



Paradise Introduction

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1892
1865
27

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~~Rachel~~
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No Review or blog
Lit mag ok

Notes for Paradise Intro
Come Prepared or Not at ALL. Few things
intrigued me more than the history
of former slaves. What was it like for
them in the decades following Emancipation
Proclamation. [Those who stayed or left
following the blood soaked response
to Reconstruction]

Among the migrations, one is especially
fascinated me. The land appropriations
in out west. The Black towns, newspapers,
homesteading, colleges. When I began to
read some of the newspapers founded and directed
to A.S. Amos I was struck by the frequency of the

Not the
urban
inflect
but

character should have an African American narrator. Did you have any say or strong feelings about who narrated your audiobooks?

Alfred Woodard

TM: No, I didn't know who they had picked. I just signed the licenses, and I guess the publisher thought it would be good to get a black actor, like Lynne Thigpen or Desiree Coleman, to do it. You know what's interesting though? I've done audiobooks, or permitted one book, I think *Home*, to be done as an audiobook in France. The reader is an actress, who is extremely good -- I've heard her, I met her, and she has kind of a low voice, like mine. I heard from the editor a couple of weeks ago that the translation of the book, as it's read by this woman [Anna Mouglalis] in French, is selling like hotcakes. So the editor asked me whether I would let this woman do all the others, and I said of course. I mean, that's a whole new thing for me to hear. I don't think the audiobook's jumped off in Europe the way it has here, but it certainly looks like it's going to jump off, since the audiobook of this French actress's reading has sold incredibly well. It means that not only is it not necessary to have an African American read my book, but she could be white and she could be European, and do it also.

MR: I just have one more question for you. I think of your books as formally complex since, among other things, they have lyrical passages that look like poetry on the page. Do you try to draw attention to the novel's form when you're reading aloud?

TM: Well, I think poetry -- all the poets hate it when I say this -- poetry is now really good sentences cut up. [laughs] It's just really, really good sentences and then you cut them in parts; it doesn't have to rhyme or what have you. Anyway, what I really work at in terms of intimacy is -- I call it "invisible ink," although somebody told me that was inappropriate. Like in the book *Home*, for example, I withheld color, primary color, all the way through the book. Nothing has color unless it's white or black, nothing, until the character gets home. And then there's all this color in the garden, in the trees, and he says "Were they always this green?" It's not subtle, but it does mean something in terms of trying to suggest to the reader, and make him feel that comfort and that beauty and that safety of being home. There's the smell, ~~there's the stuff~~, there are the gardens, there's no trash. ~~Nobody~~ ^{people} might not like you, but they're not going to hurt you. Rather than say THAT, what I just said, those sentences, I just use the palette of color to do that job, almost like an illustration. So I have certain techniques, even if the reader could care less about the techniques, I think, in the books, certainly not in audio. I opened *Song of Solomon* with red, white, and blue. I thought that was interesting to me, but no one cared that the character had these blue wings and red roses and white something or other. That was me, talking to myself, I guess. [laughs]

/
there
were

)
clouds

Editing the Black Book was ^{a helpful} an education for me. Collecting "collectors" who provided the disparate flotsam of African American life: serious, the sad, the comic, the successful the tragic, ^{among the} documents and photographs, newspapers interested me most.

Reading and writing were such prized skills in my family.

The story goes like this. My Grandfather attended school in the 1860's for one day ^{in person} to tell the teacher he wouldn't be back. The story goes on: his older sister would teach him to read. Which obviously she did because among his legendary accomplishments was his boast that he had read the K. J. V. ~~five~~ cover to cover ^{only} five times.

My wonder was not his ^{or even} prowess - but what kind of school was available to a black child in the middle of 19th Century rural Alabama? I never got an answer to that question, but I knew the

(over)

Pittsburgh Courier
Cleveland
Call and Post

Franklin
"Short
order
cook"

Orestes never put ^{sc} what

No one ^{wondered} what there was
~~said~~ ~~well~~ when ~~learned~~
to read ^{for him}

^{and what}
how would he use this
skill? What was there for him to
read? Books? On ^{the} ^{poor} little
house farm? Unlikely. Library?
Certainly not. But there was one
reading source available to him.
The K.T.V. of the Bible. And
according to the story he read it
cover to cover five times (in his life.)

It was understood to be very
impressive and contributed to

The esteem in which reading ^(along with script writing) was held
(in my family — prized above much else
over)

reading and script writing were
prized in my family at not merely
~~for information and~~ ^{an aesthetic} pleasure but as
an a political act. ^{Black people is} Access to text
~~for black~~ at that time was not merely
unavailable (in most places in the South)
it was illegal. (See "Black Codes of
Virginia")

So it was with eagerness
that we looked forward to the
Cleveland Call and Post and The
Pittsburgh Courier two newspapers
devoted exclusively to African American
news

like the
Amsterdam
News

It was inevitable that in
editing the Black Book with its
flotsam and jetsam of A.A. life
A.A. life - ~~bad~~, ^{ironic} comic, ~~the~~ ^{the} successful
~~the~~ tragic, ~~the~~ proud - that
would be drawn to ~~the~~ Black
news papers. Those of the
printed in mid 19th century (when
my Grandfather spent his ~~and~~ ^{have}
few minutes in school) ^{lost those} ^{issued during} during the
Oklahoma rush. (50 some

How erudite, how informative how genuinely
newsworthy. Yet a single ^{subject} ~~them~~
was prominent in headlines and
expositions: "Come Prepared or Not
at All"

A Two
fascinating
themes
were implicit

1. 'if you have nothing stay away.
2. This ^{new} land is opportunity for a few

Translation: No poor ex slaves, welcome
in this paradise.

What could that mean for former
slaves - illiterate, exhausted refugees
with no resources. How would they
feel having trekked all that way
(from chains to freedom) only to be
"told ~~you~~ this here is Paradise,
but you can't come in."

I also noticed that ^{in the} photographs of
townsman were invariably light-
skinned. Was skin-privilege a
part of this separation - one that
replicated white racism?

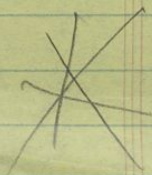
I wanted ^{dig into these TK by}
the novel ~~to~~ exploring the reverse: ~~the~~
exclusivity by the very black; construction
of their own Paradise - one that refused
to ^{entranced to the} mixed race. How would patriarchy play
and how ^{might} matriarchy threaten.

Certain themes became urgent
The def. of Paradise (origin, description etc)

The power of colorism

The conflict between patriarchy &
matriarchy
The disruption of racial discourse

"gated
community"
their
own.



This Town
Delusions of Power
Habeas Corpus
Dearest

300

When my parents went to the
courthouse to get married, ^{there were two} they had to
put their palms on the ~~Bible~~ ^{Bibles} reserved for
Negroes. The other one was for white ~~people's~~
~~hands.~~ ~~The Bible, I'm telling you.~~ After that
my ^{my} Even though ^{close up} you couldn't tell
if Mother or my father was white or not.

You might think it's ~~was~~ a bad thing
to group ~~into~~ according to skin color ~~the~~
the lighter the better → but how else can you ^{hold a little dignity?} ~~survive~~ ^{being} How
else can you avoid ~~a million~~ ^{being} insults
spit ^{on} in a drug store
~~slaps~~ ^{shoving} elbows shoved
at the bus stop. Let
alone the namecalling.

I heard about all of that.

And more. My mother wasn't stopped from
trying on hats in the department store. And my
father could try on shoes in the front ^{Grocery} not in
a back room.

? So when Lula Ann turned ^{into a} tar baby, it scared
me. But it wasn't my fault.

Sandiago
Gonzalez

/ SAAC Willis b. 1824 = Cuba
Res. 1880 - Greenville, Alabama
farmer/land owner
4 sons ea. 88 ac m. Kizziah
Kimble

Oliver Willis b. 1853
Nettie "

Charity
John S. ^{mom} Willis b. 1864 Greenville
m. d. 1947 Lorain
m. Ardelia M. STYRE 1903

mama

1906

A

Precinct in Africa
11-10 Tues
11-12 Maya.

DRAFT—PARADISE INTRODUCTION

The story goes like this. My Grandfather attended school in the mid-nineteenth century for one day in order to tell the teacher he wouldn't be back, ^{because} ~~It was around 1860 and he~~ had to work. His older sister, he said, would teach him to read. ^{I wondered,} ~~Where~~ was this 'school' in 19th century Alabama? In a church basement? Beneath trees out in the woods? The location would have to be hidden because black people's access to education in general and reading specifically was violently discouraged and, in most of the South, teaching African Americans to read was illegal. Virginia law, in 1831, is instructive and representative of 19th century South. "Any white person assembling to instruct free Negroes to read or write shall be fined not over \$50.00 also be imprisoned not exceeding two months." "It is further enacted that if any white person for pay shall assemble with slaves for the

purpose of teaching them to read or write he shall for each offense be fined at the discretion of the justice..." ten to one hundred dollars. *In short, there would be* Thus, no teaching paid or unpaid, of free Negroes or slaves without penalty. Nevertheless, his sister, my great aunt was successful because against all odds, my grandfather did become literate. But how would he use that skill? What was there for him to read? Books on that poor little farm? Unlikely. Library? Certainly not. But there was one text available: the Bible. Which is why, I suppose, that among his legendary accomplishments was his boast that he had read the King James Version of the Bible cover to cover five times.

Reading and script writing were prized in my family not only for information and pleasure but also as a defiant political act. *My mother joined Book of the Month Club (year?)* We looked forward with eagerness to newspapers devoted exclusively to African American news and opinions.

In our house issues of 'The Pittsburgh Courier' and the

("They" don't want us to read? Well...")

'Cleveland Call and Post' were worn to shreds with multiple readings and readers. Like ^{other} ethnic newspapers ~~everywhere~~ ^{they} these elicited passionate commentary, ^{debate} questions, argument.

We poured over J.A. Rogers work. [title tk], DuBois' Souls of Black Folk and whatever we could find that encouraged, ~~disciplined~~ and informed us about being black in America.

It was inevitable, therefore, that when I edited "The Black

Book", a complex record of African American life that I

solicited from collectors, that ^{early (?)} ~~nineteenth-century~~ newspapers would fascinate me. ^{Especially "Colored" ones.} It ~~was~~ [^] there, in photographs and print ⁼

^{much} ~~that~~ African American history—sad, ironic, resistant, tragic, proud and triumphant—was on display. Of particular interest

were those printed in the nineteenth century when my

Grandfather spent his few minutes at school. I learned there

were some fifty Black newspapers issued in the Southwest

following Emancipation and the violent displacement of

Native Americans from Oklahoma. The opportunity to

establish black towns was as feverish as the rush for whites to occupy that territory. * ^{Journalists} Black papers were ~~erudite,~~ ^{useful} informative and genuinely newsworthy.

One theme in particular in those papers ~~published specifically for black readers~~ intrigued me. Prominent in their headlines and articles was a clear admonition: Come Prepared Or Not At All.

Implicit in those warnings were two entreaties: 1. If you have nothing, stay away. 2. This new land is Utopia for a few.

Translation: no poor former slaves are welcome in the paradise being built here.

What could that mean for ex slaves—threatened, exhausted refugees with no resources? How would they feel having trekked all that way from chains into freedom only to be told, "This here is paradise but you can't come in." I also noticed that the town leaders in the photographs were invariably

* The ^{news} And Black papers encouraged the rush and promised a kind of paradise to newcomers: land, their own government, safety

The we was even a movement to establish their own state.

light-skinned. Was Skin privilege ^{also (like money)} a ^{feature} part of the separation?
 One that replicated white racism?

I wanted the novel to dig into these matters by exploring the reverse; exclusivity by the very black-skinned; construction of their very own 'gated community', one that refused entrance to the mixed race ³ considering the need for progeny in order to last, how would patriarchy play and how might matriarchy threaten. ² In order to describe and explore these problems I needed to examine the definition of paradise, to delve into the power of colorism, to dramatize the conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy, and especially to disrupt racial discourse by signaling ~~it~~ then erasing it.

PARADISE.

The idea of paradise is no longer imaginable or, rather, it is over-imagined which amounts to the same thing—and has therefore become familiar, commercialized, even trivial.

Historically the images of Paradise in poetry and prose were intended to be grand but accessible, beyond the routine but imaginatively graspable, seductive as though remembered.

Milton speaks of "goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruit, Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue,...with gay enameled colours mixed..."; of Native perfumes." Of "that sapphire fount the crisped brooks, Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold..." of "nectar visiting each plant, and fed flowers worthy of Paradise... Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm; Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind, Hung amiable,...of delicious taste. Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks Grazing the tender herb." "Flowers of all hue and without thorn the rose." "Caves of cool recess, o'er which the mantling vine Lays forth her purple grape and gently creeps Luxuriant..."

Such a beatific expanse in the 21st century we recognize as bounded real estate owned by the wealthy and envied by

the have-nots

~~guests~~, or as parks visited by tourists. Milton's Paradise is

these days

~~now~~ quite available if not in fact certainly as ordinary,

unexceptionable desire. ~~Physical paradise is, therefore~~

*Modern **

minus

beauty, plenty, rest, exclusivity and ~~presumably~~ eternity.

☐ BEAUTY is beatific, benevolent nature combined with precious metal (gold) and jewelry.

PLENTY, in a world of excess and attending greed, which tilts resources to the rich and forces others to envy, is an almost obscene feature of ^{modern} paradise. In this world of outrageous, shameless wealth squatting, hulking, preening before the dispossessed, the very idea of 'plenty' as Utopian ought to make us tremble. Plenty should not be understood as a paradise-only state, but as normal, everyday, humane life.

REST, that is the respite from labor or fighting for rewards or luxury, has dwindling currency these days. It is a desireless-ness that suggests a special kind of death without

each of
has Milton's Characteristics.

dying. Rest can suggest isolation, a vacation without pleasant or soothing activity. In other words, punishment and/or willful laziness.

EXCLUSIVITY, however is still an attractive even compelling feature of paradise because so many people—the unworthy—are not there. Boundaries are secure, watchdogs, security systems and gates are there to verify the legitimacy of the inhabitants. Such enclaves separate from crowded urban areas proliferate. Thus it does not seem possible or desirable for a city to be envisioned let alone built in which poor people can be accommodated. Exclusivity is not just a realized dream for the wealthy; it is a popular yearning of the middle class. "Streets" are understood to be populated by the unworthy, the dangerous. Young people strolling are understood to be prowling the streets and up to no good. Public space is fought over as if

it were private. Who gets to enjoy a park, a beach, a street corner? The term 'public' is itself a site of contention.

ETERNITY avoids the pain of dying again and in its rejection of secular, scientific arguments, has probably the greatest appeal. Medical and scientific resources are directed toward more life and fitter life and remind us that the desire is for earthbound eternity, rather than eternal afterlife. The implication being that this is all there is.

Thus, paradise, as an earthly project as opposed to a heavenly one has serious intellectual and visual limitations. Aside from "Only me or us forever" heavenly paradise hardly bears mention.

But that might be unfair. It is hard not to notice how much more attention is given to hell rather than heaven. Dante's *Inferno* beats out *Paradisio* every time. Milton's brilliantly rendered pre-paradise world, known as Chaos, is far more fully realized than his paradise. The visionary language of

the doomed reaches heights of linguistic ardor with which language of the blessed and saved cannot compete.

There are reasons for the images of the horrors of hell to be virulently repulsive in the 15th and 16th centuries. The argument for avoiding hell needed to be visceral, needed to reveal how much worse such an eternity was than the hell of everyday life. That was when paradise was simply the absence of evil—an edgeless already recognizable landscape: great trees for shade and fruit, lawns, palaces, precious metals, animal husbandry and jewelry. Other than outwitting evil, waging war against the unworthy, there seems to be nothing for the inhabitants of paradise to do. An open, borderless, come-one-come all paradise, without dread, minus a nemesis is no paradise at all.

Patriarchy vs. Matriarchy. Notable in Milton's paradise is the absence of women. Eve alone is given space in that place.

Progeny apparently is not required since there will always be

along with
other
mythical
figures

more blessed to enter. Also, besides caretaking, what is there for women to do?

Because the paradise the black newspapers envisioned not so subtly encouraged light-skinned applicants, a major excitement for me in writing *Paradise* was an effort to disrupt the assumptions of racial discourse. I was eager to manipulate, mutate and control imagistic, metaphoric language in order to produce something that could be called race-specific/race-free prose, language that de-activated the power of racially inflected strategies—transform them from the strait jacket a race-conscious society can, and frequently does, buckle us into.* One of the most malevolent characteristics of racist thought is that it never produces new knowledge. It seems able to merely reformulate and re-figure itself in multiple but static assertions. It has no referent in the material world, like the concept of black blood or white blood or blue blood, it is designed to construct artificial

* A Refusal to "know"
characters or people by the color of their
skin.

borders and maintain them against all reason and all evidence to the contrary. *To collapse see p. 2*

Material relating to the black towns founded by African Americans in the 19th century provided a rich field for an exploration of race-free/race-specific language. *p. 6-7*

"They shot the white girl first and took their time with the rest." With that opening sentence I wanted to signal *the presence of race as* 1. ~~White and black~~ *hierarchy* *its collapse as information* ~~victims and~~ 2. ~~Erasure of racial difference in the female~~

~~paradise~~. The novel places an all black community, one chosen by its inhabitants, next to a race less one, also chosen by its inhabitants. The grounds for traditional black vs. white hostilities shift to the nature of exclusion, the origins of chauvinism, the sources of oppression, assault and slaughter. The black town of Ruby is all about its race—preserving it, developing myths of origin, and maintaining its purity. In the convent race is indeterminate ~~because~~ all racial codes are eliminated, deliberately withheld. For some

Race as hierarchy

readers this was disturbing and some admitted to being preoccupied with finding out which character was the 'white girl'; others wondered initially and then abandoned the question; some ignored the confusion by reading them all as black. The ^{perceptive} lucky ones read them as fully realized individuals—whatever their race. Unconstrained by the weary and wearying vocabulary of racial domination, the narrative seeks to un-encumber itself from the limit that racial language imposes on the imagination. The conflicts are gender related and generational. They are struggles over history—who will ^{tell} and thereby control the story of the [^] past? Who will shape the future? There are conflicts of value, of ethics. Of personal identity. What is manhood? Womanhood? And finally what is personhood?

Raising these questions seemed most compelling when augmented by yearnings for freedom and safety; for plenitude, for rest, for beauty; by the search for one's own

space, for respect, love, bliss—in short, how to re-imagine Paradise. Not the "Come Prepared or Not at All" command to make sure you get a ticket before you enter a theme park; but an interrogation into the narrow imagination that conceived and betrayed paradise.

We called him Big Papa and he was 96 when he died. He left me his violin ^{along with a} but more important he gave me passion for ^{inquiry} reading which morphed into a passion for writing about reading.

He stood in the ^{vegetable} garden peeling a yam with his pocket knife. Then ^{eating} ~~licing~~ the raw ~~pieces~~ ^{pieces} slices one after another. ~~He~~ If he wanted the chair you were ~~sitting~~ in, he stood there ^{until you got the message} silent, looking at the sitter. He was too religious for any church. He drew pictures of ~~us~~ ^{gave us} — my sister and me. And ~~passed~~ ^{the gift of} Chewy Gum.

Where ever he was in my
Grandmother's house — on the
porch, at the Kitchen table, —
~~The~~ ^{that's where} power and deference were,

He didn't exert power, he
assumed it. ~~to think,~~

~~of~~ ^{the} men in Ruby — their
easy assumption of uncontested
authority, ~~their rigidity~~ I was
fascinated by what would be their
response to female authority & power.

And it was in part from knowing him that I
could ~~make~~ understand and ~~create~~
How might

1 The Conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy with
play out in ~~paradise~~ He left me his ~~vision~~ ^{passion} — ~~at~~ ^{for} books

I want to begin my meditation on the trouble with Paradise with some remarks on the environment in which I work and in which all Western writers, certainly, also work. The construction of race and its hierarchy have a powerful impact on expressive language, just as figurative, interpretative language impact powerfully on the construction of a racial society. The intimate exchange between the atmosphere of racism and the language that asserts, erases, manipulates or transforms it is unavoidable among fiction writers who must manage to hold an unblinking gaze into the realm of difference. We are always being compelled by and being pulled into an imaginary of lives we have never led, emotions we have never felt to which we have no experiential access, and toward persons never invited into our dreams. [We imagine old people when we are young, write about the wealthy when we have nothing, genders that are not our own,

people who exist nowhere except in our minds holding views we not only do not share but may even loathe. We write about nationalities with whom we have merely a superficial acquaintance.] The willingness, the necessity, the excitement of moving about in unknown terrain constitute both the risk and the satisfaction of the work.

Of the several realms of difference, the most stubborn to imagine convincingly is the racial difference. It is a stubbornness born of ages of political insistence and social apparatus. (And while it has an almost unmitigated force in political and domestic life, the realm of racial difference has been allowed an intellectual weight to which it has no claim. It is truly a realm that is no realm at all. An all consuming vacancy, the enunciatory difficulty of which does not diminish with the discovery that one is narrating that which is both constitutive and fraudulent, both common and strange. Strong critical language is

available clarifying that discovery of the chasm that is none, as well as the apprehension which that discovery raises. But it is quite one thing to identify the apprehension and quite another to implement it, to narrate it, to dramatize its play. Fictional excursions into these realms are as endlessly intriguing to me as they are instructive in the manner which the power of racial difference is rendered. These imaginative forays can be sophisticated, cunning, thrillingly successful or fragile and uninformed. But none is accidental. For many writers it is not enough to indicate or represent difference, its fault line and its solidity. It is rather more to the point of their project to use it for metaphoric and structural purposes. Often enhancing or decorating racial difference becomes a strategy for genuflecting before one's own race about which one feels unease.

I am deeply and personally involved in figuring out how to

manipulate, mutate and control imagistic, metaphoric language in order to produce something that could be called race-specific race-free prose: literature that is free of the imaginative restraints that the racially inflected language at my disposal imposes on me. [I will return to this effort in my comments on the trouble that Paradise presented for me. The Paradise project required me first to recognize and identify racially inflected language and strategies, then deploy them to achieve a counter effect; to de-activate their power, summon other opposing powers, and liberate what I am able to invent, record, describe and transform from the strait-jacket a racialized society can, and frequently does, buckle us into.

It is important to remind ourselves that in addition to poetry and fictional prose, racial discourse permeates all of the scholarly disciplines: theology, history, the social

sciences, literary criticism, the language of law, psychiatry and the natural sciences. By this I mean more than the traces of racism that survive in the language as normal and inevitable, such as name-calling; skin privileges-- the equation of black with evil and white with purity; the orthographic dis-respect given the speech of African-Americans; the pseudo science developed to discredit them etc.; and I mean more than the unabashedly racist agendas that are promoted in some of the scholarship of these disciplines. I mean the untrammelled agency and license racial discourse provides intellectuals, while at the same time fructifying, closing off, knowledge about the race upon which such discourse is dependent. One of the most malevolent characteristics of racist thought is that it seems never to produce new knowledge. It seems able merely to reformulate and re-figure itself in multiple but static assertions. It has no referent in the material world. Like the concept of black blood, or white blood or

blue blood it is designed to create and employ a self-contained field, to construct artificial borders and to maintain them against all reason and against all evidence.

The problem of writing in a language in which the codes of racial hierarchy and disdain are deeply embedded was exacerbated when I began *Paradise*. In that novel I was determined to focus the assault on the metaphorical, metonymic infrastructure upon which such language rests and luxuriates. [I am aware of how whiteness matures and ascends the throne of universalism by maintaining its powers to describe and to enforce its descriptions. To challenge that view of universalism, to exorcize, alter and de-fang the white/black confrontation and concentrate on the residue of that hostility seemed to me a daunting project and an artistically liberating one. The material that had been for some time of keen interest to me—the all black towns founded by African-Americans in the

nineteenth century provided a rich field for an exploration into race-specific/race-free language. I assumed the reader would be habituated to very few approaches to African-American literature. 1. reading it as sociology-not art. 2. a reading that anticipated the pleasure or the crisis--the frisson of an encounter with the exotic or the sentimentally romantic. 3. a reading that was alert to, familiar with and dependent upon racial codes. I wanted to transgress and render useless those assumptions.]

Paradise places an all black community, one chosen by its inhabitants, next to a raceless one, also chosen by its inhabitants. The grounds for traditional black/white hostilities shift to the nature of exclusion, the origins of chauvinism, the sources of oppression, assault and slaughter. The exclusively black community is all about its race: preserving it, developing powerful myths of origin, and maintaining its purity. In the Convent of

women, other than the nuns, race is indeterminate. All racial codes are virtually eliminated, deliberately withheld. I tried to give so full a description of the women that knowing their racial identity became irrelevant. Uninterested in the black/white tension that one expects to be central in any fiction written by an African-American author, the book provides itself with an expanded canvas. Unconstrained by the weary and wearying vocabulary of racial domination; outside the boundaries of an already defined debate, the novel seeks to un-encumber itself from the limits that figurations of racialized language impose on the imagination while simultaneously normalizing a particular race's culture. For many American readers this was disturbing; some admitted to being preoccupied with finding out which was the white woman; others wondered initially and then abandoned the question; some never concerned themselves with the discovery either by reading them as all black or,

the lucky ones, by reading them as all fully realized people. In American English eliminating racial markers is challenging. There are matters of physical description, of dialogue, of assumptions about background and social status, of cultural differences. The technical problems were lessened because the action took place in the seventies when women wandered about on their own and when African American culture reached a kind of apogee of influence on American culture in general. Conflicts in the text are gender related; they are also generational. They are struggles over history: who will tell and thereby control the story of the past? Who will shape the future? They are conflicts of value, of ethics. Of personal identity. What is manhood? Womanhood? And finally, most importantly, what is personhood?

Raising these questions seemed to me most compelling when augmented by yearnings for freedom and safety; for plenitude, for rest, for beauty; by contemplations on the

temporal and the eternal; by the search for one's own space, for respect, for love, for bliss—in short, paradise. And that throws into relief the second trouble with Paradise: how to render expressive religious language credibly and effectively in postmodernist fiction without having to submit to a vague egalitarianism, or a kind of late twentieth century environmental spiritualism, or to the modernist/feminist school of the goddess—body adored, or to loose, indiscriminating conviction of the innate divinity of all living things, or to the biblical/political scholasticism of the more entrenched and dictatorial wings of contemporary religious institutions—none of which, it seems to me, represents the everyday practice of nineteenth century African Americans and their children, nor lends itself to post-modernist narrative strategies. How to narrative profound and motivating faith in and to a secularized, scientific world. How, in other words, to re-imagine paradise?

Paradise is no longer imaginable, or, rather It is over-imagined-- which amounts to the same thing--and has thus become familiar, common , even trivial. Historically, the Images of Paradise, in poetry and prose were intended to be grand but accessible, beyond the routine but imaginatively graspable, seductive precisely because of our ability to recognize them--as though we "remembered" the scenes somehow. Milton speaks of "goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruit, Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue, ...with gay enamelled colours mixed..."; of "Native perfumes." of "that sapphire fount the crisped brooks, Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,..." of "nectar, visiting each plant, and fed Flowers worthy of Paradise..." "Nature boon poured forth profuse on hill, and dale, and plain," "Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm; Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind, Hung amiable, Hesperian fables true, ...of delicious taste. Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks Grazing the tender herb." "Flowers of all hue and without thorn the rose." "Caves of cool recess, o'er which the mantling vine Lays forth her purple grape and gently creeps Luxuriant..."

That scenario, in this the last decade of the twentieth century, we recognize as bounded real estate, owned by the wealthy, viewed

and visited by guests and tourists; regularly on display for the rest of us in the products and promises sold by various media. Over-imagined. Quite available if not in fact certainly as ordinary unexceptional desire. Let's examine the characteristics of physical Paradise: beauty, plenty, rest and exclusivity, eternity to see how they stack up in 1995.

Beauty of course is a duplicate of what we already know, intensified. Or what we have never known articulated. Beatific, benevolent nature combined with precious metals and jewelry. What it can not be is beauty beyond imagination.

Plenty, in a world of excess and attending greed which tilts resources to the haves and forces the have nots to locate bounty within what has already been acquired by the haves, is an almost obscene feature of Paradise. In this world of tilted resources, of outrageous, shameless wealth squatting, hulking, preening itself before the dispossessed the very idea of plenty, of sufficiency, as Utopian ought to make us tremble. Plenty should not be regulated to a paradisaical state, but to normal, everyday, humane life.

Rest, that is the superfluity of working or fighting for rewards of food or luxury, has dwindling currency these days. It is a desirelessness that suggests a special kind of death without dying.

Exclusivity, however is still an attractive even compelling feature of Paradise because some, the unworthy, are not there. Boundaries are secure; watch dogs, gates, keepers are there to verify the legitimacy of the inhabitants. Such enclaves are cropping up again, like medieval fortresses and moats, and it does not seem possible nor desirable for a City to be envisioned in which poor people can be accommodated. Exclusivity is not just an accessible dream for the well endowed, but an increasingly popular solution for middle class. {"Streets" are understood to be populated by the unworthy and the dangerous; young people are forced off the streets for their own good. Yet public space is fought over as if it were private. Who gets to enjoy a park, a beach, a mall, a corner? The term public is itself a site of contention. Paradise therefore has a very real attraction to modern society.

Eternity, since it avoids the pain of dying again, and , in its rejection of secular, scientific arguments, has probably the greatest appeal. And medical, scientific resources directed toward more life,

and flitter life remind us of the desire for earth bound eternity rather than eternal afterlife. The suggestion being this is all there is.

Thus, Paradise, as an earthly project, as opposed to Heaven, has serious intellectual and visual limitations. Aside from "Only me or us forever" it hardly bears describing anymore.

But that might be unfair. It is hard not to notice how much more attention has always been given to hell rather than Heaven. Dante's Inferno beats out Paradise every time. Milton's brilliantly rendered pre-Paradise world, known as Chaos, is far more fully realized than his Paradise. The visionary language of antithesis reaches heights of linguistic ardor with which the thesis language seldom competes. There are many reasons why the images of the horrors of hell were meant to be virulently repulsive in the twelfth, fifteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The argument for avoiding it needed to be visceral, needed to reveal how much worse such an eternity was than the hell of everyday life. But the need has persisted, in our times, with a significant addition. There is an influx of books devoted to a consternation about the absence of a sense of evil--if not hell--of a loss of shame in contemporary life.

One wonders how to account for the melancholy that accompanies these exhortations about our inattention to, the mutedness, the numbness toward anti-paradisiacal experience. Evil is understood, justifiably, to be pervasive, but it has somehow lost its awe-fulness. It does not frighten us. It is merely entertainment. Why are we not so frightened by its possibilities that we turn toward good? Is afterlife of any sort too simple for our complex, sophisticated modern intelligence? Or is it that, more than Paradise, evil needs costumes, constantly refurbished and replenished? Hell has always lent itself to glamour, headlines, a tuxedo, cunning, a gruesome mask or a seductive one. Maybe it needs blood, slime, roaring simply to get our attention, to tickle us, draw from us our wit, our imagination, our energy, our heights of performance. After which Paradise is simply its absence, an edgeless and therefore unavailing lack full of an already perceived already recognizable landscape: great trees for shade and fruit, lawns, palaces, precious metals, jewelry, animal husbandry. Outside fighting evil, waging war against the unworthy, there seems nothing for its inhabitants to do. A non-exclusionary, unbordered, come one come all Paradise, without dread, minus a nemesis is no Paradise at all.

The literary problem is harnessing contemporary language to reveal not only the intellectual complexity of Paradise, but language that seizes the imagination not as an amicus brief to a naive or psychotic life, but as sane, intelligent life itself. If I am to do justice to, bear witness to the deeply religious population of this project and render their profoundly held moral system affective in these alienated, uninspiring and uninspired times--where religion is understood to run the gamut from scorned, unintelligible fundamentalism to illiterate, well-meaning liberalism, to televangelistic marketing to militaristic racism and phobophilia--I have serious problems.

Historically the language of religion (and I am speaking here of Christianity, but I am relatively certain this is true of all text based religions) is dependent upon and gains its strength, beauty and unassailability from Biblical or Holy texts. Contemporary religious language, that is the speech and the script which seeks to translate divine translations into "popular" or "everyday common" parlance, seems to work best in song, in anecdote and in the occasional rhetorical flourish. [example tk]. I understand that the reason for modernizing traditional language of the Bible is an effort to connect

with and proselytize a population indifferent or unresponsive to the language that moved our ancestors. To compete for the attention of a constituency whose discourse has been shaped by the language of media and commerce and whose expectation of correlating images to accompany and clarify text is a difficult enterprise. And it appears reasonable to accommodate altering circumstances with alternate modes of discourse. While I can't testify to the success of such efforts, I suspect the "modernization" of God's language has been rewarding--otherwise these attempts would not be so plentiful.

Marketing religion requires new strategies, new appeals and a relevance that is immediate, not contemplative. Thus modern language, while successful in the acquisition of converts and the spiritual maintenance of the confirmed, is forced to kneel before the denominator that is most accessible. To bankrupt its subtlety, its mystery in order to bankroll its effect. Nevertheless it seems a poor substitute for the language it seeks to replace, not only because it sacrifices, ambiguity, depth and moral authority, but also because its techniques are reinforcement rather than liberation.

I do not mean to suggest that there are no brilliant sermons, powerfully intelligent essays, revelatory poems, moving encomiums,

or elegant arguments. Of course there are. Nor do I mean to suggest that there is no personal language, no prayer that is not stunning in its creativity, its healing properties, its sheer intellectual power. But these rhetorical forms are not suitable for sustained prose fiction. Modern narrative is devoid of religious language that does not glean most of its nourishment from allusions to or quotations from *Holy texts*.

Is it possible to write religion-inflected prose narrative that does not rest its case entirely or mainly on biblical language? Is it possible to make the experience and journey of faith fresh, as new and as linguistically unencumbered as it was to early believers who themselves had no collection of books to rely on?

I have chosen this task, this obligation partly because I am alarmed at the debasement of religious language in literature; its cliché-ridden expression, its apathy, its refusal to refuel itself with non-market vocabulary (or "its insistence on refueling itself with marketing vocabulary"), its substitution of the terminology of popular

psychology for philosophical clarity: its patriarchal triumphalism, its morally bankrupt dictatorial praxis, the unearned congratulations it awards itself for performability rather than content; its low opinion of its mission.

How can a novelist represent bliss in non-sexual, non-orgiastic terms? How can a novelist, in a land of plenty, render undeserved, limitless love, the one "that passeth all understanding" without summoning the consumer pleasure of a lotto win? How to invoke paradise in an age of theme parks?

The answer, unfortunately, is that I cannot. I chose something else, some other means of freshening the inquiry. I chose not only to explore the idea of paradise, but to interrogate the narrow imagination that has conceived it.

But that, I think, is another lecture entirely.

Toni Morrison