

Evocation and Erasure in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*:

“This dying may take a while”

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Attempting to deal with the traumatic, terrifying history of Black Americans, Toni Morrison has constantly struggled with questions of reconstructing both the past and the self through narrative and how that reconstruction might obscure reality. She recalls, ironically, that she specifically did not, however, want to deal with the era of slavery. “I had this terrible reluctance about dwelling on that era. Then I realized I didn’t know anything about it, really. And I was overwhelmed by how long it was. Suddenly the time ... 300 years ... began to drown me. Three hundred years ... think about that. No, that’s not a war, that’s generation after generation” (Taylor-Guthrie 256).

This realization led her into imagining the narrative constructs necessary to reclaiming the self, establishing stable individual and community identities within the larger national narrative. “I know I can’t change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite. Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it.” (Taylor-Guthrie xiii-xiv)¹ Her writing is therefore self-consciously political in its purpose, attempting to erase the narrative “given” to ex-slaves and evoke a narrative that is dependent not on their appropriation but of their own internal creation, both as individuals and as communities. In order for the communities of the marginalized and their descendents to appropriate their own space within the larger nation, counter-narratives are essential, being the only way to validate their experiences and make their voices consequential. Specifically, memorials are political spaces which validate the narrative they evoke. Morrison’s *Paradise* explores these physical memorial spaces and illustrates their power to erase and evoke narratives of the powerful and the powerless. *Paradise* confronts this process by exploring the traditional American narrative and, through different ways of remembering, how some communities lose their force and vitality and others rupture the master narrative and activate an essential counter-narrative.

¹ It is no small thing that Morrison uses the modal construction “to have to,” indicating an obligation. Morrison has often spoken in interviews about the purpose of her work as a political act derived from a sense of responsibility to the community: “[...] if anything I do, in the way of writing novels [...] isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it isn't about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination [...] which is to say, yes, the work must be political” (Morrison 1984: 339).

Sites of Memory

Morrison clearly positions *Paradise* within the sweep of American History, specifically referencing the Native American landscape, slavery, reconstruction, westward expansion (“Manifest Destiny”), WWI, economic bust, WWII, economic boom, the Vietnam conflict and the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and 70s. The novel’s action, however, is not presented in chronological order; the narrative, including stories told by the characters about events before their own time, spans from 1890 to 1976. The overarching history of America pulsates throughout the narrative, pressuring and shaping events for both the communities and individuals as the various ways of remembering are performed in the text. This essential American narrative,² the controlling historical narrative within which the novel is set, is known by all to lead to a “Paradise,” a utopia of equality, freedom and economic opportunity.

Such simplistic and self-serving narratives erase the possibility of counter-narratives through a process of fixing the temporal and physical boundaries of a narrative. Homi Bhabha exquisitely illustrates the interdependence between time (read “memory”) and space (read “memorial”) in narrative constructions of identity:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological maneuvers through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space—representing the nation’s modern territoriality is turned into the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism. The difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the People into One. The liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the “outside,” into the authenticating “inward” time of Tradition. (Bhabha 149)

Bhabha’s theory establishes that it is narrative that prevents the forceful and fixed defining of identity given from the outside. The inward time of Tradition is created from the performative aspects of communal ritual in which the narrative is always liminal, always turning, always vacillating between the inside and the outside. Memory is the active mechanism that makes this vacillation possible, and it is during this time of vacillation that identities are constructed, maintained, and changed. Therefore, it is how a community remembers or how a community does not remember that is of interest. One of the primary community rituals for memory is to have a memorial, a space, a concrete object around which

² The accepted narrative is that the nation and the people of America can face any obstacle and overcome it. Rebuilding is possible and desirable and the solution. And the past is always recalled in a clean, safe way. Removing the dirty from the past, so that all that is left shines and creates a stronger nation and people, is an essential element of the narrative. This clean version of memory interrupts the cycle of narrative reconstruction because it moves beyond multiplicity and into Tradition as Bhabha sees it. This process plays out in the novel at the two memorial sites.

the memories can be recovered and therefore reconstructed. Memorials exist within a space, in real time but representing what is no longer true/real/present/actual and, as its name clearly indicates, the fundamental purpose of a memorial is to spur memory, an ethereal, unsubstantive, personal and/or communal experience. Public memorials, if not always, are often associated with events which have scarred, marked, changed, forged, and/or eradicated a community, small or large. For the surviving victims of the memorialized trauma, there is a certain assuagement of pain in the memorial's ability to recall events of the past into a safer reality where the event exists but is no longer physically present. Memorials restore a sense of order and in so doing, tell a story not only of the event but of the builders' paradigm of beliefs. Toni Morrison plays on this idea by imagining two sites of memory in her novel.

The story in *Paradise* is convoluted and intricately interwoven, so difficult to summarize. However, the main plot is centered around two delimited places. The first is Ruby, an all-Black town established in Oklahoma in 1949 by fifteen families from the original town of Haven which had been established in 1890. Haven had been founded by families escaping the ruin of their lives during Reconstruction. Haven had died an economic death, and Ruby is the New Fathers' attempt to repeat the Old Father's accomplishment of establishing an all-Black town where they could be independent of white power in all its manifestations. The second place is The Convent located some miles from the town of Ruby.

These two sites of memory seem to interplay within the novel in a rather strict dichotomy. The clear-cut dichotomy within the novel has received much criticism.³ However, I would like to complicate the reading by arguing that the seeming dichotomies in the novel are in fact narrative structures which reveal the impossibility of such dichotomy. The Oven and the Convent, the twinned spaces, are in fact not diametrically opposed; both illustrate a more postmodern flexibility of memory, and both offer the promise of multiple and uncontrollable counter-narratives emerging from marginalized groups.

The original similarities between the two sites of memory create the conditions for reading them as symbolic parallels, not as opposed entities. Both spaces were originally intended to be sacred but both become spaces of contention. Both spaces hold the memory of trauma and the promise of overcoming it. Morrison explicitly illustrates that each way of remembering and reconstructing evoke and erase narratives because the spaces are accessed by different groups. Maurice Halbwach is careful to establish in his treatise on collective memory that individuals belong to many groups, so it follows that their autobiographical memory within

³ One disparaging critic noted: "Unfortunately, *Paradise* is everything that *Beloved* was not: it's a heavy-handed, schematic piece of writing, thoroughly lacking in the novelistic magic Ms. Morrison has wielded so effortlessly in the past. It's a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women, old against young, the past against the present." (Kakutani).

their distinct groups is in constant discourse with their collective memory, thus positioning each member in a constant state of flux both as an individual and within the frameworks of the groups to which they belong.

Therefore, the starting point, but not the finishing point, of the symbolism of the Oven is that it represents “monumental memory,” the Old Fathers and their parallel group, the New Fathers, who reconstruct the same Oven in the new city of Ruby 59 years later. Nietzsche’s notion of monumental history involves the privileging of events and moments which articulate through themselves alone the notions that the powerful actively inscribe into them. Little respect or attention is paid to the current of history that flows into and out of these events or moments. In other words, the narrative arc that could lend meaning and give lessons from these events and moments is lost, replaced only by the un-reflected-upon monument to the past.

The Oven

The Oven was originally built as a community oven in Haven, the first town settled by the Old Fathers in 1890. The mini-origin story that creates this particular community’s monumental narrative is that after the “pilgrims” had been refused harbor by another all-black town, Zechariah (Big Papa) Morgan and his son Rector (Big Daddy) Morgan were led by a mysterious walking man carrying a satchel. The leaders and the community followed the walking man for 29 days. On the final day, the man was seen opening his satchel near an empty animal trap set by Rector. After rummaging through his bag on the ground, the man then fades out of sight. Upon inspecting where he had opened his satchel, a guinea fowl is found in the trap. Zechariah then decides that the town should be founded at that site. The myth turns into a literal memorial site.

The first act of the town on this site is to construct a community oven. This memorialization follows naturally from the act of trapping food, nourishing of the community in two parallel ways. First, the sacred ritual of a type of sacred communion is established. The New Testament makes this connection clear—the Christ enjoining his followers to “Do this in memory of me” at the Last Supper. Second, one of the ancient conceptions of memory is that retaining moments/events is like ingesting food. This is why we “devour” books—“the process of meditating on a particular text allowed the words to become part of the person ingesting it; in a sense, he became the author of the text” (Sheffield). So the Oven is immediately established as monumental history for the members of the community. Morrison describes it as follows, alluding to elements of Manifest Destiny which mirror the national American narrative:

An Oven. Round as a head, deep as desire. Living in or near their wagons, boiling meal in the open, cutting sod and mesquite for shelter, the Old Fathers did that first; put most of their strength into constructing the huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done. [...] then the ironmonger did his work. [...] he fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it at the base of the Oven's mouth. It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce that they had lost. (Morrison 1999: 7)

The Oven is symbolically imbued with the entire purpose of the community by the Old Fathers as well as the New Fathers, reinforcing the rigorous connection between the founding of the communities and the two groups, one repeating the ritual of reconstruction and ignoring the temporal differences between the two sites of the original and the reconstructed Oven. The symbolism is, again, overt in the construction of the Oven and in the existence of these mysterious words which the reading audience is not given. Zechariah's twin grandsons have been instrumental in maintaining the Oven and the monumental history of their founding.

The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not. [...] And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather—the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. (Morrison 1999: 13)

At first, Morrison only hints at the words written there, keeping them hidden from the reader until many pages later (as I am keeping them hidden from the reader here), revealing them only during an argument between the New Fathers and the youth of Ruby in which one of the New Fathers responds to the youth's desire to "update" the words on the Oven: "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (Morrison 1999: 87). Monumental history, then is maintained. There is no reconstruction of narrative allowed in a very literal sense. The words on the Oven must stay as they are reported to have been forged, although no one actually remembers what they originally were. By not revealing the words on the Oven immediately, and then placing doubt on the veracity of the reports about them, Morrison again illustrates the possibility of multiple narratives.

Furthermore, because of what appears to be its obvious symbolic role in the narrative, the reader feels rather comfortable with the Oven's meaning in the text. The mystery of the literal words is really not that powerful. Morrison thus lulls the reader into a sense of smug comprehension, an aspect of being a part of the group that understands. Also, references to

the Oven hardly exist in the interior of the novel, which focus on the lives of the women in the town and those living at the Convent, further delineating the Oven's influence to the limited group of the New Fathers. The structure of the novel thus reproduces this act of memorial—a framing story that validates the action of the novel, anchoring it and reinforcing the act of communal narration.

The Oven eventually starts to fall out of use because the community becomes more prosperous, and each family can afford its own oven. The communal value of the space becomes devalued, and thus its sacred nature suffers because it no longer functions in a spatial context. It no longer remembers. This onset of “modernity” corresponds, perhaps consequently, to the use of the memorial site by the youth of the town. The change is marked graphically with graffiti found on the oven, symbolically and literally marking the structure and reinscribing its function. The graffiti is of a black fist with red fingernails.

A meeting was called by the young people: “Everybody [...] thought the young people would first apologize for their behavior and then pledge to clean up and maintain the site. Instead they came with a plan of their own. A plan that completed what the fist had begun. [...] things had changed everywhere but in Ruby. He wanted to give the Oven a name, to have meetings there to talk about how handsome they were while giving themselves ugly names. Like not American. Like African.” (Morrison 1999: 104)

The narrative perspective is obviously from the position of the New Fathers. The youth are fighting to update the memorial, to make it mean something to their new generation which simultaneously disrupts the national narrative. But the New Fathers are refusing. This is how collective memories lose their power. They must be able to change and reconstruct based on the present, and in Ruby, the memorial as it is cannot function. Morrison underscores this problem:

A utility became a shrine (cautioned against not only in scary Deuteronomy but in lovely Corinthians II as well) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self. Nobody better to make the point than the wayward young who turned into a different kind of oven. One where the warming flesh was human. (Morrison 1999: 104)

The New Father's inability to allow meaning in relation to the present destroyed the power of the Memorial to function into the future, and the nourishment it provided them became self-destructive as noted by Morrison's image evoking living human beings as opposed to a dead memorial.

The Convent

The second major site of the novel is the Convent. At its core, it represents the collective

memory of the marginalized. The Convent was, at first, a decadent mansion built by “an embezzler” located seventeen miles outside of Ruby. It had been left by its owner upon his arrest and then repurposed as a school for American Indian Children by the Catholic Church. Morrison notes that at the Convent, “stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” (Morrison, 1999: 4), referencing and establishing its narrative symbolism—a people massacred, cultures desecrated and eradicated—an apt space for the dispossessed women awaiting their own eradication. The female inhabitants are “throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door” (Morrison, 1999: 4). Four nuns ran the school for years until it became no longer economically feasible, and the school was closed. But the nuns refused to leave, and since the closing, the lone building in the middle of nowhere has attracted a handful of rejected and escaping women.⁴ The framing event of the entire novel is the hunting and shooting of the women in the convent by members of Ruby in an act of purification, an event that is told in the opening chapter and retold in the last chapters. This return and reconstruction of events verifies the multiple perspectives and meanings one event can take on; the retelling of the event within the contextual event of the novel itself as a narrative as a part of American literature and in the milieu of that narrative of America, reinscribes the act of narrative as a historical construction which is necessarily constantly shifting and unstable.⁵

Juxtaposition and Duplication

As solid and imposing as the Oven and its type of memory is, the type of memory construction at the Convent, however, is more fluid. The Convent was never a convent, but this is the popular term applied by the townspeople, unconsciously both denigrating its presence in their own eyes but also communicating a sacred connection. First, the Convent’s sacred nature is only true to its own group. From the perspective of the New Fathers and their community, the Convent is evil. On more than one occasion, snakes, a common symbol of evil, are placed in juxtaposition with the oven.

⁴ This primary distinction reiterates the duality motif in *Paradise*. Duality as a structuring concept is repeated throughout the novel, quite consciously by Morrison with the motif of twinning throughout—characters, towns, pregnancies, deaths, etc. This duality, however, extends into the duality of flux, that no sites of memory stay the same. This motif allows her to explore the consequences of the multiple ways of remembering.

⁵ For example, when the men enter the cellar of the Convent, they encounter a collection of materials that they do not understand because they do not share the cultural memory of the women in the Convent. For the audience of men, the memorial site of the Convent is unreadable, incomprehensible. They then attribute the debris there to a different story that makes sense within their constructed narrative.

Where the Oven had been, small green snakes slept in the sun. Who could have imagined that twenty-five years later in a brand-new town a Convent would beat out the snakes, the Depression, the tax man and the railroad for sheer destructive power. (Morrison 1999: 17)

So, Lone thought, the fangs and the tail are somewhere else. Out yonder in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven. (Morrison 1999: 276)

This overly common symbolic juxtaposition is deceptively simplistic. The point here is not that “snakes” are evil and related to the Convent but that the New Fathers are only capable of accepting this type of duality, continually relying on their notions of monumental history with its rigidly fixed narrative derived from tradition, denying any nuance or multiplicity of meaning.

Before the men arrive to rid their community of the perceived evil, the women rise in the morning and together prepare for the day as they do every day, with an emphasis on food cultivation and preparation: “One mixes dough while another lights the stove. Others gather vegetables for the noon meal, then set out the breakfast things. The bread, kneaded into mounds, is placed in baking tins to rise” (Morrison 1999: 285). Here again, a parallel is found between the Convent and the Oven in the form of communal ritual and nourishment. The men from Ruby will soon find the food forsaken as the women hide after hearing gunshots, a symbolic rupture of ritual at the site of memory.

In the end, the Convent is empty and has manifested its own memories, and the memorial of the Oven has been changed by the youth of Ruby, forcing upon the community a new kind of remembering. Now to reveal the words on the oven—the reported original expression was “Beware the furrow of His Brow,” a warning to allow destiny to manifest itself without interference or risk angering God himself. The youth had argued that, in fact, the words had really been “Be the furrow of His brow” which evokes a respect and connection to the monumental history of the New Fathers but gradually places power in the hands of a new generation of narrators, thus rupturing the way memory takes place at the site. Finally, brand new marks have been made on the oven, erasing its power completely and evoking a completely new narrative: “The graffiti on the hood of the Oven [was] now ‘We are the furrow of his Brow’” (Morrison 1999: 298). This movement is essential, the liminal point of Bhabha’s ideological displacement. This final expression erases the connection and assumes an individual power heretofore absent. As the narrative explains towards the end concerning the New Fathers,

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and greatgrands; their fathers and mothers.

Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates” (Morrison 1999: 161).

This duplication is mirrored by the lack of viable children in Ruby—stillbirths and infants who refuse to thrive. The women in the Convent are assumed to practice abortion by the inhabitants of Ruby as well as the reader. Tellingly, however, the abortions are for the inhabitants of Ruby, and, paradoxically, a viable infant is born at the Convent.

Changing Memory

The narration of the first chapter of the novel is from the perspective of the unnamed raiders who shoot the women at the Convent, one by one, leaving their bodies lying in various rooms of the mansion and outside where they were shot as some tried to flee. In the final chapters, more details are given from the perspective of the inhabitants of Ruby who arrive to help the women. As one character tries to staunch the wound of one woman, she states, “This dying may take a while” (Morrison 1999: 289). She means, of course, the physical dying of the woman. The reader will soon understand this statement differently.

After the women have all died and the helpers have all left and returned to Ruby, it is only a short time later when the undertaker, Roger Best, arrives to gather the women’s bodies. But he finds no one. “No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone” (Morrison 1999: 292) the narrator reports.

The final unnamed chapter relates five short stories about the five dead women, all presumably taking place after the supposed massacre. This final chapter validates that memory is nothing without narrative reconstruction. The novel itself simultaneously evokes and erases these women’s stories. Before reading this final chapter, the reader is pleased with himself/herself, assuming an understanding of the novel’s symbolism so perfectly. But then the rupture occurs. The final chapter seems so unnecessary. After all, the reader has mostly been satisfied with a relatively thorough dénouement explaining some back history of the Old Fathers and in which the omniscient narrative voice becomes more intrusive, telling the consequences of the action and remarking on various characters’ attitudes and responses to the events. But that final chapter is necessary thematically if Morrison’s whole point is that neither singularity nor duality is enough. To allow memory to remain vital and continuous, it actually must change. The women of the Convent, Gigi, Pallas, Mavis, Seneca, and perhaps even Connie, are all shot and dead and then given stories afterwards. So they are not dead after all. Or are they? Indeed, “This dying may take a while” (Morrison, 1999: 289).

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