

# The Open Home without Ownership in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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... can't you imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthy home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you stole from the people living there ... (*Paradise* 213)

## Introduction

In *Paradise* (1997), Toni Morrison reconceptualizes traditional ideas of paradise. Rather than a walled garden protected from evil, Morrison's paradise is a place without enclosures for exclusion and safety, an “earthy home.”<sup>1</sup> Justine Tally observes, “Morrison conceptualizes ‘paradise’ (with a small ‘p’) as an earthly endeavor constructed of a common bond and

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (Plume, 1999), p. 213. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

including all people, not just an exclusive few, ‘crew and passengers’ alike” (93). As opposed to a “hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange” (306), Morrison’s paradise establishes an open home for anybody, even for the dead, just as Missy Kubitschek claims that “Morrison’s [paradise] shows earth and the spiritual world as inextricably mixed” (63). There is, however, an important dimension to be added to this discussion: possession and ownership seem to be absent in this earthy home. Susan Strehle adequately claims, “this open paradise is approached through art and language rather than through imperial conquest: no land is claimed or taken from others; none are enslaved to build it” (52). Indeed, throughout the novel, Morrison explores the issues of ownership and property rights in constructing a paradisaal home in unique and diverse ways. For example, as many critics have pointed out,<sup>2</sup> the excessive desire for property in the all-black town of Ruby becomes a critical factor for its decline as a paradisaal town. However, the role of ownership in relation to Morrison’s approach to an open home has not been sufficiently examined. Therefore, this paper will investigate how Morrison reconceptualizes the politics of property through the paradisaal home. Furthermore, we will explore the intertwined relationship between property and race in the novel.

Property and the construction of race are fundamental to the establishment of the United States. Cheryl Harris, one of the most influential scholars in the field of critical race theory,<sup>3</sup> reveals that the origins of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Jennifer Terry keenly reads the monopolistic wealth of the Morgan twin brothers as Protestantism’s association with material greed (194).

<sup>3</sup> Critical race theory sprang up in the 1970s inspired by critical legal studies and feminism. For introductions to critical race theory, see Kimberlé Crenshaw eds.,

property rights in the United States are “rooted in racial domination” (1716). The origins of property rights, according to Harris, date back to the colonial time in America, when the European settlers deprived Native Americans of land using slave labor. Harris says, “The founders, for instance, so thoroughly embraced Lockean labor theory as the basis for a right of acquisition because it affirmed the right of the New World settlers to settle on and acquire the frontier” (1727-8). A dominant figure in conceptualizing property in America, John Locke builds on a concept of self-ownership to explain how one derives a right to possess objects: “. . . every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his” (305). Locke’s view provided a powerful justification for the dispossession especially when the settlers unjustifiably perceived that the land was essentially unused. Defining property as “a right, not a thing” (Harris 1725), Harris shows how property has been exclusively protected for white owners in American courts. In effect, property rights have been tied to constructions of racial power in America, and this dynamic is explored in *Paradise*.

This paper, then, seeks to investigate the politics of property interwoven with Morrison’s creation of a paradisaical home, while dismantling the framework within which property rights grant power to a certain race, in the case of *Paradise*, the dark skin color called “8-rock” (193). At the same time, we will examine the novel’s meditation on a notion of shared usage as opposed to exclusive property rights when creating an ‘earthy home,’ such

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*Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New Press, 1995); Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York UP, 2012).

as the Convent of the ‘stray’ women whose racial backgrounds are deliberately withheld in the novel.

## **I. Land ownership**

*Paradise* depicts African American families who live through the Reconstruction (1865-1877) and Post-Reconstruction years, following the lives of their descendants into the 1970s, and shows how land ownership is central to their conceptualization of paradise. Although the families include “an ex-lieutenant governor, an ex-banker, an ex-deacon and a whole lot of other exes” (84), they have a long history of suffering in search of home especially after “the purges of 1875” (193) posed by the virulent backlash against the social advancement of African Americans during Reconstruction. Walking from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma to escape from penury and discrimination, they experience rejections from other townships including the light-skinned African Americans and Native Americans, which are ingrained on their memories as the “Disallowing” (194, 195).<sup>4</sup> In Oklahoma in 1890, however, they were able to acquire land.

It belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear. Coming from lush vegetation to extravagant space could have made them feel small when they saw more sky than earth, grass to their hips. To the Old Fathers it signaled luxury—an amplitude of soul and stature

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<sup>4</sup> Although the men of 8-rock remember this experience as a complete rejection, some of the town people were kind enough to offer them food and blankets. In fact, the 8-rock men forbade their women to accept the food (195).

that was freedom without borders and without deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. . . . Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king. (98-9)

After facing the hardships and impediments, the families find a place they can claim their own: "This is our place" (98). Here, they build the all-black town, Haven, as an African American paradise, a safe place protected from the white society that they call "Out There" (16). In 1953, Haven's descendants had to move two hundred and forty miles west of Haven to establish a new town called Ruby, however, the leader of those descendants, Steward Morgan, nevertheless inherited his predecessors' appreciation for land ownership. As Steward roams the pastures, he rediscovers "every time the fresh wonder of knowing that on one's own land you could never be lost" (96).

In general, property rights were withheld from slaves, and the right to own land was particularly restricted, even in regard to freed African Americans (Copeland 647). Loren Schweninger, the author of *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*, argues that the ex-slaves' passion for land resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of black landowners throughout the postwar South. Among them, Schweninger claims that the most prosperous African Americans of the era of 1870s to 1915 were urban residents of "mixed-racial ancestry" (223), which suggests that the greater adversity faced by the founders of Haven was due in part to their skin color, which is described as "a deep deep level in the coal mines" (193).

Oklahoma was the ideal home for African Americans during this period.

Nowhere else but in Oklahoma did so many African Americans come to create their own communities in American history. Almost 100,000 African Americans migrated to the Indian Territory/Oklahoma from 1889 to 1910.<sup>5</sup> Although the Indian Territory was for the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole to relocate to under the 1830 Indian Removal Act, when the Land Run of 1889 was enacted, African Americans from the South rushed to Oklahoma. Larry O'Dell from the Oklahoma Historical Society points out that African Americans created more than 50 all-black towns and settlements throughout the Indian Territory between 1865 and 1920.<sup>6</sup> Just like the people of Haven, a large number of African Americans migrated to Oklahoma seeking to own land in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

In *Paradise*, the founding of Haven is contingent on ousting Native Americans from the land. Haven's story of exodus to Oklahoma and their claim on land recall colonial dispossession in America. The assertion of Haven's founders, that their freedom and right to land accrue from labor, cynically colligates the justification provided for imperial conquest. Applying John Locke's conception of property, it was confirmed that European settlers were entitled to own land developed with their labor (even though it was slaver labor), especially if the land was in "waste" (Locke 311). Reinforced by Old Testament citations, the deprivation of the Indian's land was wrongly rationalized because it was believed that "land not being used by the heathen was open to any who would make use of it" (Vaughan 110). The

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<sup>5</sup> See Cronin, p 71. Cronin states that there were almost 8,000 African Americans in Oklahoma prior to the 1889 land opening, who were the former slaves of the "five civilized tribes" (73).

<sup>6</sup> According to O'Dell, thirteen all-black towns still exist in Oklahoma today.

novel subtly comments on this irony even though the founding fathers of Haven acquire land through negotiation and labor instead of violence and deception.

In fact, the novel satirically condemns the idea of exclusive ownership. The leaders of Ruby are the Morgan twin brothers who are the direct male heirs of the Haven's founding father, Zechariah Morgan. Along with "the biggest house in Ruby" (100), 1000 acres of the town, and the town's bank, Deacon and Steward are "the richest ones" (193). According to the town's schoolteacher Patricia, Deacon and Steward "ran everything, controlled everything" (217). The town becomes a private property of the Morgan twins who have strong drive to own, control, and decide. Morrison's presentation of Morgan twins relates property ownership to their celebration of their bloodline as 8-rock. The Morgan family "included a lieutenant governor, a state auditor and two mayors" (55), a fact which the twins believe sets them apart from the other families. The Morgan twins' privileged sense of genealogy is manifested in their ownership of a bank, and their bequeathing property to their nephew, but Morrison's description of their status as powerful owners reflects the tenuous nature of such a perspective. Steward Morgan's wife, Dovey Morgan shrewdly observes:

Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses. . . . In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk their land to a toy ranch, and he lost the trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his taste buds faltered over time. Small losses that culminated with the big one: in 1964, when he was forty, Fairy's

curse came true: they learned neither could ever have children. (82)

His wife Dovey sees that Steward's moral values and vitality diminish as his rapacious accumulation of property increases. In Ruby, the spirit of sharing and cooperation that was indicated by "the Oven" has been dispelled: the bank is no longer owned collectively,<sup>7</sup> slumps in businesses are not assisted,<sup>8</sup> the poor are in debt, and the rich are in power. When the Morgan twins' nephew, K.D. impregnates and beats up Arnette Fleetwood, Deacon offers money to silence the matter. In addition, the Morgans condemn a non-profit credit union for church members as "a piggy bank" (56). Despite the fact that the town was built with a dream to be an all-black Christian town, the Morgan twins' bank "hog [s] the street" (88) in Ruby, not the church.

Ruby's exclusive property rights remain through the system of inheritance. Steward bequests his legacy to K.D. who is the last male Morgan in a legitimate line: "Steward, insolent and unapologetic, took K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making the nephew and the sixteen-month-old grandnephew rich (thus the new house), easing K.D. into the bank" (299-300). Apart from the fact that they are male heirs, one of the most important reasons why K.D. and his son can be endowed with the position of the future leader is the purity of his lineage within the 8-rock community. The color code of 8-rock becomes property to be protected.

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<sup>7</sup> In the beginning, the bank was owned by people in the town: "Everybody pitched in. . . . Families bought shares in it, you know, instead of just making deposits they could run through any old time" (115).

<sup>8</sup> Deacon's wife, Soan "didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friend's money problems to help them out" (107).



## II. Property and race

*Paradise* poses a significant question: if whiteness can become a form of property to be privileged and protected in America as a number of scholars have argued,<sup>9</sup> can blackness be envisioned in a similar way?; accumulating property, and restricting its inheritance exclusively amongst the black family whose bloodline was purified and regulated through the miscegenation law, is it possible to fabricate blackness as valuable property? In *Ruby*, the creation of blackness depends on the genealogy called 8-rock.

8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them. Descendants of those who had been in Louisiana Territory when it was French, when it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812. (193)

8-rock derives from “nine large intact families” (188) who made the original journey and shared experience of being as dark as “coal mines”: Blackhorse,

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<sup>9</sup> Cheryl Harris showed how the intangible “thing” of a race became a form of property that could be defended in the court in American history: “Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and black was extremely critical; it became a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of the benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were the sources of privilege and protection; their absences meant being the object of property. Slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property. Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be “white,” to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings” (Harris 1721). See also Derrick Bell, “Remembrances of Racism Past”; George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness”; Eva Saks, “Representing Miscegenation Law.”

Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood and both DuPres families. Traumatized by the “Disallowing,” the founding fathers of Haven come to judge light skin as *impure* while they acclaim their dark skin as *pure*. When 8-rock becomes a racial category to be conserved by “the father’s law, the law of continuance and multiplication” (279), the actual importance of 8-rock shifts into (re)producing its racial code and in maintaining control of property through lines of descent with violence and exclusion.

In establishing 8-rock-ness as property, the reproduction of that property rests on the control of miscegenation. In her essay on miscegenation law, Eva Saks places emphasis on miscegenation cases in constructing a framework of a theory on race as property: “Miscegenation, which threatened the existing distribution of property and of blood was . . . a crime by people against property. Miscegenation rhetoric attempted to stabilize property in race by investing white blood with value and arresting its circulation in the body politic” (49). Miscegenation was considered a hazard to the property of *pure* blood and a crime to be punished, while the conservation of its purity was secured through the law. In Ruby, the father’s law of “continuance and multiplication” parallels a miscegenation law in keeping the 8-rock blood “racially untampered” (217). When Roger Best, whose ancestors joined the 8-rocks in later years, married “a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197), the Morgans shun the Bests: Steward says out loud, “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (201). On their way to Ruby, Roger’s wife Delia dies in childbirth because, according to their daughter Patricia, the 8-rock men offered no help wishing to see the “dung” conveniently disappear. The father’s law in Ruby gives rights to the 8-rock

men to exclude and punish any kind of “dung” as a threat to their property of *pure* 8-rock blood, even with fatal violence.

Marriage provided the means by which the transmission of blood as property from one generation to another took place, and thus maintained racial boundaries. Unique to Ruby is a special marriage system called “takeovers”: an incestuous marital relation, where a young widower could marry into “an old man” of her “distant relatives” (196). In the process of her “history project,” Patricia discovers these disturbing untold stories of “takeovers” among the 8-rocks and understands “[t]he way people get chosen and ranked in this town” (216). As Eric Dussere<sup>10</sup> claims, these unofficial family intermarriages are the secrets and “the strategy for regulating the circulation of blood” (106). In other words, the *pure* 8-rock blood is maintained only through the manipulation of marriage. Moreover, Dussere observes that “[t]he community’s racial pure wholeness is built upon the fear and abhorrence of female sexuality” (Dussere 106). Because women’s sexuality has the potential to destabilize the 8-rock bloodlines, women in Ruby are strictly controlled.

It is, however, impossible to stabilize the distribution of bloodlines without the violent exclusion of certain women. When the men of 8-rock say: “Women always the key, God bless ‘em” (61), their reference is made to “a good woman” (112). Ruby only accepts “elegant black women” (111), whose features are demonstrated in the names of girls from 8-rock families: “Hope, Chaste, Lovely and Pure” (208). While excluding “a slack or sloven woman”

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<sup>10</sup> In his intriguing argument, Dussere compares Ike McCaslin’s act of reading the ledger in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* to Patricia’s “history project” in *Paradise*. He analyzes the tension between communities defined by racial purity and the exchange economy presented by blood as property.

(8), the town tolerates physical violence in order to *train* girls to be *good* flame keepers of the town. In the discussion of K.D.'s violence toward Arnette, her father Jeff Fleetwood roars: "She ain't been hit since she was two years old." Then Steward quickly and abusively replies: "That maybe the problem" (59). It needs to be noted, however, that Ruby's patriarch is not the only member who believes in physically disciplining girls. In fact, Patricia Best Cato almost kills her light-skinned daughter, Billie Delia, because she suspects her of promiscuity.<sup>11</sup> Trying to *educate* her own daughter with *good* will, however, Patricia loses her; Billie Delia leaves the town the next day. Internalizing the patriarchal racial ideology in Ruby, Patricia marries one of the 8-rocks, and becomes a *good* woman even though her mother died due to the negligence inspired by the racial intolerance toward her mother's fair skin. Therefore, she burns all her research papers which could expose the devastating secrets of the town's genealogy.

The novel shows the tragic failure of Ruby and the shattering of their dream to become a paradisaal town. While a spirit of sharing has given way to avarice, Ruby has become a privatized society with hostility and hatred. Excluded and disallowed by whites and lighter-skinned, they exclude and disallow them in return. They even become hostile towards town people with fair skin. In addition, Ruby *governs* women and their sexuality, solely favoring *good* women. In effect, Ruby produces 'blackness' as a duplicate of whiteness, even though that whiteness was the very thing that drove them to secede from American society.

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<sup>11</sup> Billie Delia has a reputation for sexual promiscuity because she removed her underwear to ride a horse when she was three years old.

### III. Open home

In describing the reproduction and preservation of 'blackness' through its dynamic connection to property, *Paradise* explores ways in which the politics of property can be resisted, challenged, or reconceptualized. The novel does not go so far as to say that property should be collective or communal but advances that it does not need to be simply private or exclusive. In fact, the novel shows opportunities to redefine what property could mean in rich and diverse ways. In the words describing the paradisaal home at the end of the novel, Morrison shows the potential in abandoned property to serve as the basis for reimagining a paradisaal home. The novel describes detritus of the sea as being like gems in this paradise: "Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf" (318). As Channette Romero claims, this place is "recycled from the broken and the discarded" (Romero 423).

Since it is an *imperfect* place, this paradisaal home requires "endless work" to make it anew. Importantly, the work here does not mean a physical labor or exploitation of labor, but an artistic effort for imagination and creation, as described in Piedade's song (318).

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun. (318)

Meaning “piety, pity, compassion, mercy” in Portuguese, Piedade<sup>12</sup> lies as “the patron deity and spiritual guide” (Grewal 54) and has the imaginative power to create a temporary open home for healing and recovery. In this paradisaal home, there is no wall for protection, only an open window that could be seen in the eyes of perceptive characters such as Anna Flood and Richard Misner.

While Ruby has become a closed society with the illusion of safety and homogeneity, the novel disperses the idea of a temporary open home throughout the novel, both inside and outside of Ruby. Amongst all, it is no exaggeration to say that the Convent placed seventeen miles away from Ruby is the best embodiment of this open home. It is inclusive, open, and multiracial; Consolata has multiracial backgrounds originating from Brazil; the others include one white and three black women, though their individual races are not revealed. As an open home, there is no linkage between property and race in the Convent, since there is neither an exclusive private right nor a racial background that is historically privileged.

Originally an embezzler’s mansion, then a Catholic School for Native American girls, the Convent has transformed into an open home shared with wounded women including women from Ruby. With Consolata/Connie as a deity figure, the four women in the Convent (Mavis, Grace/Gigi, Seneca and Pallas) experience the physical and emotional process of healing from the

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<sup>12</sup> Piedade has attracted critics’ attentions. For example, Brooks Bouson states, “Piedade, a complex figure who represents not only the Black Madonna and ancestor figure but also the goddess like muse and the supreme singer-storyteller” (216); Aoi Mori claims that Piedade is a hybrid figure merged with images of Virgin Mary and Yemanja, a Brazilian sea goddess. (65-68). Piedade represents a goddess figure with multi-racial and multi-religious backgrounds.

abuse and neglect in their pasts. Indeed, all these women are in desperate search for a home. Mavis escapes from an abusive partner and the accidental murder of her twin babies (led by his wrath and negligence on parenting; he was sexually abusing his daughter as well). Gigi has no family since “her mother was unlocatable; her father on death row” (257) and become distracted and absorbed in a sexual fantasy. Seneca was abandoned by her 14-year-old mother and grew up in foster care, where she experienced rape and started harming herself. Pallas was also abandoned by her mother but grew up with her father who provided money but neglected his own child. After seeing her boyfriend with her mother together, Pallas ran away and was sexually assaulted on the road. In the eyes of Ruby men, who were likewise once in search of a home, these women appear as “detritus: throwaway people” (4). Of course, they are not *perfect* as they have their own flaws and failures, however, the Convent women are certainly not “detritus.”

*Paradise* insists on the hope for an alternative perspective on the “detritus,” just as it requires imagination to see the possibility in abandoned property when creating a paradisaal home. The novel shows how those men’s fixed view on the women as “detritus” distorts reality and serves to justify their violence and cruelty. When the nine men of Ruby attack the women of the Convent, they believe that they are rightfully clearing the place of ‘detritus.’ Clandestinely, Sargeant Person, one of the attackers, seeks to profit under the guise of their *holy* mission.

[Sargeant] would be thinking how much less his outlay would be if he owned the Convent land, and how, if the women are gone from there, he

would be in a better position to own it. Everyone knew he had already visited the Convent—to “warn” them, which is to say he offered to buy the place, and when the response was an incomprehensible stare, he told the old woman to “think carefully” and that “other things could happen to lower the price.” (277)

The ultimate irony lies in the fact that these women do not have property rights to the Convent or to the land because “[t]he title was in the hands of the benefactress’ foundation” (232). Revealing their ulterior motive as the lust for land ownership, the novel makes a blistering criticism against the excessive desire for private ownership which destroys communities.

Another example of an open paradisaal home is an abandoned house called “the fire-ruined house” (233) where Consolata and Deacon meet for trysts three times. Although Susan Strehle states that this place “has all along signaled the impossibility of ‘going home,’” Strehle neglects the sexual sensation, a sense of belonging, and the possibility of transformation created in this place (Strehle 45). Albeit temporarily, this place becomes Consolata’s “mind’s home” (233). With Deacon, who reminds her of her Brazilian roots, Consolata recognizes her selfhood repressed all through her life at the Catholic school built for westernizing Native American girls. This “burnt-out house” (230) allows Consolata to see an image of “a girl with butterfly wings three feet long” left by the fire (234), which indicates the possibility of self-transformation. Although this house fails to remain as Consolata’s ‘mind home’ as their affair comes to an end, Consolata’s attempt to create an open paradisaal home is significant. Also, such a place exists in Ruby. In a little house on St. Matthew Street, Dovey Morgan meets a mysterious “Friend”



who desires a shortcut through the garden where she sees butterflies. It is an abandoned house that was once owned by Menus, Harper's son. Although she has "the biggest house" in Ruby of which her husband Steward is so proud, this little house was "becoming more and more home to Dovey" (88). Here, she can express "[t]hings she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues" (92) without worrying about upsetting Steward.

Illuminating abandoned property in a dynamic way, the novel directly and indirectly challenges the idea of individualistic and exclusive notions of ownership and discusses more flexible, open and collective approaches to property and its usage. Moreover, the novel takes one step further and introduces a concept, through landmarks and monuments, which function to destabilize the boundary between private/communal value in property. Margaret Davies, in *Property: Meaning, Histories, Theories* (2007), explains that a concept of heritage is an alternative construction of property since the very idea exists in tension with the private notion of property. According to Davies, heritage is "a recognition and protection of common or social or even global value," for example in landmarks, monuments, buildings and even intangible property such as language, literature, and music (Davies 127). *Paradise* depicts a conception of heritage which disturbs the boundaries between private/communal value in property.

In *Paradise*, representations of heritage do not only incorporate the noble history of a community's past, such as "the Oven" (which signifies Ruby's *holy* history of survival through mutual support), but also embraces controversial elements in the landscapes. In describing "the rock formation" (64) which Gigi strongly believes is worth searching for, the novel explores

the concept of heritage through diverse perspectives. The rock formation is described as “[t] he eternal desert coupling,” but people are split over the issue of the couple’s sex and sexuality.

They would have been, could have been a tourist attraction, he said, except they embarrassed local people. A committee of concerned Methodists, organized to blow them up or disguise them with cement, got started but it died after a few preliminary investigations. The committee members said their objections were not antisex at all but antiperversion, since it was believed by some, who had looked very carefully, that the couple was two women making love in the dirt. Others, after an equally careful examination (close up and with binoculars), said no, they were two males—bold as Gomorrah. (63)

The committees, rather than the whole community, attempted to solidify a definition and then to destroy the rock formation even though it was likely to become “a tourist attraction,” namely as a heritage. Throughout this novel, however, its meaning remains open and ambiguous. If the very act of preserving the community’s heritage was in the hands of a solidified regime, just as in the case of the Oven in Ruby, the cultural significance of that preserved heritage is in danger. Highlighting the meanings which are dynamic and responsive to various social values and aesthetic standards, the novel renders a diverse approach to property and its value.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the novel, art and imagination creates a paradisaal home, which

is neither an all-black town nor a place to be won. It is a communal land, open with no wall, and welcomes anyone in, not just a few elect. Once the ocean was comprehended as an obstacle to be conquered in order to reach redemption,<sup>13</sup> but Morrison's description of the sea surrounding the open paradise is not hostile; it brings in all kinds of "crew and passengers, lost and saved" (318), along with the sea trash. However, without walls or the hostile sea for protection, this place could be on the verge of conquest, just as the men of Ruby invaded and destroyed the Convent; yet, this paradisaical home risks safety for openness.

The hunger for home has been an inevitable theme in African American literature since Africans were ripped from their native land and brought to America in chains, and to be an owner, not to be owned, has been their agonized claim. Within the limits of geographical expansion, the novel explores ways of sharing available space both conceptually and physically in abandoned property. Morrison's paradise is not a home to be owned privately but a temporary home shared across religious, cultural, sexual and racial barriers.

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<sup>13</sup> Helga Ramsey-Kurz states that the constructions of real places as Garden of Eden came to rely more on the hostile seas than on walls in the imaginary of fifteenth to eighteenth-century explorers. The ocean was understood "as a special site where God revealed His judgements" (xi). Thus the successful ocean crossings became "proof of virtue, endowing the traveler with extra-legal right" and this view gained particular popularity in England (xi). On the contrary, the ocean in *Paradise* is not hostile, but welcoming.

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