

---

## The Geographical Imagination in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

---

LINDSAY M. CHRISTOPHER  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

In his book *Surveying the Interior*, ecocritic Rick Van Noy explores the writing practices of the United States' earliest western explorers and cartographers. In his preface, he calls the map "the machine in this garden," referring to common conceptions at the time that the West was a fertile, Edenic paradise that could be tamed by mapping, and be made agriculturally productive with technology. The term "geography" itself means "earth writing" or "earth describing," a practice many literary critics are beginning to recognize as a rhetorical cousin to writing. Maps and mapping techniques in fiction can be used positively (to establish order or articulate experience) or negatively (to divide or establish uneven power relations) but are mostly ambivalent and are used as both at the same time (Huggan 31). A literary cartography pays close attention to the use of space, place, narrative movement or plot, and to the actual use of maps in texts.

In her novel *Paradise*, Toni Morrison does not provide a graphic map of Ruby, Oklahoma. Instead, she draws not one but several narrative maps to account for the different geographies of this space. Some stories take readers beyond the boundaries of rural Oklahoma and back in again; others chart the distance between the past and present, providing readers with directions from a land occupied solely by tribal people to one that was carved up, occupied, and privatized. She traces the single road that leads north from Ruby, the all-black town, to the Convent where desperate women struggle with their ghosts, and beyond that into wild grasslands and forests. And while creating these multi-layered geographies, she also provides several versions of the garden: an Edenic paradise where men hold dominion over all; a safe haven for women recovering from damaging relationships; bountiful, bounded gardens that provide food and aesthetic value to their growers; and a wild, flat landscape full of beauty. Immediately we recognize there are multiple cartographies, multiple maps, and many ideas of paradise. When acknowledging all of these literary cartographies, *Paradise* becomes a radical critique not only of the effects of slavery and imperial expansion, but an anticolonial novel that asks us to reconsider the dominant modes of the American geographical imagination.

---

In the space of America, Western maps have been instrumental in the colonization and privatization of the land. Historically, “maps have relied more on conjecture than on fact” (Huggan 6). From the Middle Ages through the Scientific Revolution to the Enlightenment, most maps were designed to buttress people’s theological understanding of the world, and placed major cities and celestial paradise right next to one another. During the so-called Age of Discovery, new lands were drawn as unoccupied, unowned property waiting to be made productive. This commodification of land, Graham Huggan states, “paved the way for imperialist expansion of the nineteenth century” (8). These new maps not only were pawns in a game for corporate profit, but they also became symbols of national conquest because, as J.B. Harley points out, “the graphic nature of the map gave its imperial users an arbitrary power that was easily divorced from the social responsibilities and consequences of its exercise. The world could be carved up on paper” (qtd. in Huggan 9). Huggan argues that by “fostering the notion of a socially empty space, the blank map was fully exploited by the colonizers of the new, ‘virgin’ lands; blank maps proved equally valuable to the commercial and geopolitical agents of imperialism in countries such as Africa and India, which, although densely populated, could be impersonally refashioned for the purposes of political control and economic gain” (9). In the United States, as illustrated in *Paradise*, this happened as tribal grounds became Indian Country, then open territory, then the state of Oklahoma.

In the novel, Lone, the old midwife, directly states the connection between the isolated town of Ruby the old Convent, which sits in the middle of a corn field. She recalls all the women over the years who walked the paved road back and forth, seeking sanctuary, herbal remedies, or devilishly hot peppers from its garden. By redrawing the line between the town and the Convent, Lone explicitly maps that relationship. She thinks,

Out here in a red and gold land cut through now and then with black rock or a swatch of green; out here under skies so star-packed it was disgraceful; out here where the wind handled you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent.... And not just these days. They had walked this road from the very first.... But the men never walked the road; they drove it. (270)

In a subtle, forceful, and anti-imperial move, Lone’s mental map places “black rock” and “a swatch of green” out there in the so-called empty spaces surrounding the mappable landmarks, drawing attention to the landscape itself and its ability to exist outside human acknowledgement of it, and she also reminds readers of one affair that took place out there, that between 8-rock patriarch, Deacon, and the green-eyed matriarch of the Convent, Consolata, or Connie.

---

With the connections between these two characters, the landscape, and their relationship to space, the problem Morrison presents in *Paradise* is in part a failure of the spatial, or geographical, imagination. Geographer Doreen Massey argues that the dominating Western geographical imagination, in particular, assumes that space is and has always been like a surface, a flat given with people and landscapes stuck on it. This thinking, she argues, allows one to consider other people, cultures, and places as “phenomena” on this surface that do not necessarily have their own historical or temporal trajectories. They’re just there. These unconscious tendencies to understand space as “just there” leads us to collapse space into time, thinking that time only begins when we encounter a particular geographic space. This does three things: one, it allows us to ignore the vast amount of narratives existing simultaneously in one space; two, it allows us to think of different present spaces as being in the historical past; and three, it allows for, in Massey’s words, “the sharp separation of local place from the space out there” (7).

Morrison also forces us to acknowledge, if not understand, that many different narratives, many varied historical trajectories all exist in the single space of Oklahoma. We get glimpses of the Convent women and those who affected their former lives; we hear a bit about a family dying in a snowstorm; we know about the Algonquian girls who disappeared in Fayetteville, Arkansas. We know about the Old Fathers. The New. And we know about the threat of whites. This layering challenges our spatial perception. Returning to Massey, it forces readers to confront the contemporaneity of all historical trajectories in one space and it explodes the spatialized dichotomies of insider/outsider, center/periphery, local/global, in here/out there, with us/against us.

But readers still recognize how these binaries of inclusion and exclusion are embraced by the New Fathers in an attempt to escape a very real threat of violence and powerlessness. As Deacon thinks:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose -- behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. (16)

All of this is understandable, of course. The men of Ruby built a town in a “wide-open space,” described as the “place of all places,” “unique and isolated,”

---

“free and protected” (8). But while this will to protection and isolation was once necessary, the cultural climate had changed by the 1970s. Morrison shows that separating “in here” from “Out There” is no longer viable, as it breeds paranoia, stagnancy, and even violence when the threat of outsiders becomes too great. But while nothing is inherently wrong with living in a safe, productive place, the Morgans and their allies traded communal living and labor for capitalism and private ownership, and adopted the racist and sexist essentializations designed to uphold this system for the powerful. Morrison shows, through Deacon’s fancy car, his control over banking and property, and his propensity to see himself as a town patriarch, exactly how the Morgans reproduce this imperial discourse. She writes,

As Deek drove north on Central, it and the side streets seemed to him as satisfactory as ever. Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting. It was a view he would be damned if K.D. or the idleness of the young would disturb. (111)

So when Deacon drives around, overseeing his town, his particular brand of looking is bound with control, of the landscape and its people. Stemming from their boyhood experience on a research trip to all-black towns with their elders, Deacon and his twin, Steward, watched the older men debate everything from white immigrants, to Creek freedmen, the violence of whites. But importantly, they see them looking: “They stood at the edge of cornfields, walked rows of sawmills; they observed irrigation methods and storage systems. Mostly they looked at land, houses, roads” (108). Thus, they were not only educated on the ways women should be, after seeing 19 pastel-colored summertime ladies, but also on how space should be.

The landscapes surrounding them were something to look at, to domesticate, and to see how the “land, houses, roads” were building up. They can see no other geographies, then, no other spaces, and certainly no other lives that can exist outside of Ruby’s grand narrative. The geographical borders of Ruby, Deacon and his twin believe, are strong enough to hold the rapturous story of their forefathers’ perseverance and strength and that while keeping up with progress, they can block out time. They can’t imagine other narratives in space and they can’t see themselves as part of a larger narrative that includes the major 20th-century wars, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Power. They are neither enriched nor changed by these events, even though they lose sons to the cause. Their failure to imagine space, to think they are historically separate from other communities, both black

---

and not, the communities their children long to see, results in their insularity and violence against the closest, most outrageous outsiders they know: the Convent women.

Returning to Lone's suggestion of the geographical link between Deacon and Consolata, I want to suggest some connections between failures in the geographic imagination, knowing, and paradise. As I have mentioned, the largest act of violence in the novel occurs because the men who perpetrated it adopted the patriarchal, colonial epistemology that uses maps as a tool to link women to landscape, sexual desire to imperialism, and control to land ownership. As Peter Hulme puts it, "Land is named as female as a passive counterpart to the massive thrust of male technology" (qtd. in McClintock 26). Historian Annie McClintock agrees, writing that colonial men carry with them "the simultaneous dread of catastrophic boundary *loss* ... associated with fears of impotence and infantilization [which is also] attended by an *excess* of boundary order and fantasies of unlimited power" (26). These ideas play out in the encounters between Deacon and Connie. Both wound themselves because they fail to understand their geographies, as both are governed by imperial ideas of paradise.

Reading their first encounter is like recounting scenes of discovery: Deacon drives, as all men do, into the wild space beyond Ruby, seemingly "for the pleasure of the machine: the roar contained, hooded in steel; the sly way it simultaneously parted the near darkness and vaulted into darkness afar -- beyond what could be anticipated" (228). Already, we can read a patriarch bringing technology into the wilds, a machine into the garden, hoping to penetrate virgin territory, so to speak. But even though Connie represents the beautiful, exotic woman of unknown territory, she is neither a virgin nor a threshold figure to show him the wonders of nature, as scenes often depicted on early maps. Instead, Connie, who as a child was taken from her home by a well-meaning nun, is indoctrinated into another Western institution that promises a paradise far from earth: the Catholic Church. So when Connie, a master gardener, seemingly understands the land outside the boundaries of the Convent, she cannot help envision herself and her new lover in the original Garden of Eden. She thinks, "Out here where the wind was not a help or threat to sunflowers, nor the moon a language of time, of weather, of sowing or harvesting, but a feature of the original world designed for the two of them" (229). The open space beyond the Convent and the town, "the place where fig trees insisted on life" (236) is new for the lovers. But by the time winter moves in, they still have not paid attention to the land around them, locked in their own ideas of space. Morrison writes, "the pale sky above them is ringed with a darkness coming, which they could not have seen had they looked" (237). He tries to think

---

of a town where they can meet; she, a place in the Convent. Both never look past the geographies they already inhabit to create a new space that can hold them.

The narrative then breaks and reopens with the following passage (which guides the rest of this discussion): “September marched through smearing everything with oil paint: acres of cardamom yellow, burnt orange, miles of sienna, blue ravines both cerulean and midnight, along with heartbreakingly violet skies” (232).

After she realizes Deacon will never set foot in the convent, Connie returns to the chapel to give herself back to God: “She simply bent the knees she had been so happy to open and said, ‘Dear Lord, I didn’t want to eat him. I just wanted to go home’” (240), a home that the liberties of colonization took from her. Mary Magna, the Convent, and a Christian god turned Connie’s deep memory of love, the Sha Sha Sha, into a silencing, Sh Sh Sh. As a sunshot beams into her eye, dimming her sight, she accepts this life and its losses: “The first to go were the rudiments of her first language. Every now and then she found herself speaking and thinking in that in-between place, the valley between the regulations of the first language and the vocabulary of the second. The next thing to disappear was embarrassment. Finally she lost the ability to bear light” (242). But she also gains. She may have lost the ability take light, but she bears another kind of light, one that can raise the dead and heal the wounded.

In a parallel September, twenty years later, Deek makes his barefoot walk to Reverend Misner’s house:

It was September and still hot when Deacon Morgan walked toward Central. Chrysanthemums to the right, chrysanthemums to the left of the brick path leading from his imposing white house. He wore his hat, business suit, vest and a clean white shirt. No shoes. No socks. He entered St. John Street, where he had planted trees fifty feet apart, so great was his optimism twenty years earlier. He turned right on Central. It had been at least a decade since the soles of his shoes, let alone his bare feet, had touched that much concrete. (300)

The differences in these autumn geographies are striking. In the first, with its heartbreakingly thick palate of color, the spaces outside the town and Convent are not empty, but rather full of a force that flaunts its own movement through time. Seasonal change, winds that maul, and trees that love so deeply they grow into each other, give an indifferent agency to this landscape that bears its outrageous colors without human control. There are no grids here. Rather than being an untamed wilderness or an earthly paradise (two western epistemologies), this space is not empty, not innocent, and not neutral. If it has its own plans, they are unknowable and the wind that draws lovers together or the snowstorm that can take an entire family are real, interpretable, but never knowable.

---

By contrast, the September geography that Deacon walks through is one of artificial balance and order; the perennial flowers and neatly lined trees that guide him through his town become obnoxious in their precision. Deek's bare feet steadily progress over unnatural concrete sidewalks. In once sense, by abandoning his shoes and his car, he is walking toward his own recognition of how he falsely and smally constructed his world with all the trappings of imperial practice. He is beginning to see something beyond the land, houses, roads.

So while Consolata and Deacon's failures are failures to make room in geographical, and hence ideological, space for knowledge beyond themselves (although Connie eventually does under Lone's instruction) those spaces creep in at the end of the novel when Reverend Misner and Anna see the window, or door, in the garden of the Convent. They playfully argue about it to quell their fear of this ghostly image, but eventually begin to ask the right questions of space: "What would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" And this time, the mystery is not framed around a mystical paradise or a perfect, safely wrought world. It asks the right questions of space—the questions that lead us to imagine new worlds. And in this there is hope. Even for Ruby, as Misner, at the close of the novel, thinks, "Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it.... How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange?" (306).\*

### Works Cited

- Huggan, Graham. *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. 1997. New York: Plume, 1999.
- Van Noy, Rick. *Surveying the Interior: Literary Cartographers and the Sense of Place*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003.