

THE RIVER TO PARADISE: VANISHING AND TRANSFORMING
MEMORIES IN BLACK AMERICAN FEMINIST UTOPIAN
NOVELS

by

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My thesis compares *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett and *Paradise* by Toni Morrison. Both novels focus on exclusionary colorist towns created by Freedmen, twins with fluctuating memories, and marginalized people creating spaces of liberation by transforming their racial-gendered trauma. Through my research, each novel can be placed within the Black utopian literary field through historical analysis, tactics of racial estrangement, and the creation of spaces which exhibit modes of liberation beyond white-male supremacy. In placing the novels in the Black utopian genre, they both demonstrate successful sites of paradise and affirming selfhood through creating a process of self-reconstruction and change outside dominant constructions of place and identity. These novels exemplify Black feminist utopian landscapes that portray the transformation of ascribed identity, memories, and places to build greater conditions of living beyond racial-sexual oppression. Furthermore, these literary narratives allow marginalized subjectivity and spaces to be viscerally felt, re-articulated, and knowable to the world. Bennett and Morrison create utopianism by radially and radically expanding the margins and meaning of space and identities. Rather than making utopia a land-based project constituted by moralized conditions of perfection, these authors locate utopia in finding meaning and water. Like water, paradise becomes a dynamic space always subject to change and open to the endless possibilities people can imagine in overcoming forms of struggle.

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I was born by the river
In a little tent
Oh, and just like the river,
I've been running
Ever since
It's been a long
A long time coming, but I know
A change gon' come
Oh yes, it will.

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Introduction

The United States was born in *1619*.

Hegemonic storytellers may mark the founding of the United States as 1776, when U.S. framers signed the Declaration of Independence. Yet, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Nikole Hannah-Jones, questions this story by reframing America's founding year as 1619 in her *New York Times* initiative “The 1619 project”. Indeed, Hannah-Jones marks the beginning of America’s legacy as the year Jamestown colonists captured 20-30 enslaved Africans. Hannah-Jones’ historical narrative re-imagines and emboldens Black Americans contribution to building the United States. As Hannah-Jones proclaims, “the United States simply would not exist” without Black Americans (Hannah-Jones “The 1619 Project”). Indeed, Black people’s stolen labor built the nation, financed the most prestigious institutions, shaped American citizenship, and made America the most influential country in the world (“The 1619 Project”).

Beyond materialistically building the country, the American dream and utopian claims of freedom are also spearheaded by Black American culture. As Hannah-Jones explains, “Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all” (“The 1619 Project”). Black activist and academic, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, elaborates on these statements by similarly arguing, “Justice is not a natural part of the lifecycle of the United States, nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle” (Taylor 5). Both Hannah-Jones and Taylor recognize that Black Americans and Black politics have continuously fought, dreamed, and created the ideals of freedom, justice, and liberation by overcoming forms of oppression in the United States.

The struggle and need for justice in the United States was once again recorded on May 25th, 2020, when Minneapolis police killed a Black man named George Floyd. His death alongside countless Black lives lost to police brutality sparked the largest racial justice movement in the United States since the Civil Rights movement. Millions of Americans began questioning the creation of the United States by facing the murders of George Floyd and systemic racism. Coincidentally, one week after Floyd's death, a contemporary novel on racial passing called *The Vanishing Half* was published on June 2nd, 2020. Embedded in Brit Bennett's novel was an invaluable question for each reader: how is Black liberation achieved in the United States?

Twenty-two years earlier in 1998, Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* asked a similar question about building a Black utopia in the United States. To answer these questions, both authors write about the political experiences of Black Americans in non-linear narratives which travel across the United States and in between decades of American history. Through their characters' fragmented and varied experiences, these authors write understandable and poetic resonances on how locations, time, and relationships construct utopianism in the United States.

In centering on utopianism, these novels' spatial and temporal explorations exhibit uncanny similarities and significant differences. To begin, both novels focus on all-Black towns created by previously enslaved men seeking a place of freedom in the United States. Yet these towns demonstrate colorism in the exact opposite way: *Paradise* depicts a town which only accepts dark-skinned people, and *The Vanishing Half* describes a town where only light-skinned people are praised. Each author reveals the consequences of these racialized towns through tracking twins related to the town founders. Despite the oppositional presentation of Blackness in each town, both authors demonstrate the inheritance of racialized trauma metastasizing into the

twins' memories. Through conducting multiple close readings on these memories, I explore how each author handles their central motivation toward utopianism: the avoidance of vulnerability and the inability to process racial-sexual trauma. In the inability to process memories of racial trauma, these towns and people replicate forms of violence by absorbing meaning and purpose through oppressive and nostalgic frameworks.

To juxtapose these twins, each author demonstrates how sets of marginalized characters work to reconfigure their racial-sexual trauma to produce spaces and people full of rest and liberation. Through a close reading of each novel's conclusion, each town's marginalized characters find ways to transcend their racial-sexual oppression and find peace in a body of water. The spiritual and literary symbolism of water within both novels displays Bennett's and Morrison's argument that utopia is created through accepting and imagining the ever flowing and never-ending power of communal transformation. Though comparing these novels, each author's marginalized characters are opposite due to the town's opposing racial schemes. Indeed, in *The Vanishing Half*, the marginalized character is Jude, the dark-skinned daughter of Desiree Vignes. Yet in *Paradise*, the marginalized characters are a multi-racial group of women living in a convent. Despite the different forms of marginality in each novel, each of these characters create a successful sense of utopia through their shared vulnerability, ultimately revealing that utopianism occurs by radially and radically expanding the meaning of places and identities to build spaces that affirm and sustain fulfilling forms of subjectivity. Rather than making utopia a land-based project constituted by moralized conditions of perfection, these authors locate utopia in water. Like water, paradise becomes a dynamic space always subject to change and open to the endless possibilities people can imagine in overcoming forms of struggle.

My thesis explores how these novels exemplify Black feminist utopian landscapes that portray the transformation of ascribed identity, memories, and places to build greater conditions of living beyond racial-sexual oppression. Through my research, each novel can be placed within the Black Utopian literary field through historical analysis, tactics of racial estrangement, and the creation of spaces which exhibit modes of liberation beyond white-male supremacy. By placing the novels in the Black utopian genre, they both demonstrate how a sense of paradise and selfhood are reliant on a never-ending process of self-reconstruction and change outside dominant constructions of place and identity. These authors use Black utopianism as a fruitful site to test the capacity of limiting political formulations and expand the horizon of readers' capacity to imagine new ways of living and forming identity. Like Hannah-Jones, these novels present contradictory histories and narratives of Black Americans to re-examine the memories and stories people utilize to define themselves and communities by revealing hidden sites of paradise within the margins of the American landscape.

Literature review:

Paradise and *The Vanishing Half* are both contemporary novels released within the last few decades. Since its release twenty-two years ago, *Paradise* has received multiple forms of academic discussion, criticism, and praise. Yet Brit Bennett only released *The Vanishing Half* three years ago; most reviews of Bennett's novel belong in articles, interviews, and the news rather than academic forums. Nonetheless, *The Vanishing Half* has quickly gained heavy media attention and fame for its unique exploration of relationships, location, and racial passing within the United States. However, there remains a lack of published content that discusses the remarkable connections between Morrison's *Paradise* and Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. Comparing these novels reveals how each author makes a unique contribution to the Black Utopian literary genre by offering a multifaceted dialogue on how race, gender, location, and liberation are created and sustained in the United States.

Alex Zamalin, a professor of African American Studies, explains the history and development of utopianism alongside Black utopianism in his book *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019). The first appearance of the word "utopia" arose in 1516 as the title of Sir Thomas More's novel *Utopia* which depicted a set of planned conditions which created the perfect fictional island (Zamalin 3). Yet More created the word by combining the Greek word "eu-topos" and "ou-topos" which translates to "Good place, No Place" (Harz "Building a Better Place"). Although "utopia" meant "no place," a canonization of utopianism was adopted and transformed with the birth of Western and American political thought. Zamalin traces the co-development of utopian theory and western political thought through examples such as Plato's *Republic*, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Immanuel Kant's universal history, and even the U.S. Federalist papers (3). An evident example of the United

States' underlying utopian ideology remains visible in how the U.S. calls itself *America*: 'Land of the free' and 'God's own country' (Zamalin 4). In his argument, the reconfiguration and most known concept of utopia became driven by ideals of building perfect societies of full wealth and achieving perfection through forms of exclusivity.

Moreover, Zamalin acknowledges that centuries of discussion, literature, and political criticism have made the word *utopia* suffer from "excessive familiarity" (3). Most people have a vague idea of the word's meaning, but for many it signifies ideas of naivety, impossibility, and the danger of authoritarianism. Indeed, Toni Morrison herself explains how "the idea of paradise is no longer imaginable or, rather, it is over-imagined" so much so that it has become "familiar, commercialized, even trivial" (xiii). Given the stigma and history of Western colonization fueled by utopian ideology, dystopian novels have become far more popular and acceptable. Yet Zamalin continues to believe that Black utopianism possesses a forgotten vision of utopia beyond moralism and nationalism. Indeed, Zamalin claims Black American reflections on utopia contain "some of the most powerful political ideas" by providing detailed visions of collective life and racial identity beyond oppressive American traditions (1). Black Utopian novels depict and create bold and futurist possibilities which ignite transformative views of locating hope, justice, and liberation within the United States.

Zamalin writes that the Black experience also began with a utopian kernel of hope, suggesting that American, Western, and Black politics all have a utopian influence. From the beginning, enslaved Africans were trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean and were left with only a prophetic faith hopefully to someday reach a place of freedom (Zamalin 7). And in the time since, Black Americans have continuously fought to find freedom through protests, organization, and relentless faith. Despite the tenacity of Black American politics to create liberation, justice,

and freedom, scholars have evaded studying forms of utopianism within African American culture. Zamalin suggests this evasion may stem from the Black experience more often being described as dystopian (Zamalin 6).

Indeed, from the beginning, Africans trafficked to the United States were stripped of their identity, names, cultures, and every form of physical and political right. After enslaved people gained freedom and hopes of change, Reconstruction soon failed, and the Jim Crow era ushered in new waves of daily terrorism. The dehumanization and disenfranchisement of Black and African Americans bled into extreme forms of inequality during Segregation. Even after the civil rights movement, the U.S. government found multiple ways to force surveillance and poverty onto Black Americans through police violence, imprisonment, and public policy. As Zamalin explains, “even the most dark science fiction fantasies” could not explain the egregious injustice Black Americans have faced (Zamalin 6). Yet it is because African American culture has endured such horrors that Zamalin believes in the Black utopian philosophy that “life is too short and filled with too much injustice to not dream for a better one” (5). Indeed, Black utopian ideals have already created powerful political ideas: Black politics imagined the U.S without slavery, a country without segregation, and continued dreaming of a world beyond white supremacy.

Zamalin recognizes the lack of research into Black utopian philosophy and Black utopian literature. Most scholars agree that the genre remains relatively small but acknowledge a unique and exuberant utopian spirit coded into multiple African American cultural expressions. Dohra Ahmad affirms that Black literary utopias have not received serious research within her study *Landscapes of Hope: Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America* (2009). Yet cultural expressions of Black utopianism go far back to plantation songs and oral stories (Ahmad 131). However, the first major and formal wave of Black American utopian writing emerged at the end of the 19th

century and early 20th century, between 1880 and 1930 (Meng 2). Zamalin has named this period as the “golden age of black utopian literature” (3). The surge of utopian writing coincided with the end of Reconstruction in approximately 1877. Once Reconstruction ended, an unprecedented rate of white terrorism and public hatred toward Black Americans arose. Indeed, Black Americans went from becoming legislators, attending school, and voting to being publicly lynched and terrorized.

To combat the rising surge of racial terrorism across the country, multiple Black authors wrote about societies and locations where Black people found freedom beyond racial oppression. Some of these major African American writers included W.E.B. du Bois, “Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, Frances E. W. Harper, and the then less well-known ones like Sutton Griggs, Pauline Hopkins and Edward A. Johnson” (Meng 6). Zamalin agrees that most of these authors' work aimed to dramatize Black Americans' opposition to “white supremacy and racial violence” during the time period (5). Although the amount of Black utopian novels slowed down after the 1930s, the genre continued and took a noticeable turn after World War Two, as seen in Richard Wright’s novel *Black Power* (1954) where Black utopianism shifted from Black self-determination to abolishing white supremacy by writing a decolonizing world (Zamalin 8).

The literary genre accommodated multiple shifts and perspectives of utopia, making it exuberant and unique. Jayna Brown outlines a few of these additional characteristics and trends with Black utopian novels in her book *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (2021). For example, Brown explains that utopian novels work to radically re-imagine the world through forms of estrangement, writing that, “[u]topia is a condition of being temporally estranged” (8). Authors use estrangement to make the *normal* seem *strange*, and Black estrangement forces readers to question the naturalization of societal norms, such as racial-

gendered practices. Estrangement twists and re-fabricates normality by presenting counterfactual stories which question the status quo. Since readers cannot unimagine what they have newly read, readers must reconcile the relationship between factual and counterfactual, normal and strange, etc.

I argue that *Paradise* and *The Vanishing Half* both use racial estrangement to expose the racial-sexual hierarchies embedded in the United States' dominant political culture. In *Paradise*, Morrison creates an estrangement of race by writing a counterfactual town. After Reconstruction, Freedmen began building all-Black utopian towns, yet their towns only accepted people with light skin and wealth. So, Morrison explores the opposite: a town where only dark-skinned people are worthy of paradise. Morrison's use of racial estrangement reveals how the tactics and function of *any* racialized place harbors forms of exclusivity and violence. In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett depicts a historically accurate town built by enslaved light-skinned Black people; however, Bennett makes an estrangement of race and gender by introducing the effects of passing. Through passing, Bennett exposes the construction of race as an unreliable social hierarchy to establish paradise.

Brown also explains that Black Americans' experience with dehumanization and alienation has created the ability for Black utopian novels to “develop marvelous modes of being in and perceiving the universe” (7). Brown's observation of Black Americans' ability to conceptualize their subjectivity in such an untethered and speculative spirit means that “desire and fulfillment can be imagined outside of the confines of individualist claims” (7). The ability to produce the conditions of desire and fulfillment through non-individualistic claims is a key reason *Paradise* and *The Vanishing Half* can be considered Black Utopian novels. Each novel's concluding scene depicts people finding racial and sexual acceptance through communal

relationships while in water. Although neither entirely creates a new location of utopianism, they follow the Black Feminist utopian tradition of finding paradise through community and a decolonizing sense of place (Zamalin 8).

Paradise and *The Vanishing Half* arguably belong within the Black feminist utopian literary genre, but the genre is even smaller and less recognized than the Black Utopian field. Although multiple Black female authors have likely written Black feminist utopian novels, scholars have rarely taken the effort of canonizing and reviewing the literary genre. Indeed, the most notable and studied Black feminist utopian novels are likely *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) by Octavia Butler (Zamalin 8). However, *Paradise* was also released in 1997, so further research could well point to the end of the 20th century as a new influx of Black feminist utopian literature. Additionally, a documented field of feminist utopian literature also exists, but once again, the genre lacks any interactions with the unique racial and gendered intersectional experience Black women face in the United States.

Given the lack of formal and academic research on Black feminist American utopian literature, I decided to explore Katherine McKittrick's work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* to review the spatial struggle Black women face within dominant ideas of geography. McKittrick is a professor at Queen's University where she serves as a research chair in Black studies alongside teaching gender studies and geography. She explains how geography is not a fixed or secure concept because people produce space and its meaning— something which can always change. McKittrick critiques the traditional perspective of geography as a stable entity which can “view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable vantage point” (xiii). Moreover, she recognizes the stable vantage points which map our

world are often “white, patriarchal, eurocentric, heterosexual, and classed” through a “legacy of exploitation, exploration, and conquest” (xiii).

The issue of creating fixed and unchanging spaces means that politically dominant paths of meanings and borders are repeatedly introduced and enforced. To explain, McKittrick argues that a place can establish itself by creating forms of racial, sexual, and economical hierarchies which produce the meaning and stability of a landscape (xv). Hierarchies and social practices of marginalization, segregation, and classification determine how people organize, shape, and imagine their surroundings— they form practices of governance, history, and outlining locations (McKittrick xiv). Morrison similarly concurs with McKittrick’s observation by observing that “Boundaries are secure, watch dogs, security systems, and gates there to verify the legitimacy of the inhabitants” (xiv). These boundaries are often crafted by dictating who and what cannot enter spaces.

Forms of domination over Black women are uniquely seen within the creation of space. The dominant political power within the U.S has always been upheld by white wealthy men with land. The historical and current treatment of Black women highlights the social construction of borders, ideas of belonging, exclusion, inclusion, insiders, outsiders, margins, centers, and concealment in the United States. Indeed, McKittrick argues that Black women’s lives and experiences highlight how race and gender are “integral to the production of space”(xiii). The white wealthy men recognize where they belong because poor Black women do not belong. Black experiences and meanings of locations in the United States are often pushed to the side, erased, or deemed as non-geographic (McKittrick xiii). Yet McKittrick argues that Black matters are spatial matters; most Black experiences are geographic experiences. Black Americans have faced multiple forms of historical displacement and geographic domination through transatlantic

slavery, segregation, redlining, zoning laws, the color-line, the African diaspora, and more. Given the struggles of belonging and lack of origins for Black Americans, McKittrick affirms that the creation of spaces and places gives meaning to Black lives (McKittrick xiii).

McKittrick argues that places must conceptualize the inextricable material and metaphorical experiences within locations. An understanding of “subjectivities, imaginations, and stories” can better encapsulate the hidden world Black women live in rather than traditional forms of mapping, seeing, and locating places (McKittrick xiii). Indeed, Black women are often unacknowledged beings who contribute to the spaces in which they live, despite their imaginations and ways of knowing these spaces being erased or minimized. McKittrick believes that Black women’s geographies question the creation of spaces by pushing against the naturalization of place, forms of subjugation, and the hidden or unresolved stories those spaces hold. Indeed, McKittrick argues that mapping Black women’s geographies can reveal how blackness and gender are socially produced by describing sites where various forms of blackness and femininity can co-exist (xix).

To explore Black women’s geographies, McKittrick uses Édouard Glissant’s theory of a “poetics of landscape” to explain how fiction can portray landscapes which shape the social world. McKittrick explains that landscapes harbor a “poetics” because their geographic expressions theorize feelings, senses of knowing, and imagination of spaces and places (xxii). Given McKittrick’s definition, she claims that a poetics of landscape can include poems, novels, plays, historical narratives, or any form of expression which depicts a Black women’s space and place (xxiii). Poetic works about Black feminist landscapes offer a type of language which can articulate the hidden and complex world and space of Black female identities. Unlike traditional geographic tools such as maps and charts, a poetics of landscape can materially and

metaphorically enter spaces to challenge the production of racial-sexual terrains through a new set of geographic tools. These new tools of understanding a space can be seen through explaining contradictory histories, a nonlinear narrative, and the “infinite variety of landscapes” which people could be experiencing at once (McKittrick xxii).

Black feminist utopian novels can be easily classified as works of poetic landscapes because they contain expressions of spaces which seek to question and reconfigure the production of sites beyond racial-gendered hierarchies. Ahmad helps connect the field of Black utopianism to the poetics of landscape in *Landscapes of Hope* explaining that, given Black Americans' struggle with nationalism, the utopian genre often goes beyond dreams of a new nation and imagines entirely new spaces (131). These geographies are not based on a nation or specific borders. Instead, Ahmad believes that Black utopians gain their strength from portraying “unbounded and unfinished” modes of spaces always in flux (Ahmad 132). Indeed, Black utopians can also depict the issues of traditional utopianism by exposing them as “negative utopias,” which Ahmad explains as “a closed, fictionalized system whose portrayal ultimately serves to reinforce prevailing conditions of inequality” (134).

I argue that *The Vanishing Half* and *Paradise* are both Black feminist utopian novels for exposing negative utopias alongside the creation of liberating poetic landscapes which demonstrate an escape from racial and sexual oppression. McKittrick highlights that a poetics of landscape rejects “the desire for socioeconomic possession” and claims that “space should not be naturally followed by material ownership and black repossession but rather by a grammar of liberation, through which ethical human-geographies can be recognized and expressed” (xxiii). Bennett and Morrison both create Black negative utopias which focus on material ownership of land to establish utopia which reinforce prevailing racial-gendered hierarchies that mirror the

United States' dominant political culture. To critique the production of these spaces, each author depicts marginalized characters' creating grammars of liberation that enable their ability to produce successful spaces of utopia in water. In these novels, a grammar of liberation resembles attempts to establish communal understandings of identity, place, and history through shared memories, stories, and bodily communication.

In many ways, each author's water motif demonstrates the unbounded and unfinished sentiment of Black utopia by locating sites of liberation on moving bodies of water. These novels exemplify the simultaneous and contradictory landscapes (and utopias) people live in. By writing these works, each author affirms McKittrick's insight and creates metaphorical spaces where Black women can critique forced boundaries, rewrite national narratives, and spatialize feminism through the new geographic tools of literary imagination. These works implore readers to re-imagine the ways we live and create meaning by exploring how re-defining oneself creates a method of re-defining the world.

Part 1: Towns, Twins, and Tales

Creating All-Black Towns:

Bennett and Morrison may write about fictional towns, but they both reflect historical towns which did exist. As Zamalin explains, Black utopian ideology has materialized through a wide range of Black-established towns. Although white benefactors organized a few all-Black towns, most have arrived from Black communities' desire for self-sufficiency and racial sanctuary. Indeed, independent Black communities even existed during slavery through the tradition of maroon colonies: independent settlements founded by enslaved people and their descendants who would run away from their enslavers (“Maroon Communities in the Americas”). After slavery, a surge of freedmen across the country also sought to build all-Black towns. As Tara Avelhe, an administrator for the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities explains, at least fifty known Black communities were established in the U.S. between 1865 and 1920. Avelhe further highlights how these all-Black towns created communities which supported and protected each other through creating Black-owned farms, businesses, schools, banks, and more (Avelhe, par 3). Additionally, these towns worked to protect its people from racial brutality and forms of prejudice often found in racially mixed communities (Avelhe, par 5).

In particular, the concentration of all-Black towns in Oklahoma inspired Toni Morrison to write *Paradise*. As Avelhe emphasizes, around twenty of these known all-Black towns established themselves in Oklahoma territory. Yet the swarm and possibility of these Black towns was inextricably tied to the Trail of Tears (Avelhe, par 4). Morrison recognized the historical connection within her novel’s foreword by explaining a “particular interest” in newspapers which glossed over the violent displacement of Native Americans to instead advertise the new availability of space for Black towns (xii). As Morrison summarizes, “[t]he

opportunity to establish black towns was as feverish as the wish for whites to occupy the land.” Yet these newspapers offered more than simple all-Black towns; they sought to invite Black people to their sites of “paradise” (Morrison xii). However, Morrison discovered a few underlying requirements to enter these paradises, detecting an implicit warning for all readers: “This new land is Utopia for a few. Translation: no poor former slaves are welcome in the paradise being built here” (xii). Morrison similarly noticed a pattern about the town leaders: each was invariably a light-skinned man. She then began to question if light skin was a condition of their separation or a replication of the racism they abhorred (xii).

Morrison explores these questions by writing their opposite: two all-black towns which exclusively allowed dark-skinned people. Indeed, throughout the novel, Morrison re-tells the story of one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen facing the issue of belonging nowhere. During Reconstruction, many of these town's founders were freedmen who became legislators until they were publicly shamed out of office. Morrison explains the men's dilemma of being an embarrassment for Black people yet remaining a joke and threat to white people (302). Eventually, these men traveled across the United States seeking a new place to settle, but were rejected by poor white towns, Native nations, and already established Black towns. In facing constant rejection, the freedmen decided to form their own town named Haven. However, the town's founders never forget the series of rejection they faced and build a gated community to reject everyone as well. Haven eventually became desolate from a dwindling population and the town's remaining residents traveled further into Oklahoma to establish another community they called “Ruby”. Yet Ruby continued to harbor Haven's colorist racial hierarchies and a practice of exclusion which eventually manifests itself as a massacre against their projected enemy: a convent of multi-racial women.

Learning about these all-Black towns created for racially mixed communities also inspired Brit Bennett to write *The Vanishing Half*. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Bennett explains how her mother remembers a town of light-skinned Black people in Louisiana who used inbreeding to maintain their light skin. In her account, the concept captivated Bennett because she had “never imagined a town like this,” and believed these towns encapsulated a unique way of exploring race that “was very specific and very disturbing” (Los Angeles Times). Bennett describes the creation of her own town within the first chapter of her novel:

A town that, like any other, was more idea than place. The idea arrived to Alphonse Decuir in 1848, as he stood in the sugarcane fields he'd inherited from the father who'd once owned him. The father now dead, the now-freed son wished to build something on those acres of land that would last for centuries to come. A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place. (Bennett 5)

Mallard could be considered more of a maroon town given Bennett's timeline; nonetheless, she still establishes a colorist and exclusionary town created by a freedman. Furthermore, Bennett establishes a similar utopian pathos in the town through Alphonse's hopes; as she writes in the first line, towns are created through ideas— a sentiment repeated throughout the entire novel. Bennett explains that Alphonse gains his freedom by inheriting his father's land and holds a *wish* to create a sanctuary for mixed men like himself. Indeed, the reason for creating Mallard reflects Morrison's town Haven. Both towns hoped to establish an entirely new place which would be liberating for a few. Despite one town being exclusively for light-skinned people and the other for dark-skinned people, they both suffer from not being accepted as white but refuse “to be treated like Negroes.” Indeed, Haven's founders could not accept their dwindling statuses as former legislators to men “no one, black or white” would hire (Morrison 302). In facing these struggles, both towns create a third place which holds their utopian hopes of belonging and

community excellence. However, both authors eventually reveal how these towns are built through replicating forms of oppression and violence.

Creating Black Negative Utopian Towns:

Both Bennett and Morrison follow the tradition within Black utopian novels to expose how negative utopias are created. Indeed, Ahmad's description of Black negative utopias as “a closed, fictionalized system whose portrayal ultimately serves to reinforce prevailing conditions of inequality” can be seen within *Mallard and Ruby* (134). *Ruby and Mallard* are both exclusionary towns closed to outsiders who reinforce conditions of inequality through their racial hierarchies. Zamalin highlights how this tradition can be seen as Black authors’ warning against the danger of Black self-governance internalizing the white paternalistic ideologies which oppressed them (43). Instead of imagining locations with racial hierarchies, each author signifies that racial hierarchies *create* these places and their inhabitants’ identities.

Morrison disrupts readers' understanding of racialized locations and people by writing about a Convent of women where all racial codes are eliminated (xvi). However, the novel begins with her infamous first line: “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time” (Morrison 3). Morrison’s first line establishes race as a hierarchy but makes race a source of unreliable information since readers are unable to know who the white girl is. Morrison claims readers can attempt to find the character, ignore the question, or imagine every character is Black. Yet “the perceptive ones read them as fully realized individuals— whatever their race” (Morrison xvi). Morrison’s attempts to make race unreliable escapes the limitations racial language can place in our imagination on understanding these women (xv).

Indeed, Morrison states that racist thought can “never produce new knowledge” since it has no true “referent in the material world” and “is designed to construct artificial borders and

maintain them against all reason and all evidence” (xv). She attempts to go beyond the limiting white/black conversation to explore the unseen conflicts beneath racial discourse. Hence, traditional black vs. white conflicts are shifted toward exploring the nature of exclusion, self/other, oppression, and violence (Morrison xvi). Morrison builds a dialogue between a community where everything is focused on race, “preserving it, developing myths of origins, and maintaining its purity” versus one where racial markers are eliminated and ignored (xvi).

Bennett similarly establishes the influence of racial hierarchies within Mallard’s white paternalistic ideology throughout the novel. Bennett begins her novel in a similar yet distinctly different fashion than Morrison. Whereas *Paradise* begins with the murder of a white woman in a dark-skin town; *The Vanishing Half* begins with light-skinned Desiree Vignes walking into town with her dark-skinned child Jude. Bennett knew almost immediately where she wanted the novel to begin, recalling that “[i]nitially, I just had this image of this very light-skinned woman holding the hand of this very dark-skinned girl returning to this town and people being really awful about it” (Los Angeles Times). Like Morrison, Bennett almost immediately establishes the presence of a racial hierarchy in Mallard through the colorist prejudice of the townspeople toward Jude.

However, instead of a race-free convent, Bennett disrupts race as reliable information by introducing the idea of racial passing. Indeed, Desiree’s identical twin, Stella, passes as white and has a white child instead. Bennett explores the terrain of black/white conflicts by having a character who can position themselves on both sides— an ability which disrupts the formation and artificial borders of race itself. Similar to *Paradise*, readers can spend their time deciding if certain characters should be considered white or Black. Yet a perceptive reader could once again view these characters as fully realized individuals shaped through acts of agency. Each author

explores how their characters' interactions with forms of racial-sexual oppression construct their senses of self and the locations they can create and inhabit.

Paradise: The Morgan Twins' Powerful Memories

McKittrick explains that “the individual, the community, and the land are inextricable in the process of creating history” (xxii). In understanding this relationship of co-creation, McKittrick argues that expressions of geography are also a process of self-assertion and humanization. However, attempts to enforce a stable and fixed geography requires the constant reinforcement of historical mythologies and fixed conditions of self-assertion to naturalize the landscape. The naturalization of locations and ascribed identities, such as race, often contain underlying forces of domination and control that lead to forms of violence, assault, and dehumanization. In particular, places which govern through racial hierarchies will consistently enforce racial borders and boundaries. Moreover, as McKittrick points out, “Toni Morrison, additionally, explains that racialized geographies are pathologies” (3). Since racist thought cannot create new knowledge, these spaces and places will produce eruptions of madness and terror for self-rationalization. Morrison exemplifies McKittrick's argument by demonstrating Ruby's need to preserve their myths of origins, coherence, and domination by massacring the Convent “For Ruby” (Morrison 18).

Morrison ultimately demonstrates the co-creation of history, identity, and places through describing the memories of the Morgan twins, Deacon and Steward. Morrison establishes these twins as the leaders of Ruby through their descent and wealth as bank owners. Given their status, they represent the dominant political power within Ruby. In the first chapter, Morrison describes the influence of these twins' memories as they march to kill the women in the convent in the following passage:

The twins have powerful memories. Between them, they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they have witnessed and things they have not... And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather... A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves. On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcomed on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. (Morrison 13).

Morrison's diction of "have" denotes the "memories" as a possession, making

them unchangeable items which are described as "powerful". Morrison further pronounced these memories as power though a grandiose tone; the twins remember the details of *everything*. The power of their memories extends even beyond their own experiences. Morrison claims they can remember "things they have not" witnessed, and the lack of distinction between experiencing stories versus being told stories indicates both are invaluable and factual possessions.

Furthermore, Morrison clarifies that the power of the memories depends on the Morgan's relationship. It is "between them" that they can remember everything. However, power dynamics are questioned when Morrison personifies a specific story as "the controlling one." Through personification, readers can imagine how these memories hold a personal control and power over the twins. Additionally, Morrison clarifies the importance of this one story by titling it "the controlling one."

Morrison's personification, more broadly, creates an interpersonal relationship between memories and the twins. The story which controls them focuses on a series of rejections and hardships their descendants took while crossing the country to seek a place of freedom. Although the twins did not experience their rejection, they similarly remember being unwelcomed "on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith." In remembering the rejection of their descendants, the meaning of the controlling story has remained the same: not to accept "anybody but themselves." The twins consistently retell the story to give Ruby its meaning and origins, but

through isolation, no one is rejecting Ruby. Yet, in a pursuit of ideological coherence, Ruby locates the Convent as their dangerous outsiders. The narrative to reject anyone different haunts the men of Ruby into killing the woman in the Convent for their town.

However, after the massacre, Deacon's relationship with Steward changes alongside the origin and meaning of the controlling story. Morrison explains the change with Deacon, remarking that “[i]t was Deacon Morgan who had changed the most. It was as though he had looked in his brother’s face and did not like himself anymore. To everyone’s surprise he had formed a friendship (well, a relationship) with somebody other than Steward” (300). The imagery in the sentence “he had looked in his brother’s face and did not like himself anymore” suggests that the twins function as a mirror to view and understand themselves. Morrison's use of “anymore” reveals that Deacon was previously accepting of his self-reflection, but no longer is. In talking to Reverend Misner, Deacon reveals that he had a relationship with a woman in the convent named Connie but struggles to accept a version of himself who helped kill her. Deacon's struggle with shame dilutes his ability to narrate the story about the massacre as Steward, so he forms a new relationship with Reverend Misner. Morrison illustrates Deacon's break from upholding exclusionary norms by making the relationship a “surprise.” Furthermore, Morrison clarifies how the shock comes from Deacon’s relationship with simply “somebody other than Steward,” signifying that Deacon only had a meaningful relationship with Steward. Deacon’s new relationship with Reverend Misner makes him reveal a new story of how Haven and Ruby were created.

Deacon reveals that Haven was founded when his own grandfather rejected a version of himself through his own twin after they both faced racial violence. Deacon explains to Reverend Misner that his grandfather, Big Papa, known as Coffee, had a twin named Tea. However, when

a group of white boys were entertained by the twins' double faces, they threatened the twins to dance with a gun. Tea chose to dance, and Coffee got shot in the foot for refusing. After the incident, Coffee left Tea and contacted other freedmen with similar experiences to create Haven.

As Deacon explains the memory to Reverend Misner:

‘I always thought Coffee – Big Papa – was wrong,’ said Deacon Morgan. ‘Wrong in what he did to his brother. Tea was his twin, after all. Now I’m less sure. I’m thinking Coffee was right because he saw something in Tea that wasn’t just going along with some drunken whiteboys. He saw something that shamed him. The way his brother thought about things; the choices he made when up against it. Coffee couldn’t take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again. Not one word.’ (Morrison 303)

Morrison gives the reader Deacon’s direct interpretation of the event. He speaks with uncertainty as he begins to understand why his grandfather would reject his twin. Using dashes in Deacon’s thoughts, ‘I always thought Coffee – Big Papa – was wrong,’ creates the sense of an abrupt correction by Deacon, a feeling he needs to correct the way he tells the story. However, as he progresses, he reverts to calling his grandfather Coffee and letting himself articulate the story in a new way. Deacon believes that Coffee was ashamed of himself when looking at Tea. Morrison once again frames the relationship between twins through reflective imagery, such as “saw something” demonstrating Tea becoming a mirror for Coffee to view himself. Coffee saw a version of himself that “scared him.” Morrison emphasizes Coffee's unwillingness to accept that version of himself using blunt, direct syntax: “Coffee couldn’t take it.” The short and direct sentence creates a clear message that Coffee would rather lose his brother than process the shame he sees through him.

Morrison clarifies that Coffee is more so rejecting himself than his brother: “Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself.” Deacon explains that “[i]t scared him,” so Coffee never spoke nor mentioned Tea again. In response to the traumatic event, Coffee created a town designed to shield him from ever needing to face the choice again. The

Morgan twins subsequently inherit a town and sense of self built on a narrow path of self-isolation. They outline themselves and their town by recognizing and marking everyone else as dangerous and unworthy of paradise.

However, Deacon begins to recognize a need to process grief for the loss of his lover Connie and begins to re-imagine how he sees himself, his community, and town through speaking with Reverend Misner. Morrison highlights this self-reflection by continuing Deacon's and Reverend Misner's conversation in the following passage:

‘Lack of words,’ Richard said. ‘Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love. To lose a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that’s worse than the original shame, wouldn’t you say?’ Deacon looked down at his feet for a long time. Richard stayed quiet with him. Finally he raised his head and said: ‘I got a long way to go, Reverend.’ ‘You’ll make it,’ said Richard Misner. ‘No doubt about it.’(302)

Morrison continues the use of dialogue to demonstrate these characters' thoughts and points of view. Reverend Misner's short repetitive statements create a rhythmic tone of sadness concluded by the line: “To lose a brother is a hard thing.” He recognizes a sense of tragedy in losing a brother but sees a worse shame in *choosing* to lose a brother, rhetorically asking Deacon if he agrees, which in turn gives Deacon time to consider the lack of words, love, and forgiveness in the choice. Furthermore, Morrison uses the imagery of Deacon looking at his feet to represent him processing the shame, unable to look at Reverend Misner. Nonetheless, Reverend Misner stayed quiet with him. In that silence together, Deacon finally looks up and quotes: “I got a long way to go, Reverend.” Although the conversation was about Coffee and Tea, the use of pronouns illustrates Deacon processing his feelings though projecting himself and Steward onto the story.

Deacon could never re-imagine the story when speaking to Steward, but by speaking with Reverend Misner, he can reconfigure the meaning of memories to process his emotional trauma. Morrison's spatial metaphor indicates how small Deacon made his world and sense of self. Though indicating his need to go “a long way,” Deacon recognizes the lack of words,

forgiveness, and love around and within himself. Deacon created Ruby; Ruby created Deacon. However, by speaking with Reverend Misner, Deacon realizes that he must face the shame he feels rather than reject and close himself off. Through talking with Reverend Misner, Deacon has begun building a process to reconcile the generations of trauma embedded in the controlling story and the violence he himself enacted in its honor. With Reverend Misner, Deacon finds a new source of self-reflection with someone who believes he can “make it” to a place and sense of self where he accepts forgiveness and love.

Morrison's usage of twins signifies how meanings, stories, and identities are a shared experience. When Deacon looks at Steward with a feeling of shame, he describes his pain in relation to the experience of twinhood: “What he felt now was exotic to a twin— an incompleteness, a muffled solitude, which took away appetite, sleep, and sound” (Morrison 301). Morrison’s universal statement about twins represents how they symbolize a sense of unity. Without Steward, Deacon feels incomplete and burdened with a silent solitude he has never experienced. Furthermore, the enjoyment of life through the senses seems dull. Deacon has no appetite, cannot enjoy dreams, and only hears silence; a strong contrast to the past, when they would hear stories together and “listened to, imagined, and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more pleasurable than even the war they had fought in” (Morrison 16). Morrison suggests that the enjoyment of stories, memories, and finding their meanings were only enjoyed through their communal experience. Together, they always gave each other an affirming sense of acceptance on how the other thinks and experiences the world. Yet when Deacon feels shame in his actions, he only feels the pain of his choice when looking at Steward, a mirror to everything he is. If Deacon rejects a part of himself, the pain resembles that of losing a brother and a splintered

life. Although Coffee decided to abandon Tea, Morrison gives her readers hope about Deacon breaking their generational cycle of trauma through his choosing to be vulnerable with Reverend Misner rather than losing Steward.

The Vanishing Half: Stella's Struggle with Memories

Like Morrison, Bennett explains how the Vignes twins reflect a double sense of self splintered by racial trauma. Bennett consistently emphasizes the twins' inseparable identities, yet the first time they feel a sense of separation occurs when white men lynch their father. Bennett explains how a group of white men enter the Vignes home and lynch Leon Vignes, while his twin daughters watched from a crack through the closet door (Bennett 33). Desiree thought Stella might scream, so she covered her mouth with her hand. Seconds later, Stella covered Desiree's mouth as well. However, something also changes between them: "Something shifted between them in that moment. Before, Stella seemed as predictable as a reflection. But in the closet, for the first time, Desiree hadn't known what her sister might do" (Bennett 34).

Similar to Coffee and Tea, these twins are unable to reconcile with how to respond and process racial violence. After their father's funeral, "they no longer seemed like one body split in two, but two bodies poured into one, each pulling in her own way" (Bennett 36). Beforehand, the twins could see themselves through the other and feel unity; however, now they reflect the multitude of differences and similarities split between them both. Eventually, Stella makes a choice to leave Desiree and pass as white to escape her racial trauma. Unlike the Morgan twins, the Vignes twins did not want a town built for them. Despite being the great-great-great granddaughters of Alphonso Decuir, they "inherited his legacy, whether they wanted to or not" (Bennett 6). So, the twins run away on Founder's Day. In leaving, they each make a different choice: "Stella became white and Desiree married the darkest man she could find" (Bennett 4).

In leaving Mallard, Stella and Desiree encounter different racial hierarchies in New Orleans and the racially ambiguous twins face a crossroad about their racial identities.

Similar to Coffee, Stella *chooses* to lose her sister and creates a closed-off and exclusionary sense of self. For Stella, her choice to subvert race for her own agency was a sense of freedom—the creation of her own Haven. When remembering the first time she passed, she tells us, “Being white wasn’t the most exciting part. Being anyone else was a thrill. To transform into a different person in plain sight,” in her memories, “she’d never felt so free” (Bennett 183). To maintain that freedom, she eventually continues to pass indefinitely and hide her past from everyone she knows. The metaphor of passing, such as passing over, makes Stella's racial agency appear as a journey, an in-between experience between fixed racial boundaries, and a death. Overall, Stella’s ability to pass embodies the ability to question the stability of racial categories and the cost of trying to place freedom in isolation.

For readers, Stella's racial agency creates a space of transformation where readers can question the formation of fixed racial identities. After passing for many years and moving to California, Stella reflects on her decision to pass and desire to tell her only Black neighbor Lorretta Walker in the following passage:

She’d done one interesting thing in her whole life, but she would spend the rest of her days hiding it. When Loretta asked about her childhood, she always hedged. She couldn’t share any memory of her youth without also conjuring Desiree; all of her memories were cleaved in half, her sister excised right out of them, and how lonely they seemed now, Stella swimming by herself at the river, wandering through sugarcane fields, running breathlessly from a goose chasing her down the road. A lonely past, a lonely present. Until now. Somehow, Loretta Walker had become the only person she could talk to (Bennett 174).

Bennett begins her passage with an important tone of ambiguity through her diction of ambiguous words such as “thing” and “It”. These word choices signify that the “one interesting thing” in Stella’s life is beyond a single title. Stella’s experience of hiding “it” is not labeled as

passing; instead, her action can be interpreted as something beyond a performance or secret. Bennett's syntax presents Stella's ability to pass as a form of agency. Agency resembles her capacity to independently choose and affect change. Bennett demonstrates Stella's agency through her independent, resolute, and self-reflective voice. A word like "done" signifies that Stella has taken an action and created change in some capacity. Her self-reflective voice further articulates a knowingness about the conditions of her agency. Stella describes the cost of her choice as knowing she "would spend the rest of her days hiding it." Ultimately, Stella remains conscious of her ability and agency to transform her Black identity to gain white privileges. In the novel, some of these privileges included a better job, a large house, and an education.

However, in transforming her racial identity through passing, Stella struggles with remembering her past. Bennett demonstrates Stella's struggle by juxtaposing contradictory verbs when describing her twin sister. Stella can't "share any memory of her youth without also conjuring Desiree; all of her memories were cleaved in half, her sister excised right out of them." The connotation of "conjuring" invokes a magical and uncontrollable mood; however, the connotations of "cleaved" and "excised" suggest a mechanical and intentional tone. Juxtaposing these verbs illustrates Stella's attempt yet inability to separate Desiree from her memories. Her past cannot exist without Desiree.

To sustain her new life through passing, Stella must forget her past which means forgetting Desiree. In reflecting on her cleaved memories, Stella recognizes "how lonely they seemed now." Without Desiree, who also reflects her missing self, Stella remembers "swimming by herself at the river, wandering through sugarcane fields, running breathlessly from a goose chasing her down the road." The imagery initially clarifies Stella's loneliness, "swimming by herself at the river," but then switches to a more descriptive language, imagining

herself “running breathlessly from a goose chasing her down the road.” As the memories become more detailed, Desiree is likely uncontrollably conjured, so Bennett abruptly interrupts Stella’s memory, demanding “A lonely past, a lonely present.” For Stella, her haven from racial oppression requires abandoning her sister and enduring a muffled life of solitude.

Stella's interruption of her nostalgia reflects how people and memories challenge her choice to pass. In particular, Loretta Walker challenges Stella's present which inadvertently challenges her past. Upon building a friendship with Loretta, who reminds Stella of Desiree, she begins to reminisce on her vanishing half (Bennett 180). Her past and present were both lonely “until now.” Upon connecting to another Black woman, “[s]omehow, Loretta Walker became the only person she could talk to.” When Stella conceptualizes herself through Loretta’s eyes, a forgotten part of herself once again dreams of being seen and to speak. Indeed, by specifying Loretta as the *only* person Stella *could* talk to, Bennett indicates that whenever Stella talks to someone else, she can’t fully speak. The impossibility of speaking to others reflects Stella’s fragmented and lost sense of self, yet Loretta allows the possibility of revitalizing her whole self.

Through Bennett’s usage of twins, Desiree becomes the reflection of everything Stella runs away from— her home, her family, her racial identity, her past, and more. In a later passage, Stella wonders if Loretta secretly knows she is passing and believes it would be “[h]umiliating but strangely liberating” (Bennett 181). If Loretta knew, Stella could finally not be alone again. Although passing was once a choice to find freedom, the conditions of solitude become a new cage. As she explains, “at first, passing seemed so simple” but eventually learned “how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you” (Bennett 169). Stella cannot share her experience of the world and eventually replicates racial prejudice against Loretta, Loretta’s daughter, and Jude

to rationalize her reason and need to continue passing. Like Coffee, Stella stays resolute in seeking a haven built through isolation and abandons the necessity of vulnerability by never speaking to Loretta.

The Function of Nostalgia and Memories in Both Novels:

The Morgan and Vignes twins' relationship with nostalgia demonstrates how nostalgic notions create identity, race, and locations. Stella's choice to reject her nostalgia can be seen as a transgressive agency to resist dominant constructions of race and identity; in contrast, the Morgan twins' unwillingness to forget the past uplift stagnant ways of forming race and identity. To explore these themes, Valerie Rohy examines the tropes of passing and desire in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* to reveal the function nostalgia plays in race, identity, and nationalism in the paper "Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni's Room*." Rohy quickly clarifies how race and sexuality are constructed differences enforced by dominant cultures. As Rohy argues, "the white or straight world invents its other in order to recognize itself" (228). Since no original race exists, Baldwin and Rohy suggest a white/black racial relationship functions through white supremacy disenfranchising blackness for self-authentication. Since whiteness benefits from the relationship, white actors aim to make race an inherent truth that has always existed so it will not be questioned.

However, there is no true origin or coherent story of race in the U.S. without realizing its creation for white supremacy and their related tactics of separation and dominance. Rohy argues that race, nationalism, and most identificatory mechanisms are "retrospective, indeed nostalgic, constructions, subject to a pathos of lost origins and demanding, on part of the dominant culture, the violent disavowal and projection of its own contingent identity" (219). As Rohy explains, whiteness is contingent on Blackness, so it violently enforces the fixed boundaries between these

identities. Indeed, Rohy notes race as the ultimate trope of difference because of its completely arbitrary nature yet race still exists as a political power shaped by public spheres. Morrison demonstrates a similar perspective by making Ruby a town all about race. Ruby uses retrospective and nostalgic stories of racial purity to enforce who is allowed into their town while the Convent does not. The men of Ruby cling to a nostalgic framework of race being a hierarchy marker and the Convent becomes their marked site of depravity and “otherness”.

The significance of the twins' fluctuating memories demonstrates the inherent fluidity existing within identity, race, and locations. Rohy claims that subjectivity and the identificatory mechanisms we use to recognize ourselves as subjects “is always a story told from the vantage point of the present and projected into the past, where it gains the status of an origin” (228). Rohy’s claim means that the creation of the past and self-identified origins are constantly being made within the present. Since ideas of the past and origins are constantly being created, they offer themselves to the whims of change. The process of changing the past can be seen through Deacon Morgan’s ability to find new meaning in the controlling story alongside Stella's ability to reimagine her memories as being alone when talking to Loretta.

Morrison tackles the issues of colorism by making readers imagine a town where dark skin is praised and valued; however, Morrison reveals that violence, and an incoherent story of race will remain under any skin color if the meaning is not changed. Bennett also creates the fictionalization of passing, so readers can witness how an individual, aware of racial constructions, can expose the functions of race as an unreliable social marker of information. However, as demonstrated in Stella's cost of loneliness and Coffee’s need to reject his brother, neither character has full agency. As Rohy points out, “[a]gency and self-consciousness are never fully ours: the effect of identity continually and relatively produced by the subject to

recognize itself as a subject” (231). Rohy’s words reflect how Stella’s agency and subjectivity rely on consistently racializing herself and considering how others recognize her as a subject. Furthermore, these literary twins reflect Rohy’s sentiment by having conjoined experiences and inseparable identities— each twin finds a sense of self through their relationships.

Ultimately, Morrison and Bennett demonstrate how people recognize themselves, history, race, and places through methods of relation and meaning. The relationships we form with others and places construct how we see ourselves and appoint meaning. Before exploring the more utopian aspects of these novels, each author lets readers understand that places and identity are both created through sets of relations and reflections of shared understanding. There is no stable or universal method to map the infinite ways people can imagine and experience the world, communities, or selfhood. To understand how characters imagine a utopian sense of belonging and liberation is rooted in how they experience and express history, identity, place, and time. These authors seek to connect the material and metaphorical conceptualization of space through understanding these characters' relationships with memory. Understanding how the characters construct and govern themselves, indicates how they will identify and govern a place. As McKittrick poetically explains, the conceptual connection between “concrete spaces, language, and subjectivity” opens the possibility for envisioning interpretive alternative worlds and a series of sites which could exist outside the terrain of racial-sexual oppression (xiii).

Part 2: Love, Locations, and Liberation

The Vanishing Half: Self-Reorganization through Relationships

Through recognizing the need for self-identification through others, Bennett explores how Desiree's daughter Jude finds herself through love rather than rejection. After Desiree's marriage becomes abusive, she returns to Mallard with her dark-skinned daughter. In a town built for light-skinned Black people, Jude grows up facing multiple forms of violence. In Mallard, the town harasses and isolates her. From remembering her mother's abuse to being desired only in the dark, Jude endures a long journey of accepting her body, sexuality, and identity. To articulate the different forms of agency Jude takes against her circumstances, Bennett ends her novel with a passage that parallels Stella's reflection on her loneliness, using the same setting and similar themes of secrecy and imagery. In the conclusion, Jude and her boyfriend Reese are visiting Mallard for her grandmother's funeral, and are sneaking out to the river:

She had slipped out through the back door with her boyfriend, holding his hand as they ran through the woods toward the river. The sun was beginning to set, and under the tangerine sky, Reese tugged his undershirt over his head. The sun warmed his chest, still paler than the rest of him. In time, his scars would fade, his skin darkening. She would look at him and forget there had ever been a time he'd hidden from her. He unzipped her funeral dress, folding it neatly on a rock, and they waded into the cold water, squealing, water inching up their thighs. The river, like all rivers, remembered its course. They floated under the leafy canopy of trees, begging to forget (Bennett 343).

In the passage, Jude and her boyfriend are described as slipping away through the back door. The connotation of "slipped" means they are moving discreetly; furthermore, the imagery of "through the back door" creates an image of them avoiding the family and front door. The two then begin running "through the woods toward the river". The setting and actions mirror Stella's description of her memory swimming in the river alone and running breathlessly away from a goose. Unlike Stella who interrupts her nostalgic memory of running away from something, Jude's passage begins with her running toward something. Bennett illustrates a major difference between their

actions by having Jude be one of two people “holding hands” as they run while Stella forces herself to be alone in her memory. Jude’s passage is additionally more descriptive, particularly in its illustration of time. In this image, “[t]he sun was beginning to set, and under the tangerine sky, Reese tugged his undershirt,” shows the reader how the moment exists in the present by describing the movement of the earth and its effect on the sky. By contrast, in Stella’s passage, Bennett invokes time without imagery and uses direct deictics such as “until now” and “a lonely present, a lonely past.” The only descriptive language in Stella’s passage lives in her memories, whereas Jude’s experience in the river with Reese is entirely illustrated through lively imagery.

Furthermore, the moment exhibits how Reese stops hiding while Stella remains in hiding. As a transgender man, Reese is described as always hiding his body, bruising his chest from wrapping it, and running away from his family to become himself. However, near the end of the novel, Reese undergoes top surgery and in a wonderful moment “tugged his undershirt over his head.” When he takes off his shirt, “[t]he sun warmed his chest, still paler than the rest of him. In time, his scars would fade, his skin darkening.” The omniscient narrator describes how time will heal him; the comforting connotation of “warmed” and his scar’s ability to fade by revealing himself over time to heal his past. The darkening of his skin as a healing mechanism also reflects an acceptance of dark skin in face of the harmful violence placed on their bodies through colorism and gender dysmorphia.

Bennett also establishes an important relationship between remembering, forgetting, and becoming in this moment. While Jude watches Reese reveal himself, “[s]he would look at him and forget there had ever been a time he’d hidden from her.” Through Jude’s perspective, readers watch her ability to let go of Reese’s past to completely embrace a greater and fuller version of him. In seeing Reese, she can peacefully forget who he might have been before because he has

become so much more himself in the present. Although Reese has undergone many forms of transformation to live a more authentic version of himself, he no longer needs to remember them. Stella also wants to forget her past for a freer version of herself, yet Stella's point of view remains isolated. Stella's memories continue haunting her as she keeps them hidden rather than expelling them free.

Jude similarly transforms her relationship with her body through her relationship with Reese and their shared locations. After Reese takes off his shirt, he also “unzipped her funeral dress, folding it neatly on a rock.” Bennett uses the respectful manner of “folding” the funeral clothes “neatly on a rock” as an important sign of Reese carefully undressing Jude. The tender actions evoke a soft reminder surrounding Jude's struggle with her sexuality, body, and past relationships. While still remembering her mother's abuse, Jude previously endured mental and emotional abuse from a partner as well in Mallard. Although Jude knew not to call him her boyfriend, her first experience with sexuality was with Lonnie Goudeau, who was also “the first person to call her Tar Baby” (Bennett 85). Alongside being her childhood bully, Lonnie would only see Jude at night in a farm and refuses to acknowledge her during the day.

Although Jude left Mallard, her childhood memories of abuse and shame remain: “She wasn't in Mallard anymore, but somehow, the town wouldn't leave her” (Bennett 125). At a beach once, in a different moment, Jude remembers,

In Mallard, she never dared to swim in the river— imagine showing so much of yourself...Even now, she pictured sunbathers laughing as soon as she tugged off her shift. Snickering at Reese, too, wondering what on earth is he doing with that black thing? (Bennett 125)

Jude's relationship with her body is built on the colorist ideology placed on her by Mallard and Lonnie. Despite leaving the town, Bennett again says that places are more ideas than places, and the colorist ideology within Mallard follows and haunts Jude. Memories of being shamed and

hidden in Mallard make her feel insecure and unworthy of Reese, thinking she is too dark for him. However, Reese loves Jude and takes off her clothes with respect and their earned trust.

Jude relinquishes her body, allows herself to be seen, and reclaims her self-image by swimming in the daunting river. While they are both stripped down, they wade into the water “squealing” with excitement and “floated under the leafy canopy of trees.” Together, they relinquish layers of their past selves shaped by trauma and “beg” to “forget” their past. As Rohy earlier explained, consciousness is never fully ours, so Jude’s and Reese’s relationship creates an important sense of relation through each other. Together, they can see greater versions of themselves through each other’s eyes.

To explain the significance of the ending scene, Bennett describes the moment in an interview, calling attention to,

Jude and Reese, who are two characters who have experienced so much trauma and so much shame and so much violence in their lives, particularly surrounding their bodies. Them having this moment of bodily liberation, this baptismal moment of carefree joy together ... this was where I wanted to end. (Vox)

Bennett’s emphasis on the moment as liberation and baptismal signifies the spiritual importance of the river. In the water, Reese and Jude release their past traumas to become new. Bennett then personifies the river to align it with the characters’ struggles of remembering: “The river, like all rivers, remembered its course.” Although remembering is painful for so many of the characters within *The Vanishing Half*, memories are an inevitable force that shape the course of how they become themselves. For Jude and Reese, they make the river a site of solace. If the river can remember the course of their lives for them, they can “beg to forget” the painful or traumatic costs of their self-transformation. Through their relationship of acceptance, they create a place of freedom, of love, and rest; a place flowing with an unlimited and unbounded sense of time, space, and freedom.

The Vanishing Half: Marginality and Locations

Like Bennett, bell hooks discusses a similar power of transformation through marginal spaces in her essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” hooks depicts how people within the margin can understand the center by describing her experience of living in a small Kentucky town. In this town, a railroad separated the center and margin of the town: “Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in... We always had to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town” (hooks 20). Although hooks could never stay in the other world, she “developed a particular way of seeing reality.” She and others could look “both from the outside in and from the inside out... We understand both” (hooks 20). hook's articulation of seeing the margin and center of places opened her to a world of knowledge on how to re-imagine the boundaries of these locations. She believes that marginality should not be seen as “a site of deprivation” because it is in fact the opposite: it is “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (hooks 20). Indeed, marginality can observe and critique centralized knowledge through an inside and outside perspective.

In a locational sense, the marginal space of radical transformation in *The Vanishing Half* is the river. Jude and Reese find their moment of liberation at the river described as right outside of Mallard. In creating their own marginal space, they create a discourse of radical self-love. As hooks writes, “We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative spaces which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (hooks 23). By leaving Mallard and sneaking into the river, Reese and Jude create a new marginal space to affirm the subjective beauty of their bodies. Through their affirming love, they each reveal a more fulfilling and truer version of themselves.

In a moment of pure vulnerability, Reese and Jude strip their bodies bare and jump into the river as new people finding liberation by transgressing the boundaries of sexuality, gender, and colorism together.

The Vanishing Half: Remembering, Forgetting, and Transforming

The Vanishing Half characters' choices surrounding their marginal identities demonstrate the intertwined struggle and power of becoming oneself in face of oppressive boundaries. Remembering is an inescapable part of life, but it can be transformed. As bell hooks explains, “Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting, a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, and that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present” (hooks 17). To create political change, remembering can transform our present, but nostalgia is a useless act of reinforcing the desire for oppressive boundaries to remain stagnant. However, as Rohy earlier argued, identities are retrospective and nostalgic constructions. In their nostalgic pathos, “Identity's coherence is generated in part by endless reference to an irrecoverable origin, an *elsewhere*” (Rohy 229). Looking into the past for ourselves is inevitable, but we have the power to project our present selves into the past and mark new origins of ourselves, such as Jude, who had the power to completely relinquish a version of Reese which hid from her and mark a new origin for him in the present.

In this power of temporal transformation, meaning finds fluidity in the river— an ever-flowing space of transformation which knows its course through remembering. In locating your origin through transformation, “One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting” (hooks 19). Accepting transformation as the process of

becoming yourself is seen the moment Jude can look at Reese and forget there had ever been a time he had hidden from her. Reese has transformed so fully into himself; his past does not demand to be remembered and forgetting became a peaceful and unspoken process. According to Bennett, the process of becoming your greatest self is often a painful confrontation yet a peaceful forgetting.

Paradise: Transformation of Trauma through Community

Morrison also creates a marginal space in *Paradise* where relationships carve a pathway to work through characters' trauma through shared moments of vulnerability. Verena Harz explains this process in her online article "Building a Better Place: Utopianism and the Revision of Community in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." Harz explains that despite the women's variety of ethnic backgrounds, they all share a history of oppression and victimization. Throughout the novel, Morrison slowly reveals how traumatic memories haunt each woman: "Mavis is responsible for the death of her twin babies, Gigi witnessed the shooting of a black boy during a Civil Rights demonstration, Seneca was abandoned by her teenage mother at the age of five, and Pallas was gang-raped" (Harz). Over time, the convent becomes an open space where these women can seek shelter and leave as they please. Morrison emphasizes the freedom of the space: "they all came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave" (Morrison 262). The women's decision to stay comes when Connie names herself Consolata and offers them the skills to learn their true desires. As Consolata tells the women, "Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (Morrison 262).

Eventually, Consolata leads the women through a healing ceremony called "Loud Dreaming" where each woman works through their oppressive histories and memories. Loud Dreaming is a healing ceremony reliant on relocating their desires, reconfiguring the women's

bodies, and understanding the connection between physical and psychic pain. In the ritual, the women lay naked on the floor together and draw silhouettes around their bodies. Inside their silhouettes, they feel every story, fragmented memory, and physical sensation of each woman. They all share their traumatic histories and everyone else listens. In listening, they begin to experience, enter, and relive each other's stories. As Harz explains, these characters' abilities to relive each other's experiences creates a “multivocal, dialogic space in which different, equally valid histories emerge simultaneously” (Harz). By speaking their fragmented memories and internalized pain aloud, each woman can newly locate, confront, and reconfigure their bodies and spirit.

The women of the Convent create their own mirrors of self-recognition by placing negative emotions onto silhouettes instead of their bodies. The tool allows them to transform and accept multiple memories, emotions, and co-existing versions of themselves. English Professor, Richard Schur, explains this process in his work, “Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory.’ Schur believes the ritual allows the women to redefine their bodies and the mental constructions that give the body meaning (Schur 292). Schur explains the importance of the silhouettes in the following passage:

These silhouettes become receptacles for all of their negative thoughts, thoughts that previously had been directed against themselves. Rather than internalize the pain or punish themselves with various forms of self-mutilation, the women can examine that pain and mark it on an image instead of themselves. (Schur 292)

Schur argues that the women’s ability to externalize their emotions grants them the freedom to reconstruct the image of their physical and mental identities by creating another version of themselves to reference for meaning.

Harz similarly explains how their method of self-recognition is ultimately a process of allowing ‘otherness’ within themselves. Harz argues that “[t]he distinction between

inside/outside and self/other collapses” and the women can become whole (Harz). This example can be seen when Consolata explains to the women that “Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (Morrison 263). Indeed, Morrison explains that Eve is a mother because Mary is a daughter; their relationship co-creates each other. Given the religious symbolism, Harz similarly explains how Consolata makes the women consider themselves by not separating the relationships between “body and the mind, the sexual and the spiritual, good and bad” (Harz). The women in the Convent begin healing by conjoining both aspects of their identity “torn apart in the dualistic worldview of the dominant society and of Ruby” (Harz). By acknowledging the dualism within themselves and others, they acknowledge their racialized and gendered pain to collectively move beyond them together. Harz explains that ultimately, their communal and interactive process of giving new meaning to their memories allows the women to confront and transcend their traumas (Harz). Unlike Ruby, the Convent does not aspire for perfection in terms of homogeneity, stability, and harmony. Instead, it becomes a dynamic space where a crossroad of conflicting identities, times, and places can co-exist.

Morrison supports Schur’s and Harz’s arguments about the success of the Convent by describing the change in the women after practicing loud dreaming: “With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (Morrison 265). In a simile, Morrison compares Consolata to a “new and revised Reverend Mother,” using the religious connotation of Reverend to paint Consolata as a spiritual figure. Morrison crafts an overall mood of spiritual satisfaction through narrating Consolata's ability to nurture and alter them, creating the mood through diction such as “thirst,” “feeding,” “quench,” and “seductive” in the passage. The connotation of these words relate to

physical desires such as drinking, eating, and sex—and Consolata teaches new forms and methods of experiencing them. Morrison also signifies the positive results of their ritual by describing the women as forgetting the “moving bodies they wore.” By objectifying their bodies as something they can wear, Morrison signifies how their sense of self has moved beyond their physical bodies. Morrison further demonstrates the shift in their self-image by instead personifying the silhouettes as “so seductive” and “alive.” Morrison's seductive characterization of the silhouettes illustrates the women's desire to continue reconstructing and transforming their spirit and body. Indeed, like Reese and Jude, the women in the convent are able to peacefully forget the bodily trauma they have endured and embody greater spiritual understandings of themselves.

Schur also compares the success of the Convent to the Morgan twins when he observes that, “[c]ompared to Deacon's, and by implication Steward's, ‘total memory,’ the members of the Convent have developed a viable strategy for working through the racialized and gendered violence” (Schur 290). Schur outlines how Deacon's and Steward's ‘total memory’ is an inadequate mechanism for coping with external and internal violence. Indeed, as the women become happier, they threaten Ruby's self-image of exceptionalism. Morrison juxtaposes Consolata's understanding of Eve and Mary when the Men of Ruby call the women “bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” as they march forward to kill them (Morrison 18). As Harz explains, the women begin to “represent a version of the female Ruby's patriarchs cannot accept because it contradicts their vision of ‘true womanhood’ and eludes their control” (Harz). Additionally, the Convent violates Ruby's rule of racial purity by having a racially integrated community. Ruby holds the women responsible for creating the “intolerable ways” in which Ruby is dwindling (Morrison 275). Ultimately, the massacre of the Convent becomes a

culmination of the Ruby mens' inability to process their racial-sexual trauma and the failure of Ruby's utopia.

Paradise: Locating and Sharing Desire

Similar to Bennett, Morrison's conclusion details the women's success in creating a sense of paradise. In the last chapter, each of the murdered women appears as someone from their past. However, the conclusion is specifically about Connie, also known as Consolata, resting as a woman from her past named Piedade who sings to the ocean. Morrison describes the scene in her following conclusion:

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.

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise. (Morrison 318)

The first paragraph of the conclusion is a single sentence, including multiple phrases in the continuous tense, such as "reaching," "smoking," "going," and "coming" to create a flowing sense of time despite the usage of past tense verbs such as "shared," "divided," and "begun." Morrison's variety of verbs creates a language which emphasizes different states of being and time intertwined. The grammar reflects the mythical and speculative state of Connie being intertwined with Consolata and Piedade. However, Morrison uses a dash to introduce the last clause. The dash creates an interrupting break from the run-on sentence and a breath of air after such a long thought, creating a special emphasis on the words "the ease of coming back to love begun." As a result of Morrison's syntax, readers can feel a similar ease.

Morrison also establishes the significance of stories and memories through emphasizing the sharing of words in multiple ways. Examples include the solace of a song, words' ability to

evoke memories, and the bliss of shared speech spilled by the fire. Indeed, Morrison's diction signifies that a sense of "solace" is derived from relationships of growing together, sharing words, and evoking memories. A similar sense of bliss was described in how the Morgan twins felt when listening and sharing stories as well. For all these characters, forms of memories and stories enable characters to find their desires. The emphasis of shared experience highlights Brown's argument that Black utopian novels demonstrate how "desire and fulfillment can be imagined outside of the confines of individualist claims" (7). Indeed, Morrison establishes that desire and fulfillment are found when characters are sharing their thoughts, memories, and dreams together. The isolation of individualistic desires results in losing a brother or killing someone.

However, Morrison distinguishes finding desire from nostalgia versus purposeful methods of remembering. As hooks earlier explained, there is a struggle between a politicization of memory which longs for something to be as it once was and a remembering which can illuminate and transform the present (17). The Morgan twins consistently politicized their nostalgia of Haven to dictate how Ruby should be governed. In contrast, the women of the Convent confront their nostalgia and relinquish their desire to return to a time before their trauma. Instead, the women embrace the endless work of becoming stronger, overcoming their memories by creating new methods of storytelling.

The women's efforts to reconfigure their memories and trauma grant them access to locate home. As Rohy argues, "Home only becomes possible only after identity and the possibility of meaning are recognized as lost, when the contingency of the origin erased by nostalgia and home is naturalized as an object of desire" (231). Through recognizing the disillusionment of retrospective nostalgia, people can confront the contingency of their current

desires. In recognition, they can naturalize an object or place to symbolize their desire. What Morrison calls “the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home” reflects how the women can locate home as home, desire as desire; they align the symbolism of each signifier. They do not long for a lost place, they have located their desires and fulfillment in their home. Indeed, nostalgia cannot be escaped, yet the women’s nostalgia can be proactively located in their place of choice, they are able to return to where “love” began and remains.

The second part of Morrison's conclusion locates paradise by a sea that exists while simultaneously does not exist. The end passage is mythical and speculative, readers are unsure whether the moment exists in the past, the future, or simply fiction. Nonetheless, Morrison signifies the abundance of possibility, partially through seven commas in the second line, “Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time.” The overall effect creates a wave-like scene. Not only does the sentence *look* like multiple waves though the commas, but the words and phrases are accompanied by antonyms and contradicting thoughts. Like waves and crashes, the sentence contains oppositional words such as “crew and passengers” and “lost and saved”. The dualistic phrases emphasize the last line: “for they have been disconsolate for some time.” The word “disconsolate” is perhaps a pun for readers since *Consolata* is similar to the word “disconsolate.” Nonetheless, the pun highlights Connie's experience being lost without the strength of *Consolata*, and *Consolata* now being saved through *Piedade*. Beyond the pun, the omniscient narrator explains that people and things have been disconnected and dejected for some time, but in the water they have finally come together.

The river in *The Vanishing Half* and the sea in *Paradise* represents the unbounded, unlimited, forever changing space where meaning can be imagined and reconfigured. Morrison

symbolizes this process through the combination of spatial, temporal, and spiritual metaphors in her last line: “Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (Morrison 318). In the “now” each character can rest, yet they will simultaneously continue “shouldering the endless work” of Paradise indefinitely. Morrison also used spatial and spiritual metaphors to locate “Paradise” as an earthly project and place located “down here” rather than above in the heavens. Although the capitalization of “Paradise” signifies a place, the overall mythical and speculative nature of the conclusion signifies that the location may also not materially exist. In true utopian fashion, Morrison’s Paradise is a good place, no place. Furthermore, given the endless amount of work within paradise, Morrison’s conclusion embodies Ahmad's definition of a Black utopia as an “unbounded and unfinished” mode of space (Ahmad 132). The river in *The Vanishing Half* creates a similar portrayal through Jude’s and Reese’s ability to “float” and “forget” while simultaneously still “begging to forget” (Bennett 343). Although these characters have peacefully forgotten their memories at this moment, they all understand their work will never be finished.

Furthermore, in each novel, the bodies of water become reflections of these characters' struggle and solace. In *The Vanishing Half*, Reese and Jude struggle to remember, so Bennett personifies the river with an ability to remember. Likewise, Piedade sings a song which creates a sense of solace, so Morrison personifies the ocean as “sending rhythms of water ashore” though “heaves.” Both in struggle and solace, the alignment between these characters' actions and the bodies of water demonstrates how locations became a reflection of their inhibitors. Since locations mirror characters' emotions and actions, these authors argue that ongoing collective efforts to reconstruct identificatory mechanisms through relationships and language create utopia. T.S. McMillin further emphasizes the significance of locating these sites of utopia in

water through his novel *The Meaning of Rivers Flow and Reflection in American Literature* (2011). McMillin claims that literature offers a unique set of conditions for people to study meaning, and literature about water offers a rich exploration of meaning's fluidity (xiv). Each author utilizes the deep fluidity of water to represent the deep fluidity of creating meaning about one's body and world. Indeed, these novels become a channel of understanding for readers to connect the water around and within themselves.

Conclusion: The River to Paradise

Despite the typical depiction of utopia as a society and place of permanent happiness, these authors argue moments of utopia exist in peoples' shared desire to overcome struggle through shared vulnerability. As Zamalin writes, "Utopia requires struggle because a politics based on shared vulnerability is hard. Communicating and acting need to be reimagined not as solutions to problems, but as problems to be worked through and worked on, to be deconstructed and reconstructed" (55). Indeed, both novels create sites of liberation by marginalized people with shared vulnerabilities working together to overcome fixed dominant political cultures by exposing and reconfiguring their bodies, stories, and memories. Furthermore, these marginal spaces allow characters to create new and radical methods to deconstruct and reconstruct problems placed onto them.

Despite the novels' all-Black towns coming together in racial vulnerability, they harbored hierarchical forms of racialization which mimic the United States' dominant political culture. Yet most importantly, these all-Black towns' sense of vulnerability became obsolete through isolation and resisted any attempts to reconstruct and re-communicate the vulnerabilities of their communities. The town's people rejected futuristic hopes of change and relied on nostalgic myths of meaning for governance. Each author depicts a more successful creation of space by their marginalized characters' ability to establish practices of overcoming forms of vulnerability through transforming their relationships, identities, and memories. These relationships and politics of vulnerability reflect how forms of trauma can be collectively processed. The characters' efforts to heal together created spaces where their sense of liberation could be better located, expressed, and labeled as utopia.

Each author argues that the true strength of Black utopianism exists through marginality's ability to imagine new methods of forming identity, culture, and locations outside of dominant cultural constrictions of race and gender. These authors' work echoes bell hooks's claim that marginality is the "central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse" (20). Marginality locates peoples and ideas at the border of central knowledge; hegemonic power excludes, conceals, minimizes, and pushes marginal thoughts away. Yet, as hooks explained, the margin can observe and understand the center. Marginality understands the coexisting and inseparable nature between marginalized and centralized knowledge. In the United States, Black women are a uniquely marginalized group who offer an intersectional observation about the interplay between racialized and gendered power.

Yet the intertwined oppression Black women face can be examined during the treatment of Breanna Taylor during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. The need for justice was publicly outraged and sparked by George Floyd's death, but six police officers murdered Breanna Taylor in her home around a week earlier on March 13th, 2020. Nonetheless, Breanna Taylor's murder received far less media attention; furthermore, the murder reflected the concealed and privatized violence Black women often faced in the United States. Indeed, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor reiterates how violence against Black women, especially Black transwomen, hardly receives news coverage in her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016). Dominant political and cultural discourse in the United States leave little room for the perspective and experiences of Black women.

However, forms of literature and narrative works offer space for marginalized people to express and experience themselves in new ways. Indeed, poetic expressions of space can articulate the hidden and complex life of Black female personhood. Literature offers a unique

way of remembering and storytelling through writing contradictory histories, nonlinear narrative, and the variety of central and marginal landscapes people could be experiencing at once. These literary tools create a language which can articulate the complex subjectivity of marginalized people. T.S. McMillin explains this power of creation by describing literature as “a series of events with indefinite origins and ends, involving acts of reading and writing, yielding interpretations that contribute meaning to our efforts to understand the world in which we live” (McMillin xiv). Writing has no ending and no beginning; writers can mark new origins and moments of infinity through unfinished endings. Any imaginable or *needed* utopia can be conceived in literature.

Expressions of utopian geography and Black femininity in literature work together to advance new ways of knowing and imagining a sense of place and belonging. These authors help reveal the limitations of spatial paradigms in the U.S. and present the possibility of liberating lives beyond racial-sexual oppression through transforming stories and historical memories. Works like *The Vanishing Half* and *Paradise* allow readers to believe, dream, and imagine new ways of finding happiness through overcoming communal struggle. Although the margins of society are dangerous, these authors represent their concealed terrains as knowable sites filled with an abundance of radical possibility, desire, and freedom.



You can swim to the bank, or we can float the steam, knowing the river remembers its course. While floating in the water, our vanishing sights and memories will fade, only to reveal new sites and imaginations about the impending ocean singing us home— a place and tune we knew a long, long time ago.

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