"War" in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: History and Its Discontinuity or Reconstruction

OKI Shoko

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) is the final book of a trilogy that also includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). It is set in the all-black small town of Ruby, Oklahoma and the Convent, a former Catholic boarding school, outside the town. Ruby has a complicated history, which extends over a period from the late 1800s to 1976 (the present in the story). The group of women who live together in the Convent have all had broken lives of varying types. Many fragmental episodes related to the characters are unfolded anachronistically as the novel progresses. In an interview with Marcus, Morrison reveals that the original working title was *War*, but the publisher did not consider it marketable and suggested an alternative title, *Paradise* ("This Side of Paradise"). This title seems to be contrary to the working title. That makes the story more complicated and elusive.

Does the change in the title from *War* to *Paradise* make any difference in terms of reader response? Certainly, the battle between men and women is placed in the foreground because the raid on the Convent women by Ruby's men is narrated twice (once at the beginning and once at the end of the novel). The raid may be seen as an absurdity because the men ascribe their town's moral decay to the Convent women whom they consider the "coven." Some early reviewers reduce the novel's theme to gender conflict. For example, Michiko Kakutani argues that "[i]t's a contrived, formulaic book" and the women in this novel are "victims" while the men are "control freaks" (8). In response, many critics have insisted on the text's ambiguity, focusing on the complex relationships behind the apparent opposition

between the patriarchal men of Ruby and the Convent women. While the female characters have been focused on, the men who are the founders of Ruby and who called themselves the "New Fathers" still tended to be read as a monolithic group. Adapting Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction," Nancy J. Peterson argues that, while "the imperative to remember and to recover black history" lies at the heart of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, "[w]hat afflicts the community of Ruby is not history per se, but a history that has become official and monolithic," and that the New Fathers "certainly bear witness to the past, but they do not have a critical and dynamic relation to it" (87-89). [1]

The critics who similarly focus on the community's history presume that the unreasonable raid results from the humiliating history that the townspeople share. Their ancestors, on the way to Western settlement in 1890, were rejected not only by whites but also by blacks whose skin was lighter than theirs. Shocked by colorism among blacks, they decided to establish their own "all-black" town named Haven, Ruby's precursor. This episode, called the "Disallowing," may explain their motive for excluding a group of mixed-race outsiders, the Convent women. In fact, in the first raid scene, the Morgan twins, Deacon and Steward, remember the Disallowing as "[a] story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). The narrative, however, empathizing the connection between the New Fathers and their ancestors (the Old Fathers), misleads the reader into disregarding a significant discontinuity between both generations. In this paper, with consideration given to the working title, *War*, I analyze how the New Fathers' experiences of World War II affect the novel's subject because, in their seeming monolithic discourse, their fear of being severed from the Old Fathers' mythic history is apparent. In addition, I examine how the Convent women play a crucial role when Ruby's history takes a new turn at the end of the novel.

1. The Double Narration of the Raid

As can be seen in the Morgan twins' recollections of the Disallowing, the many fragmental episodes are narrated from the viewpoint of various characters.[2] The reader has to pay attention to the focalized character's motive behind each narration. This complicated narrative structure represents the novel's historiography. To illustrate that, I examine the two narrations of the raid at the beginning and the end of the novel.[3] In this novel, the reader finds the word "paradise" only twice, but "war" appears often. The most apparent can be seen in the motif of "war" in the first raid scene.

> They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. [...] The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stop, editing their breath, making friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations [...]. They part gracefully without words or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the target, after all, is detritus [...]. (3-4)

This passage, which is narrated from the viewpoint of the raiders, describes how the men carry out "their mission." The first shocking sentence represents the New Fathers' racism that alienates the light-skinned ones among the townspeople. The raiders make "friendly" adjustments to their guns and search the building agilely "without words," looking for their targets as though they see action. Interestingly enough, the nine raiders include seven war veterans: five from World War II, one of whom is the "leading man," and two from the Vietnam War. This chapter, titled "Ruby," ends as follows: "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they [the Convent women] are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game. God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18). The motif of "war" changes

into that of hunting, and the Convent women are compared to easy games that is tracked down by skilled hunters.

The second description of the raid at the end of the novel, however, is completely different from the first in which the men behave like brave soldiers, as follows:

> They [the men] open the game room door. An alabaster ashtray slams into Arnold's temple, exhilarating the woman wielding it. She continues to smash until he is down on all fours, while Jeff, taken off guard, aims his gun a tick too late. It flies from his hand when a cue stick cracks his wrist and then, on upswing, rams into his jaw. He raises his arms, first for protection, them to snatch the point of the cue when the frame of Catherine of Siena breaks over his head. (286)

The Convent women notice something unusual happening quickly and ambush the raiders in this retelling, although in the first description of the raid, they can do nothing but be driven out by the trained soldiers. It is noteworthy that there is another description that is deleted from the viewpoint of the men: the women grab utensils and violently fight the men, who are forced to be defensive. These re-narrated women are the opposite of helpless "victims." In particular, the fact that one of the women uses the picture of "Catherine of Siena" as her weapon is indicative of their firm defiance. Catherine was a Catholic nun that is known as the symbol of the spirit of self-sacrifice. Her figure in the picture is described as "the woman with the I-give-up face," "[a] knocked-down look, cast-up begging eyes" from the viewpoint of Gigi (74). In the re-narration of the raid, the Convent women adamantly refuse to be victims and they fight back.

The difference between the two raid scenes is representative of the novel's entire structure in which the characters' viewpoints often conflict. Moreover, the seamless shifts of narrative viewpoint, which are seen throughout the novel, make the story more obscure and ambigu-

ous. The narrative that consists of the various characters' viewpoints mosaically urges the reader to discern whose narration it is based on the viewpoint, and to read the text more cautiously. The reader is not given any information related to Ruby's or Haven's historical past. Thus, every event can be observed through the lenses of the characters, all of whom are unreliable because they are viewing things in terms of their own interests. The double narration, which employs a style of free-indirect speech, effectively encourages the reader to distance him/herself from the presumed historical facts in the novel and to re-examine them.

2. Discontinuity in the History of Haven/Ruby

The Morgan twins are said to "remember the details of everything that ever happened" and the episodes about the Old Fathers are revealed through their recollections in the first raid scene. Here, I analyze the rhetoric that the twins employ to emphasize the continuity between the Old Fathers and themselves as the heirs. The twins' grandfather, Zechariah Morgan, leads his party from Louisiana to Oklahoma, and is met with refusal when they attempt to join a prosperous settlement of blacks called Fairly because their skin is too black. The Disallowing gives them the impetus to migrate westward to found their own town, Haven. The critics often compare this long-distance migration to the biblical "exodus."[4] In fact, the twins' recollections of the migration are embellished with mythical trope: when the party wanders around the wilderness of Oklahoma, a mysterious "walking man" appears and Zechariah considers it to be a kind of epiphany. Asked by a member of the party "how long it might take," Zechariah answers, "You can't start it and you can't stop it" because "[t]his is God's time" (97-98).

Although the New Fathers try to repeat the mythic history by founding their own town, Ruby, from scratch, their experiences of the war exposes their difference from the preceding generation. The

twins consider the raid on the Convent to be heroic behavior for their town, and during the raid, they remember the reason for building the new town after the war as follows:

> Loving what Haven had been — the idea of it and its reach — they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart, and they made up their minds to do it again. [...] As new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had outfoxed it [...]. (6)

As can be seen in the designation of the "New" Fathers, they try to identify themselves with the Old Fathers who survived the ordeal, and emphasize the distance that they went in World War II to compete with the Old Fathers' "exodus." Moreover, we can see their latent desire to talk about their own ordeal in the way they name the town. Ruby was initially and temporarily called New Haven but later, the veterans tried to name it after battlefields like Guam or Inchon. "Those who fought in Europe kept coming up with names only the children enjoyed pronouncing" (17). This also shows their belief that men battle against the hostile outer world to bring peace to their community, whether it is a country or a small town.

However, the Old Fathers' "exodus" to the new settlement, which was motivated not only by racism but also by colorism among the blacks, must have differed from the New Fathers' experience as American soldiers, irrespective of race, for the cause that the United States gave them. Moreover, given the fact that the country had always tried to exclude black people as citizens, the relationship between the army and the black soldiers is even more ironic.

The Old Fathers' "God's time" is changed to "war time" by the veterans who raid the Convent in 1976 when the Vietnam War has ended. It is notable that the New Fathers' "pooled discharged pay" enables them to found the town in 1949. The New Fathers' travel to the new

settlement, as revealed in their memories, especially their children's question, "How long?" reminds the reader of the Old Fathers' "exodus" (16). However, while the ancestors wandered in unknown wilderness, the descendants' destination is land that they have already bought with their payments from the army. In the New Fathers' remembrances, their attempt to make their stories resemble the Old Fathers' history reveals their discontinuity from it because of their own unspoken experiences.

In the meantime, the New Fathers' unspoken past is tacitly shared only among those who experienced it. Deacon remembers what he saw in World War I and imagines what his sons' deaths in the Vietnam War were like as follows:

> He [Deacon], like most of the Morgans, had seen action, which is to say live death. Watched it when it was visited on others; watched it when he visited it on others. He knew that bodies did not lie down; that most often they flew apart [...]. Easter and Scout were in integrated units [...]. He did not want her [Soane] even to imagine the single question he put to Roger — first with Scout then with Easter: Are all the parts black? Meaning, if not, get rid of the white pieces. Roger swore to their racial consistency [...]. (112)

Because Deacon himself witnessed "live death" on the battlefield, he knows what happened to his sons at the time of their deaths. Ironically, the same experience in a different war, which the father and sons share, is contrasted with the historical discontinuity between the New Fathers and the Old Fathers. The above citation also clearly evidences Deacon's racism. As the critics often point out, the community of Ruby is governed by the reversed "one-drop rule" in the United States.[5] The New Fathers use the "Disallowing" story as their motive for keeping the town isolated from the outer world, and also for keeping their blood purely black. Deacon makes Roger the undertaker, who was his comrade-in-arms, swear to his sons' "racial consistency"

because he cannot bear the thought that his sons' dead bodies were mingled with white bodies. Deacon thinks that he cannot, and must not, give the information about his sons' deaths, which only his comrades-in-arms share, to his wife Soane. As such, the New Fathers' traumatic memories of the battlefield are not spoken about, even to members of their own family. Given the unspeakable experience of fragmented dead bodies, the raiders' paranoiac acts of excluding the others seem to embody their desire to project the terror that was engraved on their memories onto the external and to control it.

In contrast, Reverend Misner plans for Ruby's future by leading the youth to join the civil rights movement. He criticizes the New Fathers for repeating "their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands [...]. About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on" (161). As we have already seen, however, the New Fathers have nothing to say, but they cannot help repeating the Old Fathers' mythical history to the younger generation, instead of their unspeakable experiences. The New Fathers feel the difficulty not only in expressing their experiences, but also in connecting them to their ancestors' history, which is the story of "black" hardship. However, the (hi)story that the New Fathers try to pass down is anachronistic and ineffective for the younger generation, which is suggested by the fact that the message on the iron plate nailed to the town's oven by Zechariah became illegible as time passed. The youth of the town refuse to accept the New Fathers' interpretation of the message and try to interpret it themselves in the context of the civil rights movement.

From this point of view, the New Fathers, who are far from the Old Fathers' "God's time," seem to pass down only their deep scars of the war to the next generation, as represented by the bodies of Jeff's children. A veteran of the Vietnam War, Jeff has four children who are handicapped. Kelly Lynch Reames argues that many critics "have taken the children's illness as a sign that the town's isolation has led to

birth defects caused by inbreeding, though Jeff's exposure to Agent Orange is another possible cause of the birth defects" (34). The town's official story is that nobody had died in town since the Morgan twins' sister Ruby, and this reminds the townspeople of the mythical "Immortality." The myth was maintained by the fact that people died outside the town as Deacon's sons did on the battlefield. Ruby's myth of "Immortality," however, ends with the death of Jeff's youngest child, Save-Marie. It is noteworthy that the final chapter's title is "Save-Marie" despite the fact that she doesn't appear in the novel and her name is only briefly mentioned at her funeral. Marni Gauthier argues that "[t]he chapters of *Paradise* collectively assert a series of female-authored counterhistories that correct the patriarch's mythic history" and "the novel relates its true story primarily through women whose individual names entitle each chapter," including "the Convent women, and Patricia and Lone (Ruby's resident midwife)" (407). While mentioning another female resident of Ruby, Billie Delia, and her critical observation of the town's patriarchal politics, Gauthier does not pay attention to Save-Marie. She never speaks a word in the novel but, along with the Convent women, her shadowy presence suggests that the "War" which the men fought cannot bring the townspeople "Paradise."

3. Reconstruction of Ruby's History

Finally, I explore how the Convent women give the community of Ruby a chance to reconstruct their history before it is lost. The enigmatic disappearance of the women's dead bodies after the raid disturbs the solidarity of the community of Ruby, and the raiders tell the townspeople various stories about the raid that justify each of them. How can the reader interpret the ending of the novel?

The five Convent women, including Consolata, who is the original inhabitant, have various backgrounds; they all have unspeakable pasts. Consolata, who lives a despairing life dependent on alcohol, considers the other women to be freeloaders "like mice in a house" (222), but can-

not drive them out for fear of loneliness. In this way, these women are dependent on each other. While the raiders develop their military strategy without a word and never speak of the experiences they have shared, the Convent women must share their different personal histories by talking about them. Given the meaning of the novel's working title, *War*, for the Convent women, the narrative between the two scenes of the raid seems to describe the process in which each of them changes into an autonomous individual who can battle for her own life.

As a spiritual leader, Consolata devises a unique method in order to have the other women discuss their traumatic pasts; she paints around the outline of their naked bodies on the Convent's basement floor, and directs them to lie down within the painted outlines while talking. After the raid, they vanish, leaving only these outlines, which give rise to varying interpretations. While one of the raiders, K.D., reports to the townspeople that these painted figures are pornography and "Satan's scrawl," Reverend Misner's fiancée Anna sees them as traces of the women's inner conflicts, "the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them" (303).

Although the outlines are interpreted in various ways, the Convent women's presences, which must be eradicated for the town's survival, remain as a space that cannot be filled. Linda J. Krumholz considers Consolata's gift of raising the dead, which is called "in sight," to be indicative of her potential to be a spiritual leader as follows: "Morrison expands on Consolata's gift of 'in sight' when Consolata begins teaching the other women at the Convent, and they gain insight into themselves" (29). In this paper, however, in order to examine the way in which the novel represents history, I emphasize that Consolata's "in sight" holds a significant space in itself, and then, distances itself critically from "insight" which is represented in a word. At the critical moment in Ruby's history, which is caused by the New Fathers' raid, the Convent women's absent-presences function as a space in "in sight." The townspeople cannot decide on any rational or decisive interpreta-

tion of their vanished bodies and the traces left on the floor.

In contrast, Deacon confesses his past to Reverend Misner after the raid as follows:

> His [Deacon's] words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith — hot, misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow. He spoke of a wall in Ravenna, Italy, white in the late afternoon sun with wine colored shadows pressing its edge. Of two children on a beach offering him a shell formed like an S — how open their faces, how loud the bells. Of salt water burning his face on a troop ship. [...] Then he told him of his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance. (301)

That Deacon's words are compared to ingots made by an apprentice blacksmith reminds the reader of the cast-iron message plate that was made by the ex-blacksmith, Zechariah. Moreover, Deacon's confession begins with the beautiful scenery of an Italian beach that he saw during the war. Misner cannot understand Deacon's confession, which consists of seemingly fragmented and inconsistent stories. In this "misshapen" narrative, however, Deacon attempts to reconcile his own experience of the war with his grandfather's story, and he begins to talk about Zechariah's twin brother, Tea, who had been blotted out from the town's official history as he was considered a dishonor to the community. At the same time, Deacon reconsiders his relationship with Steward and decides to sever ties with him. While the Morgan twins' recollections of the Old Fathers are to conceal their fear of being severed from the ancestors' history, Deacon's confession can be seen as momentum for re-connecting himself to the community's past productively.

As we have already seen, the novel's working title, *War*, cast light on the New Fathers' unreasonable raid on the Convent, a repetition of their experience of the war. When the Convent women traverse the

town's history as a space that threatens to bring about another discontinuity, the novel offers a way of conveying history to the reader. It focuses on the conflicting narrations about one past event and reveals the unspoken event hidden behind the seemingly seamless history.

In her essay, Morrison urges the reader to re-examine the way of representing the presence of African-Americans in the American canon, especially the founding nineteenth century works like Edgar Allan Poe's and Herman Melville's. She analyzes how the black presence as the "unspeakable things unspoken" shapes the language and structure of American literature, and continues as follows: "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves [...]" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 11). Morrison's concept of literary history is reflected in her historical novels. In *Paradise*, certain absences can be seen as a significant momentum for re-narrating (hi)story.

Notes

1 See also Rob Davidson and Stéphane Robolin.
2 For more detailed analysis of the complicated technique of narration, see Michael Wood.
3 Philip Page explores the doubling of the narration of the raid and argues that since "no single text, version, or interpretation is adequate, the novel opens up the actuality and the potentiality for multiple perspectives of author, characters, and, Morrison assumes, readers" (640).
4 For example, see Katrine Dalsgard and Rob Davidson.
5 For example, see Marni Gauthier.

Works Cited

Dalsgard, Katrine. "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni

Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 233-48.
Davidson, Rob. "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 47.3 (2001): 355-73.
Gauthier, Marni. "The Other Side of *Paradise*: Toni Morrison's (Un)Making of Mythic History." *African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 395-414.
Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
Kakutani, Michiko. "Worthy women, Unredeemable Men." *The New York Times* 6 Jan. 1998: 8.
Krumholz, Linda J. "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review* 36.1 (2002): 21-34.
Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
———. "This Side of Paradise." Interview with James Marcus. 10 Oct. 2006. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/7651/104-8595730-1497527>.
———. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (1989): 1-34.
Page, Philip. "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*". *African American Review* 35.4 (2001): 637-49.
Peterson, Nancy J. *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001. 51-97.
Reames, Kelly Lynch. *Toni Morrison's Paradise*. New York: Continuum, 2001.
Robolin, Stéphane. "Loose Memory in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Zoë Wicom's *David's Story*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (2006): 297-320.
Wood, Michael. "Sensations of Loss." *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Ed. Marc C. Conner. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000. 113-24.