

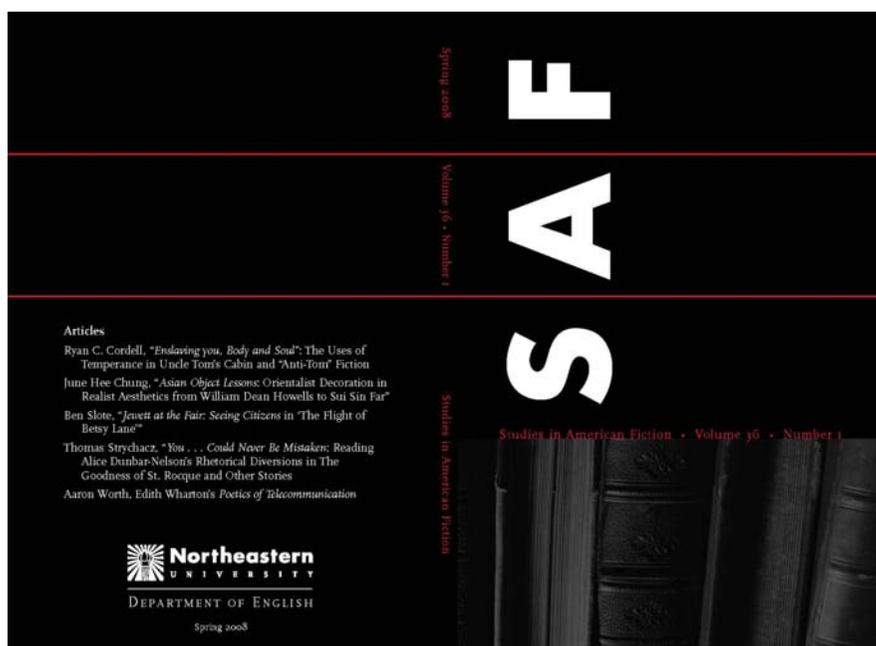
October 01, 2007

Playing on the "Darky": blackface minstrelsy, identity construction, and the deconstruction of race in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Dana A. "Playing on the 'Darky': blackface minstrelsy, identity construction, and the deconstruction of race in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Studies in American Fiction* 35.2 (2007): 181-200. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d1001827x>



Studies in American Fiction is a journal of articles and reviews on the prose fiction of the United States. Founded by James Nagel and later edited by Mary Loeffelholz, *SAF* was published by the Department of English, Northeastern University, from 1973 through 2008. *Studies in American Fiction* is indexed in the *MLA Bibliography* and the *American Humanities Index*.

Studies in American Fiction

Volume 35

Autumn 2007

Number 2

Dana Williams, *Playing on the "Darky": Blackface Minstrelsy, Identity Construction, and the Deconstruction of Race in Toni Morrison's Paradise*

**PLAYING ON THE “DARKY”:
BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY,
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION,
AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF RACE
IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE***

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In a *Washington Post* interview with David Streitfeld only days before the release of her seventh novel, *Paradise* (1998), Toni Morrison contends that what she wanted to do with *Paradise* was not to erase race but to force “readers either to care about it or see if it disturbs them” that race can be so blurred that, without specific linguistic utterance, race can go unidentified.¹ That the relationship between literature and race is of especial significance to Morrison is evidenced not only in this interview with Streitfeld but in countless other interviews, throughout her fiction, and, perhaps, most aggressively, in her collection of essays and lectures *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Lodged in the context of her investigation of how an *Africanist* presence shapes classic American texts is Morrison’s commentary on the role of the writer in articulating crucial moments in American history and in offering “truth” about society even when the literary critic will not. She writes:

National literatures, like writers, get along the best way they can, and with what they can. Yet they do seem to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind. For the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*. If I am disenchanted by the indifference of literary criticism toward examining the range of that concern, I do have a lasting resort: the writers themselves.²

Here, we are reminded that even when literary criticism, as it often does, ignores obvious relationships between the production of literature and race (which is also produced), we can still count on writers to highlight that relationship, even if they do so unconsciously.

Morrison’s fictional response to *Playing in the Dark*, one might think, would result in a novel about American (read *white* American) identity construction and the impact the *Africanist* presence has had on it. To write such a novel would certainly appease critics who, in their acceptance of Morrison as a great American author, frequently

question whether she could or would ever write a novel about white people.³ In a sense, Morrison does write about white people in *Paradise*. The coal-black citizens of Ruby mirror white American character so obviously that my first and subsequent readings of the text left me convinced that Morrison had written a novel critiquing American identity and exceptionalism whereby the men of Ruby were little more than white men in blackface.⁴ By obscuring race, Morrison is able to critique American identity construction and to show that both blackness and whiteness are produced social constructions, not fixed biological categories. This critique inevitably leads to questions about class and gender, even if only peripherally. Notably, the American art form which makes similar investigations into racial, socio-economic, and gender categories; which produces similar results; and which the novel engages consciously and unconsciously is blackface minstrelsy. A reading of *Paradise* that considers the novel through the lens of the minstrel tradition amplifies the novel's critique of American identity construction—ironically, the very thing that initiates and sustains blackface minstrelsy.

Recent essays on the novel argue that *Paradise* is, in fact, about the American experience, told from an African American perspective.⁵ Inherent in such arguments still is the element of race, since the goal of these essays is largely to show how race influences perspective, and thus how race influences the making, telling, and retelling of American history. In her prefatory remarks to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison poses two questions that are key to our reading of *Paradise* here: how are “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” constructed, and “what is the consequence of that construction?”⁶ Minstrelsy invokes these same questions; and, like *Paradise*, minstrelsy further complicates these questions by invoking issues of gender and class.

Recent literature on early blackface minstrelsy suggests that the tradition of white men using burned cork and grease paint to blacken their faces and to entertain their audiences by exploiting slavery and plantation life was perhaps most consumed with constructing “whiteness” and, correspondingly, with (mis)appropriating “blackness.” Present-day re-examinations of America's first form of popular entertainment reveal that, more often than not, minstrelsy was not about plantation and black life but about the desires and expectations of white men.⁷ Thomas C. Holt notes in “Marking: Race, Race-making and the Writing of History” that while the dominant feature of the minstrel show was its supposed portrayal of black slave life, as integral to the show as slave life was its investigation into complex political, economic, and social forces:

Studies of the content of minstrel shows, their music, and their social setting suggest that they served to assuage the cultural anxieties of both the new European immigrants uprooted from homelands and integrating into an alien society and political economy and the young rural native migrants to the city, many of whom were being incorporated into wage labor and the factory system for the first time.⁸

The exported Europeans-turned-Americans cast onto the slave population the anxiety of their fears—what Morrison calls their “fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness, their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness; of aggression both external and internal. In short, the terror of human freedom—the thing they [Americans] coveted most of all.”⁹

By projecting Americans’ patriarchal fears and sentiments about politics, class conflicts, labor, masculinity, and culture onto society’s lowest male caste—black men—minstrelsy achieved the effect of easing white men’s anxiety about their struggle with identity, allowing them to laugh at themselves (outside themselves) while using racial discourse to fashion this identity. These same fears that Morrison argues drive American culture drove the identity-less American immigrants and migrants of the minstrel tradition; and they also drive the migrated citizens of Haven and Ruby, Oklahoma, who populate *Paradise*. Like the audiences captivated by the tradition of minstrelsy, which allowed them to define themselves in terms of who they were not, *Paradise* begs the question of what it means to be or not to be an American who has reasonable access to power and who has full control of his individual freedom.

Rendered as the multi-vocal stories of women who flee their broken lives only to have their restructured ones destroyed again and as the tale of the “one all-black town worth the pain,” *Paradise* is layered with complexity.¹⁰ It rejects a linear narrative and has many characters. As careful readers, however, we are still reasonably able to follow the logic of the narrative because of the forthright manner with which Morrison offers the characters’ stories. Just as we are left to piece these women’s stories together as they are rendered in sections of their own name, we gather information about the town of Ruby piecemeal. We are given the town’s history, and we learn that the Disallowing—the single most important event in the lives of Ruby’s citizens, in which the Old Fathers, as they were called, were rejected by the citizens of Fairly, Oklahoma—is passed down from generation

to generation. In Fairly, they are rejected because of their deep, abiding blackness. Their racial purity, which they had always taken great pride in, becomes the source of their rejection and, subsequently, the single most important factor in the construction of their new identities. Eventually, they become so obsessed with racial purity that they displace one act of discrimination with another. Even so, *Paradise* is not a book about racist black people, according to Morrison.¹¹ Instead, it is an attempt to answer the question that started *Paradise*: “How do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and become destructive, static, preformed—exactly what they were running from?”¹²

At least one answer to this question has to do with Ruby’s citizens’ haphazard belief in racial purity and, subsequently, in their recourse to binarisms to construct their identity. In their quest to believe in the goodness of their blackness, they ultimately reject all things non-black. But they also reject anything black that threatens their sacred purity. Patricia Best Cato, who is never fully accepted in the community because her mother was a fair-skinned outsider, eventually realizes this; she questions the authenticity of their purity and, ultimately, reveals its instability:

The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. “God bless the pure and holy” indeed. That was their purity. That was their holiness. . . . Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-Rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. . . . In that case . . . everything that worries them must come from women. (217)

As Patricia recognizes, the only way for them to guarantee their “pure” bloodlines is to intra-marry and, more importantly, to control women—both black and white. And their need to control people to ensure false categories and constructed hierarchies turns them into the very people they claim to hate.

Creating false categories and constructing hierarchies is similarly central to blackface minstrelsy. Frederick Douglass in 1849 observed of a minstrel troop “said to be composed entirely of colored people” that “they, too had recourse to the burnt cork and lamp black, the better to express their characters, and to produce uniformity of complexion”; as Eric Lott comments, Douglass located minstrelsy’s function in “staging racial categories, boundaries, and types even when these possessed little that a black man could recognize as ‘authentic.’”¹³ Another function of minstrelsy, Lott argues, had to do with appropriating black life as inferior in order for immigrants and working class whites to position themselves as superior. In its attempt to

work out crucial issues regarding national and personal identity, minstrelsy adopted a system of binarisms whereby the only way white men could define themselves was by establishing a category of people who they were not. Such systematic racism had long-term consequences. As Holt notes,

The marking of racial otherness so indelibly into the American material and spiritual culture, into its everyday, meant that what blacks confronted was never simply insult and psychic injury, never some transient epiphenomenon, but a kind of national ambivalence about racial matters that still complicates our efforts to understand and combat it.¹⁴

This is certainly true of the citizens of Ruby, who suffer from the aftereffects of racist institutions such as slavery and minstrelsy. In parallel to the logic of the separatist principle of *othering* that structured and sustained minstrelsy, “Ruby depends upon isolation and insulation in order to maintain its black utopia, and it is its obsession with exclusion and ‘purity’ that offers not liberation from colorism but complete submission to it.”¹⁵ In essence, Ruby becomes the new Fairly, “Disallowing” any and all who are unlike its inhabitants.

Interestingly, it is a variation of minstrelsy that sets the formative diegesis of *Paradise* into motion. Through retrospective narration near the end of the novel, we learn that the Old Fathers’ most respected elder and statesman, Zechariah Blackhorse, had a twin brother Ethan, whose name has been erased from the Blackhorse Bible. After Deacon and the other men have killed the Convent women, he tells Reverend Misner that few remembered that Zechariah had a twin brother and that they were first known as Coffee and Tea.

When Coffee got the statehouse job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he was equally affronted and humiliated. One day, years later, when he and his twin were walking near a saloon, some whitemen [sic], amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren’t brothers anymore.
(302)

Shortly thereafter, Zechariah, along with other former legislators whose dignity had been challenged by white men who knew their

worth only in relation to denigrating others, abandoned the life that denied him his human freedom and sought to create a new life for himself. In short, he refused to participate in the minstrel tradition. Yet, throughout *Paradise*, Ruby's citizens mimic almost to perfection certain aspects of the very tradition Zechariah hated so much.

My contention here is not that *Paradise* is itself a minstrel performance or even that it can be read as an analogy of a minstrel performance. The novel complicates any such direct analogy. Rather, I contend that the novel mimics and then deconstructs some of minstrelsy's strategies, thereby highlighting the ways in which minstrelsy (fictionally and historically) as a tradition fails to sustain itself and thus collapses within itself. The men of the town do not perform as Convent women (except that they pretend to be pious) in the same way that white men performed as black men. Rather, Ruby's men perform as white men—America's founding fathers and their descendants to be exact—first and foremost by declaring themselves exceptional.¹⁶

In their declarations of exceptionalism, both minstrelsy and *Paradise* are heavily informed by the journey motif. As Alexander Saxton notes, "In minstrelsy's complex matrix of social content, the *journey* became the central theme. It stood in contrast to the celebration of urban opportunity and permissiveness as a lament for what had been left behind and lost." "Blackface singers," according to Saxton, "were protagonists of Manifest Destiny," in which westward movement was focal, and the journey as theme had less to do with slaves' movement than it did with white performers' movement.¹⁷ Again, onto the slave population minstrels projected their own experiences, in this case, their experience of searching for a place where they could interrogate identity and assert their dominance. Similarly, in *Paradise*, the journey, first to Haven, and then to Ruby is central to the narrative, even as the community laments what has been lost and vows never to forget the life they are leaving behind.

According to Ruby legend, the journey to Haven was God-ordained since God had given the Old Fathers signs and dreams, directing their journey much as He had done for the wandering Israelites of biblical times.

To the Old Fathers [the land that became Haven] signaled luxury—an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders and without deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. Here freedom was not entertainment, like a carnival or a hoe-down that you can count on once a year. . . . Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for

himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king. (99)

But this freedom has limits because the community of Haven, like the minstrel tradition, was rooted in an ahistorical myth and in a belief that a utopia could actually be sustained. One of the manifestations of this belief is the conflict over the motto on the Oven. The older men insist that it is to read "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." The younger generation contends that even if it did read "Beware," it should now read "Be," which would reflect the need to construct meaning when it is ambiguous or unknown, a change in times, and a desire to be *like* God rather than simply fearing Him. Ultimately, Steward Morgan puts an end to the conversation and to any new, possible (re)constructed meanings. In their generational dispute, which becomes a metaphor of the fears of change that informed American identity construction, the staid wins out over the dynamic, with Steward warning them that if anyone of them dares to "ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven," he will blow their heads off just like he would "a hood-eye snake" (87).

As the town's banker and one of its richest men (his twin brother, Deacon, is the other), Steward asserts his power and authority in order to ensure that history has a singular meaning, one which is static and which appears the way that he wants it to appear. This exchange furthers Morrison's critique of belief in monolithic meaning and illuminates the class issues that inform the novel. Power and voice are linked to wealth and masculinity, which Steward asserts, in this instance, through the threat of killing. He acts out this threat and, correspondingly, further asserts his status and his masculinity in the end by participating in the massacre of the women.

Minstrelsy, as Saxton notes, is similarly ahistorical and similarly concerned with masculinity and class. Early minstrels "perceived slaves as *part* of nature—part of the South; and from this curiously ahistorical viewpoint undertook to 'delineate' the plantation culture of the South." They duplicated the plantation myth, a myth that was "also ahistorical because its inspiration was to fix the black slave as an everlasting part of nature rather than as a figure in history."¹⁸ The men of Haven and then of Ruby, similarly, duplicate myths they create about themselves with their performances and actions and ignore certain experiences as a real part of their history whenever doing so is convenient. In terms of its mockery of class differences, minstrelsy varied from performance to performance. But minstrel acts consistently focused on the interaction between an interlocutor (frequently referred to as Mr. Interlocu-

tor) and two end men (frequently referred to as Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo).¹⁹ Mocking European aristocracy and their desires for utopia, Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo (shabbily dressed comedians whose physical appearance represented the common man and whose physical positioning as end men symbolized their marginality) incessantly outwitted Mr. Interlocutor (the elegantly attired man of supposed intelligence whose physical appearance represented aristocracy and whose physical positioning in the center symbolized his dominance). In Morrison's novel, the men of the town become Mr. Interlocutor—the center of power. And the end men, Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, in this case are women, women whose presence is tolerated until their newly created identities position them as much in the center as the townspeople and threaten their self-defined utopia.

Power is the issue; and the men know it. This is why they ultimately attack the women—because established power is threatened. The only way to maintain it is to prove that theirs is stronger. At no point do they consider sharing it. To do so would leave them with no *other* to subject or to oppress or to use as a source of consolation about who they are not. The narrator explains:

Wisdom Poole would be looking for a reason to explain why he had no control anymore over his brothers and sisters. To explain how it happened that those who used to worship him, listen to him, were now strays trying to be on their own. . . . As for the Fleetwoods . . . they'd been wanting to blame somebody for Sweetie's children for a long time . . . and although Lone had delivered some of Jeff's sick children long before the first women arrived, they wouldn't let a little thing like that keep them from finding fault anywhere but in their own blood. (277)

Instead of examining themselves, the Ruby men seek freedom from personal blame and responsibility by identifying the women as the cause of their suffering and their disrupted lives. The women's choice near the end of the novel to create an existence of their own that does not acknowledge the presence or the power of the men, thereby negating the men's role as the center of power, upsets the power structure. Ultimately, othering (and minstrelsy as its vehicle) fails as a performance strategy, and the only recourse for the now collapsing center of power is violence. In this regard, too, the novel's commentary mimics history, with the men's attack on the Convent women serving as the functional equivalent of the ritualistic lynching that occurred in great numbers in the decades following minstrelsy's historical decline. Both acts—minstrelsy and lynching—are playgrounds

for the reinscription of ideologies of exceptionalism and manhood alike. In both cases, the ideologies are appropriated rather than “authentic” and exist as “real” categories only in terms of binarisms.

Significantly, Morrison within the novel avoids making the same mistake of reinscribing an ideology of *other*. When David Streitfeld notes that “[i]t’s possible to read *Paradise* as exploring several sharp conflicts: the religious town vs. the ‘pagan’ convent, those who worship money vs. those who don’t, the Ruby men vs. the Convent women,” Morrison tells him that she does not have an agenda that pits male against female, good against bad: “All I have are questions. Everything is very complicated. Yes, it could be that I could be understood as saying that patriarchy is bad and matriarchy is good. In fact, I don’t believe any of those things. I don’t deal in these binaries.”²⁰ That she does not is significant in the sense that it helps teach the reader, who is encouraged if not compelled to participate in the text, to see the limitations of replacing one system of domination with another. While Peter Widdowson arguably misreads the novel’s unwillingness to do this—he contends that “Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America . . . and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honor”²¹—Katrine Dalsgård makes the more accurate observation:

Paradise represents a new take on both the tradition of American exceptionalism and the African American cultural tradition. In relation to the former, [Morrison’s] deconstruction of the self-conscious perfection underpinning the exceptionalist tradition implies that, unlike other writers of the tradition, she doesn’t reinscribe the national American dream theoretically. In relation to the latter, her deconstruction of Ruby’s exceptionalism figures as a warning that the mechanisms of violence and marginalization are also at work in counter-discursive national historical narratives.²²

Because the novel does not privilege a new way over an old way or a “good” way over a “bad” way, *Paradise* avoids binarisms.²³ This avoidance is especially important for at least two reasons: because the dualism of binary oppositions inevitably oversimplifies race and because the novel makes aggressive attempts to interrogate the complexity of race and to identify it as a cultural construct. By blurring racial categories and by having her black characters act in a manner that reflects dominant white ideology and behavior, Morrison avoids reifying the racial categories the novel subversively seeks to undercut. At the same time, she mocks notions of racial purity. And here, again, we are

reminded of recent re-examinations of minstrelsy which obviate notions of racial purity and the false racial distinctions minstrelsy fought so hard to create and to purport and which, subsequently and ironically, invoke minstrelsy to reveal racial categories as man-made cultural constructions.

While minstrelsy's audiences were interested in how racial differences and performances of slavery could reinscribe distinctions between black Americans and white Americans, *Paradise*, in its deconstruction of minstrelsy, blurs these distinctions. Thus even as Morrison suggests that the novel is not overtly concerned with race, its opening line suggests otherwise. And this is our first clue as readers that even though race figures in complex ways throughout the novel, it is, at the same time, completely and insignificantly important. In an interview with Paul Gray, Morrison admits that she purposefully left the race of "the white girl" unrevealed: "I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until these readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature that way. . . . Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing."²⁴ Similarly, in *Playing in the Dark*, she notes that the kind of work she always wanted to do required her "to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains."²⁵ Morrison makes her first attempt at this in "Recitatif," her only published short story, which, ironically, is driven by a crucial significance in racial difference. For Twyla and Roberta, the two girls of the story who become known as "salt and pepper" in the orphanage where their mothers leave them, racial identities take on vast significance, first when one mother snubs the other because of the girls' racial difference and later when they find themselves on opposite sides of a protest that debates the appropriateness of school busing. Although race is a crucial factor in the story, the reader is left to figure out which girl is black and which girl is white. Ultimately, because Morrison removes all racial codes which would definitively identify the girls as belonging to a specific race and then includes any number of racially ambiguous codes to confuse their racial identities further, the reader is encouraged to recognize race as a cultural construct and to see how "blackness" and "whiteness," without linguistic utterance, are more alike than they are unlike and that they are in fact, at times, indistinguishable.

Morrison revisits this technique in *Paradise* and reinforces notions that conflate "whiteness" with invisibility. And even though the white norm is invisible more often than not, it still "seems to encompass an authoritative, hierarchical, restrictive mode of thought."²⁶ But with notions of normalcy that privilege whiteness disturbed, a feat the novel

achieves by announcing the presence of a “white girl,” whiteness becomes relatively visible (we never really see which girl is the white girl) only in the sense that it is announced. “By specifying the white girl,” Linda Krumholz notes, “Morrison has reversed the accepted racial logic in which blackness is the exception and whiteness the norm. By calling her ‘the white girl’ Morrison makes whiteness the exception, and thus she constructs the invisible and ‘universal’ point of view as not-white.”²⁷ When this is done, race becomes little more than a social construct, less clear than ever. Connie, for instance, with her green eyes and tea-colored hair, could be mistaken for the white girl until the narration refers to her as one of three “non-white urchins” (223). We assume that Mavis is black since no one reacts strangely to her presence and since she muses that she had not seen a single white person other than the gas station attendant. But at this point, only 45 pages into the novel, normalcy has been reversed, and all characters are assumed to be black unless otherwise indicated. As each character is introduced, we search for cultural clues (substantiating the premise that race is constructed) that may indicate each girl’s affinity with an ethnicity. But in this respect, too, Morrison is purposefully unclear. Gigi enters the town and is immediately the focus of male attention because of her body. She even has an affair, which aligns her with the Jezebel and the loose-black woman stereotypes. Yet we have to be astute enough to realize that the text does not deal in stereotypes. Seneca, who at one point is a sex toy for a white woman, has a large butt (again, typically associated with black women). But this is her only physical characterization. And Pallas, the daughter of a wealthy father and an artiste mother (potentially suggestive of white culture), has cinnamon-colored legs. Purposefully, each cultural indicator is juxtaposed with a contrary marker. And the only way to come close to identifying who is white is to eliminate the characters who, through linguistic utterance, are identifiably black. In this sense, the novel reiterates the premise Morrison asserts in *Playing in the Dark*—that “whiteness” loses most, if not all, of its meaning without a non-white *Africanist* presence.

AnnLouise Keating makes a similar observation:

Though we generally think of “white” and “black” as permanent, transhistorical racial markers indicating distinct groups of people, they are not. In fact, the Puritans and other early European colonizers didn’t consider themselves “white”; they identified as “Christian,” “English,” or “free,” for at that time the word “white” didn’t represent a racial category. . . . It was not until around 1680, with the racialization of slavery, that the term was used to describe a specific group of people.²⁸

What this recognition highlights as much as anything is that “whiteness” evolved in response to “blackness.” But in its attempt to avoid reproducing the “white man’s laws” of superiority, *Paradise* does not privilege “blackness” over “whiteness” but, rather, attempts to transcend race to the point of humanness. No shadows of blackness or of whiteness loom over the women after they disappear into the door or window of their personal paradise. So although it clearly speaks to race, the novel is not about race at all. And the blurred distinctions of black and white, the displacement of characteristically white fears and anxieties onto black bodies, and the display of whiteness as a learned and identifiable social practice that can be replicated by any and all (and, hence, its obvious inauthenticity) prove that while race cannot be erased, it has no place in humanness.

It is no coincidence then that Morrison focalizes the crux of the novel and its commentary on the fear that characterized Americans through the town teacher, Patricia Best Cato, an outsider who is not black or white enough to use racial discourse to fashion her identity and who, subsequently, seeks to fashion it through *truth* instead of through *othering*. What she learns after having the children compose autobiographical sketches is that the Old Fathers rewrote their own past by forgetting that which to them was unattractive and created their new identity after being relegated as an *other* in Fairly. Obviously, creating a new self-narrative is not in and of itself the problem. Misappropriating history and excluding those who do not subscribe to the revised version is. And this is what the new generation of men does to the Convent women, only their way of excluding the women is by killing them. The moment the men’s freedom is challenged, the “authenticity” and self-definition characteristic of their 8-rock blackness reveals itself as the parasitical and subjugating essence of blackface minstrelsy. The only difference is the men forego the preliminary act of mimicking their end men and move straight to committing violence against them. Thus, as Misner thinks in the moments before he is about to eulogize young Save-Marie, “[w]hether they be the first or the last, representing the oldest black families or the newest, the best of the tradition or the most pathetic, they . . . ended up betraying it all. They think that they have out-foxed the white man when in fact they imitate him” (306).

In much the same manner that America, as the New World, claimed to free itself from the Old World by denying the freedom of an underclass, the citizens of Ruby violently rather than humorously impose their minstrel-like fears of failing, of powerlessness, of “Nature unbridled,”

of the absence of “so-called civilization,” and of external and internal aggression onto the Convent women. In the moments following the attack on the women, the narration muses:

Bewildered, angry, sad, frightened people pile into cars, making their way back to children, livestock fields, household chores and uncertainty. How hard they had worked for this place; how far they once were from the terribleness they . . . witnessed. How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they escaped? (292)

The novel’s commentary about the citizens’ belief in socially constructed categories as stable and authentic and their subsequent attempts to reinforce these categories suggests that they believe, at least in part, because of their failure to create an identity for themselves that would resist binary constructions and accept the truth of their past, that the town has, indeed, become the world they sought to escape.

Interestingly, the Convent women, like Ruby’s citizens, also struggle with the past and with identity construction in light of the past. But the women’s response to this challenge is quite different from that of Ruby’s inhabitants. They form their identities solely on the basis of their own existence and, more importantly, without othering and without appropriating the past. The reign of the women at the end of the novel thus fictionally speaks to the same truth Morrison proposes in *Playing in the Dark*—the achievement of freedom at the expense of the non-free or the oppressed is not freedom at all. It is, instead, an inhumane activity, offering only a temporary solution to a problem that will inevitably resurface when the oppressed acquires a sense of power and of himself. By deconstructing the traditions of whiteness that the citizens of Ruby have adopted and made their own (particularly as they relate to human freedom and the construction of identity), *Paradise* suggests that the crisis of power indicative of Ruby (and white America) can be negotiated only when its citizens use their *human* and not their *racial* imagination to disconnect their difficulty from fear and past rejection(s) and reconnect it to the larger socio-political issues that created the crisis initially. And this is what Connie teaches the women and why they each return to some aspect of their past before they disappear: they must define themselves with the past in mind but without fear and, consequently, without othering. Their healing demands “transcendent group interaction [where] they pass beyond the boundaries of individual and other. . . . As they do so, they heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal har-

mony. They gain self and community."²⁹ Otherwise, the temporary power advantage they might gain exclusively as individuals would eventually transform itself into long-range instability since the problem that makes *othering* necessary is seldom resolved but, rather, displaced.

The only problem with this commentary is that it achieves its voice in a world that displaces reality. For the emergent women, the human world is replaced by a more mystical one. And the women's survival is uncertain, at best, to those to whom it speaks most passionately and upon whom it would have the greatest didactic effect. The question, then, becomes *is self-identity that is not hegemonic achievable in the real world or only in an imagined paradise?* The behaviors and epistemologies of Patricia Best Cato, Reverend Misner, Lone DuPres, and the other somewhat neutral citizens of Ruby seem to imply that a non-hegemonic existence is, indeed, possible in the real world when this existence is based on reality, as opposed to myths of racial purity and exceptionalism. The real issues that necessitate minstrel-like behavior must be unmasked and construction of one's identity must be devoid of *othering*.

The novel reinforces this position throughout as it critiques America's rejection of those the nation deemed impure and as it mocks America's exceptionalist belief in its own distinctiveness as morally superior and socially responsible. American exceptionalism emerged from the Puritans' belief that, in fleeing persecution in England, they were to establish the exemplary Christian community—a paradise of sorts. But as Morrison points out in her commentary about the novel, there is an element of exclusion inherent in our human concept of paradise.³⁰ Since its inhabitants necessarily think of themselves as the chosen people, their job is to isolate themselves from other people. Accordingly, Morrison critiques the isolationist notions of paradise and American exceptionalism alike throughout *Paradise*. Dovey feels so isolated she imagines that she has a mysterious visitor; the younger children feel the need to move away to Demby to create a real life for themselves; and, ultimately, Ruby fails in all of its attempts to be a successful paradise. As Dalsgård points out,

By insisting on the inextricable connection between the exceptionalist striving for perfection and a repressive and ultimately violent isolationism, Morrison emphasizes the process of supplementarity at work in exceptionalist discourse. An apparent plentitude, the paradisiacal (African) American community is revealed by the imperfection outside and/or beyond its limits and against which it seeks to define itself, the women at the Convent, to lack this very imperfection and thus not be a plentitude after all. Because of the supplement's dual function, this lack is inhabited, and thus paradisiacal (African) American community is rendered un-

stable by its imperfect other.³¹

The citizens of Ruby can view themselves as superior only in the sense that they are separate from the world from which they have isolated themselves. Morrison's critique of American exceptionalism is thus not simply about America's failure to live up to its ideal of exceptionalism and to its promises (to Native and African Americans alike) but as much, if not more so, about its misguided belief in the very *idea* of exceptionalism. Similarly, the novel's critique of patriarchy is not simply about the Old Fathers' (both the fictional and the actual white founding fathers') failure to offer women, especially those who openly reject patriarchy, the same individual freedom they craved and fought for but also about the erroneous notion that someone else's freedom is theirs to give.

But the men of Ruby believe in offering and taking away freedom as wholeheartedly as they believe in their own freedom to decide who is exceptional and who is not. That they consider themselves "chosen" is evidenced not only in the myth of their journey to Haven, where God led them to "their place," but also in their yearly Christmas pageant where they integrate the Disallowing into the story of the birth of Christ. Even before the women at the Convent become an issue, the men exercise their right to co-opt history and sacred myth and to cast others aside at will. Over the course of the years, the number of holy families is reduced from nine to seven, as two families are out-cast without explanation.³² After admitting to herself that hers was surely one of the families the townspeople had conveniently begun to omit and, hence, deemed "not good enough to be represented by eight-year olds on stage" (216), Patricia becomes even more aware of the falsity of Ruby's creation myth, and by her sheer recognition of its flaws, interrupts it. By connecting Fairly's rejection of the Ruby ancestors to Mary and Joseph's rejection in Bethlehem and then likening the founding families, whom they rename "holy families" each year at Christmas, to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the town's citizens display their willingness to write themselves into being, even as they are completely unwilling to allow the women to act similarly. As soon as the men begin to suspect that the women will make such an attempt, they plot to kill them. They rationalize their intent and, again, assert their likeness to God, this time as judge:

Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either.

They don't need men and they don't need God. Can't say they haven't been warned. Asked first and then warned. If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. We can't have it. . . . Can't have it at all. (276)

The women's biggest crime, as Lone interprets it, is that they dare to live peacefully without men, and they choose themselves for company. Connie's ritual, which, ironically, involves painting the *self*, encourages this choice.

In the beginning the most important thing was the template. . . . Consolata told each to undress and lie down. . . . When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. (263)

They stay within the confines of the templates until their loud-dreaming begins. Having achieved the power of voice, they tell their stories, and, eventually, they begin to step into each other's tales. By using their power as individuals to help each other as a community, their healing begins. They reject isolation, categories, and identities that have been constructed in terms of *other*. Instead, they step outside of the "self" (which they have recreated in the form of the template) to create new identities for themselves based largely on who they are and who they have been. So when Lone goes to warn them about the men's plan to attack them, they are so enamored with their newfound freedom that they are oblivious to their impending doom. They are convinced that they have found their paradise—a place where "white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plum swim alongside children . . . where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation" (263–64). But as the citizens of Ruby have learned the hard way, paradise simply cannot exist among the living—not even when it is constructed, painted, or blackened up.

When read through the lens of blackface minstrelsy, *Paradise* reveals, among other things, that produced categories of race and identity are so unstable that, when threatened, they often collapse. Just as recent reexaminations of America's oldest art form reveal that minstrelsy was never simply about one specific thing, neither is *Paradise*. It is not simply about race, nor is it simply about gender. Instead, Morrison purposefully complicates the novel to investigate these very categories and their relationship to each other and to identity construction. She thus develops her

novel in a context where the presence, the transgression, and the containment of fear coexist one with another and where, in response to such fear, false identities are constructed and, ultimately, dissolved. Few mediums accommodate this coexistence better than blackface minstrelsy. Thus, reading the novel through its unconscious contemporary engagement with the tradition reveals the truth that minstrelsy inadvertently discloses—all that is constructed can, as easily, be deconstructed; therefore, the only indelible and, arguably, significant identity is that of humanness.

Notes

I must thank Greg Carr, Greg Hampton, and Douglas Taylor for reading an earlier draft of this essay and for offering helpful comments and suggestions for revision. I would also like to thank my colleagues and students in the graduate program in English at Howard who offered useful feedback to my presentation of a shorter version of this essay at a Graduate Studies in English colloquium.

¹ Toni Morrison, "The Novelist's Prism: Toni Morrison Holds Race up to the Light and Reflects on the Meaning of Color," interview by David Streitfeld, *The Washington Post*, January 06, 1998, final ed., sec. B.

² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 14–15.

³ In a 1989 television interview for "A World of Ideas II" (Public Affairs Television), Bill Moyers asked this very question of Morrison as he inquired whether or not it was conceivable that she "could write a novel in which blacks are not at center stage." Her response was an unequivocal "absolutely."

⁴ Since we are never privy with any absolute certainty to knowledge about which "girl" is the "white girl," all of the girls, too, could as easily be white as they are black.

⁵ See, for instance, Rob Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 47 (2001), 355–74; Peter R. Kearly, "Toni Morrison and the Politics of Community," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 3 (2000), 9–16; Katrine Dalsgård, "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, no. 2 (2001), 233–48; and Philip Page, "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (2001), 637–64.

⁶ Morrison, *Playing*, xii.

⁷ See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); and David Wellman, "Minstrel Shows, Affirmative Action Talk, and Angry White Men: Marking Racial Otherness in the 1990s," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 311–31, for further commentary on the issues driving minstrelsy.

⁸ Thomas C. Holt, "Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 1 (1995), 15.

⁹ Morrison, *Playing*, 37. Notably, Morrison could as easily have been referring to minstrels here as to early Americans in search of their identity. She is specifically referring to the latter, however.

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1998), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

¹¹ Morrison, "Novelist's Prism," sec. B.

¹² Toni Morrison, "Paradise Found: A Talk with Toni Morrison about Her New Novel," interview by A. J. Verdelle, *Essence*, February 1998, 78.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, "Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders," quoted in Lott, 36.

¹⁴ Holt, 17.

¹⁵ Justine Tally, *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths* (Hamburg, Germany: Lit, 1999), 84.

¹⁶ Unlike minstrels, who were so insecure and unsure of themselves that they constructed their identity by mocking black men, the men in Ruby do not bother to mock the Convent women, in part because they are firmly grounded in their belief in their constructed identity.

¹⁷ Saxton, 173, 172.

¹⁸ Saxton, 173.

¹⁹ See Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African American in the Performing Arts* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1967) and Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974) for further commentary.

²⁰ Morrison, "Novelist's Prism," sec. B.

²¹ Peter Widdowson, "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics, and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001), 324.

²² Dalsgård, 246. The latter recognition reaffirms my point that the novel's play with minstrelsy, like minstrelsy itself, collapses within itself and ends in violence because the tradition is too flawed to sustain itself historically or otherwise. While Ruby's men do indeed mimic white men, they are far more complicated than mere minstrels. Similarly, the novel's critique of notions of racial purity and exceptionalism move far beyond American practices of both ideas to world (mis)interpretations and (mis)applications of both concepts.

²³ While Morrison avoids binarisms, not all writers/critics/theorists do. As AnnLouise Keating argues, "although theorists of 'whiteness' attempt to deconstruct 'race,' all too often they inadvertently reconstruct it by reinforcing fixed categories of racialized meanings" (910). In her brief critique of Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Unequal*, for instance, she notes that Hacker does indeed describe race as "'a human creation,' not a fixed biological fact, and acknowledges that because people use the word in numerous ways, clear-cut definitions are impossible. . . . Yet throughout the book he continually refers to the 'black race' and the 'white race' without complicating the terms" (910). See AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)Constructing 'Race,'" *College English* 57 (1995), 901-18.

²⁴ Toni Morrison, "Paradise Found: The Nobel Prize Changed Toni Morrison's Life but Not Her Art, as Her New Novel Proves," interview by Paul Gray, *Time*, January 19, 1998, 4.

²⁵ Morrison, *Playing*, xi.

²⁶ Keating, 906.

²⁷ Linda J. Krumholz, "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002), 28.

²⁸ Keating, 912.

²⁹ Page, 642.

³⁰ See James Marcus, "This Side of Paradise: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," Amazon.com, May 12, 2000 <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/75651/002-5902217-44200>>, and Anna Mulrine, "This Side of 'Paradise': Toni Morrison Defends Herself from Criticism of Her New Novel," *US News & World Report*, January 19, 1998, 71.

³¹ Dalsgård, 241.

³² Here especially we are reminded that the novel moves beyond a critique of American notions of exceptionalism and extends its critique to world beliefs in exceptionalism, particularly as the notion relates to ongoing debates between Palestinians and Jews. By invoking the story of the birth of Christ and relating it to how others have adapted the sacred myth for their own gain, the novel reminds us that ideas about exceptionalism and about the idea of “paradise” are age-old and equally unsuccessful world wide.