

The Trouble With Paradise:  
Exploring Communities of Difference in Three American Novels

by  
Blair Nosan

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## Abstract

Paradise has played an integral role in western culture since its beginnings in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. While paradise has had different connotations throughout this long human history, this thesis focuses specifically on the Euro-American paradise story, a model developed by exploring the idea of an earthly paradise alongside its influence on European expansion. I posit that the Euro-American model necessitates a cohesive communal—or, in America, national—identity. This imperative, which will be shown to underpin the Euro-American paradise, becomes destructive in even seemingly insular communities, which are actually inhabited by complex differences.

This thesis shifts the center of the Euro-American model and considers voices that have been silenced by the ideal of a paradise that excludes difference. Exploring the paradises created by marginalized Others and the ways in which they replicate the Euro-American model is a fundamental undertaking in discerning the lived character of “Americanness.” By focusing on three novels that critique paradise through Jewish American, African American, and Native American communities, I will consider how exclusion from the American mainstream has led these three disparate novels to a common critique of the monolithic notion of paradise.

Each of the following chapters is devoted to a different minority American novel. By viewing these texts as fictional representations of minority experiences, this thesis will explore how the communities that have been subordinated and silenced by the story of paradise have responded with a challenge to its implicit intolerance of difference. Considering this long standing myth through the lens of those whom it has dispossessed and denied will emphasize the myriad of voices that populate the American landscape. Ultimately, these critiques of a hegemonic narrative will lead to an alternative model of sustainable communal difference, which embodies the motivation of these minority writers.

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### Short Titles

- “Calloway”: Calloway, Colin G. *New Worlds For All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- “Dippie”: Dippie, Brian W. *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*. Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1982.
- “Goldman”: Goldman, Marlene. “Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in *Green Grass, Running Water*.” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162. (Summer/Autumn 1999): 18-38.
- “Holland”: Holland, Sharon P. and Tiya Miles, eds. *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006
- “Kent”: Kent, Alicia A. *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- “King”: King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993.
- “Morrison”: Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Penguin Putnum Inc., 1999.
- “Pollack”: Pollack, Eileen. *Paradise, New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

## Introduction

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Paradise is not a sacred place; it is a story. It speaks of events that arise in a garden, after death, on vacation, in secluded communities, and even upon discovery of new lands. It always includes the same distant rumblings: life could be better, it could be different—it could be *perfect*. The origins of this story can be traced to the biblical Garden of Eden. Although the notion of heaven, an after-life paradise, is still prevalent in many spiritual traditions, after centuries of revision this tale of human expulsion from a perfect place has also acquired new meaning. European settlement in North America, characterized by the desire to colonize an earthly manifestation of bounty and bliss, models this new paradisaal vision.

Although the history of America suggests that Europeans alone partook in the search for paradise, this essay will investigate how fictional minority communities engage the “Euro-American paradise model.”<sup>1</sup> Two of the three novels I examine invoke this model in their creation of minority communities; their efforts present a microcosmic re-enactment of the dramas and idealizations central to the creation of the United States. The experiences of oppression and “Otherness,”<sup>2</sup> which inspire these characters’ search

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, the “Euro-American paradise model” will be used interchangeably with the word “paradise.” Although the notion of paradise has many different meanings, even within this essay, other paradise visions will be signified as such, while “paradise” alone will be a reference to the American model.

<sup>2</sup> “Other” and “Otherness,” with a capital ‘O’ is used to refer specifically to minority consciousness. Rather than insisting on racial tensions, this term is meant to diffuse the sensation of being marginalized by

for a place of refuge, ultimately reveal how their insular communities fracture under the paradisaical imperative of cohesion. Although no explicit relation exists between the idea of paradise and the necessity of unity, the following essay will uncover how these two notions have become inadvertently synonymous with the marginalization of difference. By “shifting the center”<sup>3</sup> of the story of paradise and focusing on two fictional minority communities that create failed paradises, and a third that presents an alternative, I will reveal how the Euro-American story of paradise includes implicit and destructive demands.

The three novels I have chosen as meditations on the Euro-American narrative of Paradise in contemporary minority imaginations are Eileen Pollack’s *Paradise, New York* (1998), Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1999), and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). Eileen Pollack explores modern Jewish identity through her protagonist’s failed efforts to protect an insular Jewish vacation colony in the Catskills from the passage of time. Morrison’s novel reveals how the preservation of an all-black town’s “perfect” home necessitates the subordination of individual voices. Both of these novels impart their critiques of paradise by emphasizing the presence of difference within their seemingly “homogenous” communities.

King’s novel, the final investigation in this essay, does not create a fictional paradise. Rather it expands on the failed paradises in Pollack and Morrison’s novels, and explores alternatives to the one-dimensional story of paradise. King revises the dominant

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privileging the perspectives and sentiments of individual characters rather than assuming that minority or majority status necessitates belonging or exclusion.

<sup>3</sup> “Shifting the Center” is a feminist analytic tool used to critique hegemonic constructs by focusing analysis on a marginalized group. In this particular instance, I will be shifting the center by considering minority discourse on a “majority” ideology: i.e. paradise as progress.

Euro-American paradise model, and postulates that “white”<sup>4</sup> Americans’ engagements with this myth have suppressed Other American identities.

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In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Toni Morrison emphasizes the importance of autonomy in a minority search for paradise. While describing the particular experience of African Americans trying to find a home in America, she describes the different motivations of Native Americans and immigrants:

African-Americans ... had left a home. So they're seeking for another home, while other people are doing the same thing, except the other people were leaving a home that they didn't want to be in any longer, or couldn't be in any longer. Native Americans were being moved around in their home. African-Americans were looking for a second one and hopefully one that would be simply up to them, their own people, their own habits, their own culture, and ... contain themselves in that.<sup>5</sup>

The distinct American experiences of immigrants, slaves, and natives, begin to reveal the complex experience of searching for a home, and how it is always a search inflected with the desire for personal and cultural autonomy. The need to preserve autonomy is especially prevalent in a country that once described itself using the assimilationist metaphor of “the melting pot.”<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Morrison characterizes these groups as searching for—rather than as having found—a home in America. New immigrants and Africans have both left homes so they are seeking replacements, while

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<sup>4</sup> Because King uses the category “white” American to describe hegemony, I will employ this term in discussing his novel despite its seeming homogenization of the identity categories that will be complicated within this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, Interview. *Conversation: Toni Morrison*. By Elizabeth Farnsworth. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june98/morrison\\_3-9.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june98/morrison_3-9.html).

<sup>6</sup> David R. Roediger, “All About Eve, Critical White Studis, and Getting Over Whiteness,” *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (California: University of California Press, 2002).

these groups in tandem with Euro-Americans have contributed to the removal of Native Americans from the lands they previously called home. Morrison concludes by explaining how African Americans sought a home that would contain *themselves* in it, which implies that being denied personal and cultural autonomy has been central to African American experience.

By considering the fictional voices of characters who respond to feelings of Otherness, I will explore how the tension between minority cultural autonomy and hegemonic narratives of American identity present common threads woven through the vastly different perspectives in each of these narratives. I will also consider why their impulses to reveal and challenge intolerance have ultimately focused on the story of paradise.

The question that echoes throughout each of these novels begins with Eileen Pollack's Jewish protagonist, Lucy: "We had helped build this nation. We had kept it afloat since earliest times. We didn't need to tiptoe like guests or poor relations. After nearly three centuries, wasn't it time we felt as much at home as anyone else?"<sup>7</sup> This notion of "feeling at home" is at the very core of each of these novels, and this essay will explore its specific significance in the histories of Jewish, African, and Native Americans who, according to literary scholar Alicia Kent, "were racialized in the debate about what it meant to be American. These three groups were seen either as a "problem" or "question" the nation needed to solve."<sup>8</sup> These victims of Diaspora, slavery, and exile were thrust aside and labeled as antithetical to the vision of a unified American identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Eileen Pollack, *Paradise, New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). 246.

<sup>8</sup> Alicia A. Kent, *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11.

They were denied in order to protect an imagined paradise from the “dark forces” of Otherness represented by racial, ethnic, religious, ideological, and gendered difference.

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Attempts to complicate the pervasive binaries that structure American identities resound throughout each of these novels. These authors emphasize the complexities of feeling like an Other in America as it differs within and throughout minority communities. Driving each of their novels is the feeling of not belonging, and it is explored through the eyes of characters emerging from distinct personal and cultural experiences. The analysis that follows considers both the generalized histories of marginalization experienced by Jews, blacks, and Natives, and couples these histories with the individual and collective experiences of Otherness in fictional minority communities. For the purposes of this essay, discussions of identity may at times employ generalizing terms in order to articulate the complex racial and ethnic visions these authors impart. Ultimately, however, as these authors reveal through their fictions, identity must be viewed through many lenses, and no single term or perspective can encapsulate the unparalleled diversity of individuals.

The identities named and explored within these texts do not remain consistent throughout each novel. Pollack investigates the binaries that define Jews in opposition to *goyim*—the Yiddish word for non-Jews—and emphasizes the different interpretations of Jewishness within an insular community. Morrison focuses on the construction of racial hierarchies and stresses the nuances within racialized identity categories. Finally, King emphasizes the binaries between white and Indian cultures, yet simultaneously explores *how* binaries and rigid identities become fixed categories. Additionally, the intersections

of gender and racial/ethnic identity, present in different ways within each of these texts, introduce another complication to identity formation. As these diverse agendas reveal, there can be no singular definition of white, Jewish, black, Native, or American that coheres throughout these stories.

Finally, power struggles that accompany feelings of Otherness unfold in distinctive ways in each of the following novels. Regardless, frequent references to “hegemony,” “Americanness,” “patriarchy,” “Euro-Americans,” and “whites,” may at times seem to homogenize the notion of how identity is linked to power in America. This is by no means an oversight, but rather an attempt to explore how these notions differ and persist within the context of each of the novels. These authors work to complicate, not simplify, identity; thus my own efforts have been to focus on contextualization and specificity when engaging these nuanced terms.

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Because this investigation is rooted in the very peculiar nature of a long-standing human ideology, a consideration of the history of paradise is necessary; this story’s origins in the Garden of Eden do not instantly reveal its versatility and how it has been mapped onto American consciousness. A short study provides the building blocks for the Euro-American model of paradise, which factors silently into America’s history and explicitly in Pollack and Morrison’s failed paradises. To begin this history of paradise, I turn to historian Gerard P. Luttikhuizen for his collection of essays entitled *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*. Luttikhuizen’s collection provides a structural analysis of the language of paradise,

investigating ancient texts as a means of explaining the shift of the Eden narrative from “divine garden” to “earthly paradise.”

Part of Luttikhuisen’s collection reveals how “paradise” was conflated with “Eden” when translating the Hebrew Bible into Ancient Greek. Choosing a Greek word that communicated both divinity and the cultivation of nature led to the Persian loan word *Paradeisos*, which refers to royal (enclosed) tree parks.<sup>9</sup> Once *Paradeisos* became “paradise,” the secular implications of royal parks inspired the notion of a perfected space that offered a contrast with the difficulties of the real world.<sup>10</sup> This shift reveals the source of the European imagination’s investment in America as an idealized space that provided a dream of escape from the toils of quotidian life.

Ed Noort’s essay “Gan-Eden in the Context of the Mythology of the Hebrew Bible,” explores how fantasies of human power over nature are inherent in the story of Paradise. He describes paradise as a world that contrasts with every day life. In paradise, human experience is no longer subjugated to the unknowable and uncontrollable, but rather can be cultivated and civilized. He states, “Paradise is the bridge between nature and culture.”<sup>11</sup> By characterizing paradise as a bridge that connects constructed culture and essential nature, Noort illuminates the connection between paradise and human’s perceived ability to command nature. Less obviously, his metaphor of a “bridge” suggests the circumscribed path that humans must walk in order to reach this idealized state of command.

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<sup>9</sup> J.N. Bremmer, “Paradise: From Persia, via Greece, into the Septuagint,” in *Paradise Interpreted: Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed., Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 1999), 5.

<sup>10</sup> E. Noort, “Gan-Eden in the Context of the Mythology of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Paradise Interpreted: Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed., Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 1999), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Noort, 36.

This vision of paradise as a sphere in which humans command nature relates directly to the history of America, more specifically, to the European rhetoric of colonization as exemplified in Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness*. He describes how puritans viewed America as "a bare land, devoid of already established (and corrupt) institutions... where they could start *de nouo*."<sup>12</sup> This puritan story of a virgin land, however, has been pointedly challenged by recent historians who make room for Native American voices, such as Colin G. Calloway's *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. Calloway explains how "European colonists intended not only to take over the land; they also were determined to change it, to remake it into something more closely resembling the world they had left. They did not find a new world in America; they did set about creating one."<sup>13</sup> While European rhetoric describes the Americas as a fortuitous discovery of empty—and malleable—lands, Calloway's description, which refers specifically to the land without recalling the indigenous inhabitants, reveals how European control of America was achieved through the assimilation of Native lands and identities under a generalizing and homogenizing American power.

A unified "American" vision that sought to cultivate new land was thus central to the American paradise project, and terms such as "Manifest Destiny" were popularized during the 19<sup>th</sup> century's push for colonists to settle further and further west. As Euro-American settlers invaded Native lands with increasing rapidity, they developed rhetorical arguments—fallacious binaries of civilized and savage—that promoted the

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<sup>12</sup> Perry Miller, "Errand into the Wilderness," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser., Vol. 10, No. 1 Jan. 1953: 15.

<sup>13</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds For All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 12.

European destiny of “assimilating or destroying” Native American peoples. Such a practice reveals how European ideologies championed civilization as a requisite to progress, and property ownership as requisite to civilization. This linear model—from property to propriety—emphasizes the connection between land ownership and the Euro-American paradise.

Brian W. Dippie highlights the vocabulary common to this era in his discussion of U.S. Indian policy, articulating popular beliefs that allotting Indians personal property would inspire them toward being civilized,<sup>14</sup> that American progress was contingent on the assimilation of Natives,<sup>15</sup> and finally that “the Indian could be civilized, and education, agriculture and private property would work the transformation.”<sup>16</sup> Each of these ideologies champions Euro-American culture as the only legitimate culture, underpinning the perpetuation of a one-sided account of American identity, which excludes difference from its narrative of unity, destiny, and perfection.

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The history of the European discovery and settlement of the Americas reveals the growth of the story of expulsion from Eden to a story that describes the potential for human improvement, and eventually to the story of an entire continent that foreign voices proclaimed to be “a land of opportunity.” It is this most recent version of the paradise narrative, which speaks of America as a “blessed land for the taking” that Pollack, Morrison, and King’s novels interrogate. By probing Pollack and Morrison’s failed paradises using the lens of the Euro-American paradise model, we will discover why such

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<sup>14</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1982), 163.

<sup>15</sup> Dippie, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Dippie, 164.

communities result in the creation of hierarchies and the subordination of difference. Then we will turn to King's novel, which critiques the Euro-American model by presuming the failure of the insular paradise. He writes instead of an alternative to paradise—which he characterizes as an end-driven, linear, and intolerant script of American identity—by creating Native characters that confront how prejudices shape American identities. By redressing the story of paradise through minority American characters, each of these novels reveal the fault lines within the Euro-American notion of paradise itself. They begin their projects with the search for cultural autonomy in America, yet ultimately reveal and challenge the assumptions that have resulted in the push for a unified American identity.

Eileen Pollack's *Paradise, New York* begins this exploration from a Jewish perspective. The novel takes place nearly a century after the nineteenth century mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to America. Pollack's protagonist, a nineteen-year-old Jewish girl named Lucy, struggles with the tensions between the racialized past of Immigrant Jews, their modern "potential" for assimilation, and her own search for authenticity in the garish world of the Jewish Catskills. Throughout Lucy's exploration, she remains rigidly committed to her childhood memories of her grandparent's insular Jewish Catskills hotel, the Eden. When Lucy finally confronts the fractures within the Eden, her realization illustrates the dominant meaning of authenticity in America, as well as how it demands the subjugation of other voices in protection of its univocal ideal.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* further exemplifies the hegemony of the paradise model and its implicit subordination of difference. By inspecting the "master-narrative" within the all-black town of Ruby, alongside the subordinated voices of Ruby individuals

and a nearby community called “the Convent,” Morrison provides a microcosmic example of how the Euro-American paradise both necessitates and undermines unity. Morrison ultimately reformulates a vision of paradise that is relational rather than hierarchical, and rooted in a spectrum of human experiences, rather than a linear progression toward a monolithic ideal.

Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* subsumes Pollack and Morrison’s critiques of insular communities, and proceeds toward a heterogeneous vision that repeatedly interrogates the linearity of the Euro-American model of paradise. By using Native voices to rewrite various hegemonic American narratives, which have legitimized monolithic American identity, King both reveals and critiques the structure of narrative itself. He substitutes Native worldviews where they were once denied and in doing so posits an alternative structure to the linear paradise narrative. Much like Morrison and Pollack’s conclusions, King’s entire novel presents a complex revision of a story that, at its core, has suffered most from a repeated impulse to simplify, to make neat, and in doing so, to refuse difference.

Entering these novels will serve to complicate the vision of a Euro-American paradise. With each of the characters and communities herein explored, there will emerge a plethora of voices seeking to feel at home in America. As their polyvocal lives are given voices, they will reveal how the notion of an American paradise, which attempts to recall the unity, beauty, and unimaginable goodness of a sacred space, has ultimately created an unsustainable model of identity, and community.

## Finding “Jewishness” and Authenticity in the Catskills of *Paradise, New York*

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*“If God had found a reason to take a snapshot of Paradise, it would have shown Main Street to be the trunk of an evergreen, roads sprouting like boughs so ragged and droopy the whole thing resembled a Christmas tree left by the curb”<sup>17</sup>*

Eillen Pollack’s novel, *Paradise, New York*, opens with this image at once divine, and droopy. With these words, the novel’s protagonist, Lucy, personifies God as a tourist adrift on a dying strip with only the kitsch of a leftover Christmas tree to photograph. While the immortal trunk of an evergreen represents Main Street, the streets branching from it have fallen victim to the ravages of passing time. Furthermore, this depiction opens with two contradictory words: “if,” and “God.” While “if” is a word fraught with doubt and self-consciousness, “God” embodies power and decisiveness. This description, which describes the act of recording an image of Paradise, foreshadows the important role of nostalgia in Lucy’s story. While mocking the notion of God’s involvement in this decaying landscape by suggesting God would have little reason to take a picture of Paradise, it also reveals the desire for preservation, and the tensions between secular and religious identification that characterize Lucy’s quest to feel at home—as a Jew—in America.

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<sup>17</sup> Pollack, 3.

*Paradise, New York* tells the story of Lucy, a nineteen year-old Jewish girl who spent her childhood summers at her grandparent's Catskills hotel, The Eden. Her memories of the 1960's focus on an era of greatness that, as the opening lines of the novel reveal, has since ebbed into decay. When she returns from her first semester at New York University, which her brother dubs "NYJew," in mockery of its high concentration of Jewish students, she seeks an escape from the feeling of anonymity that plagued her big city experience. No longer feeling unique, she approaches the Eden seen through a gauzy filter of nostalgia, recalling her childhood memories of this place where she always felt special. Lucy seizes on the idiosyncratic experience of growing up in this peculiar niche of Jewish culture. She decides that her authentic identity must be rooted in this singular experience that sets her apart from her peers. Yet when she decides to attempt to "save" the Eden from being sold, the protests of her brother, her grandmother, and her lover, the Eden's handyman, tell a different story of its past. They complicate Lucy's conviction that her identity is contingent on the hotel's existence, revealing that this belief stems from her unwillingness to break from the past. Each of these characters point to the troubles inherent in her attempts to find herself and her Jewishness in this vacation "paradise."

### ***Growing up Between Eden and Paradise***

Lucy comes of age between the heterogeneous working-class town of Paradise, and the secular vacation colony that defines its borders based on a culturally religious identity—the Eden. Because of her experiences of shuttling between minority and majority status, she not only becomes aware of the superficiality of the town's diversity, but also learns that heterogeneity is not synonymous with integration. Conversely, much

of her nostalgia for the Eden is rooted in her childhood friendship and adult love for Thomas Jefferson, the Eden's black handyman. Her personal experiences, which often transcend the insularity of the Eden, and her critiques of the superficial diversity of Paradise, are nonetheless bound up in a place and a culture that defines its borders via the exclusion of "non-Jews." Pollack's novel explores the question of what it means to call an insular Jewish vacation colony "paradise," and perhaps more importantly, how growing up in Eden can be a limitation to authentic personal growth.

In *Paradise, New York*, there exists a pervading tension between Lucy's past and the Eden's present. When the novel opens, Lucy is traveling to the Eden to watch her parent's escort a potential buyer, a Hasidic Jew, around the hotel's decaying premises. Even the novel's first image, the droopy Christmas-tree-like Main Street seen through Lucy's eyes, reveals that the Catskills have fallen irrevocably from their previous glory: the hotels are curbside trash, waiting to be picked up and carried away. While Lucy sees this decay, she cannot reconcile it with the past, when the Catskills provided her with a vibrant sense of a unique identity, a sense of purpose she found herself groping for in the anonymity of New York City.

Lucy's exchanges with her brother, Arthur, reveal a different story. Arthur has always seen Catskills culture, and therefore the Eden, as a refusal to accept modern American Jew's ability to partake in the mainstream. Pollack's novel insists on the tension between modern Jewish identity and immigrant traditionalism. Arthur's story raises persistent questions about whether American narratives of success can actually accommodate Jewish culture. While Arthur argues insistently that Jews are no different from their fellow white Americans and that places like the Eden are merely "pining for

the *shtetles*,”<sup>18</sup> Lucy believes that the Eden represents an important cultural enclave that must be protected. She decides that it is up to her to save it from demise.

Lucy’s grandmother, Jennie Appelbaum, is vehemently opposed to her plan to save the Eden. Lucy describes Nana as obsessed with the various opportunities denied her in her past. Because the controlling factors in her life have been her gender and her immigrant status, her sense of agency has been repeatedly denied by these inflexible identity categories. Similar to Arthur, Nana sees the Jewishness of the Eden as a trap, a roadblock on the way to the *real* American dream of success. As Lucy struggles with her for control of the Eden, she is forced to confront the fact that idealizing the Eden of her youth has forced her to ignore the ways in which it has negatively influenced the lives of the people she loves.

The most poignant critique of the Eden comes from Lucy’s lover, Thomas Jefferson. He is the Eden’s black handyman, a minority among minorities. As will be explored in each of the novels within this essay, difference is often understood as being at odds with “perfection.” The happiness of the guests and the functioning of the Eden repeatedly subordinate Thomas’ own needs, and marginalize his identity. While he works as a handyman because his dream of attending college was shattered by racism, many of the Eden’s guests see him as “nothing more than a *shvartzer*,” a Yiddish word meaning “black” that Lucy observes is full of hypocrisy. “How could *shvartzer* mean a man who didn’t like to work, and a man who worked hard at unpleasant tasks most white people were too lazy to do? A man like a Jew in some way that made him more admirable than a white *goy*, yet a man who would never be like a Jew because he didn’t

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<sup>18</sup> Pollack, 80.

enjoy reading?”<sup>19</sup> The complexities of Thomas’ character, which fascinate Lucy, go unnoticed by the Eden’s guests. While he speaks Yiddish, Hebrew, and German, and spends his nights translating the Old Testament from Hebrew into English, they write him off as a black man the Eden employs to clean up their mess.

The tension between admitting and ignoring time is central to Lucy’s narrative. Pollack dramatizes this by splitting the story into a four-part cycle of the hotel season: The Winter, The Spring, The Season, and The Fall. Lucy’s own conception of the Eden, however, evades the reality of passing time. Because time introduces the possibility of decay, and Lucy sees her identity, her Jewishness, residing within the Eden’s walls, she dedicates herself to an unchanging vision. She insists on rehabilitating the Eden’s chipping plaster and the slouching floors, while Nana, Arthur, and Thomas each work toward her slow realization that the Eden will only ever house nostalgia for a past that has more complexity than its walls can contain.

### ***Jews In Paradise, A Brief History***

Because Pollack’s novel emphasizes the tensions between immigrant and modern Judaism, inspecting the unique history of Jewish immigration to American and presence in the Catskills will help elucidate this novel’s complexities. For this history, I turn to Stefan Kanfer’s, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt*. Kanfer explains how the Jewish Catskills initially developed from the need to escape the debilitating conditions of the Lower East Side. With over 500,000 newly immigrated Eastern European Jews packed into tenement houses and sweatshops, the Catskills revived their vision of the American dream. Escaping persecution in Russia in exchange for the

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<sup>19</sup> Pollack, 31.

horrors of immigrant poverty was hardly what the droves of newcomers had expected to find upon their arrival in land of dreams. Once they had supplanted themselves in a Catskills vacation colony that fit their dreams, however, Jews were finally able to claim that they had found a home. “All week our lives are lived from the tenement to the factory.” [A visitor stated as he] waved at the green hills. “To us it’s paradise.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, there was a persistent whisper that followed the immigrants out of the city and into the green countryside, thus the Jewish Catskills were segregated from the other resorts that populated the hills. For the *Goyim*—as Yiddish speaking immigrants referred to non-Jews—the endless succession of bungalow colonies and resorts that began to infiltrate the rolling hills were an eyesore. The offense, which masqueraded as a response to the “colonizing” of pristine lands, was really a reaction to the character of the incoming population. “The sense of a corrupted Eden pervaded the Catskills. It was emphasized by those unpicturesque individuals who were as out of place on an idealized landscape as a menorah at a church picnic.”<sup>21</sup> The Jews and their culturally inflected vision of paradise, which grew increasingly more distasteful in the eyes of the *Goyim*, offended most deeply.

The Jewish Catskills culture grows out of established U.S. citizens’ racialization and denial of the newly arrived Eastern-European immigrants. In response to the discrimination suffered in the Lower East Side and in Europe, the Jewish resorts offered amenities in excess. There was always food for the taking, “all you can eat” meals were a staple, and extravagant displays of wealth and ownership were a means of asserting that Jews too could partake in the American dream. Because Jewish culture emphasized the

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<sup>20</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Kanfer, 32.

importance of entertainment, Yiddish theater became a fixture of the Catskills experience. “By the middle of the thirties,” however, as second generation American Jews began to feel the pressures of mainstream American culture, “everyone in the Catskills was pondering the question openly or unconsciously: Should I stay true to the ancient Jewish laws and traditions? Or should I put both feet in the American mainstream?”<sup>22</sup> One of the most pivotal movements towards assimilation involved performing traditional Yiddish entertainment in English. As the stage was transformed into a medium that the non-Jewish American public could access, Broadway, TV, and Hollywood stars became the gateway for the Jewish Catskill’s participation in the mainstream.

As Jews gained an unprecedented foothold in the entertainment industry, they contributed immensely to the formation of a popular American identity. This identity championed “whiteness” in opposition to the mainstream’s image of the ethnic Jew and other racialized Others. Alicia A. Kent explains, “The Jew was seen as the immigrant, the foreign element, the alien. Yet in contrast to this perception, Jewish Americans of Eastern European descent helped create American culture.”<sup>23</sup> Kanfer expands on this same phenomenon in his discussion of Jews in Hollywood, explaining:

The message was made clear in every one of [the Hollywood Jew’s] films...“America is a ‘happy ending’ nation.” Contrary to the anti-Semites who saw dark and un-American forces coming over in steerage... it was the immigrants “who stylized, polished and popularized the concept of the American way of life.” In essence that concept meant no exotics or obvious members of

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<sup>22</sup> Kanfer, 131-132

<sup>23</sup> Kent, 123.

minority groups in leading parts, particularly if they looked like young versions of Goldwyn, Fox, Mayer, Loew, Cohn, or Warner.<sup>24</sup>

Not only did influential American Jews help perpetuate the narrative of a “happy ending nation,” they also characterized Jewish, and other ethnic/racial minorities, as antithetical to this story of success. They helped propagate the conception of an America populated by heroic Euro-Americans who fought evil foreigners, visibly ethnic Jews included.

However, even the minority identity of Jews shifted with the tides of change. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the incorporation of less ethnic-looking Jews into mainstream media, the decline in Eastern European immigration after the Immigration Act of 1924, and the steady migration of black Americans north, “led to changes in the racial alchemy of the nation... whites of European descent (including newer European immigrants) were gradually reconsolidated into one group, largely in opposition to African Americans.”<sup>25</sup> As Jews benefited from their “European-enough” appearance, which was necessary to access the American success story, their assertion of cultural difference remained subjugate to the dominant scripts of white Christian identity. This tension between assimilation, ethnicity, and authentic cultural difference winds throughout Pollack’s novel.

### *Critiquing Eden*

These divergent pressures within Jewish identity inspire Lucy’s adult nostalgia for the clearly defined niche of Jewish culture that characterized her summers in the Catskills. Her attachment feeds her desire to preserve the hotel, in direct opposition to her loved one’s resentment of the space that burdened their lives. Refusing to see the

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<sup>24</sup> Kanfer, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Kent, 127.

Jewish Catskills as a passing memory in the long history of shifting Jewish identities, Lucy insists on the importance of preserving the Eden because of its offering of an authentic Jewish cultural experience. Although she fondly recalls the plethora of unique identities hosted by the Eden of her youth, Lucy's desire for a physical embodiment of Jewish "authenticity" forces her to deny the presence of difference in service of an insular Eden. Her desire to reproduce the Jewish Catskills culture of the past silences the critiques of those individuals who see the Eden from different perspectives. Her inability to acknowledge their critiques ultimately contributes to her realization that the preservation of a fixed and unchanging paradise necessitates the subordination of difference.

Lucy's realization of the Eden's limitations blossom slowly over the course of the novel, and are motivated by Nana, Arthur, and Thomas' critiques of her project. Her grandmother harangues her because she wants her to cast off the traditional female role of reproducer, as she herself was unable to do. She knows firsthand the mechanism by which women have been enslaved to tradition. Arthur's critiques come from his assimilationist impulses. He sees the Eden as perpetuating nostalgia in efforts to differentiate and distinguish Jews from mainstream America, a decidedly foolish endeavor in his view. Ultimately, Thomas's perspective as a minority among minorities provides the strongest critique of the limitations of an insular paradise, questioning Lucy's commitment to its once protective, now stifling boundaries.

### *Nana*

Nana, whose true name is Jennie Appelbaum, was among the mass influx of immigrant poor who worked the sweatshops and lived in the tenements of the lower East

Side, the first generation of Jews to develop the Catskills as a place of refuge. Lucy presents her grandmother's history as parallel to Jennie Grossinger's, the matron of the wildly successful Catskills Hotel "Grossinger's." These are two women, both named Jennie, who grew out of the same beginnings, although only one of their roads led to success. While Nana's anger over the success of Grossinger's and the relative failure of the Eden suggest that most hotels succeeded at gaining wealth and prestige, Eileen Pollack, who based her novel off of her actual experience growing up in the Catskills, suggested otherwise in our personal interview. She asserted that only very few of the hotels, such as "Grossinger's" and "The Concord," ever made any money.<sup>26</sup> While the Catskills in many ways symbolized the monetary success of American Jewery, the hotels themselves, and the lavishness of the culture, exaggerated the paradisaical qualities of life in the mountains.

Nana's story exemplifies both the unique history of Eastern European women's agency within the business world, and how this agency did not necessarily extend to personal autonomy. Lucy states Nana's persistent question: "Why! What's the difference between us," and explains, "She thought a woman's fate was determined by her birthplace, her family, her wealth, by the husband who chose her. What else but these facts could account for such a failure, such a stunning success?"<sup>27</sup> While the cause of Nana's defeat is not made explicit in these lines, and certainly relates to the relative unlikelihood of "such a stunning success," Lucy acknowledges that Nana's lack of agency generates her bitterness. She claims to sympathize with her grandmother, who has

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<sup>26</sup> Eileen Pollack, Personal Interview, 18 Jan. 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Pollack, 142.

been victimized by sexism, yet Lucy ultimately decides she must ignore Nana's opinions in the service of her vision of the Eden's infallibility and perfection.

Nana exhibits a feminist consciousness grown from the particularities denied to her in her youth because of her gender. She screams at Lucy about how her marriage ravaged her sense of autonomy: "You want to use your brains...to help run this hotel...Brains? I need my brains to pluck a chicken?... you could run a big business... a woman has a job, she doesn't have to take crap from a man. You have the chance I didn't have!"<sup>28</sup> Pollack explained in our interview how Eastern European Jewish women worked, "They were strong women, they did the business."<sup>29</sup> Yet Nana's work links her implicitly to the reproduction of tradition and culture, as illustrated by her being forced into the role of hotel supervisor by her husband. Nana's gender connects her work experience to her immigrant "obligations" to transmit Jewish culture. Because the transmission of culture occurs in the female domain within Jewish immigrant communities,<sup>30</sup> Nana's work at the hotel merely replicates her familial "responsibilities." Nana has little control over her destiny, less so because reproducing tradition in the hotel and her family has demanded her female servitude.

Lucy observes how Nana's lack of agency defines her character, and so much of what her grandmother views as a "good life" stems from her conviction that her life *could have been* different. While Lucy sees running the Eden as a job, Nana characterizes it as the private sphere in which she was forced to play the role of the mother. Her critique of Lucy's desire to rebuild the Eden is a response to her husband's sacrificing her in the service of his vision of a Jewish paradise. Lucy's unwillingness to acknowledge Nana's

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<sup>28</sup> Pollack, 85.

<sup>29</sup> Pollack Interview

<sup>30</sup> Kent, 128.

suffering blinds her to these important truths that complicate the standards of goodness and perfection to which she holds the Eden.

*Arthur Appelbaum*

Lucy's brother, Arthur Appelbaum, struggles with assimilation and difference throughout the novel and reacts with measured fury when Lucy reveals her plan to save the Eden. Arthur's critique of her plan grows out of his critiques of Jewishness itself. Arthur would prefer to dispel the parts of his identity that conflict with the mainstream; assimilation, doing away with difference, characterizes his vision of paradise. He asks Lucy, "Do you really think Jews are so different from anyone else?" and regales her with the similar breakfast habits of Jews and Christians.<sup>31</sup> He mocks the notion of anti-Semitism in America, antagonized by his mother's fears of *the Goyim* and Lucy's affection for an insular Jewish community. "This is America!" Arthur howls at Lucy, "They don't love you for being a loser. They love you for being rich."<sup>32</sup> Arthur fails to realize that his own success stems not from a lack of racism or anti-Semitism, but from his ability to shed the mark of his difference, his Jewishness, and pass as a white. Arthur's opinion of Judaism is rooted in his understanding of Judaism as a religion, while Lucy sees it as an ethnic and cultural identity that cannot be escaped and therefore must be understood.

From an early age, Lucy expresses wariness over her brother's distaste for her actions, "My brother thought the highest form of attention a brother could bestow was relentless correction. And because he did love me, he feared I would become what he

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<sup>31</sup> Pollack, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Pollack, 80.

most hated: a woman who thought she was special.”<sup>33</sup> The passage that follows Lucy’s observation reveals how Arthur’s fears are based on stereotypes of “pushy Jewish women,” vestiges of his experience serving demanding hotel guests in his youth. Lucy does not realize that Arthur rejects her because of the intersectionality<sup>34</sup> of her femininity and her “Jewishness” until much later in the novel when she observes that, “my brother had announced so many times that I was loud and obnoxious, I had come to accept this, though I understood later he meant only that I looked and acted too Jewish.”<sup>35</sup>

Arthur’s sense of decorum recalls hegemonic standards of femininity and Lucy’s shortcomings articulate the way her Jewish background influences her particular expression of femininity. Arthur sees her as unwilling to assimilate, choosing her backwards, inauthentic Jewishness out of nostalgia, when she could just as easily choose to be a successful member of the mainstream. He condemns her vision of paradise—shaped by an immigrant culture that asserts its difference in response to being denied a space in the mainstream— and deems it backward and unproductive.

Arthur eventually must confront the fact that in spite of the superficiality of Catskills Jewish culture, abandoning Judaism is not as simple as he once imagined. After years of trying to assimilate, Arthur finds himself working toward making partner at a waspy law firm in Boston. When he finally decides to leave the firm to join his fiancé in New York, his secretary tells him that he wouldn’t have received the promotion anyway. “When Arthur pressed why, she said she had overheard [his bosses say] that Arthur’s hair

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<sup>33</sup> Pollack, 14.

<sup>34</sup> “Intersectionality” comes from feminist theory. It emphasizes the ways in which identity categories intersect to produce different experiences of discrimination. Instead of construing of an identity that is oppressed in distinct ways (ex: black females experiencing separate effects of racism *and* sexism), intersectionality posits that these intersecting oppressions result in a combined experience of a unique oppression. A woman’s gender is inseparable from the experience of racial oppression.

<sup>35</sup> Pollack, 66.

was too curly.”<sup>36</sup> Once he confronts the ethnic marginalization of Jewishness in the mainstream, regardless of religious affiliation, Arthur takes his first steps towards reconciling his critiques of the Jewish Catskills.

A conversation between Shirley Feildel, one of the Eden’s guests, and a visiting historian attracted to the Eden to study “tradition,” best articulates the confusion between culture and religion particular to the Jewish experience. The historian states: “Most American Jews stopped believing in the Bible a long time ago. They were ready to stop being Jews. Then they found out what was going on in Europe. The world wanted them dead? Ha! They would keep being Jews, out of spite.” Shirley responds to his assertion with a loaded question, “And is spite a good reason to keep alive a religion? Without spite, without being hated, is there really no other reason to go on being a Jew?”<sup>37</sup> The tensions in her statement run deep. Shirley is a Holocaust survivor who has thus been discriminated against for being ethnically Jewish, regardless of religious orientation. Additionally, Shirley speaks from the vantage point of one who actively participates in a Jewish community as a returning guest at the Eden.

While her statement does not provide an answer to this complex question, it addresses the concerns within Lucy’s own psyche, serving as a reminder that Jewish identity places an imperative on individuals to find their own sense of authenticity and meaning. This exchange echoes the intricacies inherent in the notion of consensus within the Jewish community, and implicitly suggests the complications within all insular communities. The different interpretations of Jewishness that coexist within the insular

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<sup>36</sup> Pollack, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Pollack, 168.

Eden—including but not limited to Shirley, Arthur, and Nana’s perspectives—complicate Lucy’s desire to maintain a paradise defined by only a single dimension of identity.

*Thomas Jefferson*

Lucy’s relationship with Thomas Jefferson shakes the foundations of her insular vision of paradise most deeply. Not only does Thomas provide a contrast to Lucy and Arthur’s potential for assimilation—his skin color defines his identity in a way Jewishness generally does not—he also has his own integrationist goals that particularize his critiques of Lucy’s plan to save the Eden. When Lucy first reveals her project to Thomas, he responds by asking, “sure you want to keep it only for Jews? That always seemed, well, sort of *limited* to me.”<sup>38</sup> When Lucy considers Thomas’ proposition, she imagines an Eden where jokes are told in English and American food replaces Jewish food, “if everyone were welcome, what would make the Eden more special than a Holiday Inn?”<sup>39</sup>

As Lucy continues to define her Judaism in terms of its physical manifestations, she finds it impossible to imagine how a community can be special without being distinctive: how authenticity can be possible outside the boundaries of the community one enters through birth. Her thoughts echo the sentiments of her youth, “to be like everyone was to be no one.”<sup>40</sup> She conflates Thomas’ heterogeneous community with Arthur’s ideal of homogeneity. Lucy abhors the notion of a community in which people assimilate toward a norm, yet she is unable to imagine Thomas’ vision of a community where people integrate while preserving difference. Lucy struggles to understand how a group of people who are not defined by a pervasive shared identity could create a

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<sup>38</sup> Pollack, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Pollack, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Pollack, 60.

meaningful bond. Thus articulating the difficulties of imagining a paradise that includes difference.

Thomas, meanwhile, departs from the Eden and constructs a revised version of paradise, one that draws on his integrationist vision and his dedication to group heterogeneity. He buys Pospissel's Playland, a crumbling bungalow colony down the road from the Eden, and sets about shaping it into the Monticello he pined for in his Virginian youth. Lucy arrogantly resents Thomas' "abandonment" of the Eden, which she herself instigated by choosing the Eden over Thomas in response to Nana's ultimatum. She notes with frustration and wonder how all of her guests seem to disappear from the Eden only to wind up at Thomas'. Lucy eventually begins to concede that Thomas has a certain knack for creating a heterogeneous community that works as well, if not better, than her homogenous Eden.

At Thomas' house warming party, Lucy observes the vastly different people assembled for his celebration. Thomas tells her, "Man loses his real family, got to put together a new one," and Lucy disdainfully murmurs, "A family isn't something a person collects, like matchbooks or coins."<sup>41</sup> As Lucy dismisses Thomas' constructed self, Pollack provides insight into his character during our interview. She explains how Thomas represents someone who searches for the "spark of the divine" outside of his easy enclave.<sup>42</sup> The "spark of the divine" refers to the Hasidic Jewish belief in serving God through joy, through seeking godliness in the sparks of everyday life.<sup>43</sup> Thomas emphasizes the universality of this spark through his diverse vision of community.

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<sup>41</sup> Pollack, 193.

<sup>42</sup> Pollack Interview

<sup>43</sup> *The Jewish Americans*, PBS, 2 Feb. 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/watch/index.html>.

Thomas' vision of a reconstructed family stems from his desire to escape the disappointments of his past. He leads a reclusive life at the Eden in efforts to hide from the institutional racism that "conquered" him in his idealistic young adult years. Yet he finds happiness in his ability to structure a community that embodies his ideals. Lucy, however, has still not achieved an understanding of the happiness Jefferson has created for himself. She inspects the "goods" at his party, the gifts brought by his guests and the food on display. She cannot attribute known histories or simple categories to them, nor can she fit herself neatly into his life, and so she flees. Alienated by the sense of authenticity and love that pervades the room, she slips out the back door and realizes that she will be haunted by her inability to comprehend how a room full of superficially different people are able to partake in the shared experience she has been trying to fabricate in the Eden.

### *Looking Outside of Eden*

Although Lucy observes the deterioration of the Eden in the novel's opening lines, her ensuing efforts to rescue it from destruction are enacted through her denial of the limitations of time and difference. The Eden's fall, nonetheless, is precipitated by a glaring mid-season augury, which comes in the form of a short television spot for a local news station portraying the hotel as evidence of the resurgence of Catskills nostalgia. The show, only three minutes long, effectively erases all of the quirky shortcomings of the Eden in favor of representing it as a replication of the idealized past. This "glossing" of the hotel's difference is an allegorical reconstruction of Lucy's attempts to revive the idealized Eden of her youth. She finally realizes that not only was the Eden never a perfect replica of the real Catskill paradises, "the other hotels," but that her nostalgic

attempts to resuscitate the Eden required the inauthenticity of erasing the hotel's and her loved ones' differences.

Realizing that her own love for the Eden relies on an idealization of the past, Lucy admits the accuracy of Nana, Arthur, and Thomas' critiques of the Eden. She recognizes Thomas' success at creating a heterogeneous community, which embodies an authenticity more profound than a Holiday Inn. She sees how the Eden requires a toiling Nana in order to function smoothly—specifically as Lucy herself begins to acquire the same bitter countenance after only one season of dealing with difficult guests. Every paradise requires the toil of someone saddled with the heavy weight of other people's pleasure. Arthur's critiques of the Eden stem from his discomfort with the complex tensions between Jewishness, ethnicity, and autonomy. Even he eventually confronts these complexities because, like Lucy, he realizes that Jewishness is an inseparable part of his identity, whether chosen or not. Lucy finally comes to understand that the warmth of a place, its meaning, comes from the people who occupy it, not the space itself.

As the Eden races towards the end of the season, Lucy admits her own limitations as the savior of paradise. When Arthur leaves money under Lucy's pillow to pay for a room for himself and his fiancée, a gesture countering Lucy's refusal to accept payment from family, she states, "In that moment between my brother's departure and my descent back to sleep, I tried to figure out why everyone I knew—Arthur, my mother, Thomas, Nana, Jimmy—made me feel like a whore."<sup>44</sup> Lucy realizes that her efforts have necessitated the commodification of an identity and a nostalgic ideal, and she begins to understand her own complicity in the Eden's superficiality.

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<sup>44</sup> Pollack, 176.

Additionally, Lucy feels like a whore because of how her efforts have been gendered. She has been selling sex without love—culture as commodity—a falsity that Pollack underlined in our interview. But what really makes her feel like a whore is not that she sold fake goods, but that she utilized the empty symbol of the Eden to sublimate her desire for a meaningful culture. Lucy wants to have a culture she can be proud of, but because what she has is the decaying Eden, she tries to dress it up. She asks Thomas if adding new curtains to the lobby windows will help clean up the Eden’s appearance and he responds, “you [can’t] turn a whore... into a lady just by putting her into a clean dress.”<sup>45</sup> Making the physical space of the Eden look new, clean, or modern, will never provide the Eden with the authentic Jewish identity Lucy seeks to impose.

Finally, Lucy admits that the Eden no longer contains the paradise of her youth, and that the secular Jewish culture she seeks requires the authenticity of personal discovery, rather than a physical space. “If you believed, it was one thing. If not, it was fake.”<sup>46</sup> Not only does Lucy realize that her attempts to fix the Eden were superficial, but that confining the essence of the culture she hoped to save to a building ultimately served as a limitation.

What finally moves Lucy to reexamine her attachment to the Eden is Shirley’s husband, Nat Feidel’s, death. He walks out onto an un-repaired fire escape to address Lucy’s distressed cries that he hears outside his window, and as Thomas and Lucy watch from below, the fire-escape breaks away from the wall and he falls in a dramatic arc to his death. He is the visual manifestation Lucy’s effort to ignore the deteriorating effects of the passage of time.

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<sup>45</sup> Pollack, 101.

<sup>46</sup> Pollack, 237.

The last chapter of the novel, which opens in the moments after Nat's death, is entitled *The Fall*. His death ushers in the death of Lucy's attachment to paradise. "I knew that he was dead, as surely as I knew that whoever I had been until now was dead too."<sup>47</sup> Lucy marks this moment as the Eden's entry into time, and with the temporality of the place, much like the fall of Adam and Eve, comes the absolute and undeniable loss of the eternal dream of paradise. Throughout the novel, Lucy attempts to update the physical structure of the Eden in efforts to make it relevant to modern Jews, and to herself. Yet she ultimately ignores the people who occupy the space, silencing the voices of her guests and her loved ones in order to preserve a vision, which had truly died long ago.

After Nat's fall Lucy must face the undeniable fact that her idealized vision of the Eden could only exist outside of time. The insularity she once perceived as integral to the preservation of the space has ultimately undermined the Eden's integrity, and its ability to persist in a changing world. While Nat's fall introduces time into Lucy's conscience, it does not introduce time to the Eden. Each of the critiques of Lucy's attempts to save the hotel grow from the different experiences of their speakers, which shape their visions of community and identity. It is impossible to construe of a paradise without difference, even when living from generation to generation in the same place. The physical space of the Eden merely provides enough room for nostalgia. What Lucy has failed to realize is that her commitment to the culture she grew up with stems from her own belief in its importance—it never belonged to the Eden.

When Thomas tells Lucy that he has abandoned his hopes for the Playland, a vision of paradise that rivaled her commitment to homogeneity, he explains: "Every

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<sup>47</sup> Pollack, 207.

world you create, it has to have borders, has to have rules. Has to have someone making up those rules, someone in charge. Only God creates worlds. One world.”<sup>48</sup> The boundaries and rules central to Thomas’ critique of human attempts to create paradises stem from the dogmatic vision that describes paradise as a physical space, which a community can occupy and cultivate, thereby transcending the dramas of existence. Although Thomas built the Playland because of his conviction that humanity can eclipse the walls of a building and form an authentic integrated community, he realizes with the fall of the Eden that the spatial construct ultimately limits human efforts to reach the divine, and to touch one another.

The ending of the novel hearkens back to the Hasidic creation story that Thomas relates to Lucy during one of her many childhood visits to his shack. He explains that the Hasids believe that God made a world once, but it was weak and it cracked and all of its pieces were scattered in the darkness. Eventually God decided to make a second world, one that wouldn’t crack, and the Hasidic mission was to collect all of the leftover pieces of the first world, all of the sparks that manifest themselves as gold flakes. The gold flakes weren’t limited to a particular place or person, you had to look for them everywhere, “Everyone you meet, every little thing you see, got to pay attention.”<sup>49</sup>

Lucy develops her belief in the divine over the course of the novel, and it ultimately becomes integral to her sense of self. She comes to describe her God as one who may have created order from chaos, but not some being who judges or observes, who can be blamed for earthly evils—Lucy finds her sense of agency and authenticity in this. Having grown from a child who believed that God had a special mission for her,

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<sup>48</sup> Pollack, 247.

<sup>49</sup> Pollack, 41-42.

rooted in saving the Eden she was placed in at birth, she comes to realize as an adult that she has to seek beyond the bounds of the identity she was given in order to truly inhabit her life. Pollack told me in our interview that she wanted to communicate that, “the place you look for the sparks is not only in Eden.”<sup>50</sup> As Lucy stands looking over the town that Thomas grew up in, an industrial district with gutters, windows, and steel gas tanks, she sees these otherwise ugly structures reflected in the sunlight and likens them to gold coins, like flakes. “She [flings] them into the sky, hoping they might rain down upon everyone in a shower of sparks.”<sup>51</sup> Lucy finds authenticity in the beauty of the everyday. While industrial districts may not be the same as Holiday Inns, she finally understands her power to seek goodness in all things; paradise is not contained in the concrete walls of a building, but in the open mind, looking out through loving eyes at the beautiful, and the ugly.

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<sup>50</sup> Pollack Interview.

<sup>51</sup> Pollack, 251.

## The Dominant and Subordinate Narratives of an All-Black Town in *Paradise*

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In Toni Morrison's own words, her novel *Paradise* conducts an inquiry into the nature of the paradisaical ideal: "It was my meditation... and interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, [paradise is] based on the notion of exclusivity. All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in."<sup>52</sup> Much as Thomas Jefferson observes in *Paradise, New York*, worlds, paradises of human invention, inevitably have boundaries. These rules and delineations only serve to replicate the hierarchies that instigate the desire for refuge in the first place.

Morrison's novel charts the gradual deterioration of a community named Ruby, an all-black town set in 1970's Oklahoma, and its interaction with a community of female runaways living in an abandoned Convent seventeen miles down the road. A town named Haven precedes the community of Ruby, founded toward the end of the nineteenth century, when freed black slaves migrated to Indian Territory motivated by the desire to escape the oppressive laws and discriminating ideologies of the post-slavery South.

In the introduction to *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds*, Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland describe how the historical establishment of all-black towns in Indian country reflect the hope that, "by showing the values of race pride, self-reliance, moral fortitude,

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<sup>52</sup>Morrison Interview

and industry, [freed-slaves] could demonstrate their fitness for equal inclusion in the broader U.S. republic.”<sup>53</sup> There exists a tension between these two motivations, the first rooted in the desire to escape an oppressive society, the second in replicating its values in hopes of inclusion. Each of these impulses shape Ruby’s story, and while they seem distinct in nature, exploring Ruby’s history and the diverse voices within the community reveal the ways in which this community’s efforts to escape oppression through the creation of an all-black town ultimately reproduce the racialized and gendered hierarchies that initially motivated their flight.

Morrison portrays Ruby’s regard for a single master-narrative as the source of the town’s history, yet simultaneously reveals how other town voices are subordinated to the coherency of this monolithic “truth.” The twin brother’s Deacon and Steward Morgan lead Ruby’s most prominent men, who are aptly referred to as “the patriarchs.” The twins claim to have “powerful memories. Between them they remembered the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not.”<sup>54</sup> These memories are the basis of the community’s master-narrative. Patricia Best, Ruby’s “other” historian, tells a different story. Her marginalized “light-skinned female” narrative challenges Ruby’s internalized hierarchies and presents a polyvocal model of storytelling, which is replicated by Others throughout the course of the novel.

As the daughter of the first Ruby patriarch who defied the town’s unspoken rule of racial purity, Patricia provides visible evidence for the implicit hierarchies that structure the town. “8-rock blood” is the name Pat coins to refer to the Ruby legacy of racial purity. The term describes blue-black blood so pure and deep it is said to reach

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<sup>53</sup> Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds., *Crossing Rivers, Crossing Worlds*. Duke University Press. (Durham, N.C.: 2006), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, 13.

back to Africa, untainted by mixing with whites and light-skinned blacks. Having pure 8-rock blood guarantees status within Ruby and, coupled with maleness, it become the definitive exclusionary rule. While the master-narrative corroborates the notion that purity rules protect the Rubinites from the racist world beyond their borders, Patricia's narrative reveals how the patriarchs reproduce and invert the models of racial hierarchy promulgated by the dominant society.<sup>55</sup> The patriarchs alienate those light-skinned female members of the Ruby community in order to preserve the town's purity, and they silence all narratives that challenge their absolute authority.

Pat's narrative is both challenged and corroborated by other Ruby townsfolk, specifically Reverend Misner and three Ruby women: Soane and Dovey, wives of the twin patriarchs, and Lone Dupres. Misner did not grow up in Ruby thus his presence, much like Pat's, unsettles the Ruby Patriarchs. Additionally, his political ideals, representative of the Black Power movement of the 1970's, exemplify the ways Ruby tries to segregate itself from all outsiders, even blacks struggling for basic civil rights. Soane, Dovey, and Lone each instigate silent forms of rebellion within their marriages and among the other women. However the tensions they reveal between the Ruby patriarchs and the Ruby women are frequently hidden in the public sphere in order to protect the master-narrative. The competing histories of the Morgan twins and Patricia, and the activism of Misner, Dovey, Soane, and Lone, help contribute to the eventual realization that Ruby is the embodiment of a failed paradise project.

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<sup>55</sup> Virginia Kennedy, "Native Americans, African Americans, and the Space That is America: Indian Presence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," in *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, eds., Sharon Holland and Tiya Miles (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006). 210.

The presence of the Convent complicates the tensions between the Ruby narratives. Residing seventeen miles away from Ruby and occupied by a group of five diverse and unrelated women who congregate to heal physical and emotional wounds, the Rubinites see the Convent's tolerance of difference as a threat. The building itself is a pre-existing space without clearly defined ownership and with multiple histories of use. It was originally an embezzler's mansion, subsequently a Catholic convent and school for "native" girls, and finally a refuge and site of spiritual awakening for five marginalized and abused women. While the Convent women work toward healing themselves, often helping struggling Ruby townsfolk along the way, their difference becomes an intolerable threat to the Ruby patriarchs, who eventually carry out a plot to murder the five refugees, silencing their menacing polyvocal lives once and for all. The patriarchs' insistence on a constructed—controlling—narrative demands the subordination of the lived and various experiences of the Convent women and the actual Ruby townsfolk, thus illustrating Morrison's inquiry into the pitfalls, and the potentials, of paradise.

***"The Men Take Aim, For Ruby": Narratives from the All-Black Town***

No moment stands out more clearly as representative of the transmission, coherence, and preservation of Ruby's master-narrative than the scene in which the Ruby school children perform the annual Christmas pageant. This scene, inextricably linked to the other acts of storytelling within *Paradise*, also provides for a direct confrontation between Patricia's narrative and the patriarchs'. The Christmas play reenacts the event in Ruby's past called "the Disallowing." This event is *the* formative moment in Ruby's

history, and Patricia explains that, “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many.”<sup>56</sup>

Before exploring the patriarch’s narrative in contrast with Patricia’s, it is important to note that the “ultimate truths” within the twin’s memories actually differ from both of these stories. This emphasizes the way they, along with the other patriarchs, have manipulated the truth in order to create a coherent and controlling worldview. The story held in Deek and Steward’s memory speaks of established communities of whites, *Mulattos*, and American Indians, who repeatedly turned away the nine families of freedmen traveling from Louisiana to Oklahoma.<sup>57</sup> While the pageant differentiates between light-skinned mulattos and 8-rock blacks, the twins’ memory describes the mixed race homesteaders as their *Negro* brothers. They remember the Disallowing as a being-turned-away because they were “too poor, too bedraggled looking to enter.” Class distinction in the face of racial brotherhood struck their deepest nerve. They internalized this rejection as the “contemptuous dismissal by the lucky,”<sup>58</sup> and describe the double insult of being seen as lower class deviants, and the even deeper one of being called unworthy by fellow ex-slaves. While the patriarchs’ story does not vocalize the racialized component of their being refused, the revised Nativity story begins to reveal the unspoken messages that undergird the master-narrative.

### *The Christmas Pageant*

The pageant opens with four figures seated on stage in front of a sign that reads “Inn.” The four innkeepers seated on stage wear felt hats, suits, and yellow masks that

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<sup>56</sup> Morrison, 189.

<sup>57</sup> Traci M. Knapper, *Paradise as Paradigm: Exploring the Critical Geography of Race and Gender in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Toledo: University of Toledo, 2002), 12.

<sup>58</sup> Morrison, 14.

recall the imagery of “Black Face.” They wear “a yellow and white mask featuring gleaming eyes and snarling lips, red as a fresh wound.”<sup>59</sup> There can be no mistake that Morrison’s description of the children’s masks recalls the historical form of entertainment, for and by whites, in which actors wore masks with exaggerated black features, painted coal black with blood red lips.<sup>60</sup> Opening the play with this image forefronts the narrative’s racial tensions, but also emphasizes and homogenizes the “yellow face”<sup>61</sup> or mixed race of the innkeepers, while the twin’s narrative describes how whites, blacks, and Indians each participated in the Disallowing.

The next movement shows a parade of seven couples, holy families “dressed in torn cloths and moving in a slow two-step,”<sup>62</sup> who approach the yellow faces. “Is there room?” one of them asks in a breaking voice, “Get on way from here! Get! There’s no room for you!” the masked ones respond.<sup>63</sup> While the twin’s memory, as well as Patricia’s story, speaks of nine founding families who traversed the country from Louisiana to Oklahoma, and were turned away, the number represented on the stage is seven. As Reverend Misner watches from offstage, he remarks this discrepancy in number and turns to Patricia Best for explanation. She scoffs at him and refuses to acknowledge the significance. Later, she admits her shock that the public representation of Ruby’s history, controlled by the patriarchs, has slowly decreased the number of 8-rock families included among the elite. This provides early evidence that while Deek and

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<sup>59</sup> Morrison, 208.

<sup>60</sup> Kent, 36.

<sup>61</sup> “Yellow face”: I am referring to the masked figures as wearing “yellow face” in order to evoke the notion of a dramatized representation of otherness, specifically in terms of racialized difference. I realize that Yellow Face has been used to represent the racialization of Asians, but I use it here to specifically refer to light-skinned African Americans.

<sup>62</sup> Morrison, 208.

<sup>63</sup> Morrison, 209-210

Steward's memories affirm Pat's version of the history, their positions of power within Ruby allow them to rewrite the town's operative truths.

As the holy families back away from the yellow faces, these masked figures contemptuously toss cardboard squares of food at them. The holy families rear back, disgusted by their pity, and yell, "God will crumble you. God will crumble you... Yes He will. Yes He will." The Ruby audience joins them in chorus.<sup>64</sup> As the masked figures collapse, the children enact the discovery of Haven's founding site by forming a ring and singing Amazing Grace. The audience overflows with pathos as they relive this shared history.

Meanwhile, Reverend Misner, who stands at the back of the room talking with Patricia, reads the scene in terms of Ruby's obsessive isolation from the outside world. He sees the ring of children as an echo of Ruby's fortress-like existence: the town, he says, has been created merely "to keep everybody locked in or out."<sup>65</sup> He observes how Patricia identifies as an outsider by referring to the Disallowing as "their" story, and not her own, yet Patricia refuses to confront his legitimate critique and instead publicly defends the patriarchal control she silently resists.

#### *Patricia Perspective*

Patricia's version of the Disallowing wavers from the continuity of the Christmas pageant, particularly in her assertion that the "fair-skinned colored men ... Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits" were generally kind to the wandering Havenites. They "gave them food and blanket; took up collection for them; but were unmoving in

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<sup>64</sup> Morrison, 211.

<sup>65</sup> Morrison, 213.

their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night's rest."<sup>66</sup> These vestiges of kindness, however, are not the legacy that persists in the master-narrative. Rather, the Christmas pageant is a simplification of the evils perpetuated against the founding fathers. Because the many insults of whites and Indians were compounded by insults from their own light-skinned black brothers, the patriarchs focus their hate and their representation of evil on the pale faced black men who denied them, in other words, they simplify the story so that the Rubinites are able to place easy blame on all non 8-rocks.

Patricia reveals that what "lived a quietly throbbing life because it was never spoken of,"<sup>67</sup> was the hierarchy of racial purity that silently informs the notion that Ruby's salvation is contingent on the absolutist protection of 8-rock blood. She emphasizes how Deek and Steward's description of the Disallowing, in which the families were turned away because of class differences between the wandering freedmen and their established brothers, was nonetheless internalized as a racial difference between 8-rock men and light-skinned black men.

They had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves... the sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain.<sup>68</sup>

She sees the depth of the 8-rock's resentment as a calculated response to those blacks that defined their superiority based on the possession of "whiteness." The darkness of the 8-

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<sup>66</sup> Morrison, 195.

<sup>67</sup> Morrison, 195.

<sup>68</sup> Morrison, 194.

rock's skin was viewed through the lens of the hierarchy adopted from a Southern-white culture, which privileged light over dark in binarized terms. Mixing with the 8-rocks would have meant further distancing themselves from the ideal of being a white American, and the chance of being included in the American dream.

As a result, the 8-rocks define themselves through the perfection of the very feature that had set them apart for judgment by the racially "impure."<sup>69</sup> They respond to the Disallowing by internalizing their own sense of hierarchy in which darkness determines superiority. They invert the one-drop-rule employed by Southern-whites in the Jim Crow era, and the Patriarchs label anyone with even a drop of "white blood" as "not 8-Rock" and therefore "tainted." The Christmas pageant silently enacts the hierarchies that enforce Ruby's intolerance of difference. As Patricia's story reveals, the patriarchs' intolerant vision of purity and perfection becomes integral to the preservation of their hard-won paradise.

### *Split Consciousness*

Patricia's family history exemplifies the problems inherent in the Ruby patriarch's internalization of racial hierarchies. When Pat's father brought his white wife to Ruby, Steward Morgan rebuked him by saying "he's bringing along the dung we leaving behind."<sup>70</sup> In a letter Patricia writes to her father, she reflects on racist acts ideologies like Steward's, "They don't hate us because Mama was your first customer. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like

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<sup>69</sup> "Impure" refers to the whites and light skinned blacks. Zechariah Morgan, Haven's founding father, reverses the discriminatory language traditionally used against blacks to devalue those who are not 8-rock. In the language of the Rubinites, it champions a reversal of mainstream conceptions of purity in favor of Blackness rather than Whiteness.

<sup>70</sup> Morrison, 201.

me.”<sup>71</sup> Patricia goes on to explain that she, and later her daughter Billie Delia, were the first “visible glitch” in Ruby’s purity. The visibility of her outsider status allows Patricia to study Ruby objectively. It also excludes her from the community’s vision of perfection, and it silences the alternative Ruby history she pieces together using family trees and anecdotes, which she gleans from her students.

Part of the history Patricia pieces together tells of her mother’s death. While Pat’s father accepts the dominant story that his wife’s death was unpreventable, telling Pat that, “more than one woman has died in childbirth,” Patricia argues adamantly for her own reading of the event. “Those 8-rock men didn’t want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn’t want to drive out to a white’s house begging for help; or else they just despised [her] pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go.”<sup>72</sup> Patricia astutely observes, however, that her mother’s death revealed a fracture in the community. “The women really tried,” she says, describing the women’s distress when faced with their inability to help a dying member of the community. “[But] even with their wives begging [the men] came up with excuses, because they looked down on you Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering.”<sup>73</sup>

What Patricia observes is the split consciousness of the Ruby women, frequently evidenced by Deek and Steward’s wives, Soane and Dovey, and the town midwife, Lone Dupres. These women partake in many silent forms of resistance that differ from their public efforts to help Pat’s white mother in spite of their husbands’ refusal. Soane seeks an abortion when she discovers Deek’s affair with one of the Convent women—an event

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<sup>71</sup> Morrison, 197.

<sup>72</sup> Morrison, 198.

<sup>73</sup> Morrison, 197.

to be explored in greater detail in light of the Convent narratives. Dovey insists on spending her nights alone instead of accompanying Steward to their ranch on the outskirts of town. While these women perform these successful acts of resistance in silence and without corroboration from other townsfolk, when they choose to unite their voices they repeatedly fail to overpower the hegemony of the patriarchs, as illustrated by the death of Pat's mother.

Lone represents the voice of the women in the few moments when they attempt to unite. This unity occurs in instances such as the woman's attempts to save Pat's mother, as well as when Lone gathers the women with the hopes of thwarting the men's plot to attack the Convent women. It comes as no surprise, however, that the patriarchs call her "crazy." While the women respect Lone, and follow her in certain instances, they too remain susceptible to the patriarchs' dominant voice and often doubt her, attributing her prophetic knowledge to senility rather than divinity.

Pat observes the women's public complicity with the men, despite their private acts of resistance, while collecting her Ruby history. She states that the older women, "Dovey, Soane and Lone DuPres, hinted the most while saying the least."<sup>74</sup> While the Ruby men vocally corroborate Steward and Deek's public story of Ruby history, the women resist their ideologies, but only through the fractured truth telling of individuals. While this is far more conducive to accuracy, it is easily silenced by the publicly unchallenged "truth" of the master-narrative.

Much of the tensions between female narratives and *the* master-narrative arise from the blood rule. While the patriarchal history manipulates Deek and Steward's memories, it continues to emphasize its access their "truths." Thus they construct a

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<sup>74</sup> Morrison, 188.

myth<sup>75</sup> that supports the necessity of blood purity and legitimizes their control over Ruby citizens. This articulates the profound faultiness in the attempt to build a homogenous paradise, which necessarily silences the differences that populate Ruby.

### *Controlling the Town*

The patriarchs effectuate “an interpretation of the past that has no space for growth or reexamination,”<sup>76</sup> and through this history, they guarantee their control—as well as the demise—of Ruby’s future. After the Christmas pageant, and after her defensive conversation with Reverend Misner, Patricia admits to herself that her coldness towards the Reverend was predicated on the defense of the master narrative. She is upset by her public corroboration, and reminds herself “all that nonsense she had grown up with seemed to her like an excuse to be hateful.”<sup>77</sup> When Patricia returns home, she addresses the fact that there were only seven holy families in this year’s play, and realizes that another 8-rock family has been “cut” for violating the blood rule, much like her own.

When she asks her father why the numbers have changed, he tells her he hardly noticed and makes up an inadequate excuse. She prods him further, asking him directly, “It was skin color, wasn’t it? The way people get chosen and ranked in this town.” Her father is all too willing to make excuses for the patriarchs, even when Pat points out that he is the victim of their racism. When she reminds him of how Steward called his wife “dung,” he tells her: “There might have been a little offense taken—long ago. But nothing hard... The Morgan’s are very serious about themselves. Too serious

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<sup>75</sup> Fraile-Marcos, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Kennedy, 213.

<sup>77</sup> Morrison, 214.

sometimes.”<sup>78</sup> This exchange once again illustrates the willingness of the Rubinites to subjugate their own interests to the master-narrative.

Ultimately, Patricia realizes that the divide between the Ruby men and women runs even deeper than she initially suspects. As she mulls over the purity rules, which begin to take on a nearly magical status in their perceived capacity to provide for the safety and longevity of the Ruby folks, she comes to the following realization:

Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who? ... Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality.

Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women.<sup>79</sup>

Patricia comes to understand the bargain at the center of the blood rule, as well as its sexist subordination of Ruby women. She realizes the patriarchs need to control the women, and recognizes the ways in which the Ruby citizens, both men and women, have corroborated the patriarchs’ control because of their shared conviction that coherence is requisite to the maintenance of their paradise.

### *Mapping Identities onto Race and Gender*

Billie Delia, Patricia’s daughter, exemplifies the intersection of racism and sexism, which typifies the Patriarchs’ investment in pure bloodlines and their control over Ruby citizens. One of Billie’s inner monologues reveals her awareness of the patriarchs’ need to control “their” women. She watches a friend’s wedding and ruminates on the motivations behind the rushed ceremony. “The real battle,” she says,

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<sup>78</sup> Morrison, 216.

<sup>79</sup> Morrison, 217.

“was not about infant life or a bride’s reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals.”<sup>80</sup>

Billie Delia’s awareness of the patriarchs’ desire to control female sexuality is bought at the price of an incident of public shaming in her youth. Patricia observes, “Ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia would like.”<sup>81</sup> The lightness of Billie’s skin is the unspoken reason behind the perception of her “loose” sexuality. This notably inverts mainstream feminist theory. Patricia Hill Collins states in her article concerning the intersectionality of race and gender that, “women of color... have never had the luxury of being “ladies.”<sup>82</sup> Inverting the racial and sexual hierarchies of mainstream society, Billie’s deviance is mapped onto her specifically because of the intersectionality of her gender and the lightness of her skin.

Billie relays the story about how when riding a horse at age two, she delighted in the sensation of “how perfect her skin felt against that wide expanse of rhythmically moving animal flesh.”<sup>83</sup> At first no one suspected her budding sensuality, but at age three, when she pulled down her “panties” to recapture the sensation, the Rubinites looked on in horror and disgust. Patricia illuminates the connection between the shaming of Billie and the resentment of her skin. “Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was—only an innocent child would have done that, surely.”<sup>84</sup> Instead of permitting young Billie the

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<sup>80</sup> Morrison, 150

<sup>81</sup> Morrison, 203.

<sup>82</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and connection,” in *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, eds., S.M. Shaw & Lee (Boston: McGraw Hill), 79.

<sup>83</sup> Morrison, 150.

<sup>84</sup> Morrison, 203.

benefit of innocence, the town stamps her character indelibly with lasciviousness. The stamp stems not from her actions but from her difference. This episode profoundly comments on the efforts of a minority community to construct a paradise via a controlling myth of purity, and unity, that ultimately shuns its own members in the process of trying to protect them.

***“Holy Women Dancing in Hot Sweet Rain,” The Convent Narratives***

Because the ideals of purity and unity control Ruby, the enforcing of a coherent identity through the marginalization of outsiders and “impure” insiders becomes requisite to the perpetuation of the community’s vision. Ruby’s policing poignantly opposes the freedom that characterizes the Convent women. Much as Ruby’s desire for paradise stems from a disenfranchised past, so too do each of the five convent women tell stories of their escape from a troubled environment and settlement in the utopian Convent. The Convent as a building has a past that merits examination. Its creation, decidedly different from Ruby’s, echoes the complexity at work in this “other” space. Within the liminal boundaries of the Convent, five women confront their pasts and establish a paradise rooted in heterogeneity and a vision of humanity that levels Ruby’s conception of itself as paradise.

Originally an embezzler’s mansion, the Convent rises from the emptiness of the Oklahoman plains long before the appearance of Ruby.<sup>85</sup> The mansion is a bullet shaped fortress built by a paranoid criminal, who abandons the building after only an evening’s use—taken to jail during his inaugural party. In the Convent’s second life, a group of nuns convert it to a Catholic school “for native girls.” The four nuns who open the

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<sup>85</sup> Morrison, 10.

school seize on the opportunity to establish Catholic influence in a protestant state.<sup>86</sup> After the school closes, the nuns dwindle in numbers leaving only Consolata behind to take care of the last dying nun—the woman who originally rescued Connie from a destitute future—beginning the Convent’s third cycle as a place of refuge and personal discovery.

The Convent is presented as a palimpsest of histories. Despite the embezzler’s personal choices in building the mansion, its subsequent dearth of individual owners, and immediate transformation from “sleazy” to pious by the Sisters who colonize it, contributes to the layering of the building’s character. The literal effacing of the embezzler’s erotic embellishments—“Consolata’s first tasks were to smash offending marble figures and tend bonfires of books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out of the fire and had to be chased back to the flame”<sup>87</sup>—as well as the subsequent removal of the Convent’s religious symbols after the nun’s departure—“clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus”<sup>88</sup>—suggest each occupant’s ability to refashion the Convent to fit their needs. The numerous changes in the Convent’s function: from mansion, to religious school, to refuge, suggests the importance of its mutability. The Convent seems able to shift allegiances without difficulty, which reverberates in stark contrast to the staunch refusal of the Rubintes to admit even the slightest of changes into their community.

While the Convent’s multidimensional history differs greatly from Ruby’s fabricated univocal past, the individual stories of the Convent women mirror the experience of the Rubinites. Both groups chart their search for a place of refuge,

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<sup>86</sup> Fraile-Marcos, 22.

<sup>87</sup> Morrison, 225.

<sup>88</sup> Morrison, 12.

motivated by the various discriminations in their past. However, “In Ruby—in paradise—life is defined by race, [while] the Convent is a community because life is defined by shared experience.”<sup>89</sup> The Convent women each arrive at their salvation haphazardly, finding refuge without having to seek it. The discrimination in their past stems from sexism and racism, yet within the Convent their identities are no longer limited to their gender or their race.

We are first introduced to Mavis who flees her abusive husband days after her twin babies die while she rushes to buy groceries, fearing her husband’s wrath. “Mavis’ quest for a suitable meat for Frank’s supper results in human devastation (her twins suffocate in her car while she deliberates between chops and wieners inside a grocery store).”<sup>90</sup> This establishes Mavis’ vulnerability to Frank’s power, and her marked failure as a mother. Mavis’ shortcomings are rooted in the paralyzing pressures placed on her as wife and mother.

Gigi is a floater with an imprisoned father and boyfriend. She arrives in Ruby after chasing the promise of a desert miracle—a natural rock formation that looks like a black couple making love. For Gigi, the dream of the “couple endlessly fucking” really stems from her search for a panacea, the desert couple’s sexualized image far preferable to the recurring memory of racial violence during a civil rights protest. Gigi’s dreams are often populated by a little black boy in a crisp white shirt standing amidst a rioting crowd, trying to cup the blood flowing from his chest in his hands so as not to mess his shiny black shoes.

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<sup>89</sup> Kennedy, 216

<sup>90</sup> Pamela Gail Fritz, *Power Hungry: Black Women, Food, and Power in Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye,” “Beloved,” and “Paradise”* (Virginia: University of Virginia, 1999), 23.

Seneca leaps out of the back of the truck she is hitching on to aid Sweetie, a Ruby woman, in her stumble down the Convent road. Seneca becomes entranced by the ambiguous emotion stretching over the frantic woman's face as she walks down the road that stretches for miles behind her—a road that no doubt reminds Seneca of the intricate network of streets she carves into her arms and thighs to evade her painful memories of abandonment. She blames herself for her sister's decision to leave her in the Projects because of her own conviction that she wasn't "good enough" at taking care of herself, a kind of internalized oppression that discounts the damaging societal structures that create her challenging circumstances.

Pallas leaves behind an eating disorder and a wealthy father for her artist mother, and then leaves her mother for the Convent, arriving there by chance after facing rape and heartache. Pallas is chased into a lake in her birthday-present-brand-new car while fleeing from the image of her mother and her lover slipping into each other on a sandy desert floor. She runs from the desert and from the heavy blackness of the water she had waded in after the crash, trying to hide from the voices of men with violent intentions. She ultimately fails to evade them and arrives at the Convent without knowing that she carries an offspring of rape inside her.

Consolata, whom the girls refer to as Connie, has a history that is both the exception and the rule. Unlike the others, she did not run away, but rather a missionary nun named Mary Magna lifted her from a heap of garbage in Brazil, "because whatever life the exasperated, headstrong nun was dragging [her] to, it would be superior to what lay before [her] in the shit-strewn paths of the city."<sup>91</sup> Although not by her own design,

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<sup>91</sup> Morrison, 223.

Connie fits into the puzzle-like shared history of these exiles, each of whom “deliver” themselves to the convent with the hope of a better life to come.

Not only does Connie allow the women to inhabit the Convent, providing shelter from the oppressive forces of the outside world, she also brings about their awareness of the hybrid nature of their selves. If not for this awakening, using the Convent as a refuge would merely parallel the story of Ruby’s isolation. Connie’s reinvention of the pervasive myths of gendered and racialized hierarchies allow her to convert the space from an isolated fortress into a liminal utopia, and to help the four women metamorphose into human beings freed from the controlling impulse toward uniformity that dictates their identities, much as it controls the population of Ruby.

#### *Connie’s Story*

Connie, having lived at the convent for the past forty years, has a history of involvement with the town of Ruby that further illuminates the dichotomies between these two spaces. After years of indoctrination into the strict Catholic rules of the nuns who adopted her, Connie falls into a love affair with Deek Morgan, the very town patriarch who vehemently opposes racial mixing within Ruby’s borders. “For thirty years she offered her body and her soul to God’s Son... and those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a pullet’s egg when she met the living man.”<sup>92</sup> In the years when Ruby was getting started, Consolata found herself accompanying Mary Magna to the Ruby pharmacy where she made eye contact with Deek, who immediately responded to her gaze with his shared desire to lead her to a discovery of her sexual self.

Deek, however, is married, and theoretically bound by the same purity laws he enforces in Ruby. Connie is exactly the *mulatto* color the history he helped write tells

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<sup>92</sup> Morrison, 225.

him to avoid. He nonetheless pursues their affair, and they seem at first to be safe from Ruby's prying eyes. Eventually, discovery by Steward, as well as Deek's intersecting racist and sexist perception of Connie's sexual appetite, destroy their affair. In Connie's final effort to hold on, she asks Deek to live in a makeshift love-nest with her, and she bites his lip seductively to affirm the depth of their commitment. His response to this act echoes the fear of difference within Ruby. "Clover, cinnamon, soft old linen—who would chance pears and a wall of prisoner wine with a woman bent on eating him like a meal."<sup>93</sup> Connie intimidates Deek with the depth of her desire and her willingness to assert it. His vision of her beauty becomes tainted by the perception of her as a temptress, all of which springs from the Ruby binaries that suggest the deviance of all women without color<sup>94</sup>.

Consolata, meanwhile, spirals into a long cycle of depression and redemption based on her confusion over the division between pleasure and purity she sees placed before her. Her pleasure troubles her because it leads her to the sin of lust, and yet she cannot reconcile the idea that God would ascribe no divinity to the depth of her feelings for Deek. "Dear Lord," Consolata pleads, "I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home."<sup>95</sup> She finds herself confronted with the religious imperative to subjugate her body to her soul, and eventually awakens to a revolt against this age-old mythological binary of Eve and Mary<sup>96</sup>, choosing to carve out a liminal space that incorporates both.

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<sup>93</sup> Morrison, 239.

<sup>94</sup> "Women without color" is a play on the feminist term "women of color." In light of the patriarch's inversion of the "one drop rule," it follows that Deek's perception of deviance is rooted in the presence of white blood, much as the opposite is true in mainstream consciousness.

<sup>95</sup> Morrison, 240.

<sup>96</sup> While this is a religious ideal, it has been translated into other female binaries associated with race and gender: for instance, the binary opposition of "the mammy" and "the jezebel," and many binaries that are simply gendered, ex: "the virgin" and "the whore."

*Uniting the Fractured Self*

Connie's enacts her awakening through a sermon to the four women, which invites them into her enlightened state. Her realization of the necessity to do away with the binary opposition of body and soul ultimately frees the Convent from the hegemonic narratives of race and gender purity that control Ruby and the mainstream.

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh so hungry for itself I ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again ... After she is dead I can not get past this. My bones on hers the only good thing ... So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones ... Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve.<sup>97</sup>

Consolata's plea reverberates throughout western history. The marriage of Eve and Mary, flesh and soul, forefront the necessary reconciliation between this binary schema of femininity. Connie's knowledge of both earthly and spiritual desire, along with her willingness to combine the two into a hybrid theology, is the mechanism of the Convent women's liberation. While the Ruby women struggle with the strictly dictated social roles they must ascribe to in order to support their communal identity, the Convent women effectively escape these binaries by complicating and uprooting the dominating mythologies that define their self-hood, and the boundaries of paradise.

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<sup>97</sup> Morrison, 263.

While the Ruby men refer to the Convent women as “bodacious black Eves,”<sup>98</sup> Consolata reclaims the negative connotations of the Eve myth, “Never put one over the other,” she states, insisting that Eve and Mary are of the same blood and are both necessary for survival. It is this dialogue between the body and the spirit that ultimately frees the Convent women from their troubled pasts.

Gathered in the kitchen door, first they watched, then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces... In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain.<sup>99</sup>

The women’s rain dance explores both the holy and the sensuous; the simultaneity of the rain, both earthly and the divine on their skin, effectuates their rebirth as women freed from the stifling constructs of patriarchy.

The women’s capacity to feel both earthly and godly challenges the claim of Ruby’s men that “They don’t need men and they don’t need God.”<sup>100</sup> These events emphasize the impossibility and absurdity of the gender roles the Ruby patriarchs impose on women. To the Ruby men, and within common representations in American culture, women are either Eve’s or Mary’s, never both and never neither. Just as the patriarchs shun Billie Delia for the intimations of sensuality at a young age—inherently linked to the racist notion of her “impurity”—Deek rebukes Consolata, calling her the “gnawing woman who had bitten his lip just to lap the blood; a beautiful, golden-skinned, outside

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<sup>98</sup> Morrison, 18.

<sup>99</sup> Morrison, 283.

<sup>100</sup> Morrison, 276.

woman with moss-green eyes that tried to trap a man.”<sup>101</sup> Deek’s conception of Consolata as the temptress Eve echoes the threat of her mulatto skin. It is unclear which is worse: the sin of biting into something that isn’t hers, or the sin of being brown, an outsider, and a woman. Both provide Deek with just cause for his murderous rage.

### *Murdering Difference*

The murder of the Convent women is predicated on the notion of silencing temptress Eve’s, thus the Patriarchs consider themselves the actors of God’s will. Morrison states in the moment before the men shoot the Convent women, “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby.”<sup>102</sup> But as Morrison goes to great lengths to establish, the furor of the men grows from their conception of strict gendered and racialized binaries, and the necessary subjugation of all difference to the myth of Ruby’s superiority. They believe they are doing God’s work by ridding Ruby of the threat of the outsider temptresses, while the Convent women actually embody a form of divinity by embracing their hybrid natures. The men’s vision of their paradise as God-given and God-protected is enhanced by Linda Krumholz’s observation that the description of the women at the time of their murder as “hunted doe’s anointed with ‘holy oil’” is a description of “the women as Christ-like sacrificial victims and the men their executioners.”<sup>103</sup> Yet Krumholz fails to compare this image of the Convent women with the parallel image of them as “holy women dancing in hot sweet rain,” that pours over their shaved heads and upturned faces. The spiritual ecstasy of this moment leads to the claim that, “If there were any recollections of a recent warning or intimations of harm,

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<sup>101</sup> Morrison, 279-280.

<sup>102</sup> Morrison, 18.

<sup>103</sup> Linda J. Krumholz, “Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison’s Paradise,” *African American Review* 36, No. 1, Spring 2002: 22.

the irresistible rain washed them away.”<sup>104</sup> The rain washes the Convent women clean, which provides for the men’s perception of them as anointed. At the same time the rain dance reveals the source of their anointment as “holy” in and of themselves, not as sacrifices ushering in their divine surrender to the patriarchs protection of Ruby.

### *The Shoreline*

The final echoes of the Ruby narrative stand in direct opposition to the novel’s ending, which depicts Connie in an earthly paradise. As the Ruby women review the crime scene, devastated by the violence they have seen, they think to themselves, “How hard they had worked for this place; how far away they once were from the terribleness they have just witnessed. How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?”<sup>105</sup> This question has been answered by Patricia and Billie-Delia’s stories, by the literal and figurative corruption of Ruby’s future generations, by Connie’s own narrative, and finally by the strength afforded to the Convent women and their efforts to break free from the mold and re-build a paradise based on their own humanness, not their ability to carve a space out of the land.

Morrison leaves us with one final image, one that expands the critiques provided by the novel and posits a vision of paradise, here on earth, without the isolationism, sexism, and racism of Ruby, and without the tragic ending of the Convent.

In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman’s lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl—fuse in the younger woman’s face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in

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<sup>104</sup> Morrison, 283.

<sup>105</sup> Morrison, 292.

cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf ...

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.<sup>106</sup>

Left with this image, the reader closes Morrison's novel with a sense of paradise *revised*. Paradise, if anything, is far from perfect. It is strewn with broken pieces and replete with mixtures, ugliness, and beauty. It is not one thing but many; nor does it exist only in an afterlife but rather, "down here," on earth; it must be worked at constantly. Most importantly, despite the fact that Morrison leaves us with a final intimation that paradise exists in the daily beauty of the complexity of life, this complexity is not located in one place. Throughout her novel, paradise has been attached to the land, but here we find that the water is constantly licking the shore, as if constantly shifting the boundaries of the space these mythic women inhabit. Paradise, Piedade's song echoes, is a human invention, a refuge, but it constantly must be revised in order to persist alongside the many differences of human identity, even within seemingly uniform human communities.

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<sup>106</sup> Morrison, 318.

## Polyvocalizing American Identity and Giving Voice to Native Worldviews in *Green Grass, Running Water*

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Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* picks up the narrative revision of paradise where Pollack and Morrison leave off. In their novels, the importance of maintaining a cohesive communal identity creates faultlines in "paradises" replete with difference. In King's novel, this paradigm of cohesion echoes in the controlling scripts of American identity he seeks to revise. King paints Native identity in opposition to the notion of "linear progress," which implies forward, "westward,"<sup>107</sup> expansion. He reveals how Euro-Americans legitimize the acquisition of Native lands—and cultures—by framing America as a land in which the drama of paradise necessarily unfolds. While "linear" colloquially implies progression, moving from point A to point B, *Green Grass, Running Water* critiques linearity, presenting it as a one-dimensional construct that leaves no room for change or difference.

King, himself of Cherokee, Greek, and German descent, focuses his novel on the workings of inter- and intra- community hybridity. *Green Grass* opens—unlike *Paradise* and *Paradise, New York*—from a standpoint already disillusioned by the exclusionary scripts of paradisaal communities. As shown through Pollack and Morrison's narratives, seeking a spatial and atemporal paradise requires communal cohesion, and therefore

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<sup>107</sup> "Westward" refers to the direction of manifest destiny. It is not meant to suggest that the west is the only direction of expansion, but rather to highlight how European movement in this direction has become synonymous with the notion of "civilizing the wilderness," a concept that inherently undermines the presence of Native identities.

marginalizes difference and individual voices. King uncovers how Euro-Americans have deployed the story of paradise as a powerful story of progress and expansion, which has implicitly subjugated Native autonomy. By shifting the center of Western history using the voices of a community of Blackfoot Indians, a band of aging Indian Goddesses, and a white male “asylum” director and his black female “sidekick,” King revises binarized narratives of Indian white relations and polyvocalizes North American identity.

A variety of characters with lives intricately woven together comprise *Green Grass, Running Water*. King employs their stories as critiques of the univocal model of American identity. By extracting four central plots from the novel, this chapter will focus on the various perspectives of the characters that populate these stories; it begins with the Grand Baleen Dam. This structure exemplifies government denial of treaty rights because the corporation, Duplessis international, built the dam on Blackfoot reserve land in Alberta, Canada, without seeking approval from the tribe. The dam narrative tells the story of Eli Stands Alone and how he attempts to protect his home from the dam. It articulates the tensions between Native and white notions of “paradise” by invoking a long history of supplanting Native homes with white imperatives.

The various acts of naming and revising that characterize the stories of the four aged Indian goddesses comprise the following section. The Old Indians are escapees from an “asylum” at Fort Marion, Florida. They alternate narrating the four sections of the novel, each of which one of their origin stories frames. These origin stories fuse Native mythologies with Judeo-Christian narratives and shed light on the power of “naming,” central to hegemonic scripts of Euro-American identity.

The Old Indians arrive at the Blackfoot reserve intent on “fixing” the world. They focus their healing powers on Lionel, a Blackfoot who is about to turn forty and has spent most of his life trying to be white. Lionel’s story connects to the other principal Blackfeet characters: specifically his uncle Eli Stands Alone, his cousin Charlie Looking Bear, and his girlfriend—who is dating both Lionel and Charlie—Professor of Native Studies, Alberta Frank.

Dr. Joe Hovaugh, asylum director, trails the Four Old Indians to Blossom, dragging along his “side-kick” Babo, the asylum’s black female janitor. He directs Fort Marion, the historical prison that holds the fictional Old Indians captive. King emphasizes his obsession with theorizing how the Indian’s escapes correlate with large-scale natural disasters, thus Hovaugh represents the restrictions of a strictly “scientific” worldview.

### *Invoking Native Identity*

It is important to note that Brian W. Dippie’s and subsequent discussions of the myth of “the Vanishing American”<sup>108</sup> pertains to the exploration of the role of paradise in King’s novel. This myth, prevalent during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and still operative today, perpetuates the dual notion that America is a promised land, a new Eden, and that Native Americans—similar to blacks and ethnic-looking Jews—represent those Others who cannot successfully conform to the civilization this new land is destined for. Alicia A. Kent’s discussion of the Vanishing American reveals this crucial link between “man in a state of nature,” i.e. Indian; America as an “idyllic natural paradise untouched by the

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<sup>108</sup> “The Vanishing American” truly refers to the vanishing Indian, yet the terminology reflects the colonial relationship between Indians—Americans—and colonial European powers. Thus, I will continue to engage the language of the Vanishing American, rather than adapting it to the colloquial terminology of “Indian.”

modern world”<sup>109</sup>; and the inevitable absorption of both of these idealized existences by the tide of civilization. By revising narratives that imagine America as an “untouched” wilderness, this novel reveals the way Euro-Americans employed this myth to appropriate Native lands and cultures. Through these revisions, King complicates Native identities that dominant narratives have often assimilated, or silenced.

In an interview with Peter Gzowski, King describes *Green Grass, Running Water* as a “pan-Indian novel...something that talks about Native people in general, in North America, in Canada and the U.S.”<sup>110</sup> By creating a story about one Indian community inflected by many of the shared histories and experiences of North American Native communities, King ruminates on white/Indian relations without homogenizing Indian identity. He undermines the binary identity categories often imposed on Natives by exploring how dominant narratives construct them.

King weaves the lives of his characters together, achieving a model of simultaneity and interconnectedness best described, not as a *composite* with distinct parts, but as “a *complex*, which is one unit whose makeup is intricate and interwoven.”<sup>111</sup> This description of a unit characterized by shared experiences without being limited to a univocal model, allows for the presence of difference. It can be likened to the communities theorized by Thomas Jefferson in Pollack’s novel, and by the Convent women in Morrison’s. For King, Native American spirituality and culture conflicts with the model of a cohesive and unchanging paradise. As the novel’s title suggests, it is green grass and running water, metaphors for growth, renewal, and a circular—flexible—

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<sup>109</sup> Kent, 78.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas King, “Peter Gzowski Interviews Thomas King on *Green Grass, Running Water*,” by Peter Gzowski. *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 66.

<sup>111</sup> Herb Wylie, “‘Trust Tonto’: Thomas King’s Subversive Fictions and the Politics of Cultural Literacy,” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 111.

model of existence, which ultimately embody the peace and goodness that Euro-Americans, and the fictional blacks and Jews in the preceding novels, have mistakenly sought within the confines of a bounded paradise.

### *The Dam that Stops up Voices*

Eli Stands Alone's legal struggle with the corporation Duplessis International, which constructed the Grand Baleen dam on Blackfoot land, is central to this exploration of *Green Grass, Running Water*. It also recollects broad-reaching experiences within Native American history, and challenges dominant American narratives of paradise. When Eli Stands Alone returns home after decades of hiding from his Indian identity—not unlike his nephew Lionel—to find that his childhood home, hand-built by his recently deceased mother, stands in the spillway of the newly constructed dam, he immediately files an injunction and moves into the house. Thus Eli takes his place within a long history of government constructing dams on Native lands, part of a recurrent tale of the exploitation of both Native land and Native peoples.

In the nineteenth century, dams replaced zoning maps as the primary method of relocating Indians vis à vis “the flooding of reserve land, the loss of water resources, [and] the destruction of livelihood.”<sup>112</sup> Both zoning and the building of dams exemplify the models of Indian removal, consistently based on decisions made without the consultation of those individuals and tribes directly affected. These decisions are almost always legitimized by the notion of progress. The dam in *Green Grass, Running Water* emphasizes this history. Its man-made lake, Parliament Lake, is sold as shorefront property to wealthy buyers, thereby excluding Natives from their own land in the service

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<sup>112</sup> Florence Stratton. “Cartographic Lessons: Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*.” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 93.

of an idyllic paradise for those who can afford access—a microcosmic example of the European colonization of America.

The dam symbolically responds to Andrew Jackson’s promise to the Creek Nation on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1829: “there your white brothers will not trouble you; they will have no claim to the land, and you can live upon it, you and all your children, as long as the grass grows or the water runs, in peace and plenty. It will be yours forever.”<sup>113</sup> This sounds like the promise of an undisturbed paradise, but as King implies with the Grand Baleen, the government has its own agenda in terms of “running waters.” The building of a dam that blocks the flow of water symbolically nullifies the tenets of land treaties like Jackson’s.<sup>114</sup>

The white characters in the novel champion a position that treaties *merely* communicate symbolic promises that lack literal authority. Bill Bursum, Lionel’s boss and a Parliament Lake property owner, states, “As long as the grass is green and the waters run. It was a nice phrase, all right. But it didn’t mean anything. It was a metaphor. Eli knew that. Every Indian on the reserve knew that.”<sup>115</sup> Bursum champions the quelling of Eli’s claim to the land because of his own ties to the lot he has paid for, which Eli’s injunction denies him. Bursum, in a very literal sense, privileges his own notion of paradise, his own use of the land, over Eli’s desire for the river to be left alone and the land to be left to his people. Bursum’s conviction that treaties are not meant to last corroborates his belief in the myth of the Vanishing American. Native control of the land becomes negligible if those with power propose a more productive application. As Dippie sarcastically asserts in his text, “white Americans could not be blamed because

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<sup>113</sup> Dippie, 45

<sup>114</sup> Stratton, 93.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 296.

their wishes and God's will coincided so nicely."<sup>116</sup> This conviction that Euro-American agendas were destiny, and Native life was necessarily subordinate to the dominant vision of progress, is precisely how Bursum conceives of his lakefront property.

Clifford Sifton, head of the dam project, also operates under the assumption that Native American presence is antithetical to the progress of the twentieth century; in response to the injunction, he walks to Eli's cabin daily, "respectfully [requesting] that [he] relinquish [his] claim to this house and the land on which it sits."<sup>117</sup> Eli turns him down each time, explaining that treaties provide governmental backing for his right to the land. Sifton tells Eli in frustration, "Those treaties aren't worth a damn. Government only made them for convenience. Who'd of guessed there would still be Indians kicking around in the twentieth century."<sup>118</sup> As Sifton and Bursum both imply, they see the government's treaties as meaningless because they were written under the assumption that Indians would slowly disappear in the face of civilization and "progress." The *unfortunate* persistence of the Indian, however, is precisely what King works to reclaim. His portrait is unsympathetic to the Euro-American notion that because Indians purportedly cannot exist in a modern world, the promises made to them need not be upheld.

As Eli watches Sifton leave his cabin after another failed interview, he notes how Sifton's words are "snatched up by the wind and drowned in the rushing river."<sup>119</sup> This observation reverberates within the context of King's novel. Given the dam's function, the stopping of rushing water, and the fact that the dam's construction is undertaken

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<sup>116</sup> Dippie, 87.

<sup>117</sup> King, 155.

<sup>118</sup> King, 155.

<sup>119</sup> King, 158.

through an act of silencing, Eli's vision of Sifton's voice drowned by the rushing water suggests the deluge that the destruction of the dam will eventually precipitate. Opening its "floodgates" becomes integral to the restoration of an alternative vision of paradise, characterized by personal autonomy and the metaphor of constant change, i.e. running water.

### *The Four Old Indians*

King revisits the model of paradise that failed in Morrison and Pollack's novels as the same construct that legitimizes Euro-American subordination of Native autonomy. This narrative, which emphasizes the coherence of a pervasive ideal thus subjugating and silencing difference, is at the center of each of the four Old Indian's creation myths. As the novel unfolds, its four sections tell the story of how each of the Old Indians is named. Naming four aging Indian women The Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye, requires an explanation. King describes his choice of names as an effort to redefine the notion of stock Indian characters: he says, "Within North American popular culture, you know, you've got the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and you've got Ishmael and Queequeg, and you have Hawkeye and Chingachgook, and you have Robinson Crusoe and Friday... they're not archetypal characters in literature, but they're Indian and white buddies...."<sup>120</sup> King goes on to explain how the Old Indians adopt these names because "they are forced to assume these *guises*—by history, by literature, by just the general run of the world."<sup>121</sup> He emphasizes how these stock narratives about "buddies," create and perpetuate the binaries that paint whites as "civilized" and Indians as "savage." He then sets out to subvert these dominant and subordinate roles.

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<sup>120</sup> King Interview, 67.

<sup>121</sup> King Interview, 67.

### *In the Garden*

The first story, told by First Woman, alias “The Lone Ranger,” begins with a revision of the Eden narrative and moves on to challenge canonical literature and film; this “biblical to pop culture” model is followed by each of the four Old Indians. As Marlene Goldman explains, King’s narrative undermines the belief that there is no alternative to the end driven “Genesis to Revelations” narrative. She states, “The novel tackles the problem at its root. From the start, the novel invokes the biblical story of Genesis, “point A” of Christianity’s narrative of progress.”<sup>122</sup> Goldman interrogates pervasive myths of a cohesive American identity and their perpetuation of a unified monolithic definition of progress. Additionally, she suggests that these myths, which describe America as a paradise, originate with the hegemony of the linear narrative of Genesis.

First Woman’s origin story subverts this myth, and it opens with a Native origin story that satirizes the Garden of Eden. It begins with her fall from the sky and her landing on Turtle Island, which is the articulation of America in certain Native origin stories. First Woman’s fall recalls a common frame for a common Native origin story, referred to as an Earth Diver story,<sup>123</sup> in which an Indian goddess falls from the sky world onto the back of Grandmother Turtle and forms Turtle Island by piling mud upon the Turtle’s shell. King’s Earth Diver story explains that as the mud grows around Turtle Island, it gets “big and beautiful all around.”

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<sup>122</sup> Marlene Goldman, “Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in *Green Grass, Running Water*,” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn 1999), 30.

<sup>123</sup> “Reading Notes for Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*.” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 147.

Coyote, a stock character from Native storytelling who interacts with characters throughout King's novel, vacillates between the role of a clueless observer and one who plays an integral role in the outcome of the various character's narratives. In First Woman's story, Coyote sees the lush island and states, "That is beautiful... but what we really need is a garden."<sup>124</sup> Coyote's response invokes the response of European settlers who carried with them a singular narrative of progress in which the cultivation and civilization of American wilderness—and its "savage" inhabitants—articulated the destiny of the so-called New World Garden.

The Old Testament God is named "GOD" in King's text, and GOD satirically appears in the novel's prologue as a confused character in a Coyote dream. As that GOD leaps at Coyote's suggestion that Turtle Island requires a garden to civilize its wild beauty, the direction of this story begins to unfold. When the narrator explains that the Native Earth Diver story is "the way the story starts," that GOD replies, "That's not the way it starts at all. It starts with a void. It starts with a garden."<sup>125</sup> Because the hegemonic Judeo-Christian narrative supports the dominance of GOD, that GOD expects the Native story of creation to be erased in favor of the Garden myth. While the narrator tells GOD to stick around, "that garden will be here soon," the reader is reminded that this Native story contains a garden because it has been forced to accommodate the Judeo-Christian narrative, while Euro-American hegemony has required the silencing of Native origin stories in the service of a monolithic narrative of *true* human origins. This dynamic of the subjugation of Native narratives of origin to protect the coherency of the Euro-American story recollects the silencing of Patricia's narrative in the service of

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<sup>124</sup> King, 39.

<sup>125</sup> King, 40.

Ruby's communal identity in *Paradise*, and Lucy's unwillingness to acknowledge other interpretations of authenticity in *Paradise, New York*.

When the Garden of Eden appears, it challenges the unacknowledged biases and assumptions within the Genesis story by revising them in First Woman's voice. "First Woman's garden. That good woman makes a garden and she lives there with Ahdamn. I don't know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know."<sup>126</sup> This garden is created by First Woman's cultivation of the land, decidedly different from the Old Testament story, which says that God placed a garden in a barren world. This Native revision of Genesis emphasizes the presence of nature, albeit uncultivated, prior to human or divine involvement. Also, it reverses the Adam and Eve narrative: "I don't know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know," is a reference to what *happened* in the other garden narrative, the one in which Eve was created from Adam's rib. By saying "things like this happen," the story reinforces the multiplicity of actual origin stories, while simultaneously critiquing the notion of "origin" as an absolute story of beginnings, which is how Europeans employed the lessons of Genesis upon contact with Native communities.<sup>127</sup> Because First Women and Ahdamn are both presented as "already present" without being created by GOD, or God, or any other character, the story redefines the singularity of the creation presented in Genesis. Suddenly, Eve carved from Adam's rib is just another "thing that happened," another possible narrative of human beginnings.

King revises the story of "the New World Garden" by writing a Genesis about beings that were already present, and about a garden created by a woman. The notion

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<sup>126</sup> King, 40.

<sup>127</sup> Calloway.

that America existed as an empty land for the taking is highly popularized rhetoric from the era of European colonization of America. As Colin G. Calloway points out, the notion of a “wilderness America was largely myth: European settlers often lived in reoccupied Indian towns, ate Indian foods, and dealt with Indian people on a regular basis.”<sup>128</sup> In King’s narrative, as GOD watches First Woman and Ahdamn in the garden, he yells, “That’s my garden. That’s my stuff.” But the narrative continues by paying little attention to GOD’s claim of ownership. “So. There is the garden. And there is First Woman and Ahdamn. And there are the animals and the plants and all their relations. And there is all that food.”<sup>129</sup> This description bears marked parallels to European descriptions of the new world. In the early days of European occupation of America, however, the presence of First Woman, Ahdamn, and all of their relations were often silenced in efforts to claim the rights to the discovery of animals, plants, and “all that food.”

The next exchange between GOD and First Woman draws the allegory of Genesis, the discovery of the new world and ambivalence toward its native inhabitants into even sharper focus. When GOD leaps into the garden and yells, “you got to put all that stuff back... This is my world and this is my garden,” First Woman scoffs at him, “your garden... you must be dreaming.’ And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples.” GOD is infuriated by her disregard for his property ownership, “All this stuff is mine. I made it.” But King’s narrative, unlike the Christian story, corroborates First Woman’s status as cultivator. When she tells GOD, “News to me... But there’s

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<sup>128</sup> Calloway, 3.

<sup>129</sup> King, 42.

plenty of good stuff here. We can share it. You want some fried chicken?"<sup>130</sup> she recreates the circumstances of European colonization. The "discovery" of the new world is humorously contested within the same narrative used to legitimate the appropriation of Native lands.

As previously mentioned, the myth of the Vanishing American is riddled with the notion that European's—and later Euro-Americans—were destined to colonize the Americas, and that because Natives were too primitive and innocent to adapt to civilized life, they would slowly perish, paving the way for further expansion west.<sup>131</sup> What King reveals in his revision of the Garden myth is the troubled nature of ownership that begins with the myth of Eden. King satirizes the Old Testament God's claim to the land, drawing a parallel between the Genesis story: "the lord God planted a garden in Eden,"<sup>132</sup> and his own: "First Woman's garden. That good woman makes a garden."<sup>133</sup> King substitutes European models of ownership with a Native model, and First Woman offers to share her garden, much as Natives offered to share land with settlers.

While the Native model focuses on land use, the European model centers on title. King's satire suggests that the Judeo-Christian narrative legitimates ultimate control of the Garden because of one's role in its cultivation. The discrepancy over different notions of property ownership recurred throughout the European appropriation of Native lands. Indians consistently signed treaties they interpreted as giving Europeans rights to partake in the hunting and farming of shared lands, while Europeans operated under the

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<sup>130</sup> King, 72-73.

<sup>131</sup> Dippie.

<sup>132</sup> Genesis 2: 8.

<sup>133</sup> King, 42.

assumption that Indians ceded the lands into their complete control.<sup>134</sup> By postulating that this narrative of absolute ownership extends back to an Old Testament God, King gives a voice to the Native perspective by appropriating the European origin story and infusing it with distinctly Indian characters and worldviews.

### *Naming and Native Autonomy*

The importance of personal autonomy is central to King's narrative, and each of the Four Old Indians' stories emphasizes how acts of naming are a primary site of power in white/Indian relations. In each of the four Old Indians' stories, naming is integral to their agency and identity. As each of the goddesses confront stock characters from canonical western narratives, such as Genesis, the Lone Ranger, and Moby Dick, they attempt to name themselves within the context of these stories. While they initially try to preserve their identities from "pre-contact" with the western scripts, they ultimately undergo a process of renaming that occurs infrequently as personal choice, and more often as coercion by white characters from the dominant narratives.

After First Woman leaves the quasi-Eden, notably at her own behest, she puts on a ranger mask and is immediately recognized by a group of white soldiers as The Lone Ranger. "That's me," she says, and "his name is Tonto," she says of Ahdamn.<sup>135</sup> Disguising herself as the white Lone Ranger provides for her protection, and for her ability to name Ahdamn—note that she gives him an Indian name—but once she removes her mask she is arrested for "Being Indian," and taken to Fort Marion. In the second origin story, Captain Ahab, from Moby Dick, names Changing Woman Queequeg, a naming she resists. She suggests an alternative to the Indian name Queequeg: "Ishmael is

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<sup>134</sup> William Secunda. Lecture, 13 Feb. 2008.

<sup>135</sup> King, 76.

a nice name.”<sup>136</sup> When Changing Woman is caught by the same soldiers that capture First Woman, she states, “Call me Ishamel.” The soldiers scoff, “Ishmael! This isn’t an Ishmael. This is an Indian,” but Changing Woman insists a second time, “Call me Ishamel.” At this second request, the soldier says, “All right... We know just what to do with unruly Indians here in Florida.”<sup>137</sup> While being Indian is the crime, having a white identity can provide for an escape, but if a name isn’t accompanied by an appearance, “playing white” becomes just as bad as being “Red.”

In the third origin story, Thought Woman winds up on Robinson Crusoe’s island, and Crusoe, the shipwrecked writer, immediately tries to name her Friday. In response, she tries to explain to him that she is Thought Woman, but he insists on calling her Friday, and even tells her, “as a civilized white man, it has been difficult not to have someone of color around whom I could educate and protect.”<sup>138</sup> Thought Woman acts unimpressed and she tells Crusoe, “I’ll be Robison Crusoe. You can be Friday,” to which he retorts, “stop being stubborn.”<sup>139</sup> Thought Woman decides to leave Crusoe and asserts her agency by diving into the ocean and floating away. When the soldiers capture her, she says, “I’m Robinson Crusoe, I’m in charge.” Their only response is “Good grief, another Indian,”<sup>140</sup> and they take Thought Woman to Fort Marion.

Old Woman narrates the final origin story. Her two encounters revise the biblical story of Jesus walking on water, and the character Nathaniel Bumpoo, from James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Saga*. When Old Woman first encounters Jesus, she names him Young Man Walking on Water. When she saves a ship full of his disciples

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<sup>136</sup> King, 218.

<sup>137</sup> King, 249-250.

<sup>138</sup> King, 325.

<sup>139</sup> King, 326.

<sup>140</sup> King, 361.

and they try to name her as their savior, Young Man Walking On Water chastises them and tells them, “Nonsense, that other person is a woman. That other person sings songs to waves,” Old Woman proudly agrees, “That’s me,” but the disciples are less impressed, “A woman? Sings songs to waves... Young Man Walking On Water must have saved us after all.”<sup>141</sup> Although the disciples use Old Woman’s name for Jesus, they also confine her within identity categories—Woman and Indian—and employ them in determining her limitations.

When Old Woman meets Nathaniel, who calls himself “Nasty” Bumpoo, he insists on naming her Chingachgook, the name of his Indian friend, in spite of her repeated protests. When an anonymous person shoots Nasty, he blames Old Woman. She is, after all, a “savage,” who must be engaging in skulking<sup>142</sup> techniques. He decides to “reward” her with the name Hawkeye, which Nathaniel’s adopted tribe names him in Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. When Old Woman assumes the name Hawkeye to evade being captured, the narrator tells Coyote that Hawkeye is not a good name, “ It sounds like a name for a white person who wants to be an Indian.” “Who wants to be an Indian?”<sup>143</sup> Coyote asks. Only those who are protected by their white identity would choose an Indian identity, or rather, have the capacity to choose an identity at all. This argument is reinforced by Old Woman’s capture in which the soldier tells her that she is being arrested for “trying to impersonate a white man.”<sup>144</sup> This sentencing is particularly

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<sup>141</sup> King, 391.

<sup>142</sup> Europeans used the term “skulking” to describe Indian warfare, in which landscape and natural cover was used. This has an obvious derogatory limitation as it implies cowardliness, however, colonists frequently adopted Indian tactics instead of European open field blood-battles.

<sup>143</sup> King, 437.

<sup>144</sup> King, 439.

ludicrous given that it occurs within the context of a famous literary figure, Nathaniel Bumpoo, whose entire identity is rooted in being a white man who impersonates Indians.

Each of these episodes, diverse in their specific stories, work to expand the parameters of narratives that have shaped the dominant scripts of American identity. Just as Adam is afforded the task, and ability, to name the plants and animals in the Garden of Eden, having dominion over the garden because of his maleness, King shows how these stories have been influenced by the interaction of race and power. The authoritative voice of the white male soldiers, who have access to governmental, literary, and mythological narratives that support their hegemonic position, effectively thwart each of the goddesses' attempts to name themselves.

### *Moby Jane: Space for other Others*

As the novel undertakes to rewrite dominant western narratives to include Native identities, King includes other voices as well, exemplified in the episode that satirizes the story of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville's classic American novel about the whaling trade. After Changing Women meets Ahab and resists the naming he attempts to bestow on her, she observes him as he watches the seas for the great white wale, Moby Dick. When he makes his whaling call, "Whalesbianswhalesesbianswhales,"<sup>145</sup> a black female whale, Moby Jane, appears instead of Moby Dick. Margery Flick and Jane Fee in "Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," observe the significance of how with this and the second cry, "Blackwhalesbians," King effectively buries *lesbian* in the surrounding words. "Though

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<sup>145</sup> King, 19.

his crew tells him the whale is black and female, Ahab persists in seeing a great white male whale. He also throws overboard anyone willing to see [Moby Jane] for what she is (black, female, lesbian).”<sup>146</sup> This episode emphasizes the rigidity of King’s satirized Ahab. The captain’s unwillingness to recognize difference echoes the intolerant paradises explored in the previous texts: King also reveals how restrictive narratives necessitate the subjugation of “different” voices in order to preserve their coherence.

King goes beyond simply voicing the invisibility of black lesbians; he gives them a space within his text and challenges heteronormativity,<sup>147</sup> by including a sexual encounter between Moby Jane and Changing Woman. Admittedly, this episode is brief and its eroticism understated, but it nevertheless provides a space for the marginalized lesbian experience. “Changing Woman presses herself against that whale’s soft skin and she can feel those waves rock back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.” As Changing Women starts to yield to the seductive motions of the whale, Moby Jane tells her, “Wrap your arms and legs around me and hold on tight and we’ll really have some fun.” Without naming her intention, Moby Jane suggests they have sex. “It was marvelous fun, all right, that swimming and rolling and diving and sliding and spraying, and Changing Woman is beginning to enjoy being wet all the time.”<sup>148</sup> By presenting Moby Jane and Changing Woman as having a same sex—cross species!—sexual encounter described in terms of multiple modes of pleasure,<sup>149</sup> King not only gives

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<sup>146</sup> Margery Fee and Jane Flick, “Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders are in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*.” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 135.

<sup>147</sup> “Heteronormativity” is a term from feminist theory, which refers to the assumptions of universal and essential opposite-sex-attraction.

<sup>148</sup> King, 248.

<sup>149</sup> This refers to the multi-locus sexuality described by Luce Irigaray, a feminist theorist who revises heteronormative narratives of sexuality. Luce Irigaray posits in “The Sex Which is not One,” that female pleasure has multiple loci. “Woman’s pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and

voice to the marginalized black lesbian, he also polyvocalizes the dominant narrative of sexuality available within Western culture.

### *The Lost Blackfeet*

Now that I have explored Kings methods of subverting the dominant discourse and suffusing it with Indianness, we can explore the realist narratives of the Blackfoot, specifically focusing on the three culturally “lost” adults and the elders who guide them toward a stable sense of self. Lionel appears to be the most pitiful of the three characters; he claims that his adult life is the product of a series of three small mistakes with big consequences. At the novel’s outset, Lionel’s fortieth birthday approaches while he is sullenly employed at a home entertainment store and still entertaining his childhood fantasies of being John Wayne—a markedly anti-Indian hero. Lionel’s romantic interest links him to his cousin Charlie, a shallow “sell-out” who makes his money as the recruited Native lawyer defending a corporation’s construction of a dam on Blackfoot land. Alberta, Native studies professor and lover to both men, spends her non-teaching hours trying to find a way to get pregnant without having to deal with a man, especially not her boyfriends.

King represents all three individuals as spatially separate from the Blackfoot reservation. He introduces Lionel on a driving trip with his pushy aunt, Norma, who spends most of their trip—which notably lacks a defined place of origin or destination—giving him advice and telling him, “If I didn’t see you born with my own eyes, I would

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vaginal passivity... the pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute irreplaceably to women’s pleasure (30-31). Because her pleasure is multiplicitous, especially in comparison with the monolithic pleasure of the phallus, she explains that the feminine is always passed over in favor of the more tangible, more concrete, more visible form taken by masculinity. She states that “the other sex [has been perceived as merely] the indispensable complement to the only sex,” a sentiment that echoes King’s assertion that other narratives have been subjugated to *the* narrative.

sometimes think you were white.”<sup>150</sup> Norma’s criticisms reveal Lionel’s distance from his Indianness, she chastises him for failing to visit his family, and for making mistakes rooted in his desire to be white, such as privileging western medicine over Native techniques. As an eleven year old, Lionel insisted on seeing a white doctor because he wanted to get his tonsils taken out—not an unsurprising desire for a kid who sees his peers missing school because of a “simple” operation. Norma, however, puts tonsil surgery in perspective as she repeatedly criticizes Lionel for wanting to “get his throat cut,” a violent description of a treatment that seems absurd in the context of traditional Blackfoot medicine.

Alberta, conversely, remains ideologically connected to her Native identity, yet spatially distant. She teaches a class on Native American history, lecturing to a classroom of apathetic students about a history King intertextualizes throughout the novel. While Alberta’s students doze, she informs them of the history of Fort Marion, an “Asylum” in Florida where the U.S. government herded seventy-two Plains Indians, including the fictional four Old Indians, and imprisoned them because of their attempts to resist the extermination of the plains buffalo.<sup>151</sup> Alberta focuses on the “Plains Indians Ledger Art,” a series of drawings by the imprisoned Natives, which were later sold for profits, thus invoking the history of commodifying Native identity for white pleasure.<sup>152</sup>

King expands the topic of Fort Marion into a central metaphor of the novel, making it a space that recurs throughout *Green Grass, Running Water*. Not only the site of Babo, Dr. Hovaugh, and the Four Old Indians’ beginnings, it also reappears as the termination of each of the four Indians’ creation myths. Marlene Goldman points to the

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<sup>150</sup> King, 7.

<sup>151</sup> Goldman, 21.

<sup>152</sup> Goldman, 22.

fact that the ledger books illustrate “Native acts of self representation,” by literally drawing over the structured, linear template of the European ledger with colorful, pictographic depictions of the self.<sup>153</sup> This provides another example of how the novel invokes narratives that redraw American identity, favoring a palimpsestic and polyvocal model over the problematic erasure of difference.

Alberta, despite her engagement with this rich history of Native identification, is physically removed from her tribe. She teaches in Calgary, and although she does not live in opposition to the reservation like Lionel, much of her narrative lingers on the disappointments associated with her father and her early realization of the tension between white and Native autonomy. Herb Wylie’s essay describes the representation of Alberta’s father as shifting from a stereotyped image of a drunk Indian, to a contextualized and historicized character, “deflecting attention from his state [alcoholism] to the causes of it: the debilitating effects of racism.”<sup>154</sup> What Wylie does not mention, however, is how her father’s struggles affect Alberta. She responds to the structural violence inflicted on Indian identity by pursuing a structural cure. Her decision to teach Native studies within an institution, coupled with her resistance to the notion of marrying Lionel or Charlie, despite her overpowering desire for a baby, exemplify her struggles with partaking in Indian culture. She evades her culture, which she associates with the debilitating effects of racism, and seeks to rectify these problems from a distance. The image of her students dosing off during her lecture, however, provides an intimation of Alberta’s sense of failure in trying to correct the injustices done to Native communities. She segregates herself from her own Native community in efforts to fight

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<sup>153</sup> Goldman, 24.

<sup>154</sup> Herb Wylie, “‘Trust Tonto’: Thomas King’s Subversive Fictions and the Politics of Cultural Literacy.” *Canadian Literature: Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 161/162, Summer/Autumn 1999: 119.

ignorance structurally, yet her separation from the reservation creates tension within the development of her Native identity.

Meanwhile, Charlie Looking Bear allies himself with the racist institution itself. Duplessis International, the company in charge of constructing the Grand Baleen dam, recruits him as a token Native lawyer. They seek him out during their trial against Eli Stands Alone, Charlie's cousin. Thus Charlie comes to symbolically fight against his own tribe's autonomy since construction of the Grand Baleen occurs on Blackfoot land in direct violation of treaty rights. Charlie implicates himself in the erasure of Native rights by pandering to his own sense of self worth rather than to his tribal identity. However, he also has a history of being debilitated by the dominant white discourse of Indian identity. His father's past as a "Hollywood Indian," shapes Charlie's relationship with his Indian identity. With a stage name like Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle, King makes it no subtle fact that even Native actors have to conform to a romanticized version of Native self-hood.

Raised on narratives characterized by the repeated slaughter of Indians in John Wayne-type westerns, these un-heroic narratives about Indians thwart Charlie's attempts to identify with his father and his Indianness. As a young boy Charlie asks his mother, "Did he ever play the lead? You know, the hero." She tells him, "He could have, but that was back before they had any Indian heroes." Charlie presses her on, "I mean, did he ever play a lawyer or a policeman or a cowboy?" "A cowboy," she laughs, "Charlie, your father made a very good Indian."<sup>155</sup> In light of this exchange, it comes as little surprise that Charlie has difficulty accepting his Indian identity. In hegemonic narratives of American identity, Indians can only be Indians, never lawyers or cowboys. Charlie

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<sup>155</sup> King, 166.

pursues his own visions of success, influenced by the American dream of monetary wealth, to a career that ultimately stands in direct opposition to his Indian self. While he has achieved his goal of monetary success, he has had to subjugate his Indian identity, literally fight against it, in order to embody the American dream.

### *Dr. Hovaugh's Garden*

One final example of King's reworking of hegemonic narratives, including those of Eden, can be found in the character of Dr. Joe Hovaugh. Dr. Hovaugh, whose name spoken aloud sounds like Jehova, controls Fort Marion, thus embodying a satirically imperceptive god-like ruler of the asylum. King introduces Hovaugh describing his view of the front of the hospital from the vantage point of his oversized oak office desk. "Dr. Hovaugh sat in his chair behind his desk and looked out at the wall and the trees and the flowers and the swans on the blue-green pond in the garden, and he was pleased."<sup>156</sup> These closing words, "and he was pleased," are an allusion to the Biblical narrative of creation, which repeatedly emphasizes God's pleasure in his creations with the words, "and God saw that it was good." By attributing Hovaugh with pleasure in response to his garden, King suggests his praise as awe in his power, thus implicating the Old Testament God with ego-centrism as well.

When Hovaugh's secretary interrupts his appraisal to inform him that the four Indians have escaped Fort Marion, he reveals his obsessive need to understand the narrative behind the Indians escapes from the asylum. In a conversation with his friend, Dr. Eliot, Hovaugh insists on a correlation between the Old Indians' escapes and the dates of historical large-scale disasters. In spite of Dr. Eliot urging him to consider other dimensions of the Indians' flight, Hovaugh remains staunchly committed to the linear

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<sup>156</sup> King, 13.

paradigm of direct cause and effect.<sup>157</sup> King's narrative initially sympathizes with Hovaugh's scientific scrutiny of past events, following his journey from Fort Marion to Blossom, and interspersing his voyage with viable, albeit ambiguous, clues along the way. But the novel's "large scale disaster"—the destruction of the Grand Baleen dam—eventually unfolds under his watchful eye without the direct involvement of the Old Indians.

Hovaugh's biases toward established narrative trajectories blind him to certain observable facts about the Old Indians. For instance, he continues to see them as men, unable to conceive of powerful and autonomous women. Hovaugh and the other white male characters' inability to recognize that the Indians are women—Babo is the only person who sees that they are female—invokes scripts of early-contact European influence on Indian culture. Calloway notes how colonists, interested in war and trade, "sought out the men as those responsible; as a result, the influence of women [who were previously in positions of power in certain tribes] seems to have declined."<sup>158</sup> The European tenet that men occupy positions of power blinded them to the actual political organization of tribes. The emphasis on the invisibility of the femaleness of these four powerful Indians provides an indelible critique of the controlling hold of dominant narratives.

### *Turning the Circle*

King's novel culminates with a poignantly non-chronological return to each of *Green Grass, Running Water's* central narratives. The "ending" returns to the beginning of the four Old Indians' story; the middle of Eli's; the stagnancy of Dr. Hovaugh's; the

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<sup>157</sup> Goldman, 32.

<sup>158</sup> Calloway, 122.

future of Alberta, Lionel, and Charlie; and Coyote's present. As the novel concludes, it does not provide simple answers, which Coyote emphasizes when he repeats the same question that opened the novel, "But where did all the water come from?"<sup>159</sup> When Lionel tells Norma that he never did find out why Eli had chosen to come home, her answer seems to fit Coyote's question, "Always best to figure those things out for yourself."<sup>160</sup> Although the novel offers very few resolutions to the twists and turns that characterize its multilayered plot, it ultimately provides a sharp commentary on the subjugation of Native culture in the service of a Euro-American paradise.

The story of the Grand Baleen dam weaves through the culmination of Eli and Dr. Hovaugh's narratives. At the end of the novel, an earthquake and a little Coyote mischief breach the dam—three cars with names that evoke Columbus' expedition "sail" into its lip and "tumble over the edge of the world."<sup>161</sup> As Hovaugh watches the waters empty out of Parliament Lake he sees the Old Indian-inspired disaster he came looking for, "it's all here, I was right after all, the dates, the places."<sup>162</sup> He responds with such pride in his ability to accurately predict the next step in the linear narrative that he fails to consider the earthquake itself, as well as acknowledge that he still has not found the Indians he came looking for.

Eli, on the other hand, senses the importance of the day and goes out on his porch to watch the sunrise. He is shaken by the earthquake and ultimately killed by the water that floods his cabin. When Norma, Lionel, and Alberta come to collect the wreckage of the cabin, Norma says, "Going to miss him... but he had a good life, and he lived it

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<sup>159</sup> King, 469.

<sup>160</sup> King, 462.

<sup>161</sup> King, 441.

<sup>162</sup> King, 454.

right.”<sup>163</sup> Ultimately, when Charlie arrives and tells everyone that he is heading to L.A. to see his estranged father, Norma says, “Tell your father hello for me. Tell him about Eli.” This moment resonates with other moments throughout the text; the act of storytelling not only shapes this entire narrative, but having a story to tell provides the Native characters, particularly the Old Indians, with autonomy, authority, and purpose.

The religious festival, the Sundance, marks the culmination of the Blackfoot narratives. As Lionel and Alberta partake in an ancient tradition, Lionel finds his own story to tell. The Sundance is a ceremony that Goldman characterizes as celebrating “an aboriginal conception of the world in which the individuals can locate themselves at the centre of a land-based, communal, and non-hierarchical spiritual practice that involves both body and soul.”<sup>164</sup> It not only provides the ultimate embodiment of the non-linear, multifaceted narratives imparted in King’s novel, it also resonates with the worldviews posited in the culminating scenes of Pollack and Morrison’s texts. This space recalls the “hard won paradise” of *Paradise*, and the “shower of sparks falling over the industrial sector of Virginia” that define *Paradise, New York*’s closing vision. The Sundance expands on these images, embodying a constantly shifting and deeply meaningful event, defined by a seven-day calendar that marks its open and close. This complex event is best characterized by the four Old Indians who look on the circle of teepees constituting the Blackfoot camp from a distance:

"How beautiful it was," said the Lone Ranger.

"Yes," said Ishmael. "How beautiful it is."

"It is ever changing," said Robinson Cursoe.

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<sup>163</sup> King, 260.

<sup>164</sup> Goldman, 20.

"It remains the same," said Hawkeye

This complex temporality replete with shifting perspectives has defined *Green Grass, Running Water* throughout, and ultimately embodies the circular narrative structure that King proves to be open to difference and change.

When Eli and Latisha, Lionel's sister, bring Lionel and Alberta to the Sundance, their otherwise linear lives become suffused by the rhythms of the tradition that surrounds them. Alberta realizes that she is pregnant, a fact she refuses to admit because of its unlikelihood—but it ultimately helps her realize her own place within her community. She decides that she will stay and help Norma rebuild Eli's cabin. No longer in need of Lionel or Charlie, she feels free to pursue her Native roots and the raising of a child without fear of perpetuating a stagnant one-dimensional Indian identity.

Lionel finds his voice for the first time while helping his elders protect the sanctity of the Sundance. He helps defend against a white intruder who tries to take pictures of the dance. The Indians tell him afterward that, "In the years to come, you'll be able to tell your children and grandchildren about this."<sup>165</sup> Lionel remains a slow learner, even after his heroic debut, but in the final moments of his story, while he and Alberta help Norma build the Cabin, Lionel says, "Maybe when the cabin is finished, I'll live in it for a while. You know, like Eli. Maybe that's what I'll do."<sup>166</sup> While Lionel still seems uncertain about his future, he has finally found an Indian hero: Uncle Eli has replaced John Wayne once and for all.

Charlie leaves Blossom to visit his father in Hollywood after having finally realizing that the un-heroic roles cast to his Indian father had little to do with his "self"

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<sup>165</sup> King, 428.

<sup>166</sup> King, 464.

and everything to do with his race. Both Charlie and Lionel's stories "conclude" with their discovery of heroic Native individuals who have touched their own lives—their ability to reconcile their dreams with their Native identity become integral to their sense of feeling "at home." This markedly differs from the failed paradises in Pollack and Morrison's novels, which required individuals to fit themselves into an inflexible space incapable of accommodating growth or change.

One of the final images of the novel is Dr. Joe Hovaugh, sitting in his office looking at the same view of his garden as in the first scene of the novel. What he sees still pleases him, and it seems to be no mistake that what he sees has not changed in the slightest. Dr. Hovaugh ultimately embodies the "Genesis to Revelations line." While his narrative "progresses" linearly, it resists alteration and therefore is merely a repetition of an unchanging narrative *about* progress. Much as the garden is the beginning and end of his story, the monolithic western story of Eden and paradise never changes its basic parameters. Hovaugh's ending is literally his beginning, which cannot be mistaken with the circular pattern of the Sundance. Unlike Hovaugh's narrative, which resists change, the Sundance is "based on the principle of the circle, [yet it remains] open to the contingencies of chance."<sup>167</sup> The last Coyote episode echoes this revision:

"Earthquake! Earthquake!" yells Coyote.

"Calm down," I says.

"But it's another earthquake," says Coyote.

"Yes," I says. "These things happen."

"But we've already had one earthquake in this story," says Coyote.

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<sup>167</sup> Goldman, 34.

“And you never know when something like this is going to happen again.” I says.<sup>168</sup>

This vision of change as circular and unpredictable stands in opposition to Dr. Hovaugh, who looks for clearly defined beginnings and endings and winds up standing right where he started.

The novel's close does not present a resolution. Coyote still does not understand the message of the four origin stories much as Lionel still struggles to comprehend Eli's advice. Yet King has successfully begun to dismantle the structures that create roadblocks for his characters. Challenging the hegemonic linear narrative from every angle, the story that emerges repeatedly reinforces the necessity of questioning dominant narratives of success. This echoes how a hegemonic narrative of Euro-American progress has legitimated the denial of peace “as long as the grass is green and the rivers run” throughout post-contact Native history. King has shown how Native spirituality, which he represents as land-based and circular, provides an alternative to the Euro-American story of paradise, which retells the same linear story about progress, yet fails to adapt when faced with the change and difference inherent to human life.

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<sup>168</sup> King, 458.

## Conclusion

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What began as an exploration of paradise in three vastly different novels has culminated in a project that interrogates the assumptions at the very core of American identity. Much as Pollack and Morrison's novels opened with characters searching for an uncompromising home within a diverse nation that views "Otherness" as a pervasive and threatening category, they ultimately confront the fact that attempts to avoid—rather than confront—difference, be it internal or external, only serve to replicate the raced, gendered, and Othered hierarchies that inspired their initial search for paradise. There are deep faultlines inherent in the development of communities that place emphasis on a one-dimensional conception of identity. The consensus these communities require becomes as marginalizing as the assimilating imperatives of the mainstream.

By building fictional insular paradises, Pollack and Morrison reveal how these constructs fail to acknowledge the complex of identities within every human community. Typified by the Convent women and Thomas Jefferson, these authors reveal that only shared experience can transcend boundaries and unite individuals. While the shared experience of being an Other certainly includes the potential for connection, privileging a particular dimension of identity—such as race, ethnicity, or religion—inevitably disregards the multiple intersecting experiences that constitute a person's sense of self. When community becomes a rigid idealization of unity, it implodes.

The failure of these paradise projects grows from the same conventions that King responds to in his critique of “white” hegemony. The notion of linear progress, of perfecting the human experience, may begin with Adam and Eve, but it has a finite conclusion upon this couple’s expulsion from the atemporal Garden of Eden. In spite of this pervasive narrative, the myth of Eden has been transformed into a story that posits the potential for a return to this state of bliss. Lucy believes the Eden to be a perfect space that must be protected from the ravages of time; the Patriarchs become murderers in efforts to protect their constructed paradise from difference; and in *Green Grass, Running Water* white characters constantly undermine Native autonomy using scripts that legitimize the subordination of Others to a univocal ideal. The Euro-American paradise ultimately proves to require the same stagnancy and uniformity of Ruby and the Eden.

Yet from each of these discouraging critiques of the monolith of “American identity,” a phoenix rises from the ashes. The concluding visions of these novels echo one another in their hopes for a paradise re-visioned. In their view, paradise is not a sacred place; it is a story that can be found anywhere, even in the industrial sector of a Virginia ghetto, on a constantly eroding shoreline littered with sea trash, and finally in a circular vision of humanness that is suffused with the rhythms of the earth, and open to the subtle changes, and seismic earthquakes, that are inherent in the passage of time. Each of these novels take the notion of paradise out of the cultivated enclosure of Eden and place it in the heterogeneous, mica flaked and muddy earth. Their constellations of difference shine.

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