promoter or pre-established economic base. They became “bound by the enormity of what had happened to them,” so that they focused their rancor on the black town who refused them, even though they had a “horror” of white people (Morrison, *Paradise*, 189). After a search led by a mystical walking-man and then more than a year of negotiations and labor for some land owned by “a family of State Indians” (98), the migrant families got their land in west-central Oklahoma and founded Haven. As young boys, the Morgan twins believed that when their grandfather Zechariah “discovered how narrow the path of righteousness could be” (14) through the Disallowing experience, he chose the words which he carved into the metal “lip” of an oven which was built in early Haven for all of the families to use: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (86-87; 195).

The middle phase of town development begins in *Paradise* with the building of this communal Oven, which is always capitalized in the post-utopian time of the text. Havenites had made the bricks to build it, and besides cooking, they gathered there for storytelling and socializing. It was both the practical and communal center of the town, and such communal sites were also prevalent in the actual all-black towns. In Mound Bayou, Mississippi, there was the community’s artesian well. A photograph shows a proud city marshall, C.H. Williams, standing by the well (Hamilton, *Black Towns*, 47; courtesy of Milburn J. Crowe). This phase of the all-black towns, which spanned just a few years to several decades depending on the town, came closest to the “utopian” ideals of an independent, prosperous, and socially and morally harmonious all-black community. There were businesses, hotels, and several churches in most towns during their growth and prosperity periods.

Religion seemed to play an integral part in the all-black communities, especially in the community-building middle phase, as the A. M.E. Methodist and

First Baptist church records in the Nicodemus Historical Society collection reveal.¹⁸ In Oklahoma, Lee Meriweather complained in the *Langston Herald* on June 15, 1893 of a “preaching plague” (2);¹⁹ likewise, the editor of the *Boley Beacon* wrote on March 12, 1908, that Boley was “overstocked with preachers” (1).²⁰ Social and civic clubs were also quite prevalent; there were chapters in national organizations such as the Masonic Lodge (men) and the Order of the Eastern Star (women), as well as groups like the “Three K Club” in Nicodemus, whose motto was:

Taint what we have/but what we give
 Taint where we are/but how we live
 Taint what we do/but how we do it
 That makes this life/worth going through it.²¹

This is similar to the service-oriented spirit found in the statement which appeared continually at the top of page one of *The Boley Beacon* for several years: “*All Men Up, Not Some Men Down.*” And it is echoed as well in the motto developed by the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs in 1910 and adopted by the National Association of Colored Women (founded in 1896), “*Lifting As We Climb,*” which Reese uses as a chapter title in *Women of Oklahoma, 1890-1920* (177).

According to David Chang, women in the actual all-black towns in eastern Oklahoma in the early decades of the twentieth century “experienced their gender and racial identities as bound together, and brought their experience into their mobilization as black women” through various organizations and political activisms (“From Indian Territory,” 285). And some women owned ranches (such as Marie Moore, born Alexander; a Nicodemus founding family which still holds a great deal of land in that area) and local town-businesses (Reese, *Women*, 152; Freeman, 80). However, because there was a negative association of African American women with field and wage labor after slavery, part of the agenda of organizations such as the NACW was to establish a “new model of black womanhood” based on high standards of morality, education, and cultural service (Reese, *Women*, 145). While critical and popular literatures alike illustrate the activism of Oklahoma’s African American women—including their work in the numerous Oklahoma NAACP chapters—Morrison’s text presents that period only in retrospective glances. As the leading townswomen in *Paradise*, Soane and Dovey Morgan, sisters and wives of the twin Morgan brothers, Deacon and Steward, were modern homemakers and service-oriented towards their community, but they were not active in the NAACP or any other organization beyond the borders of their town. Morrison’s apparent revision of historical black women’s activism, however, is actually establishing the extreme isolationism of her fictional community as a “post-utopian” one, as does her invention of Steward Morgan’s angry words about Thurgood Marshall as a “stir-up Negro”

(Morrison, *Paradise*, 82) for developing an NAACP segregation suit in Norman, Oklahoma.

In an important sense, *Paradise* renders the middle phase of all-black town development as a broken progression: while wealth and resources, made possible by the removal from Haven to Ruby, expand communal values, as in the connections with other all-black towns which the founding fathers maintained but their sons dropped. Much of this irony is captured in *Paradise* in a single image. The Morgan twins hold the memory of a “dreamy” photograph, when as young boys while visiting another “one of the prosperous” all-black towns on a sunny Sunday morning in 1932, they watched in awe the nineteen beautiful ladies in pastel dresses getting their photograph taken. But the reader is introduced to the image through the remembrances of one of the men while he is stalking the Convent women with his gun. Ruby, unlike Haven, becomes the site for the reification of an image, its remembrance “pastel colored and eternal” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 109-110), the women made objects of perfect, passive beauty in the men’s gaze.

Initially, the founders of Haven did share something with their actual, historical counterparts: “In the struggle over land,” David Chang notes, “African Americans . . . crafted politically potent racial identities in relation to their national identities and drew the social boundaries of the nations to conform to the line of race” (“From Indian Territory,” 5). But the righteousness of Haven’s founding families was passed down through the next generations in the form of a powerful folklore, one which has maintained the idea of Ruby as an exogamous community with a hierarchy of authority based on blood inheritance, a caste system with the Morgan line comprising the highest class. The males who walked to Oklahoma from Louisiana and Mississippi may have lost their professional status for good at the end of Reconstruction, they may not have had the ready cash or staples required, but they did have pure African American bloodlines, going back to the eighteenth century in North America. They made of this racial purity a bulwark, a mark of superiority which was so engrained that even in the 1970s the adult generation still looked down on lighter-skinned blacks. Those who married outside the founding families were ostracized, as were their offspring: Patricia Cato Best, Ruby’s widowed schoolteacher, along with her daughter, Billie Delia, had to suffer for being the daughter and granddaughter of a woman so light-skinned she could actually “pass.”²²

Paradise has an uneasy, complex relationship with what I will call the third stage of the historical all-black towns, when they endure primarily in remembrances after their populations and their social and economic institutions dwindle.²³ In one sense, Morrison inverts the pattern,²⁴ because while the town in her novel is revived materially, it is diminished *through* the practices of remembrance. The construction of African American nationhood and citizenship in eastern Oklahoma, documented in both Chang’s and Reese’s historical studies, is separated by time and distance from Morrison’s imagining of the Ruby

community.

Morrison chooses an interesting site for her second all-black town. While Haven had had “one thousand citizens” in 1905, it eventually dwindled down to eighty (*Paradise*, 6), so that when World War II was over, the families pooled their resources and bought cheap land in the Oklahoma Panhandle after tornados wrought heavy damage there in 1947. The panhandle was known as “No Man’s Land” in Territorial days because there was little regulation and sparse population.²⁵ The location is appropriate because it is a hard, “backward noplacé” (308); a place in which to disappear, or which signifies disappearance, perfect for a group bent on living outside history. America, states Richard Van Alstyne in *The Rising American Empire*, is founded upon the idea of an “*imperium*—a dominion, state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power” (quoted in Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 8). Morrison interweaves this idea with Winthrop’s colonial vision of America as a “cittie upone a hill” to suggest that, emotionally and spiritually, these vantage points of desire become repressive, and the communities which engage in them falter as they become inflexible to change.

The second chance, as it were, to turn Haven back into what it was supposed to have been, gave the people an even more intense desire to realize their dream of an all-black, isolated and independent community. And for twenty years or more, it seemed to work. They had land, natural gas wells, money, a bank, and an undertaker, and therefore could continue to believe that they could be exempt from political trends and insulated from whatever the State government, “white-cappers,” or boll weevils might do: onward goes the *imperium*. However, as Morrison’s novel reveals repeatedly, the Morgan twins’ own lives were diminished, paler versions of the past glories sealed in their memories. And so Ruby was essentially “Deafened by the roar of its own history” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 306). Yet, inevitably, some of the residents did begin to hear the roar: the women.

In their “protected” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 8) isolation in Ruby, Patricia Best, Lone DuPres, Soane and Dovey serve as registers of the tensions which were cropping up between families and generations. The *Boley Progress* of May 17, 1906, ran a column titled “True Mothers”: “Upon you the hope of the race depends; you can determine its bounds or stay its progress,” and in the early years of Ruby, Soane Morgan seemed to believe that. When she went to the Convent to put an end to Consolata’s affair with her husband, it was because “he can’t fail at what he is doing. None of us can. We are making something” (240). By the 1970s, however, after Consolata had saved one of her sons’ lives by laying hands on him (her power to “step in”) and after both of her sons had been killed in Vietnam, Soane had inwardly withdrawn and become critical of the conflicts in and around Ruby. Dovey, Steward’s wife, thinks that her husband was in moral danger. Since he had sold the gas rights to their land and become wealthy, the ranch was “reduced to a show ranch” (88). “Aside from giving up

his wealth,” Dovey thinks after saying a bedtime prayer, “can a rich man be a good one?” (93). Dovey also recalls that neither of the Morgan twins “had wanted a second floor like the Haven bank had, where the Lodge kept its quarters. They didn’t want traffic into their building for any reason other than bank business” (88). Profit-motive had become paramount over other concerns, such as the cohesiveness which social organizations provided in the historical all-black towns.

Tracing the townswomen’s private thoughts is a good example of one of Morrison’s aesthetic trademarks: letting discrete elements of the story of what has happened emerge only through multiple and meandering discourses of private consciousness. As the internal voices of younger-generation townswomen, Anna Flood and Billie Delia, are added to those of the women mentioned above, they begin to form “telling” of the community their own way, laying the groundwork for a counter-narrative. Trudier Harris, in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, argues that Morrison’s storytelling functions as community folklore, but that her major emphasis is on the “reversal” of expectations created out of the folklore, placing the characters in situations “where outcomes consistently fall short of expectations” (11). The townswomen reveal such reversals as they ponder the two cultural sites at which the hegemonic origin-story of Haven is contested or played out: the Oven and the school Christmas play.

Whereas Deacon and Steward think fondly of the Oven in *Paradise*’s first chapter as they roam through the Convent on their mission of violence, Soane recalls in chapter two that not only in “scary Deuteronomy” but in “lovely Corinthians” as well, it is offensive to God and destructive to those who presume to turn “a utility into a shrine” (103-104). To the Morgan brothers and other patriarchs of Ruby, “Beware the furrow of his brow” meant “Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it” (87), but to their teenage children, who challenged seventy years of accumulated folklore to replace the now-faded word “Beware” with “Be,” it meant *Be* the power, as in Black Power, which is what offends the elder men to the extent that Steward threatens to blow the head off of anyone “like you was a hood-eye snake” who might try to change anything about that Oven (87).²⁶ His wife, Dovey, however, believed that “nailing its meaning down” was dangerous because the one nailing—“On the Cross” (93) had already happened. And to Billie Delia, Ruby, Oklahoma becomes a “prison calling itself a town” (308).

Reverend Misner thinks about the odd relationship of the current Ruby leaders to their collective past in terms of a growing emptiness: “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” (161). Indeed, the second major piece of folklore in the community, the school Christmas play, is all about the past founders’ generation. The event is a call-and-response performance, and its 1974-production is filtered through the

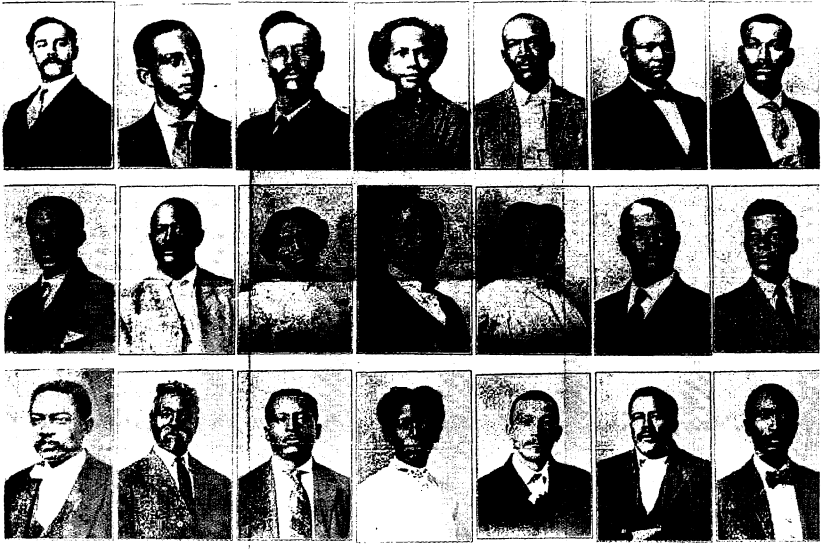


Figure 5: “A Group of Progressive Citizens of Red Bird, Oklahoma.” Courtesy of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries. Twine Collection, No. 60.

viewpoint of Patricia Cato Best, the children’s schoolteacher, as well as the town’s unofficial genealogist.²⁷ Patricia’s internal monologue reveals the underside of “the town’s official story” (188), because as she watches the school drama unfold one cold December evening, she knows exactly what will happen. It will be the same as every year since 1951:

The masks turn toward each other, then back to the supplicant . . . after which they roar, shaking their heads like angry lions. “Get on way from here! Get! There’s no room for you!”

“But our wives are pregnant!” Lorcias points with the staff.

“Our children going to die of thirst!” Pure Cary holds a doll aloft.

The masked ones wag their heads and roar (210).

This ostensible children’s play actually combines two stories: the Nativity, with an emphasis on Joseph and Mary being refused shelter at the inn, and “the Disallowing” story of Haven’s founders being refused admittance to Fairly. Pat is having to field questions from Richard Misner, who is seeing the play for the first time. “You don’t know where you are, do you?” she finally asks him, because he cannot seem to realize that for many Rubyites, the Christmas story and

the story of the founding families are one and the same. As the children on stage playing the parts of “the holy families” wave fists and chant ““God will crumble you”” to the nasty innkeepers, the audience “hums” their response: ““Yes He will. Yes He will. . . . Into dust!”” and ““Finer than flour he’ll grind you”” (211), performing the climactic call-and-response ritual that has persisted same since the play’s inception.

Significantly, the school’s Christmas production was older than any of the church programs in Ruby; it was performed before any of the Churches were even built (185). In Ruby, it eclipses the Biblical narrative, for what lights the hearts and minds of Ruby’s most powerful citizens are stories about their ancestors. Patricia, in stark contrast, thinks that these stories, which “emerged like sparks lighting the absences that hovered over their childhoods,” would only provide young girls with “the shadows that dimmed their maturity” (189). “Mythologizing,” says Morrison, “can end up hurting more than helping” (Marcus, “Interview,” 4). And so the prideful, endogamous designs of the Haven/Ruby generations to preserve their pure bloodlines falter. There is the suggestion in *Paradise* that the Morgan twins’ lack of children is no coincidence, and perhaps neither is the fact that after Jeff Fleetwood returned from Vietnam, he and his wife, Sweetie, had four “broken” children requiring around-the-clock care. In one of the most poignant sequences in the novel, Sweetie Fleetwood walks seventeen miles to the Covent one freezing winter morning in her bathrobe for no apparent reason, but many of Ruby’s wives and daughters and rejected sons²⁸ will, like Sweetie, trek the seventeen miles to the Covent and back for their separate, desperate reasons. Additionally, Soane’s breathing problem (Morrison, *Paradise*, 100) is a literal metaphor for what is happening: people are suffocating from the folk-world of Ruby. Yet, while many of the townswomen express profound reservations about the community’s leadership, their stories can only preview, but cannot penetrate, the seamless hegemony of Ruby’s powerful folklore.

That is left up to the five outsider-females to throw the town back upon itself. Consolata is the first: the orphan rescued at age nine from her prostitute life in the slums of a South American capital by the same “Sisters Devoted to Indians and Colored People” (223) who move into the Oklahoma embezzler’s mansion to found Christ the King School for Indian Girls by 1926. Almost thirty years later, when the Haven families had settled into their new Oklahoma pan-handle homes in 1954, Consolata’s devotion to God “cracked like a pullet’s egg” (225) when she saw Deacon Morgan. Their clandestine, erotic love trysts, initiated and terminated by Deke, were over by the time the last of the Arapaho girls leaves and the nuns departed, leaving Consolata and Mother Superior, Mary Magna, when the first of the “drift” women shows up in 1968. Over the course of the subsequent six years, one by one the remaining four women find shelter with a near-blind healer whom everyone calls “Connie.”

Mavis’ arrival, the second of the five women, signifies how far Ruby is into the metamorphosis from a temporal to a timeless community. Having gotten a



Figure 6: “Two Young Black Women on the Hood of a Car.” Courtesy of the Archives & Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, No. 21075.6

ride into town with Soane Morgan to get some gasoline for her Cadillac, she notices first the sign, “RUBY POP. 360,” and then has this observation:

[her] immediate impression of the little town was how still it was, as though no one lived there. Except for a feed store and a savings and loan bank, it had no recognizable business district. They drove down a wide street, past enormous lawns cut to dazzle in front of churches and pastel-colored houses. The air was scented. The trees young. Soane turned into a side street of flower gardens wider than the houses and snowed with butterflies” (*Paradise*, 45).

As an outsider, Mavis sees what few living in Ruby can: a simulated community where nothing seemed real, where appearance mattered more than action. This replication of a place-memory²⁹ is so “romanticized and mythologized,” suggests Morrison, that it has become “frozen” (Marcus, “Interview,” 4). But not quite.

Ruby had been solidifying towards a static image of itself for twenty years when Gigi, the third of the “drift” women, arrives, and it took only her walk across the street to expose one giant fissure in their bedrock of civic virtue. “Either the pavement was burning or she had sapphires in her shoes,” the chapter begins, because K.D., the nephew and heir to the Morgan fortunes, had “never seen a woman mince or switch like that” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 53). K.D.’s years-long, obsessive affair with her threatens to turn Ruby into a lava flow of desire which his uncles Steward and Deacon try at first to cool or contain. Gigi (“Grace,” her real name, is what Connie chooses to call her) is the most blatantly sexualized of the four women who come to the Convent, and unlike each of the others, Gigi arrives initially on Ruby’s main street on a sunny afternoon, stepping off a bus and into the stares of young people with “pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair” (53). By the time she arrives in Ruby in the early seventies, Gigi is uninhibited and impatient, selfish and vindictive, and her presence rapidly accelerates the explosive resentment which gets drawn to the Convent.

As each woman’s arrival to the Convent makes rifts in Ruby’s placid surface, the progression of the narrative itself begins to take on the formal characteristics of resistance and reversal. Syncopations occur in the very arrangement of *Paradise*, as the chapter-titles as well as organizations create an off-beat rhythm to the “controlling” (13) story. Each of the nine chapters is named after a woman from either the town or Convent, beginning with “Ruby,” the name of the Morgan twins’ sister.³⁰ One of the most significant off-beat emphases in the chapters is the fifth, central one, which narrates the marriage of K.D. and Arnette Fleetwood, a much-anticipated wedding in Ruby. K.D., having broken off the relationship when Arnette told him she was pregnant, and Arnette, after forcing the baby’s birth and abandoning it to die before she went off to college in Langston, are on rather shaky footing, a fact made worse when they are upstaged by a verbal duel between the two ministers presiding at their ceremony. The young couple’s problems, which are real for the future of their union, are eclipsed by their elders’ warring discourses, another of the several inversions in the novel.³¹ The conservative, fire-and-brimstone Reverend Pulliam’s opening remarks to the bride and groom about how “God is not interested in you” (142) and “if you think love is natural you are blind” (141) are countered by the progressive, civil-rights activist Richard Misner’s strangely long silence as he holds up the simple wooden cross, hoping the attendants would see the message of unconditional love it bore (145-146). This war of perspectives ruins the wedding, and it also illustrates how Morrison uses verbal styles to signify on the mind-sets of some of her characters.

Rhetorical profiles in *Paradise* work against each other, at times producing parody. For example, the “Mavis” chapter begins with mixed descriptive textures as we are introduced to Mavis’ world before she headed West. Mavis’ two babies had suffocated in a shut automobile while Mavis went into a store, and afterwards, she believed that her husband and her two older children were going to kill her: “[T]he neighbors seemed pleased when the babies smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time” (21). This rancor in the context of such poignant tragedy mixes the sacred and profane to reveal, for one thing, the fallibility of her characters.³² In syncopating the serious events she is reporting with ironic and sardonic commentaries, the narrator is signifying on the self-righteousness judgements of others. This same syncopating principle is apparent when around 1973 Gigi voices her opinion of the now-sacred Oven as “some kind of barbecue grill” (67).

On the other hand, *Paradise* recognizes that the mythology had been a cohesive social element which kept the Haven-Ruby families going. After all, upon statehood, Oklahoma had made its first orders of business the implementation of Jim Crow statutes (1907) and a grandfather voting clause (1910); then there were the numerous “accidental” misappropriations of road, school, and utility funds which all-black towns deserved; and when the landscape of violence fueled by lynchings, burnings, and “whitecappers” running Negroes out of certain towns culminated in the massive fires and still unknown number of deaths of the 1921 Tulsa Riot,³³ Oklahoma must have seemed like an inhospitable place in which to forge a new black citizenship. Morrison has commented on *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* as forming a project about “loving something or someone so much” in the effort to endure and transcend the experiences of slavery, dispossession and forced migrations (Darling, “In the Realm,” 6) that the love ended up hurting. *Paradise* probes this context in a spiritual way, as it ponders the efforts to make a covenanted community based on religious principles. The moral orientation of the Rubyites’ religious practices are challenged by the mystical practices of the Convent women. And *Paradise* probes “love” in the context of the harsh westward migrations undertaken by African Americans 130 years ago: what kind of “love” must have been necessary to sustain these migrants in the face of tremendous odds as they worked to survive, break ground, build shelter, gather and hunt food, and avoid the violence aimed at them by white settlers competing for the same resources? Into her already multi-layered, cross-rhythmical composition, Morrison makes space for a serious meditation on the quest for paradise. Indeed, the multiple endings of the novel suggest that, despite their corrosive, exclusionary practices, there was also something noble in the Rubyites’ efforts to “make a way out of no way,” for they managed to turn their shameful refusal and defeat into the making of a sanctuary for their descendants.

Intertwined with *Paradise*’s many conflicts is Morrison’s inquiry into an outward-directed, unselfish form of love. Through classical, Biblical and Afri-

can American literary allusions, Morrison's novel presents the imagery of an ancient pattern being reenacted in the Ruby-Convent community. As Patricia Best is thinking about her vast genealogy project, she looks out her window to check the December weather:

A mineral scent was in the air; sweeping down from some Genesis time when volcanoes stirred and lava cooled quickly under relentless wind. Wind that scoured cold stone, then sculpted it and, finally, crumbled it to the bits rock hounds loved. The same wind that once lifted streams of Cheyenne/ Arapaho hair also parted clumps of it from the shoulders of bison, telling each when the other was near (Morrison, *Paradise*, 186).

"Genesis time" initiates what several of the last sections of the novel foreground: a Garden of Eden story. Perhaps the Rubyites, so attracted to their dream that they break their own covenants, are Morrison's contemporary version of the first humans cast out of the Garden of Eden. In this sense, the creations of Haven and Ruby are exemplary of the eternal human search for the way back to that Garden. However, the women at the Convent are also searching for a paradise: that place where their gnawing yearnings could be once and for all extinguished. Their iconoclastic rituals, along with the novel's epigraphic reference to a gnostic poem full of paradox and attributed to a female Revealer,³⁴ suggest that Morrison's interrogation of paradise will not fall exclusively within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

"I just wanted to go home," Connie thinks, as she ponders why her unquenchable desire for Deacon Morgan (240) became the very thing that drove him away. "Home" in Morrison's novels is a spiritual, as well as a physical space of shelter.³⁵ As various characters find their way home, paradise is manifested throughout the novel in a key motif: walking. Morrison's vision of paradise extends through and beyond Judeo-Christian traditions as it emphasizes the walking-journey as a timeless, spiritual motif. We have already seen that *Paradise* inscribes the historical trek into Oklahoma and Indian Territories, itself an exodus of Biblical proportions. But there is another motif about walking in *Paradise*: three instances of ephemeral, godlike walking men, each of whom are seen by only one person, and each delivering some message to relieve, sustain, or uplift the seer. The first, seen by Zechariah in 1890, helps found Haven. The second walking man is seen by Dovey Morgan several times; his easy kindness is a reminder of "natural" freedom to a woman who is circumscribed by her husband's patriarchal power.³⁶ Connie's walking-man, the third, comes with a "light step" (251), in reverse to Zechariah's loud-stepping giant, and his coming portends the end of the righteousness established when the words of the Oven were forged in Haven shortly after its founding.

The novel's alternative paradise is an ironic reversal of the conventional Judeo-Christian iconography: it is created in a basement with the guidance of a blind woman. Directed by Connie, who has been functionally blind for over a decade, the other four women prepare the stones of the cellar's floor by scrubbing them until they were "as clean as rocks on a shore" (263), and this will become their haven for letting go of past trauma. Possibly modeled on a ritual practice of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomble, the women's outlining of their naked bodies on the floor are filled in by them with crayoned drawings, relevant objects, blood, symbols, and words.³⁷ They then begin to remember, in unison, the most horrible things about their pasts: "they adjust the sleeping baby head" (264) together in the back of Mavis' Cadillac on that hot day when the babies suffocated. Bits of familiar narrative are repeated here, and these acts of telling are furthermore "a joining" of the women's nightmares and desires.³⁸ In this way, the Convent women shut themselves off from the rest of the world to find solace in one another's stories, a barrier against the exhaustive, psychic traumas of their pasts. Ironically, finding this solace in each other's storytelling allows them to withdraw from the outside world, but this withdrawal ultimately renders them vulnerable and unprepared for an attack. Perhaps Morrison is clarifying here a significant aspect of African American historiographies; namely, that they can be a source of solace *and* nostalgia that, if taken to extremes, becomes self-destructive. Since the retreat of the Convent women in *Paradise* is on one level destroyed, even though some of the women seem to continue on after their deaths or disappearances, there is no "winning" side in this battle. There is, however, clarification of what some of the problems are.

By the time Lone DuPres, Ruby's former midwife, tried to warn them that some of Ruby's men were coming after them, they believed that they were invincible. Dancing in the rain with shaved heads and a new baby in their midst (Pallas' child, the result of her having been gang-raped before arriving at the Convent), Connie, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas felt themselves to be a women's band, complete in their isolation. Yet even though they were able to confront and thereby begin healing their past traumas, they are not able, anymore than the Rubyites, to live outside of history. The shootings narrated in the opening pages drove the women out, but perhaps only temporarily. Thus the men's actions failed to achieve the control they desired. The bodies of two women inside the mansion disappear by the next morning, and the women shot while running through the field were never found. The Convent women may not have been invincible, but they were, nevertheless, uncontrollable. Their self-knowledge signifies "the mutiny of the mares," clearly a source of fright to the Morgan men, but a delight to Billie Delia:

When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town . . . a backward noplacé ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who

could live and who not and where. . . . 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 (Morrison, *Paradise*, 308).

And indeed, the miraculous and fleeting reappearances of Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas to various family members form the next-to-last pages in the novel.

Syncopating the warring factions in *Paradise* leaves a space—perhaps not a very large one in this story—for dialogue or for the reader’s response to the author’s call,³⁹ something which forms an important aspect of Morrison’s writing aesthetic (Morrison, “Memory,” 39). For example, there is an indication that the Rubyites, “those outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people” (306), will eventually separate themselves from the “controlling story” of their forbears and live forward rather than backward in time, as Deacon Morgan makes his humbling, barefoot walk to Reverend Misner’s house to begin talking about his newfound revulsion for his and his brother’s actions against the women (301–303). The novel’s last page, in fact, provides a coda for the failed effort to achieve a utopian community. It does not offer a clear way out of the constant work of balancing the desires to both remember and forget, to be both safely confined and dangerously free, but what the final geography of *Paradise*’s “going home” offers is a continual, timeless solace while the work continues. The other-worldly place of a seashore where one woman cradles another on the last page of the novel is a transcendent realm, and into it comes a ship full of “disconsolate” passengers and crew who “will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). The image of a ship coming to shore recalls the failure of the “Back to Africa” movement⁴⁰ as well as the losses of those who worked to establish the Oklahoma towns, and it also reinvestigates an important iconography in African American literature relating to the dream for a better future.

Morrison’s ship is allusive of both Frederick Douglass’ famous apostrophe in his *Autobiography* to the ship in Baltimore harbor and Zora Neale Hurston’s opening lines in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Douglass’ yearning to be on the ship—“You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave!” (Douglass, *Narrative*, 1704)—is critiqued by Hurston’s narrator when she declares that “ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board” [emphasis added] while for women, “[t]he dream is the truth” (Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 9). Morrison’s ship coming ashore continues with the narration begun in Douglass and Hurston by suggesting that dreams will eventually land, and perhaps end, in reality: “an earthly Paradise,” Morrison has stated, “is the only one we know” (Marcus, “Interview,” 3). And it will be achieved, paradoxically, just by giving up some of the intensity of the dream. *Paradise* urges upon its readers the questions we might do well to put to ourselves continually: “who

is the Beloved?” (Darling, “In the Realm of Responsibility,” 6), and how can that love devour us as well as nurture us?

Was Morrison mocking the actual “remnants” of African American migrations to the west to create self-sufficient, viable all-black towns in *Paradise*? The novel is actually not critical of remembrances like the one made by a long-time resident of Nicodemus, Ora Switzer: “We’ve got people here that aren’t willing to let it die” (“Children Once Played Along Now-Desolate Streets,” *Wichita Eagle*, March 28, 1971). Rather, *Paradise* is critical of the Rubyites who “aren’t willing” to let their town *live*. What, then, remains from the legacies of the all-black towns of Oklahoma and Kansas? *Paradise* testifies to the tens of thousands of people who migrated to the Oklahoma and Kansas lands who faced the enormous challenges of not only building a city on a hill, but of also confronting the inevitable failure to do so; confronting the fact that, if they faltered, it was because they were all too human not to.

Notes

1. 10,000 African Americans were present in the first of the land “runs” in 1889. Population statistics vary, however. For the 1907 Oklahoma Census by territory see Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma: A Resource Book* (1971), 150. In 1907, the total African American population of Oklahoma was 112,160; the Indian population was 75,012; the white population was 1,226,430, according to Chang, *From Indian Territory to White Man’s Country: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Land Ownership in Eastern Oklahoma, 1889-1940* (2002), 130. Other sources on the all-black towns are: Bittle and Geis, “Racial Self-fulfillment and the Rise of an All-Negro Community in Oklahoma” (1969); Crockett, *The Black Towns* (1979); deGraaf, “Race, Sex and Region: Black Women in the American West” (1980); Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (1982); Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915* (1991); Hill, “The All Negro Communities of Oklahoma: the Natural History of a Social Movement” (1946); Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (1996); Littlefield and Underhill, “Black Dreams and ‘Free’ Homes: The Oklahoma Territory, 1891-1894 (1973); Pease and Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (1963); Reese, *Women of Oklahoma, 1890-1920* (1997)

2. Morrison has alluded to the correspondences between *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* in interviews: how much love is too much, or not enough, for African Americans who have experienced ruptures of culture, community, and family? See Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 207, 240, 254.

3. The basis for ragtime, “a heavily syncopated melodic line over a regularly accented bass rhythm,” becomes in jazz ensembles “the complex lines of the lead instruments . . . backed by the steady on-the-beat chording of a rhythm section.” Bill Kirchner, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46. A definition of syncopation: “a shifting of the normal accent, usually by stressing the normally unaccented beats,” *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing, Inc., 2003).

4. Pease and Pease, in *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, define nineteenth-century African American planned colonies in the U.S. and Canada as similar in some ways to utopian communities which were also developing at that time, but significantly different in purpose. While utopian “experiments” were “in the European tradition of socialism and communism, African American colonies were “dedicated to training their inhabitants in the virtues of self-reliance, individualism, and independence. . . . and operated almost without exception upon the basis of profit-making capitalism,” 18.

5. I take the parenthetically marked adjectives from the title of one of Toni Morrison’s most frequently cited essays, “Unspeakable Things, Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (Winter 1989), 1-38.

6. Morrison’s first novel begins with Claudia’s opening statement that she cannot tell why her friend Pecola was raped by her own father, but she can tell how. *The Bluest Eye*, 5.

7. In September 2000, at the Toni Morrison Society’s second biennial conference, “Toni Morrison and the Meanings of Home,” Professor Morrison made these comments in a discussion following a session of paper presentations on her work.

8. "Big Little Town on the Prairie." *People Magazine*, 23 September 1991, 103-06.

9. Nicodemus Historical Society Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas, Lawrence. The Collection contains materials from Nicodemus beginning in 1877 and continuing well into the 1990s, including records of several churches, social and civic organizations, and the school, as well as a large number of personal letters, newspaper columns, cards, announcements, births, deaths, marriages, mementos, and photographs. I am grateful to Deborah Dandridge at the Spencer Library for her guidance with the collection.

10. Hill's article came out in 1946; Littlefield and Underhill's "Black Dreams and 'Free' Homes" was published in 1973; Crockett's *The Black Towns* in 1979; Franklin's *Journey Towards Hope* in 1982, Reese's book in 1997. Since I refer to these works elsewhere in this essay, see works cited for full citations.

11. "Blood quantum" were recorded during interviews when tribal members, Native, Black, or White, enrolled: "full blood," "mixed blood" or "Negro." This policy, notes Chang, "differentiated African Americans from other people on the basis of 'blood'" ("From Indian Territory," 104). Chang's analysis of how Allotment policies exacerbated racial differences is extensive and thorough. His study focuses on "how African Americans and Native Americans imagined their own races, their own nations" (7).

12. These encounters in Morrison's novel are mostly positive: they bartered with Creek and Choctaw (Morrison, *Paradise*, 13-14) and worked a piece of land belonging to a family of "State Indians" for "a year and four months" until they "had it free and clear," 98-99.

13. Chang, "From Indian Territory," 86-88, discusses how the "'the full blood'" as a figure of "tragic but inevitable demise" was a part of late-nineteenth century's "Anglo-American imagination." This, Chang argues, informed Senator Dawes' intentions to help the Indians make the difficult transition into modern American society. Dawes believed the Indians were innocents who needed stewardship; thus, enrollment, allotment, and guardianships.

14. Nicodemus, Kansas; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Langston City and Boley, Oklahoma; and Allensworth, California. Similarly to Hill's, Hamilton's research focuses on the development of the all-black towns within the context of the broader Western migrations.

15. Details in the Nicodemus Historical Society Collection show striking similarities to details in the novel; for example, for the Nicodemus Celebration introduced in 1888 by Robert Scruggs, one of the founders, horseracing was introduced "at one end of Scruggs' grove," according to the *Ringneck Chatter*, n.d. (Nicodemus Historical Society Collection Box 4:9, newspaper clippings). Likewise, the people who move from Haven to Ruby in 1949-50 celebrate getting themselves established with a horserace. Another example has to do with a Christmas play: "Pearlena Moore will have a member from each family making up the program" for the 'Demus celebration, according to columnist Ola Wilson, December 23, 1976 (Nicodemus letters, correspondence Bates family, box 4:8). Morrison produces something similar in the children's Christmas play in *Paradise*, with the difference that two of the original founding families had no children in the play.

16. Lawrence B. de Graf cites another usage of the word which appeared in the *Topeka Daily Capital* on August 29, 1937, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon"; see de Graf's *Black Women in the American West*, 290.

17. Lula Craig addition to the Nicodemus Historical Collection, folder 3; the "sunflowers" quotation is from Ernestine Van Duvall in "Kansas Homecoming," *Historic Preservation*, Nov-Dec. 1991, 80.

18. The African Methodist Episcopal church records from 1933-40 in the Nicodemus Collection contain hundreds of orders of worship, dues collection records, planning and budget notes for socials, and condolence collections. Box 1:1.

19. The *Langston Herald* editor, like many editors of newspapers in the all-black towns, wrote frequent commentaries on individual and community conduct; the notion that there were possibly too many preachers is not a moral criticism but an economic one; could the town financially support so many ministers?

20. *Boley Beacon* and *Langston Herald* courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society Newspaper Collection, Oklahoma City.

21. Nicodemus Historical Society Collection, Box 1:13, "Three K Club Minutes, 1932-41." Crockett, *Black Towns*, Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, Hamilton, *Black Towns*, and, most thoroughly, Reese, *Women*, all document the various organizations of which African Americans in Kansas and Oklahoma opened chapters: home economics extension clubs, lodges (for women as well as men: "Order of the Eastern Star"), school and church auxiliaries. The Nicodemus collection also contains numerous records of such organizations.

22. Skin color was, historically, an issue in some all-black towns. In Boley, when news that an exclusive club of light-skinned women was being formed, there were angry protests. Lighter-skinned members of all-black communities were sometimes considered socially "low," according to Crockett, to the extent that this put pressure on choices as to marriage partners (*Black Towns*, 69).

23. Besides the annual Nicodemus reunion, other communities have created historical celebrations or markers as well. African Americans in Oklahoma have been working to restore some of the historical sites in Boley, Oklahoma.

24. Nicodemus' economic base was diminishing in the 1930s and 40s; several descendants of the founding families still live there, however, and many more live in towns close by. The annual reunion, in contrast, draws hundreds of extended family descendants.

25. Travel books still warn of the panhandle's harsh conditions, such as sudden winter storms which can quickly strand travelers on county highways due to sudden white-outs. This, in fact, occurs in Morrison, *Paradise*, 121-24.

26. In their anguish over the young people's desire to change the Oven's meaning, Ruby's founders mirror John Winthrop's own bitter disappointment, his "anguish," in Loren Baritz' words, "at seeing the sons of the fathers stray from the path of righteousness he had worked so hard to blaze." (*City on a Hill*, 44).

27. Patricia's efforts to trace all of the marriages between the families is too detailed to go into in this essay; she does come to the conclusion that the Rubyites had practiced intermarriage between the families to the extent that there was some "distant" problems with "blood rules," such as the fact that her husband, Billy Cato, had a mother who was married to her own great-uncle, making Billy's father also his great grand-uncle, Morrison, *Paradise*, 196.

28. Soane visits regularly for Connie's medicinal teas; Menus, who is another African American Vietnam veteran in *Paradise*, spends recovery time at the Convent over his drug and alcohol addictions; Billie Delia goes there when her mother, Patricia, hit her during an argument; perhaps even K.D. Morgan's infatuation with Gigi/Grace is also a sign of his desperate attempts to kill or cure the side of himself which ultimately prevails to marry a girl within the exogamous community, Arnette Poole.

29. Place attachment is a complex, integrating phenomenon which takes into account not only the "affect, emotion and feeling" about a place and the knowledge and beliefs about an environmental setting, but, Low and Altman argue, must also take into account the array of social relations, their temporal as well as spatial history, of people in a community ("Place Attachment," 3-7).

30. Ruby died after becoming ill en route to the panhandle because no hospitals would treat a Negro. The narrative never details her life, making her a ghost-like presence of a woman whose "price was far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10).

31. Other reversals are: "Ruby," the first chapter, is in diametric opposition to "Save-Marie," the last, as a death due to racist negligence finds a reverse parallel in Save-Marie's death due to the refusal of her parents to seek treatment for her; the deaths of Connie and the other Convent women are reversed by the inexplicable disappearances of their bodies and reappearances of their ghosts in some of the last pages of *Paradise*.

32. Morrison's depictions of African American communal practices in her novels frequently underscore their importance, but she also at times critiques them, especially in the case of one faction of a community disapproving of another. In *Beloved*, the resentment of the neighbors around Baby Suggs' place the day after the blackberry feast causes them to neither warn the household that a slavecatcher had arrived in town, nor hum in support of Sethe as she is being taken into the Sheriff's custody.

33. A history of racial violence in Oklahoma is covered in Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 128-152; see also Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 1982. The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, in which approximately 30 blocks of the black business and residential district were destroyed, was reviewed by the Tulsa Race Riot Commission created by the Oklahoma Legislature in 1997, in part to look for possible mass graves for blacks killed in the riot. *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 21, 1999.

34. The epigraph is from "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," from the *Nag Hammadi* collection. It is the same text from which Morrison draws the epigraph to *Jazz*. For a developed analysis of Morrison's use of Gnosticism in the trilogy, see Jessee, "The Female Revealer in Toni Morrison's Trilogy," forthcoming in *Toni Morrison and the Bible*, ed. Shirley Stave. New York: Greenwood Press (August 2006).

35. At the "Toni Morrison and the Meanings of Home" Conference of the Toni Morrison Society held in her birthplace, Lorain, Ohio in September, 2000, there was a panel discussion on the "Meanings of Home" in African American culture. Marita Golden, bell hooks, and John Edgar Wideman talked about home as both a sanctuary and the place where conflicts are played out. Marita Golden stated that home was "both the tornado and the shelter."

36. This figure, initially appearing in a gust of butterflies, may be an illusion to "Tea Cake" in Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a slender, kind man who was "a glance from God" for Janie, and who, also like a demigod, "crushed scent" out of the ground with his footsteps (185).

37. See two brief pieces in The Toni Morrison Society's newsletter: Kokahvah Zauditu Selassie suggests in "African Rituals in *Paradise*" that the Convent women's filled-in silhouettes are suggestive of "Kongo pembas or Vodun veves" (5). Simone Poindexter Drake's "Abstract of

Nation, Violence against Women and Safe Space in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" discusses Morrison's incorporation of Afro-Brazilian traditions as a postcolonial practice (8). *Wordwork: The Newsletter of the Toni Morrison Society*. 9:2-10:1 (Double Issue Fall 2002/Spring 2003).

38. This also has a precedent in *Beloved*, when the three voices of Sethe and her two daughters, Denver and Beloved, become joined into one voice: "I am Beloved and she is mine," Morrison, *Beloved*, 214.

39. Call-and-response in the African American oral tradition describes both verbal and non-verbal communications between speaker and listener; the listeners "punctuate" the speaker's responses with expressions, answers, exclamations of their own. Geneva Smitherman notes that in "the traditional black church, call-response is often referred to as the congregation's way of 'talking back' to the preacher," *Talkin and Testifyin*, 104).

40. *Paradise* alludes to Oklahomans who followed Alfred Charles Sam in his efforts to organize the return of African Americans to Africa. Many who paid money for the trip never made it, and some who sailed on the *Liberia* in 1915 to the Gold Coast came back destitute; see Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 172-73. Bittle and Geis state that "it was from Oklahoma populations that Alfred Sam drew the greatest number of recruits for his return to Africa," "Racial Self-Fulfillment," 118.

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