Writing a "War" Novel:
Self-referentiality and Post-national Critique
in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*[1]

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This essay argues for the centrality of the theme of war in Toni Morrison's 1997 novel *Paradise*, and analyses the treatment of this theme in relation to Morrison's previous fiction and the work of other contemporary African-American writers. In particular, I argue that Morrison's fiction contests the narration of war as a break in the continuity of the nation, and as a strategic opportunity to represent the nation to itself—a representation open to recontainment within an ongoing narrative of national progress. This reading of war as a theme in *Paradise* is developed through an analysis of Rey Chow's recent work on war and "self-referentiality" in the post-Cold War era, in which the time and space of war are no longer in opposition to the time and space of the nation, but are coterminous with the globalized and fragmented nation of the contemporary era. I further argue that the novel's analysis of the production of authority and the performance of power can be understood in terms of the construction of a visual order of knowledge characteristic of the "world as picture" that Martin Heidegger identifies as key to the metaphysics of the modern age, and that Chow locates in the doctrine of U.S. exceptionalism in the Cold War era and after. This essay then develops the analysis of exceptionalist discourse applied to the novel in criticism thus far, to argue that the novel explores the use of exceptionalist discourse not only in the nation at large, but particularly in the nation at war. I therefore argue that the novel can usefully be understood as "post-national" in the critical sense of the term, in that the novel both resists the totality of a single national narrative, and the possibility of the "post-war" nation.

> *Paradise*, a novel whose working title was "War," tells a story about Us versus Them, beginning with a man shooting a gun. Only readers unfamiliar with Morrison's previous work would expect the battle lines to be clearly drawn, or look for a victor to emerge when the smoke has cleared.
>
> (Shockley, Rev. of *Paradise*)

As Evelyn Shockley notes in her review of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), the working title of the novel was "War," and despite Morrison's later revision of the title the earlier name remains apt.[2] Although, as Morrison herself has stated, the novel is not about "war as we know it" ("This Side of Paradise"), this essay will argue that war, and the recent history of war, are central to the novel, and to its place in Morrison's fiction and contemporary African-American fiction.

Though none of Morrison's novels can be identified as traditional war novels, an expanded notion of the "war novel" could arguably be applied to her fiction, focusing as it frequently does on the analysis of violent forces structured by law and the state, and the formation and consolidation of group power turned against enemies and outsiders. More narrowly, black soldiers and war veterans play key roles in a number of Morrison's novels, and the violence these characters experience, both in international conflict and on their return to the United States, comprises a significant element of Morrison's critique of narratives of national and racial identity in the United States. While war veterans, and in particular their experiences of violent assault and expulsion from victory celebrations on their return to the United States, recur in almost all of her novels, *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) can be seen as primary examples of this tendency in Morrison's fiction. In *Sula*, the traumatised World War I veteran Shadrack haunts his peacetime community and acts as a perpetual reminder of the life-threatening violence of war, a violence that re-emerges in this community not through an engagement with international conflict, but through the eruption of violent anger against the racial and economic exclusion the community suffers.[3] In *Song of Solomon*, a group composed almost entirely

2. Toni Morrison has expressed her own satisfaction with the final title, noting that she agreed with her publisher's suggestion that the title "War" should be revised. In an interview to James Marcus said of the original title: "It was off-putting. Besides, the novel wasn't about war as we know it, with armies, navies and so on" ("This Side of Paradise").

3. Important analyses of this aspect of *Sula* (1973) include McKee; Guth; Reddy; Hunt; Ryan.

of veterans takes part in a campaign to redistribute racial violence in the United States, by pledging to respond to anti-black violence with a reciprocal violence against whites. These veterans explicitly link violence suffered at home—emblematized in the novel with the historic murder of Emmett Till in 1955—with the violence they, and potentially Till's father, experienced in conflicts abroad (82), while the only non-veteran member of this group, Guitar, aligns himself with the decolonization politics of black nationalism rather than allegiance to the American nation state (114). In each of these novels, the placement of black war veterans in civil society deconstructs the narrative of war fought in the name of the nation: the suggestion that the sacrifice made by these soldiers for the sake of the nation will be rewarded on their return to civil society is exposed as false, or at least deeply suspect. Further, any suggestion that the space of the nation is distinct from and different to the zones of war that exist overseas is put into question by the violence inflicted on black war veterans on their return to the United States, and the violence experienced by the communities to which they return.[4]

While war and the history of war in the United States are clearly themes in these novels, this is rarely expressed as the manifest content of these works. Instead, it exists as what Deborah Guth describes, in relation to *Sula*, as a "suppressed model" (579), in much the same way that the Civil Rights movement haunts these novels, as analyzed in detail by Melissa Walker in her 1991 study *Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement* (119-26). Further, as Patricia Hunt has noted in relation to *Sula*, the treatment of war in Morrison's work is not historiographic to the extent that it attempts to recreate the lived experiences of black veterans at certain historical junctures. In Morrison's novels the historical experiences of black veterans are layered upon the imagined experiences of the communities they return to, and read and reread through the lens of the present in which Morrison writes: in the case of *Sula*, the period of the Vietnam War (454).

Throughout twentieth-century United States history, narratives of war, racial and national identity have a tangled and complex relationship, and competitors on various sides of these shifting debates have seized on war as an opportunity to reframe the debate, to posit and prophesize altered

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4. This analysis of the two novels is developed in greater detail in Kathryn Nicol's "Locating the Front Line: War, Democracy and the Nation in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*."

relationships within the nation at war and the "newly" peaceful post-war nation. Gary Gerstle describes the history of this idea of war as a catalyst of national and racial identity in *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (2001), and details numerous struggles over attempts to shape and control the narration of international conflict within the nation frame. While, as described above, Morrison's fiction clearly participates in such a rewriting of the narratives of war, I would argue that her fiction, and in particular *Paradise,* is profoundly skeptical about the possibility that war can perform the function of such a break, or that the experience of war can be transformatory in any positive way. Further, I will suggest in this essay that the analysis of the "self-referentiality" of power in the novel, a self-referentiality that is specific to the post-Cold War period, is post-national in the critical sense suggested by Barabara Brinson Curiel and others in their introduction to *Post-National American Studies* (2000), rather than deployed in the name of a new, or renewed, nationalism or counter-nationalism (1-21). I will further suggest that this critical position both locates Morrison in her contemporary period, and sets her writing to some extent at odds with the work of other contemporary African-American writers.

As noted above, Morrison's early work was written during the period of the Vietnam War. The narrative of this conflict has been written and rewritten both in African-American literature and its reception. In his 1986 essay, "Blacks in Vietnam," Norman Harris outlines what he sees as the "essential" plot of the African-American Vietnam experience, a plot characterized by a conversion, or failed conversion, from a colonized American identity to a decolonized and politically aware African, or Third-World identity (121-25). Focusing on a small selection of novels, Harris argues that war in Vietnam had the potential to act as an awakening for black troops through an increased awareness of the racist nature of American society, and the realization of common ground with colonized peoples elsewhere (129). Such a reading of the Vietnam experience clearly echoes the anti-colonial arguments of much black nationalist thought (Pinkey 8-13). However, in his 1997 essay, "MIA: African American Autobiography of the Vietnam War," Jeff Loeb analyses a much larger range of autobiographical writings of the period, and argues that African-American accounts of the Vietnam war are far more varied than Harris suggests (106-7). Crucially, Loeb's analysis reveals the extent to which the reception of these written testimonies—whether fictional or autobiographical—are dependant upon the expectations of their readers. In

the texts he examines, in particular, he discovers responses to the nation state, and the possibilities of African-American national identity, that range from the outright rejection described by Harris to affirmative testaments of patriotic dedication (Loeb 109).

Such an engagement with the telling of "war stories" can also be found in the work of a number of contemporary African-American writers, including John Edgar Wideman and Walter Mosley. Both of these writers are immediate contemporaries of Morrison, and although I do not have the space here to examine their work in detail, I do want to briefly outline both the use of such "war stories" in their recent work, and sketch out the ways in which this work seems to differ from Morrison's project in *Paradise*. I will then turn to a detailed analysis of the novel itself.

Like Morrison, Mosley and Wideman have not written war novels as such, but have written fictions in which war veterans and "war" as idea and experience play key roles. In his 1998 novel, *Two Cities*, Wideman returns to the scene of his earlier, 1990 novel, *Philadelphia Fire*: the 1985 attack on the MOVE house by the Philadelphia authorities. The second novel, though not conventionally realist, is far less experimental than the first, a quality Wideman himself notes (Berben-Masi 569). Another significant difference is in the use of the figure of the war veteran, or an analogous figure, in each novel. J.B., in *Philadelphia Fire*, wears "army fatigues, camouflage issue … funky, filthy from six months in the field" (170), and although J.B. is not himself a veteran of the war that has killed or maimed his generation, his experiences are paralleled to those who have served in Vietnam: "his crew" are "[f]ucked over good in Asian jungles whiles this Philly jungle fucking over J.B. and the brothers left here to run it. Casualties just as heavy here in the streets as cross the pond in Nam" (173). J.B. is homeless, and imagines the street as a war zone, a viewpoint represented through a disjointed and disorientating narrative that mixes direct speech, third-person narration, dramatic dialogue and rap. J.B. appears to be the victim of random violence in the city, a violence whose perpetrators cannot be easily identified, and he also expresses an understanding of violence that links the national and international, locating violence in a context of power struggles that are global as well as local.

> Lebanon Soweto West Bank Belfast San Salvador Kabul Kampuchea. Spin the globe and touch it wherever it stops. You'll get blood on your finger. A gigantic jigsaw sheet of glass smashed to smithereens and fragments spattered everywhere nobody can put it back together again. (160)

Engaged in a fantasy of war and imprisonment, J.B. still recognizes the globalized nature of modern warfare in "the weight of East German helmets, Israeli arms, British uniforms" (172). While J.B's disorientated yet critical attempt to re-imagine and therefore understand the nature of modern conflict continually reaches beyond the local to the international, Mr. Mallory, the veteran of Wideman's later novel, *Two Cities*, tells a war story that conforms much more closely to conventional narratives of war, and a specifically African-American experience of war. Mallory is stationed in Europe during World War II, where he and a fellow black soldier are attacked by the white soldiers of their troop who claim to have mistaken them for the enemy (195), an attack that is linked in Mallory's memory to the lynching of Emmett Till in the United States (194). After the war, Mallory returns to the United States and dedicates himself to commemorating the black community through art—specifically photography. As in Morrison's earlier novels, the representation of a war veteran here enables a demonstration of the continuity of the violence of war and the violence experienced by African Americans at home, violence typified in both of Wideman's novels by the attack on the MOVE house. Further, though, Mallory's photographs, accidentally shared with the community at his funeral, not only defuse a scene of gang violence, but also appear to represent the community to themselves in a way that is not otherwise available (239). Though the content of the pictures is not represented, and may in fact indicate the unrepresentable, the sharing of the pictures with the black community gathered at the funeral performs a function and closes the novel: "that was the beginning of the end of the worst part of the day" (239). Though the language here is undeniably cautious, Mallory the war veteran's photographs clearly perform a redemptive function in relation to his community, a community beset by internal violence and external discrimination.

In the fiction and non-fiction writing of Walter Mosley, experiences of warfare are also narrated, far more directly, as narratives of enlightenment, in which experience gained during international conflict can be put to positive work at home. In his Easy Rawlins Mysteries, the status of the main character as a war veteran and the role of his experiences of war in equipping him for civilian life are repeatedly emphasized (Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* 60, 80, 100, 105). Rawlins' experience of war allows him to face a white enemy in a situation in which he is able to fight back, and this knowledge equips him for survival on his return to the United States. An interesting development of this narrative can be found in his short non-

fiction piece *What Next: A Memoir Towards World Peace* (2003), written after the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the most recent wars in Afghanistan, and overshadowed by the 2003 U.S. declaration of war on Iraq. In this, Mosley provides an alternative narrative of international conflict, service and national identity. Mosley narrates his father's experiences in World War II as an experience of enlightenment based not on the recognition of his difference from American identity, but the discovery of his Americanness. Facing enemy troops who do not distinguish between American soldiers on the basis of their race—who see all "Americans" as enemies—his father states: "I became an American in France, under fire and afraid for my life" (14). This experience is described as a conversion experience, one from which his father will return to the nation—the United States—with new perceptions and a new purpose. The stages of this conversion are clearly recounted:

> ... first, the fearless ignorance that blinded my father to his real place in the world and the real threat of the war; then the violent and frightening experience that made him see that he had been wrong all those years; and finally the wisdom he gained, which showed him that he had to break away from the world he had known, and the world that knew him, in order to act on the knowledge he had gained. (12)

Mosley does not suggest that African Americans simply embrace American identity in this essay. Rather, the essay is a call to arms to African Americans to become politically engaged with the nation, and to draw on their experiences as victims of American imperialism and racism to actively contest the direction of national politics (23). In each of these more recent examples however, war appears to continue to function as a break in the narrative of the nation that affords an opportunity for enlightenment and a new understanding of the nation "at home." Further, though this new understanding may take different forms, these novels continue to conform to the idea of the nation, or the group within the nation understood in relation to the nation as a whole, as the basic unit of social and political organization.

   In her recent book *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (2006), Rey Chow argues that since the Cold War there have been significant developments in the *episteme* of war in the West which must be taken into account in any attempt to understand later twentieth-century and contemporary conflicts,

and the means by which such conflicts are framed, structured and represented in contemporary life. She argues, after the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

> ... war would exist from now on as an agenda that is infinitely self-referential: war represents not other types of struggles and conflicts—what in history classes are called "causes"—but war itself. From its previous conventional, negative signification as a blockade, an inevitable but regretted interruption of the continuity that is "normal life," war shifts to a new level of force. It has become not the cessation of normality, but rather, the very definition of normality itself. (33-34)

According to Chow's analysis, war in this contemporary period can no longer be understood as a distinct break in the narrative of the nation, or a rupture in the normality of the peaceful life of the nation. Further, while both Wideman and Mosley appear to turn back to World War II as a conflict which can still serve this narrative function, Chow identifies the technological developments of World War II, and the symbolic power of the atomic strikes on Japan as a turning point in the shift from war as a direct engagement, rooted in a time and place that could be securely mapped and isolated, to war as pervasive, continual and global, carried out not through the direct engagement of forces, but through the symbolic power of nuclear arms, and the deterrent and containment policies of the Cold War (32). As a result:

> The space and time of war are no longer segregated in the form of an other; instead, they operate from within the here and now, as the internal logic of the here and now. From being negative blockade to being normal routine, war becomes the positive mechanism, momentum, and condition of possibility of society, creating a hegemonic space of global communications through powers of invisibility and control. (Chow 34)

War then is no longer the exception through which nations and citizens may revise and renew their relationships, but an ongoing condition founded upon technological developments and the symbolic force of technology which infiltrates daily life while distancing the state and its citizens from direct knowledge of conflict itself.[5] As a result of this "normalization" of war in

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5. *Paradise* (1997) is not only a post-Cold War and post-Vietnam novel, but obviously also written in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, probably the contemporary

contemporary times, the temporal and spatial divisions structuring the war stories described above, temporal and spatial divisions which allow them to carry out their transformatory functions, must come into question.

I will return to Chow's work later in the essay, but here I wish to turn directly to *Paradise.* The novel tells the story of an all-black town, Ruby, located in Oklahoma in the 1970s, and opens and closes with an attack by a group of townsmen on the only neighbour of the town, a Convent which houses a disparate group of women who are identified by the townsmen as a threat to the social order of the town. The body of the novel contains a digressive history of the town and its inhabitants, told in multiple voices and initiated and interrupted by events in the contemporary life of the town. Wars, and war veterans, do figure in this town history, and to some extent the use of these figures appears to be quite conventional. While the "new fathers" of Ruby are veterans of World War II (6), the generation of sons with whom they come into conflict are identified with the Vietnam War and the politics of black nationalism (102, 207).[6] The name of Ruby itself is shadowed by World War II conflict zones: before the name is decided upon, alternatives suggested by the ex-soldier founders include "Guam, … Inchon" and "unpronounceable" European names (17). Interestingly, the desire to name the town in this way is described as a desire to find a name "that did not speak of failure … new or repeated" (17); a desire to decisively break with the experiences of the past. However, this desire is overruled, and the conflict between the town and the Convent comes to stand, I would argue, for the frustration and indeed impossibility of such a decisive break.

While the town of Ruby is riven with familial, gender and generational conflicts, the men who carry out the attack on the Convent in the opening of the novel form a cohesive and effective group in which individual difference appears to be submerged. No names are used, and "the men," "the brothers," "the father," "son," and "nephew" (3-18), act in concert and apparent concord as they launch their attack. When the townsmen are overheard planning the attack, towards the end of the novel, their voices are indistinguishable (275-76), and they are said to gather "[l]ike boot camp recruits, like invaders preparing for slaughter" (280). The townsmen who

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conflict in which the simultaneous proximity and distance of modern conflict was felt most strongly by observers in the West. For influential opinions on this subject, see Baudrillard and Virilio.

6. Not only is the town founded by veterans, but it is also referred to as a "fortress" (213) and a "kingdom" (276).

carry out the attack, at this point in the novel, do not appear to represent the town in its variety and complexity, but through the consolidation of group identity and, through this, authority. While a number of significant studies have focused upon the construction of and resistance to authority in the novel,[7] I want to focus upon this mobilization of authority, to suggest that this is a thematization of war that conforms to the *episteme* of war that Chow describes, and that contests the construction of authority at a national, as well as a local, level. The town, in its engagement with its others, can be seen as a microcosm of the nation at war, in a period where the nation is always at "war."

The ironic nature of the townsmen's narrative is indicated almost immediately. Early in the novel, the town is described as:

> … free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. (8)

Even as the narrative voice here reflects on the safety and security of Ruby, the characters whose actions hold the narrative focus at this point are engaged in an attack on the Convent, and on literally sleepless women, the very figures of vulnerability whose safety here symbolizes the security of the town. In this passage, the Convent women—the literal prey of the townsmen—slip from the attention of the narrative voice and are replaced by other women whose security is linked to the strength and isolation of the town. This replacement of the actual Convent women with a figural "woman" in the focus of the narrative voice is replicated in the imaginations of the townsmen themselves. When the novel returns to the attack on the Convent at the end, we are told of one of the leaders of the attack, Steward Morgan, that:

> The women in the Convent were for him a flaunting parody of the nineteen Negro ladies of his and his brother's youthful memory and perfect understanding. They were the degradation of that moment they'd shared of sunlit skin and verbena. They, with their

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7. See, for example McKee, "Geographies of Paradise"; Friedman; Sweeney.

> mindless giggling, outraged the dulcet tones, the tinkling in the
> merry and welcoming laughter of the nineteen ladies who,
> scheduled to live forever in pastel shaded dreams, were now
> doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female.
> He could not abide them for sullying his personal history with
> their streetwalkers' clothes and whore's appetites; mocking and
> desecrating the vision that carried him and his brother through
> a war, that imbued their marriages and strengthened their efforts
> to build a town where the vision could flourish. He would never
> forgive them that and he would not tolerate this loss of charity.
> (279)

Steward Morgan's response to the Convent women is expressed in terms of
a visual representation that exceeds the value and indeed the veracity of the
images of the Convent women produced here. Not only are the Convent
women's identities dispersed into "mindless giggling," "streetwalker's
clothes" and "whore's appetites," but they are also figured as agents of some
destructive force, rather than victims of this fragmenting gaze. The true
victim revealed by this passage is not the Convent women under attack, or
even the "nineteen Negro ladies" of Steward's memory, but the integrity of
his memory itself, the "vision," "dream," and crucially the "perfect
understanding" produced by the coming together of vision and knowledge
in his memory. This loss of clarity is not only described during the attack on
the Convent, but apparently resolved by it: repeatedly, the men moving
through the Convent discover that there, "the view is clear … The view is
clear" (18).

In each of these examples, the townsmen engage in the production of
a worldview that simultaneously represents and explains their actions. In
both cases, the production of this worldview mimics the production of a
"world picture" described by Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Age of
the World Picture." Heidegger defines the projection of a "world picture" as
key to the metaphysics of the modern age, to the extent that such projections
characterize the relationship between vision and knowledge, and man and
his objects. "World picture" in this case, "does not mean a picture of the
world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture" (129), as a
projection emanating from the point of view of the observer (132), and a
projection which precedes any other knowledge of the objects or terrain
under examination; indeed, this terrain does not exist as such until it is
visualised in this act of projection (118). This world-as-picture does not
indicate a heterogeneous visual style, but an ordered system through which

objects must pass before they can become known—or seen—*as* objects. In the age of the world picture, "[n]ature and history become the objects of a representing that explains. Such representing counts on nature and takes account of history. Only that which becomes object in this way *is*—is considered to be in being" (Heidegger 127, emphasis in original). While the townsmen move towards the Convent, their thoughts and narrative voice continually project alternative images of other places and people that "world" their experience of the attack on the Convent in such a way that the terrain of the Convent and the women who live there disappear before their eyes.[8] Further, their worldview is structured by their own projections and values, typified by Steward Morgan's memories, above. Significantly, it is not ultimately the values of the Convent women that appear to underlie his anger, but his desire to protect the integrity of his own value system, and his self-image as the foundation of this value system: "*He would never forgive them that and he would not tolerate this loss of charity*" (279, emphasis added). Steward's self-conception as charitable and as a source of moral authority can only survive if the source of his loss of charity can be erased.

As a result, the townsmen who carry out the attack on the Convent can be seen as "self-referential" in the terms defined by Chow in *The Age of the World Target*. Here, Chow develops Heidegger's theory of the "world picture" to describe the instrumental use of knowledge in American military and academic thought in the post-atomic era. Focusing on area studies as a site of convergence between military and academic work, Chow suggests that area studies typify the self-referential nature of Western knowledge in the later twentieth century (11-17). Initiated by the Defense Department as a strategy of the Cold War, the mission of area studies was to provide a unified perspective on the world from which the United States could view, and act upon, its others—or more precisely, its enemies (Miyoshi and Harootunian, eds. 2). The self-referentiality of area studies, Chow argues, lies both in its centering of the West as point of reference and comparison, and the instrumental character of the knowledge produced under its rubric. Therefore, the knowledge produced by area studies, in Chow's account, is primarily useful in its capacity to construct the world as an object to be grasped and known—though no longer as a picture, but as a "target"—

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8. The most striking aspect of this process of appearance/disappearance is the identification of the "white girl" (3, 4, 285) by the townsmen, a figure whose identity is otherwise not confirmed by the text. For a discussion of this, see Nicol, "Visible Differences."

and as a means of protecting the objectivity of the perspective from which this target is viewed. In times of war, this objectivity is required in order to justify engagement in conflict and to preserve the integrity of the "peacetime" nation that must persist, before and after, the time of the battle.

> In the decades since 1945 … the United States has been conducting war on the basis of a certain kind of knowledge production, and producing knowledge on the basis of war. War and knowledge enable and foster each other primarily through the collective fantasizing of some foreign or alien body that poses a danger to the "self" and the "eye" of the nation. Once the monstrosity of this foreign body is firmly established in the national consciousness, the decision makers of the U.S. government often talk and behave as though they had no choice but war. War, then, is acted out as a moral obligation to expel an imagined dangerous alienness from the United States self-concept as the global custodian of freedom and democracy. (Chow 36)

Such self-referentiality is clearly at work in the discourse of the townsmen as they carry out their attack on the Convent. The Convent women are identified as enemy aliens by the townsmen, but the threat that they appear to pose is not only as representatives of difference in a town based on a common heritage and common standards. The Convent women are also identified as a threat to the self-presence of the town fathers themselves, their self-identification as both protectors of the town and as guarantors of the moral status of this protection. It is as a result of their self-identified moral authority that the town can be both "free and protected" (8). To maintain this moral order, the attack on the Convent, which involves the movement of the townsmen towards the Convent, is repeatedly construed as a defensive action necessary to protect the integrity of the town, an argument the men have "mapped" and "honed" (275). The unified, anonymous voice of the townsmen engaged in the attack accuses: "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" (276, emphasis in original). By narrating attack as defense, the townsmen legitimate their actions and, as a result, this narrative carries out a performative function, constructing legitimate and illegitimate identities that define the rights of individuals to safety and freedom from harm. Allen Feldman suggests that "[l]egitimation resides in the construction of a fictive

depth, a dimensionality of force which draws consciousness away from the concrete material investment in acts and effects that reproduce domination in time and space" (3). The legitimation of their actions through this narrative of attack as defense, therefore, secures the identity of the town as a source of freedom, through the investment in the myths of the town which define the town as "free and protected" (8), rather than the material practices the townsmen engage in as they move against the Convent women.

Chow relates this strategy of legitimation specifically to the doctrine of American exceptionalism as it is employed in modern American military thought and action, and to the proliferation of these modes of knowledge in civil society (36). As Katrine Dalsgård claims in her essay on *Paradise* and "(African) American exceptionalism," the doctrine of exceptionalism has rarely been understood in conjunction with African-American history or culture: in fact, as she notes of Deborah L. Madsen's *American Exceptionalism* (1998), African-American history and culture has more commonly been used to undermine claims to exceptionalism (235). However, Dalsgård argues convincingly that *Paradise* should be read as a critical and deconstructive engagement with the doctrine of exceptionalism, in particular its capacity as a tool in nation-building (240-6). As Dalsgård contends, the novel suggests that the capacity of the doctrine of exceptionalism as a tool in nation-building is deployed by both American nationalism *and* black nationalism, and as a result, despite the all-black identity of the town, the themes of nationalism and nation-building in the novel engage with both of these traditions (236). I would argue further that through the use of exceptionalist discourse in the attack on the Convent, the novel engages not only with the nation at large, but also with the nation at war in contemporary times—a war that is at once intimate and distanced, domestic and military.

While the force of the townsmen's worldview is put into action in the attack on the Convent, this force is not unopposed or unopposable. In particular, the second narration of the attack, at the end of the novel, replaces the figural bodies of authority of "the men" with the literal bodies of individuals, bodies which are vulnerable to attack, and several of the men are seriously and permanently injured as the Convent women fight back (286, 290). Further, the attack has numerous unintended consequences that destabilize the authority of the older generation in the town and inaugurate irreversible changes in the town itself (306). This is not a result of a failure of technique or target, but rather a result of an inherent contradiction within the logic of the townsmen's violent defense

of a town which strives to be at once "free" and "protected," a contradiction which also marks the tensions between ideas of war and peace in the Cold War era and after, and the contradictory military logic of "violence to stop violence" (Chow 42). Despite the display of legitimation and investment in exceptionalism characterizing the representation of the attack on the Convent, this representation is continually undermined by the existence of alternative narratives and experiences, in particular Pat Best's alternative history of the town (187-88), and the many private experiences of the townswomen.

Similarly, the changes in the town following the attack are also ambivalent, rather than a decisive break with the past or establishment of a new order. This is in part because these changes are chiefly imagined rather than actual, but primarily because of the continued presence of the Convent women in the closing pages of the novel, after their departure from the Convent. In keeping with the idea of modern warfare as a continuous, rather than discontinuous, stage in the narrative of the nation, the continued presence of "the enemy" in the "post-war" situation of the town undermines any sense of closure in the narrative.

Although the Convent women do create a space which resists not only the authority of the town, but also the authority of its drive to grasp the "world as picture," this space is not a utopian alternative upon which a new society can be founded (McKee, "Geographies of Paradise" 205; Dalsgård 243). I would argue that the ambivalence of the representation of the Convent women in the close of the novel is both a form of resistance to the totality of the national narrative and a rejection of the closure offered by the idea of the "post-war" nation or experience. Throughout the novel, the reader is reminded of the "stateless" identities of the women. Connie, an orphan adopted illegally in another country, is literally stateless (247), while the others lack family connections (in particular patronyms) as well as permanent homes. Furthermore, a persistent theme of the townsmen's criticism is their illegitimate occupation of the Convent.[9] At the end of the novel, this statelessness, I would claim, is represented both as a source of empowerment—freedom—and a potential threat. Billie Delia, a member of the younger generation, imagines the women in their absence, and wonders: "When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling

9. Patricia McKee examines the theme of "occupation" in the novel in detail ("Geographies of Paradise" 209).

itself a town?" (308). Yet, the transformation of the Convent women into figures of resistance can also be seen as a problematic transformation of the women into the very figures of threatening violence that the townsmen imagine. In the closing pages of the novel, in which the women appear to take part in a series of meetings with their families from which they move onward to an unknown destination, the closure implied by these meetings is undermined by both their ambivalent status as real events and by the signs and symbols of violence the women carry with them. Gigi's father notes her "army cap and fatigue pants—camouflage colors. Heavy army boots and black T-shirt. And now that he thought of it, he could swear she was packing" (310). Pallas appears to carry a sword (311). Mavis's meeting with her daughter involves mention of a wound in her side (315), possibly a memento of the attack, but potentially a reminder of a wound caused by her daughter years earlier (21-23), symbolically unhealed till now. Seneca, though not armed, is seen with blood on her hands (316-17). Though the women have escaped the town, they do not appear to have escaped the possibility of conflict. By locating this "war" within the nation, there is no clear and stable distinction between the time and space of war, and the time and space of peace. Further, by presenting the reader with these images of armed women, stateless yet within the state, Morrison appears to invite us to share Delia's thought, and to question whether, in this nation simultaneously at war and peace, it is possible to move beyond violence or to live in a "post-war" world.

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