BODIES AND BELIEFS: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines religious identity in women's narratives in postwar America. The texts I explore trace the spiritual quests of protagonists who transgress social and religious gendered codes in a search for meaningful religious practice. Resisting the notion of universal truths, the authors of these texts overturn conceptions of God as patriarchal and univocal, often through formal innovations characteristic of postmodernism. Breaking down the ethnic basis of religion while acknowledging religion's troubling history of racism and sexism, these narratives instead cast religion as a means to cultivate community and social justice. Religion, formerly defined through exclusionary practices, is thus re-imagined as dynamic and performative.

Chapter 1 focuses on Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" and "Three Days and a Question," and Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," which center on strong female protagonists and position the problem of racial and religious identity side by side. Chapter 2 examines the role of narrative and ritual in religion as a means of healing trauma in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony and Mary Gordon's memoir, The Shadow Man. Silko and Gordon both investigate

religion's ties to ethnic culture through their protagonists' bi-ethnic identity, and posit the need to adapt and individualize traditional religious ritual. Chapter 3 explores Allegra Goodman's Paradise Park and Louise Erdrich's The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, novels that follow protagonists who overtly challenge the norms of religious gender roles and religious-ethnic communities. These two examine how performance may bring about deeper spiritual communion or, conversely, create a sense of alienation. Religious community is also a central theme of Toni Morrison's Paradise, the subject of Chapter 4. Paradise focuses on the misogyny and rigidity that attends Christian rhetoric, and poses as an alternative a hybridized religion that draws on Catholic and West African beliefs evoked through a maternal divine presence, who stands for political autonomy, the curative powers of nature, and sexual freedom. The Epilogue examines Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees as the culmination in popular culture of the movement towards ecumenical and self-crafted religious practice, and the foregrounding of race and gender in religious identities and communities.

Acknowledgments

I first fell in love with feminist theory and criticism as an undergraduate at Wesleyan University in a class on the Victorian novel taught by Christina Crosby. There I encountered the article, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction" by Nancy K. Miller, who I had the good fortune to work with at the CUNY Graduate Center. Nancy's outstanding scholarship and the rigor of her responses to my writing inspired me to strive toward excellence. Her interdisciplinary approach to contemporary culture and feminist theory was instrumental in helping me to broaden and deepen my analysis of these texts.

I completed my dissertation while beginning my first years of teaching at Principia College, in Elsah, Illinois. I owe a tremendous debt to Nancy, and to my other readers, Rachel Brownstein and Steve Kruger, for their flexibility and patience in working with me long distance. Rachel's exemplary teaching and writing have been a model to me for many years. Her sharp insights on the question of Jewish identity were invaluable, as were her warmth and wit. Steve has been extremely generous with his time, as well as his many kind words of encouragement. I am deeply grateful for the ideas he offered on the overall framing of this project and the role of race in American perceptions of religion.

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helping especially with readings of O'Connor and Kidd's texts, and was generous with her time and editorial skills. As the chair of the department, Lynn also created a class schedule that facilitated my writing and travel.

Patricia Clough, the director of the CUNY Women's Studies Program, invited me to join the lively Conviction Project Seminar, which provided a great opportunity to participate in interdisciplinary dialogue. I am grateful for the grant the Women's Studies program awarded for this, and for funding from the Helena Rubinstein foundation. A CUNY Writing Fellowship and Winchester fellowships from Wesleyan University also provided support. A grant from the New York Council for the Humanities enabled me to lead a seminar at the Brooklyn Public Library, where I sounded many ideas in this dissertation in the classroom.

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Introduction:

God and the American Woman Writer

When the literary critic Alfred Kazin published God and the American Writer in 1997, he challenged the claim that religious beliefs had ceased to matter by the late nineteenth-century, due to the emergence of Darwinism, psychology and nihilism.[1] Religion instead was "rescued" by William James and "put on trial" by Mark Twain (161, 176). Eliot deified the Anglican Church, with its aesthetics and hierarchies, in rebellion against his Protestant frontier ancestry; Frost sketched a God akin to indifferent nature; and Faulkner revealed the peculiar brand of religious self-righteousness saturating the racially divided South, imagining God as "the Player," akin to blind chance or fate. In Kazin's literary America, God had survived, albeit transformed, well into the twentieth century. In the Afterword to God and the American Writer, however, Kazin refers to Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and John Updike's In the Beauty of the Lilies, as contemporary novels that take religion as their subject, yet still construct their characters largely psychologically. These texts for Kazin become evidence that psychology finally had replaced religion as the universal approach to understanding subjectivity a century later.

As with many male critics of his generation, women writers barely exist for Kazin; he overlooks even the most prominent and respected among them. The

[1] J. Hillis Miller titled his 1963 analysis of several nineteenth-century authors, The Disappearance of God, asserting that this disappearance of God, a "nihilism that was covert," led to God's death, "the presupposition of much twentieth-century literature" (vii). The notion that the metaphysical premises of writers of the modern and postmodern eras had grown out of Nietzsche's declaration of God's death, Marx's suggestion that religion is a mind-numbing drug, and Freud's eschewing of religion for psychology, continues to be widely accepted, as also seen in A. N. Wilson's study, God's Funeral (1999), published over thirty-five years after Miller's book (12).

nineteenth-century writers, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Emily Dickinson, he gives their due, but in twentieth-century literature he mentions Flannery O'Connor a scant three times, though he knew her at the writers' colony at Yaddo and expressed interest in her novel Wise Blood on behalf of Harcourt Brace prior to its publication. Toni Morrison, similarly, does not appear alongside Pynchon and Updike as a Nobel Prize winning novelist for whom religion figures largely and originally, but is cited only to shed light on Faulkner and Stowe in her analyses of Christianity's impact on slave life. This is not even to address the absence of major works on religion by other African-American writers, like James Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain or Richard Wright's The Outsider, both published in 1953. The dearth of analyses of modern women writers, and African-American writers, presents a skewed picture of the twentieth century and leads Kazin to draw simplistic conclusions.

In a way then, this dissertation could be called "God and the American Woman Writer" after Kazin's book, as the idea evolved both from my appreciation for Kazin's assertion that to understand a writer's text, we must understand that writer's metaphysical premises, and from my skepticism about his conclusions on religion and writing in late twentieth century America, due to the scarcity of women's texts in his study.

My dissertation begins with analyses of texts by Grace Paley and Flannery O'Connor in Chapter 1 as precursors to more contemporary writers, and continues Kazin's project by picking up where he left off in the fifties with Faulkner and Frost. Yet to start with these authors takes us on a very different route through

the American literary scene—one that centers on female writers and examines works from genres associated with female audiences and authors (and thus often treated less seriously), such as short fiction, memoirs and popular novels—in tandem with more canonical literature. These writers deliberately foreground religion in ways that differ sharply from their male predecessors, largely due to the impact of the second-wave feminist movement and the public discourse on gender that has followed. Their texts thus provide a critique of the male hierarchies and sexist structures established by the religions under examination, questioning them through female protagonists who resist conventional gender roles that would restrict them to serving as passive receptors to male authority. Further, several of the authors examined here re-imagine God as female, exploring the implications of a God who possesses and expresses qualities associated with a maternal relationship to humanity. This presence of a redemptive God in contemporary American women's texts—and the attractiveness of it to readers—needs be examined as it stands in direct opposition to the common wisdom about the dominance of secularism in twentieth-century life and literature.

The prevalent assumption that spiritual skepticism is the dominant mode of thought in the postwar era derives from the Godless universe evoked in the work of prominent novelists like Pynchon, but is articulated still more explicitly in Don Delillo's White Noise (1985). Delillo's novel portrays a world in which religion is a mere simulation of belief, intended for comfort, but entirely lacking in truth or substance. The question of faith comes to the fore in White Noise,

when the protagonist, Jack Gladney, grapples with his desire for the security of belief to counter his fear of death. Jack's fate appears entirely determined by technology, chemicals, and unseen bureaucracies and policy makers—all material forces entirely out of his control—yet Jack feels compelled to appeal to an otherworldly power when overcome by his fear of death: "Don't let us die, I want to cry out to that fifth century sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light. Let us … live forever, in sickness and health, feeble-minded, doddering, toothless, liver-spotted, dim-sighted, hallucinating. Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you?" (103). Jack's turning to the heavens for some controlling force produces no result, and appears as a primitive impulse driven by panic, rather than by faith in a spiritual power or the possibility of transcendence. Power in this text is not held by any deity or spiritual laws, but is diffused throughout institutions, mechanisms and technology, powered by men and let loose upon the world.

The penultimate scene of White Noise reinforces this portrayal of belief as defunct in the postmodern world. At the climax of the novel, Jack tracks down a man who has slept with Jack's wife and given her pills that he professes cures the fear of death. Jack shoots this man and is himself superficially wounded. After dragging his victim to an inner-city hospital run by nuns, Jack is treated for his own wound, and looks for comfort by engaging the nun who nurses him in a conversation about belief. Yet when he asks about heaven, the nun who has been amenably chatting with him while tending his wounds becomes hostile. Questions about angels, the Pope, the creation of the world elicit responses such

as, “Do you think we are stupid?” or “You would come in bleeding from the street and tell me six days it took to make a universe?” (317-18). The main duty of the nuns, she explains contemptuously to Jack, is not to believe, themselves, but to simulate belief for the sake of the rest of the world who do not believe.

> As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. … You are sure that you are right but you don’t want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (319)

In White Noise, the world is so spiritually bereft that even the nuns hold no authentic spiritual beliefs. Delillo thereby casts religion as an outmoded institution, founded mainly on superstitious practices like “asking statues for good health.”

The texts examined in this dissertation, however, are predicated on the perception that religion is still a vital force in the postmodern world that serves to shape identity, create community, and assuage the grief and fear that attend death. Their authors stand in contrast to Delillo, Pynchon and the majority of male postmodern writers, by representing the possibility of healing and transcendence

through the very beliefs and rituals that Delillo treats as outmoded superstition. Postmodernity has affected the representation of religion by necessitating a rethinking of its form and application, but it has not made religion obsolete.

The works discussed here include Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" (1953) and "Three Days and a Question" (1991), Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" (1964), Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony (1977), Mary Gordon's The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for her Father (1996), Allegra Goodman's Paradise Park (2001), Louise Erdrich's The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2001), and Toni Morrison's Paradise (1998). The authors represent a range of religious and ethnic backgrounds, though, given the history of religion in the United States, Christianity emerges in nearly all of the texts as a force to be reckoned with. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 will all discuss texts that are paired according to shared themes, rather than grouped by the religious or ethnic backgrounds of their authors. This approach highlights the thematic intersections across different religions and genres, which reveal the larger values and concerns that characterize American women's approaches to religion in the post-war era. In Chapter 1, a shared interest in addressing racial divisions and social injustice emerges through Paley and O'Connor's work, for instance, that anticipates that of the later authors, despite the fact that Paley's stories are more stylistically experimental than O'Connor's and that the two hail from very different religious traditions.

In Chapter 2, placing Mary Gordon's memoir and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* alongside one another allows for an examination both of the peculiarly

American problem of bi-ethnicity and bi-religiousness that the protagonists of their narratives must navigate, and of an experimentation with religious ritual for healing. Pairing the novels by Allegra Goodman and Louise Erdrich in Chapter 3 highlights the questions each author raises on the relationship between religious gender roles, performative acts and the construction of subjectivity. These threads converge in Toni Morrison's Paradise, the subject of Chapter 4. Paradise both represents the patriarchal and racialized structures of conventional institutionalized religion, and imagines an alternative spiritual community with a maternal priestess and image of God at its center.

With the exception of Mary Gordon's memoir, The Shadow Man, all these works are fictional; yet it is important to consider these texts in light of their authors' religious backgrounds and beliefs, much as Kazin did in his analyses, given the extent to which the writers' representations of religion appear to stem from their personal knowledge of these traditions—and what we can know of that knowledge.

The writers I focus on here depart from other important women authors, preceding or contemporaneous with them, who wrote of characters striving for spiritual wholeness, but doing so outside of religion and as a solitary private project. The quintessential example of a novel in this tradition is Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel Surfacing, which was groundbreaking in its intertwining of feminist issues with spiritual ones. In Surfacing, the narrator, who is never named, must face and overcome the spiritual sterility of her society. This alienation is manifest in allusions to war, the pervasive sexism that reduces

women to their bodies and compels them continually to seek male approval, and the decimation of nature by "Americans"—a term the narrator uses not just for people from the United States, but for anyone with who acts violently toward humanity and the environment. Traveling to her parents' house on an isolated island with her boyfriend and another couple, after having been notified that her father is missing, Atwood's narrator searches for her father and eventually learns of his death. She must then resolve her feelings of loss and confusion about her childhood and more recent past. Her stay on the island comes to constitute a spiritual journey, which eventually leads her to separate from her three companions, and abandon speech and the trappings of civilization by living alone in the woods for a week. After this self-imposed exile, the narrator appears to regain a sense of wholeness, but the book ends on an ambiguous note when her boyfriend arrives back on the island to look for her, and she remains hidden in the woods while he calls out to her.

The protagonist of Surfacing embraces a spiritual communion in nature, but in order to do so, she must simultaneously reject Christianity. The first step in this process occurs when she begins to translate the suffering and martyrdom associated with Christ to the natural world around her. A heron she finds killed and strung up by hunters becomes symbolic both of the larger destruction of nature perpetuated by much of humanity, and of Christ's martyrdom:

> The shape of the heron flying above us the first evening we fished, legs and neck stretched wings outspread, a blue-gray cross, and the other heron or was it the same one, hanging wrecked from the tree. Whether it died

> willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals in the fall killing the deer, that is Christ also. (141)

Atwood herself explained in an interview soon after the publication of Surfacing, that Christianity, as "an imported religion" with imported gods, causes its followers to alienate themselves from the specific place they actually inhabit (216). The destructive tendencies Americans show toward nature go hand in hand with a rejection of the sacredness native to the place. She explains,

> The other thing that the imported gods will always tell you to do is to destroy what is there, to destroy what is in the place and to make a replica of the god's place, so that what you do is you cut down all the trees and you build a gothic church, or imitation thereof. And I think that the authentic religion that was here has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way. (216)

By the end of the novel, Atwood's narrator has utterly rejected Christianity, and after seeing ghost-like appearances of her parents during her week of exile, reflects, "No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus" (195). She also seems to have found a more authentic spirituality, intrinsic to the place she inhabits, but she is as of yet unable to articulate it or build on it to make social connections or social change. Her position represents the possibility of a "third thing," as Atwood refers to it, "somebody who would be neither killer nor a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship toward the

world" (213). The protagonist of Surfacing rejects both the role of victim or killer, but by the end of the novel still remains separate from society, leaving open the question of what form this third position would take in the actual world.

Many of the salient themes in Surfacing—its feminist approach, its focus on the spiritual aspect of nature, and its attempt to achieve wholeness—appear in the books under examination here. These authors diverge from Atwood, however, by representing the individual spiritual pursuits of their protagonists as bound up in an active engagement with a religious tradition and community, and by imagining the possible ways in which their spirituality might inform a social ethic or political activism.

The orientation toward addressing social problems, which appears in these narratives, is a tendency that the critic Wendy Steiner has observed appears largely in work by women and ethnic writers in American literature of the postwar period, in contrast to the authors like Pynchon that Kazin cites. In "Postmodern Fictions: 1960-1990," Steiner notes that it is the very presence of these social and political concerns in their texts that have caused most women and ethnic writers to be excluded from the postmodern canon, for "[a]ccording to it [the mindset that upholds the high-postmodern/low-minority divide], any exploration of a societal dilemma other than white male existential angst is a throwback to the nineteenth-century novel, or rather, there is no progressive existential angst that is not white, male, and ethnically unmarked" (442). Postmodernism has thus become a value-laden term, perceived as more progressive than other forms of art, so that contemporaneous work that does not

fall into that category, including the work under investigation here, appears as lesser in quality or reactionary in ideology.

Noting that literature that engages with social issues may be every bit as experimental in form as the more apolitical texts that form the postmodern canon, Steiner observes that postmodernism emerged in a time of increasing ethnic and cultural pluralism, which resulted in certain necessary stylistic innovations:

> What happened was that an extraordinarily talented array of writers responded in new ways to the modernist givens—the existential sense of the absurd, the arbitrariness of historical description, the importance of the medium of language in shaping thought and action. Without ignoring or denying these facts, they insisted on the validity of personal experience as an alternative to angst and hyperrationality (441).

The women writers included in this dissertation are reflected in this description, some in terms of their formal innovations, but all in their exploration of "societal dilemma[s] other than white male existential angst." These innovations appear in Silko's novel, Ceremony, and Gordon's memoir, The Shadow Man, which perform religious rituals through writing, as well as in Morrison's Paradise, which continually shifts perspectives and shuffles its chronology. Further, when postmodernism is seen as a moment in which artistic innovation is catalyzed and enriched by multiple perspectives that undercut the dominant voice, it can encompass texts that explore a God who never was dead for certain cultures, like the Pueblo, Ojibwe and African-American communities Silko, Erdrich and Morrison portray. This expanded understanding of postmodernism would also

allow for the recovery and remodeling of the God of dominant Eurocentric culture, in a way that supports, rather than oppresses, non-whites and women.

God becomes a problem for these authors to work out. Acknowledging their own partiality—a refusal to take an "objective" stance that would stand in for all humanity as modernists attempted to do—their narratives open the door wide for an idea of God and a system of beliefs and practices that are specific and partial, and not meant to operate as a universal Truth for all humanity. This may take the form of a localized religio-cultural tradition as in Ceremony, or a hybridization of beliefs and rituals, such as Erdrich's protagonist, Agnes, adopts from the Catholic and Ojibwe traditions in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. In Paradise this phenomenon culminates in a hybridization of West African and Christian beliefs and rituals; in Silko's and Erdrich's novels, a return to representations of God conceived by the Laguna Pueblo and Ojibwe peoples; and in The Secret Life of Bees in the pastiche of religious traditions the female characters adopt to suit their individual and collective needs.[2] In these narratives, the struggle for autonomy against dominant patriarchal and racist forces is supported by turning to a new concept of God. These writers thus move the idea of God and the instability of postmodern identity into questions about how one lives one's life, and out of and away from philosophical absolute truths.

In this way, these writers might be seen to respond to Mary Daly's call at the height of the second-wave feminist movement, for a new brand of Christianity free from the sexism that had plagued it. Examining the ties between patriarchal

[2] I discuss The Secret Life of Bees, a popular novel by Sue Monk Kidd published in 2002, in the epilogue.

social structures and religion, Daly strove to transcend the narrow patriarchal figure associated with the term "God" in Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (1973).[3] Daly's conclusion that "the entire conceptual systems of theology and ethics, developed under the conditions of patriarchy, have been the products of males and tend to serve the interests of sexist society," clearly influenced these writers, whether directly or indirectly (4). Daly argues that the American feminist movement "implies universal human becoming [and] has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God," because it supports women's realization of their wholeness and humanity. This premise led Daly to identify women's quest for self-realization as a search for a God, or ultimate reality, that transcends the patriarchal God that has hampered religion (6). Daly asserts that because God implies ultimate transcendence or reality, we must hold onto the God question, rethinking God not only as not male or non-anthropomorphic, but as verb rather than noun, suggesting something dynamic and flexible.[4]

It is precisely this conception of God as a dynamic entity that facilitates self-realization and wholeness that one can see developing and emerging through American women's literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The texts examined here were published after and influenced by the second-wave

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[3] Beyond God the Father was preceded by The Church and the Second Sex (1968), a call for gender reform within Catholicism and followed by Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (1978) and Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (1984), which attempted to establish a new Goddess based religion.

[4] Feminist theologians, such as Rebecca Chopp (1997), continue to build on the groundwork Daly laid by calling for a dismantling of patriarchal structures within Christian theology, rather than striving for women's inclusion within already existing institutional or theological frameworks. Chopp's essay, "From Patriarchy into Freedom: A Conversation between American Feminist Theology and French Feminism," builds on Julia Kristeva's concept of transformation, reading patriarchy as sin, and transformation as the promise of Christian redemption (241).

feminist movement, with the exception of Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" (1953) and Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" (1964), discussed as precursors to the others in Chapter 1. The influence of the feminist movement further appears in all, in their resistance to the gendered hierarchies that are supported by traditional Judeo-Christian religions, which Daly had earlier exposed.

Still more closely connected to this project is Carol Christ's Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (1980), which brought together Christ's interest in women's reconceptualization of spirituality with feminist literary theory, to show how a range of Western women writers approach spiritual quests throughout the twentieth century. Spirituality among the authors she considers—Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich, and Ntozake Shange—is constituted by affinity with nature, creative expression, and a deep existential examination. Distinct from a "social quest" (Christ's term), the focus of most feminist literary critics, a spiritual quest "concerns a woman's awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe" and "includes moments of solitary contemplation [though] it is strengthened by being shared" (8). For Christ, however, a spiritual quest is not a religious one, nor does it necessarily include a belief in or desire to understand an entity called God.[5] However secular the texts she focuses on may appear, Christ draws on theories by theologians Michael Novak, Stephen Crites and Paul Tillich to make a case for the sacred dimension of these works. Through her appropriation of Crites' term

[5] Shange, the one black writer Christ includes, is also the one author here who writes specifically about discovering God by that name when in for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf the lady in red sings as her final words "I found god in myself//and I loved her/ I loved her fiercely" (63, qtd in Christ 117).

"great powers," and Tillich's "ground of being"—"[d]eliberately more ambiguous than the terms 'God' or 'gods'"—Christ argues for her authors' attempt to show "the self's sense that it is related to something larger" (10). In this way, her use of "spirituality" reflects a trend of the last quarter of the twentieth century, identified by the historian Amanda Porterfield in The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening, in which

> the term *spirituality* emerged as a means of representing the common ground of religious experience and feeling that Christians from all traditions might share. Like the language of justice and peace, the language of spirituality served as means of avoiding more controversial topics of dogma, creed, and ecclesiastical authority. …In the context of American culture, the term *spirituality* took on a life of its own….by the 1980s, many had adopted *spirituality* as a term preferable to religion to characterize their mystical experiences and personal outlooks on reality. (40-41)

The texts I examine in this dissertation, like those Christ explores, focus on a spiritual quest that is informed by feminist principles. Unlike Christ's authors, however, the writers I examine portray their protagonists struggling with religious traditions and institutions as an integral part of their spiritual quests. Spirituality in these works does not exist independently from a "social quest." Instead, religion becomes the arena where the social and spiritual converge. The authors I've chosen thus explore the ways an individual's spiritual quest causes them to encounter conflicts around religious identity and institutions, and comes

to be either facilitated or blocked by a given religious tradition and community. The use of *spirituality* as a way to avoid "more controversial topics," including those of specific religious practice and doctrine, is just what these authors cannot subscribe to, despite their apparent desire for a more unified and ecumenical world.

The writers examined here move from questioning and resisting the gender roles enforced by traditional religion to imagining religious communities and practices that shed the sexist history of their precursors. They likewise create fictional women who minister and an idea of God that is feminine in form. In this way, they parallel feminist developments in the actual practice of contemporary religion in America. The 2002 edition of the Bible titled "Today's New International Version," for example, inserts gender-neutral language into the text[6] and the appearance of "Miriam's cups" have appeared to correspond with Elijah's cups at Seder dinners, which hold "spring water symbolizing the wells that…miraculously appeared to sustain the Israelites in the desert wherever the prophet Miriam went" (Cohen). In raising questions about religious gender roles, too, these authors address the widespread Judeo-Christian treatment of women's bodies as innately sinful or simply lesser, the exclusion of women from the clergy, and religious-based restrictions on women's sexuality.

The exploration of women's sexuality in relation to spirituality and religious structures may also be viewed as part of a larger emphasis on the body

[6] Ironically, the New York Times critic, Emily Nussbaum, urges liberals and feminists to enlist with conservatives and fundamentalists, to preserve the Bible's gendered language, arguing that the Bible reflects the times in which it was written, an epoch when women held an inferior social status to men, and that to degender the language is to dehistoricize the text.

that appears throughout these narratives. A growing focus on the body as a site where ritual is played out and religion is produced, and where religion takes effect in the form of a physical manifestation of psychological healing, appears throughout these texts, though manifest in diverse ways. Erdrich's protagonist, Agnes, who passes as a male priest on a reservation, experiences miracles that are theological concepts literalized on the body and witnesses the failure of the Church in the sick, starving and drunk bodies she tends as "Father Damien." Silko's young hero, Tayo, a native-American World War II vet suffering from battle fatigue, must heal his sick body via spiritual renewal. Morrison's Paradise ultimately offers its heroines healing through a set of sensual ceremonies tailored to their individual bodies and experiences. And clothing meant metaphorically to communicate a body's place in society (through gender, class, and profession) creates and uncreates religious identity in Goodman's and Erdrich's novels.

More strikingly still, race and ethnicity emerge as dominant factors in religious identity and its expression through the body. For Mary Gordon and Adrienne Rich, who have gentile mothers and Jewish fathers, but whose identities feel bifurcated by having been raised in Christian families, the body silently lies at the heart of the question of what constitutes Jewishness; and Grace Paley and Allegra Goodman treat this problem fictionally through controversies surrounding certain characters' authenticity as Jews. Religion occurs on and in response to racialized bodies in O'Connor's story, "Revelation," and in Morrison's novel,

Paradise, and The Secret Life of Bees.[7] This crossing of race with religion occurs, too, in Silko and Erdrich's novels, as we witness the colonization of native peoples and the decimation of their societies. In Ceremony in particular, the Catholic Church is shown to supplant native beliefs and practices with Catholic ones, while leading the Pueblo girls to idolize and emulate all things white, including white women's styles of dress, makeup and hair.

Considering this emergence of race as a central issue in all the texts under investigation, the question becomes, why this pronounced intersection of religion with race? Is it simply that the "problem of the twentieth-century," as W. E. B. DuBois famously phrased it, "the problem of the color line" seeps into every American text more or less visibly? (13). Given that American history shows religion as rife with racism—Protestant churches in particular supported segregationist policies, offering them a veneer of moral authority and respectability—the concept of solving race problems through religion would be hard for many to swallow, even after the success of Martin Luther King's Christian rhetoric in its day. American religion's legacy of gendered and race-based persecution links it to violence and exclusion.[8]

Because of this history, race works on two levels in these narratives. First, religion and race cannot be extricated from one another; in American culture,

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[7] One can trace the broader pattern of using a black character as a test of white conscience, of which this is a part, through earlier American literature as well, including such canonical works as Benito Cereno and Huckleberry Finn.

[8] Even Mary Daly was charged in an open letter by Audre Lorde, of neglecting the goddesses of African religion in Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Lorde argues that this exclusion, coupled with Daly's focus on African genital mutilation, "dismissed the heritage of all other noneuropean women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us." She asked Daly, "do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us?" (68)

religion becomes racialized. These authors must grapple with the way ethnicity lies at the roots of religious identity, as becomes evident through Silko's underlining of Christianity's connections to Anglo-American cultural dominance in Ceremony, and in the questions raised about the nature of Jewish identity in Paley and Goodman's work. In Paley's story, "The Loudest Voice," in particular, the title refers to the stereotype of "loud Jews," Jewishness having been considered and discriminated against as a race throughout history.

Second, race comes to serve as a litmus test for religion, so that the practical goodness and efficacy of a religion is determined largely by how those who practice it overcome racism in their daily lives. This use of race to test the sincerity and depth of spirituality and religious practice applies not just to those in the dominant culture, like the white protagonist, Agnes, in Erdrich's novel or Mrs. Turpin in O'Connor's "Revelation, but also to the attitudes of those from oppressed cultures toward Anglo-Americans, like the medicine man, Betonie, in *Ceremony* or the mixed-race spiritual leader, Consolata, in Paradise. Racial segregation and antagonism, the most salient problem in American history and contemporary culture, thus becomes the ultimate challenge to be overcome by religion.

The extent to which these authors place their protagonists in situations that force them to grapple with institutionalized racism and sexism, reveals that though they may foreground an individual's communion with God, they are too concerned with the social and communal to reject collective rituals and institutions altogether. The spiritual quest their characters face is directed

outward, not in the direction of some now defunct model of European Christianity, but instead in an attempt to make God something that redeems and invigorates a particular community, as well as the individual. Complicating the existential angst of postmodernity, their writing reveals a preoccupation with the greater social problems of American culture, which have affected their lives and informed their response to religion and the search for God. Negotiating between the postmodern dissolution of the self and the feminist push for autonomy and voice, the history of racism and sexism within the Judeo-Christian tradition and their desire to work toward a more just society, these writers follow Daly's call, exploring God as verb, instead of noun, as something to be performed rather than defined—and in the end, raise more questions than they answer about the problems and potentialities of religion in its effect on American identity, community and society.

In Chapter 1, I explore short stories by Grace Paley and Flannery O'Connor, women writing at mid-century whose work was influenced by their religious backgrounds in ways that strongly affect their approach to contemporaneous social issues. Paley and O'Connor anticipate the writers in the chapters that follow, by crafting their stories around strong female characters looking for metaphysical answers to social ills, including race and class inequities.

In Chapter 2, I look to Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, Ceremony, and Mary Gordon's memoir, The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father, to examine the role of narrative and ritual in religion as a means of healing a

traumatic past. Gordon's investigation into her own bi-religious and bi-ethnic identity, and her turn to Catholic sacred rituals, for healing, ties her text closely to Ceremony, which centers on a protagonist who struggles with being half-native-American and half-Anglo-American and explores the use of rituals for their curative powers for an individual and community—here, the beleaguered people of the Laguna Pueblo tribe. Silko and Gordon also share an interest in the adaptation and modernization of traditional religious ceremonies that appears more and more strikingly throughout the texts examined in the sections that follow.

In Chapter 3, I examine Paradise Park by Allegra Goodman and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse by Louise Erdrich. Goodman's novel primarily explores Orthodox Jewish communities, whereas Erdrich, like Silko, explores the relationship between Native American and Catholic theologies. These narratives both follow protagonists whose involvement with religion is intense, but unorthodox, and who overtly challenge religious gender roles. These novels highlight most clearly the problems of gender roles and ethnicity in religion, through their exploration of the relationship of bodies and beliefs to religious identity. Along these lines, Erdrich and Goodman examine how performance, as an integral part of religion, may bring an individual to a deeper spiritual communion and ties to a religious community, or conversely, cause her to feel alienated from the religion in question.

The question of community and alienation is at the heart of Chapter 4, which focuses on Toni Morrison's novel, Paradise. Paradise brings to light the

misogyny and rigidity that often accompany Christian rhetoric, and poses as an alternative a vision of a religion that draws on both Catholic and West African beliefs to evoke a maternal divine presence, closely tied to the curative powers of nature, political autonomy, and sexual freedom. An image of a Black Madonna and of various mother-daughter relationships recurs throughout Paradise, and is tied to these values and the convergence of Christian and African theologies.

Finally, the Epilogue to this dissertation examines the popularity of Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees as the culmination of the movement in these previous texts towards ecumenical and self-crafted religious practice, and the foregrounding of the role race and gender play in religious identities and communities.

In this emergence of race as a problem that is interconnected with religion, we see that the spiritual and the social cannot be parceled out from one another in these writers' work. Their project of representing an individual's quest for God and spiritual growth is tied, not only to a negotiation of religious identity, but also to an active endeavor for social justice in their communities and the greater world. Thus the history many religions share of perpetuating societal hierarchies, exclusion, and even violence, becomes one these writers revisit, in an attempt to recoup religion by finding in it a means both of healing individual trauma and bringing about greater social equity and harmony.

Chapter One:

Loud Voices and Radical Visions in the Stories of Grace Paley and Flannery O'Connor

Grace Paley once remarked of Flannery O'Connor,

> Yes, I know she had a copy of Little Disturbances of Man [Paley's first collection of stories] before she died. Cecil Dawkins gave it to her, but I don't know if she read it. I loved her use of language, but I couldn't accept her ideas about social work, that any good work had to come from inside the Church, from faith. (Isaacs 110)

Paley and O'Connor were contemporaries, born in 1922 and 1925 respectively, but beyond their generation, gender, and status as two of the most highly regarded short story writers of the twentieth century, the two chose very different paths in their lives and fiction. Paley barely graduated from high school and dropped out of college, while O'Connor earned an MFA at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Paley, who once noted, "I worked very much alone most of my life," had little formal mentoring, apart from a now famous meeting with W. H. Auden, whose class she had enrolled in at the New School (Hulley 38).[9] O'Connor received instruction at Iowa from the Fugitive/Agrarians, including Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom and Andrew Lytle, laying "the groundwork for an aesthetic and critical tradition centered on … the primacy of white southern manhood" (Prown 4). Paley constructed stories, then vignettes, increasingly experimental in form and autobiographical in content, focusing on

[9] Auden, encouraging Paley to write in her own voice, asked if she ever really used words like "trousers" and "subaltern" in her everyday conversation (Perry 106).

women and the domestic. O'Connor's plots featured the grotesque, dramatic and violent. Paley's characters and alter-egos move among apartments and urban neighborhoods, prisons and parks, while O'Connor's inhabit the landscape of the segregated rural South.

Yet beyond the differences in geography and the trajectory of their careers, the two writers share a deep-rooted religious identity that informs their fictional treatment of the social and political issues of their day. Religion underlies their texts, not in the representation of ceremonies or in any overt grappling with theology or doctrines, but as a force that drives the fiction—in Paley's case, one which shapes her protagonists' ethics as they encounter political injustices, and in O'Connor's, one which determines the lessons on the dynamic between social and spiritual realms and relationships her characters must painfully learn. Each writer gets to her idea of God largely through the contemporary social problems that concern her. Paley both raises questions about the nature and stability of Jewish identity under the duress of assimilation and contemporary political conflict and grounds her characters in a Jewish ethic of care for the immediate community and the greater world. O'Connor, whose later stories allude to desegregation and the Civil Rights movement, demands that her characters face their own racism, but through a lens of Christianity rather than a politics of secular liberalism. Both authors represent these matters of social justice as bound up in religious belief, and in this way they anticipate later American women writers who grapple with how religion functions as a foundation for political protest or societal change.

Though Paley and O'Connor are of the same generation, O'Connor's career ended abruptly with her death at thirty-nine in 1964, whereas Paley has continued to publish and give readings and talks over the last forty years into the millennium. I'll examine one of Paley's earlier oft-anthologized stories, "The Loudest Voice" (1953) in conjunction with a later and more unconventional piece, "Three Days and a Question" (1991) as a means to highlight problems that emerge around Jewish identity as it exists as a minority in America and informs political positions. Though operating from quite a different theological basis, "Revelation" (1964), O'Connor's last story, connects to "The Loudest Voice" in compelling ways. Both raise questions about gender roles through female protagonists who depart from the prototype of literary heroines by being the wrong age for romance plots, and resist stereotypes of femininity by the force of their personalities and convictions—and in these texts, these qualities are inextricably bound to questions about the formation of religious identity.

"The Loudest Voice" and "Revelation" foreground questions of religious identity through their respective heroines, Shirley Abramowitz and Ruby Turpin, each of whom possesses a loud voice and large personality. These characters become the focal points for questions about religious identity and practice, and each is shown forging a relationship with God outside the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of traditional religion. Paley's Shirley, a Jewish girl from a close-knit immigrant neighborhood, who is asked to play the voice of Jesus for her school's Christmas play, asserts at the close of her story that she knows God hears her prayers because her voice is "the loudest," while O'Connor's Mrs.

Turpin, a complacent racist and classist southern Christian, berates God in a long and demanding prayer near the conclusion of "Revelation," and, remarkably, receives an epiphany that overturns her view of the world and her own righteousness. To create such characters and award them success in their practical and spiritual endeavors constitutes a protest against traditional gender roles and representations, however humor may soften its delivery. Paley's and O'Connor's representations of religious identity crises through characters who are assertive and even abrasive, counter conventional notions of femininity, while bringing up the relationship of religious beliefs to social injustices within a community. The loud voices Shirley Abramowitz and Ruby Turpin use in prayer—the former kneeling at her bedside and the latter yelling at the sunset emblazoned sky—signify that both expect, and even demand, to be heard.

The Word and the Thing: "The Loudest Voice" and "Three Days and a Question"

The question of whose voice gets heard among competing cultures, ethnicities, and political positions links Grace Paley's more traditional and comic story, "The Loudest Voice," (1953) with the more structurally innovative and serious in tone "Three Days and a Question" (1991). "The Loudest Voice" centers on the problem of assimilation into mainstream Protestant American culture, which threatens to dilute or even erase Jewish traditions and communities. Set in New York's lower east side immigrant community, Paley draws her humor from the families' worries over their children's participation in the school Christmas pageant where it appears that the Jewish children have been

awarded the largest parts. Shirley Abramowitz, the narrator of "The Loudest Voice," has in fact been cast as the voice of Jesus, much to her father's pride and bemusement and to her mother's chagrin, because Shirley has "the loudest voice."

Much of the humor of the story comes from the fact of a small Jewish girl playing the role of the male Christian savior, and of boys with names like Ira, Lester and Meyer, cast in the supporting roles of the shepherds. To further the comic effect, when one boy, Marty Groff, makes his entrance as Jesus, Shirley notes that for his costume he is "wearing his father's prayer shawl" (61). Layers of meaning accrue in this detail alone, which points not only to Marty's Jewishness, but ironically alludes to the oft overlooked Jewish origins of Jesus and thus of Christianity. But what Paley communicates more subtly and poignantly is the anxiety of a minority community whose children are mixing with the dominant culture, possibly at the expense of their own traditions and sense of identity. The Rabbi's wife, we learn, has forbidden her son from participating in the play. Even the tree on the corner, "decorated for us by a kind city administration," is evidence of the pervasiveness of Christian culture, and prompts the neighbors to walk "three blocks east to buy a loaf of bread" to avoid "its chilly shadow" (60). Jewish identity as a religion and ethnicity is shown, with however light a touch, to be under threat by the dominant Christian culture through the intermixing and education of these immigrants' children.

Shirley's father, in contrast to the Rabbi's wife, is both proud of the recognition bestowed on his daughter and ambivalent about the play itself. In debating with her mother and the other parents, he unconvincingly defends the

play as educational as a piece of history and "a beautiful affair, you have to admit, introducing us to the beliefs of a different culture" (62). Further, while debating the merits of Shirley's participation in the play with his wife, he poses the question: "Does it hurt Shirley to learn to speak up? It does not. So maybe someday she won't live between the kitchen and the shop. She's not a fool" (59). This line of reasoning suggests that he supports Shirley stepping outside of the traditional roles for Jewish immigrant women. Participating in the dominant Christian culture is a step towards freedom from these roles.

"The Loudest Voice" is further complicated by the combination of the anxiety the play provokes in the parents, with the celebratory tone in which Shirley recounts the details of the performance and earnestness with which, at the story's close, she includes in her prayers "my talking family, cousins far away, passersby," and ironically, "all the lonesome Christians" (63). Yet Paley's choice of Shirley as her narrator does more than soften a story of collective loss with humorous twists. Shirley, in fact, has good reason to feel victorious. Her role in the play as the voice of the Son of God may initially seem merely a joke, but it also functions subversively in relation to the Christian culture in which God has been figured as a father or son, and not a precocious and vociferous little girl. For readers, the humor of Paley's story itself functions subversively for, as Jacqueline Taylor explains,

> In order to consider the connection between Paley's use of Jewish humor and her use of humor to deconstruct women's mutedness, we need to

understand how the characters in Paley's works employ humor as a critique of anti-Semitism and the pressures toward assimilation. (59) Shirley's father's use of humor within the story ("How's the virgin?" he asks the mother of the girl who plays Mary) and Paley's use of it through Shirley's description of the events around her, fits into a larger Jewish tradition of employing humor strategically to combat oppression. "For a verbal people," Taylor notes, "language will offer a crucial means of resistance, and humor can serve as one of the more subversive strategies available through language" (58-59).[10]

Likewise Shirley's prayer for the "lonesome Christians" works as a wonderful reversal by which, in her pity for those who appear to hold more power and would marginalize her, she transcends her marginalized position and holds out a promise that she, a Jewish immigrant girl, will acquire power as an adult in the new society she inhabits, much as Paley's father and then Paley herself did. As Taylor argues, "Far from becoming assimilated as a result of her participation in the pageant, Shirley has concluded on the basis of the story she told … that the Christians are a lonesome lot. Furthermore, she knows that if you want to be heard in this world, you have to speak with a loud voice" (65). Thus Paley brings to the fore the question of how to preserve Jewishness, but concludes with a subversive victory of the marginalized over the dominant culture, as filtered

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[10] Taylor refers to Nancy Walker's A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture as

> a study of Jewish humor that identifies Jewish people as 'the single group that has affected American humor more than any other group…. With their long tradition of minority status, the Jewish people developed, centuries before their immigration to the United States, a highly refined humorous tradition that both acknowledges their position as a minority and makes fun of the oppressor. (qtd in Taylor 59)

through the point of view of Shirley, who appears to remain secure in her own identity, despite her flirtation with Christmas.

Adrienne Rich, born in 1929 and of the same generation as Paley, considers this same question in her 1982 essay, "Split at the Root." Rich was the favorite daughter of a hard-working doctor who considered himself unreligious. Rich's father was determined to assimilate, and lived with his gentile wife and daughters in a moneyed Protestant neighborhood in the South. Arnold Rich had been sent by his parents to a military school in North Carolina, "a place for training white southern Christian gentlemen," and then attended the University of Virginia (102). Adrienne Rich notes that her father's Judaism, and thus hers, was rarely if ever referred to, nor was the word Jewish or Jew even spoken aloud.

> [M]y father would not enter *any* church for any reason—wedding or funeral. Nor did I enter a synagogue until I left Baltimore. When I came home from church, for a while, my father insisted on reading aloud to me from Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason—a diatribe against institutional religion. Thus, he explained, I would have a balanced view of these things, a choice. He—they—did not give me the choice to be a Jew. (105)

Rich attributes this attitude primarily to a desire to be professionally successful and rise in class standing on her father's part. In considering the correlation between assimilation and material success, Rich reflects, "I wonder if that isn't one message of assimilation—of America—that the unlucky or the unachieving want to pull you backward, that to identify with them is to court downward mobility, lose the precious chance of passing, of token existence" (111).

Isaac Goodside (né Gutseit), by contrast, embraced his Jewish identity, yet Grace Paley echoes Rich's reflection on her father's anxiety in her observation, "'really he was just a ghetto Jew'….Basically he was…a working-class man and he really never got over…[his] deference to Anglo-Saxonism. He worried a lot whether we would make fools of ourselves [among the gentiles]' (Perry, 42)" (qtd in Arcana 37). This concern over how the family appeared in relation to the dominant culture and its potential effect on his career may have prompted Isaac Goodside to remain in a Jewish immigrant community, just as conversely, it led Arnold Rich to assimilate and to cultivate the modest and reserved demeanor associated with being a Southern gentile "gentleman." Significantly, the behavior from which Arnold Rich would disassociate himself is, as his daughter explains, that of "the raw, 'pushy' Jews of New York, the 'loud, hysterical' refugees from eastern Europe…the 'wrong kind' of Jew" (111-112). Paley's family, immigrants from Russia, were this "wrong kind of Jew" and the stereotype of Jews as loud and aggressive that Rich strove to escape is, of course, the very one that Grace Paley embraces in "The Loudest Voice" through her celebration of the vibrant immigrant community she represents and Shirley's success in the Christmas pageant.

Though "The Loudest Voice" is a story with a comic twist, and "Split at the Root," a serious autobiographical essay, both Paley and Rich communicate the hegemony of Christian culture through a Jewish child who must participate in a play that perpetuates Christian dominance at the expense of Judaism. The actual childhood experience Rich recounts, however, diverges from Paley's fictional

account due to the absence of a supportive Jewish family or community for Rich, and the fact that the play, The Merchant of Venice, has a much more deliberately and violently anti-Semitic message than the Christmas production Paley imagines. Unlike the heated debates over Shirley's role as Jesus that Paley represents taking place among the Jewish community of adults, silence surrounds any conflicting feelings the young Adrienne Rich's portrayal of Portia might have produced in her father or herself. The exchange with her father that she recalls is telling, both for his apparent absence of identification with Judaism, and the encouragement Adrienne thus receives to disassociate herself from Judaism due to the reinforcement of profoundly negative association with Jews. Her description of her rehearsal for her father is worth quoting at length:

> *Two memories:* I am in a play reading at school of The Merchant of Venice. Whatever Jewish law says, I am quite sure I was *seen* as Jewish (with a reassuringly gentile mother) in that double vision that bigotry allows. I am the only Jewish girl in the class, and I am playing Portia. As always, I read my part aloud for my father the night before, and he tells me to convey, with my voice, more scorn and contempt with the word 'Jew': 'Therefore, Jew…' I have to say the word out, and say it loudly. I was encouraged to pretend to be a non-Jewish child acting a non-Jewish character who has to speak the word 'Jew' emphatically. But *I* must have had trouble with the part, if only because the word itself was really taboo. I can see that there was a kind of terrible, bitter bravado about my father's way of handling this. (104)

Rich learns from this play and other readings in school attitudes toward Jewishness that include "scorn for Jews and…disgust surrounding Jews and money," producing a conflicted feeling of being "split at the root." She has been taught by the dominant culture and her father's acquiescence to it to view Jewishness from the outside and to despise or feel ashamed by it. By reviewing these experiences that taught her to dis-identify with her Jewishness, she revises her view of herself, claiming her Jewish identity, despite her family's rejection of it.

Though Paley's father was anxious about "whether we would make fools of ourselves," she had been raised by successful parents, both of whom were Jewish, with the support of an extended Jewish family and neighborhood, and surrounded by the diversity of New York, all of which contributed to a strong identification with her Jewishness. Interestingly, however, Paley's discussion of religion in interviews reveals, if not a conflicted identity, a similar complexity in her attitudes toward Judaism as a religion because of her family's overall aversion to religious beliefs and practice.

Paley consistently expresses pride in her cultural ethnicity and community, but her understanding of the relation of these to Jewish theology and religious practice reflects more ambiguity. As she explains somewhat obscurely, "I come from a long line of anti-religionists. But, on the other hand… *Sometimes I'm against the word, not the thing itself*" (emph added, Hulley 37). The Goodsides were both atheists and very much opposed to religion, as Paley has related in several interviews, yet they celebrated the High Holy days and were "very Jewish-

identified" (Satz 196). As Arcana notes, Paley's grandfather had been an atheist, and though her father had argued about this issue with him back in Russia, he chose to give up religion entirely in America (13). "They laughed at religion," Paley relates of her parents, and claims that both "hated religiousness." Yet her father's learnedness and pride in his Jewish identity was such that he had what Paley describes as "Biblical feeling and knowledge" that he cultivated in his youngest daughter (Kaye-Katrowitz and Klepfisz 153-154). And though her mother was "firm in her disbelief and unmoving," Paley notes that "it was just assumed that I would walk my grandmother to the schul…[a]nd it was *assumed* that we would have a giant Passover dinner" (Satz 196). The family's identification with Jewishness rested on ethnic culture and history rather than religious observance. Much like Shirley, Paley grew up proud of her Jewishness and with the idea that "the world was…totally Jewish. And the people to be worried about and pitied are the ones outside" (Kaye-Kantrowitz and Klepfisz 154-5).

Paley's statements about the elements of Jewishness that drew her in as a child and hold her loyalty as an adult reveal more clearly what she means by *the thing* of religion that she's not "against." Paley frequently speaks of her attraction to "things Jewish," and describes a "social tradition" by which "all the Jews I knew were people who were concerned about the fate of the world and what to do about it." Most consistently, she reiterates her attraction to feeling part of "a continuous Jewish community" and "the social tradition of the Jewish family of very deep charity toward others…and a strong social consciousness" (Kaye 154;

Satz 197). Paley's sense of religious identity thus undergirds her interest in social justice and expression of care for the larger world.

That Jewish culture is firmly rooted in a concern with social issues, as Paley asserts, is evident in several pieces in the anthology Nice Jewish Girls: Growing Up in America. As the editor, Marlene Marks Adler, notes, the texts in this collection reveal in particular a preoccupation with the historical oppression of the Jews and its modern implications:

> The question of worthiness is at the heart of the matter for women living in the relative safety of late twentieth century America. Recognizing her story in our own, we look at our grandmother's lives first in bitterness and then in awe. Could we have withstood what she did? What if 'it'—pogroms, discrimination, death camps, another Great Depression—happened again? (8)

Jewishness is intertwined with socialism in "The Secret," Ilana Girard Singer's recounting of her secular Jewish upbringing and her family's communism in the midst of the Red Scare, and more comically in Karen Golden's "Big White Pushka," which begins with a Hebrew teacher's instruction that contributing to charity supersedes attending temple or any other rituals in its importance to Judaism (79). In the former, having described her interactions with other children who teased her, or their parents who were made nervous by her, Singer explains that only at Die Kindershule, where her father was the headmaster, among other "children like me from secular, labor, and Communist families," was she at ease. "At Die Kindershule, no religion was taught, no Hebrew prayers and no Torah.

We did not celebrate Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, or ever hear the ram's horn. Instead we celebrated holidays of political freedom and emancipation such as Purim, Chanukah, Passover" (35). The lessons she gleaned from her father, which she refers to as "a forceful Jewish legacy," were socio-political in nature: "Contribute to society and think independently, for myself" (37).

It is not surprising then that Paley's own contribution to this collection, the wonderfully titled "In This Country, But in Another Language, My Aunt Refuses to Marry the Men Everyone Wants Her To," the young narrator's aunt instructs her, "When you're bigger, you'll be in a demonstration or a strike or something" but that she should not be the one to "carry the main flag" (19). This story refers to an actual uncle of Paley's, her father's brother, Russya, who "was killed in a workers' demonstration in 1905, during the season Jews came to call 'bloody Easter'" and who Paley memorialized through "a framed photo of him in her New York apartment" (Arcana 10). Social activism, while not the focus of every piece in Nice Jewish Girls, appears in many as an inherent expression of Jewishness. So, too, in "Split at the Root," Rich recognizes Jews as a people "whose traditions, religious and secular, included a hatred of oppression and an imperative to pursue justice and care for the stranger—an anti-racist, a socialist, and even sometimes a feminist vision" (118). Certainly, this anti-racist, socialist and feminist vision surfaces frequently in Nice Jewish Girls and becomes increasingly central to Paley's writing.

Over the course of her life, Paley has been as much an activist as a writer, and this bent was cultivated in part by her parents, who as Jewish socialists

emigrated from Russia after nearly having been exiled to Siberia and Germany, and lived by an ethic of care for the community, manifest especially during the Depression. While her mother took orphan children to their summer home with the family each year, Isaac Goodside is reported to have brought a patient with pneumonia back to their home to care for him until he was well (36-7). Paley's parents, however, living an increasingly comfortable middle-class lifestyle, were disturbed by the more radical political activism Grace adopted, which exceeded their own and reached out beyond their immediate community. As a high school student, she had cut classes, done "very badly," and nearly dropped out, yet she showed great interest in politics and current world events such as the Spanish Civil War and the Italian bombing of Ethiopia (32).

Though as an adult she has traveled to Hanoi, Chile, Russia, China, and Puerto Rico, all visits prompted by political events, she remains rooted in local community organization and activism, which emerges in much of her fiction (148, 155). More often than not, her stories and activism intertwine through fictionalized representations of exchanges between close friends or family members that allude to larger political events. The connection of this ethic with her sense of Jewish identity emerges most clearly in the first piece of the collection Long Walks and Intimate Talks, titled "Midrash on Happiness," in which Paley's fictional alter-ego, Faith, speaks to her friend Ruth of the necessity of "raising children righteously up" in a near monologue on the nature of happiness:

> By righteously she meant that along with being useful and speaking truth to the community, they must do not harm. By harm she meant not only personal injury to the friend the lover the coworker the parent (the city the nation) but also the stranger; she meant particularly the stranger in all her or his difference, who, because we were strangers in Egypt, deserves special goodness for life or at least until the end of strangeness. (8)

The very title of this piece, referring to Jewish scriptural exegesis, coupled with the name *Faith*, grounds the piece in a religious discourse that serves as the underpinnings to the kind of social consciousness Faith advocates. In her use of *righteously*, Faith may "mean" the word to denote "being useful and speaking truth…and not do[ing] harm," but *righteously* in its original scriptural usage means "without guilt or sin" and in Faith's *midrash* still carries traces of this signification ("righteously"). To present as a possibility a complete freedom from guilt and sin is the kind of moral absolute that is located in the realm of religion, though in Paley's context, it sheds the moral rigidity and condemnation with which such religious absolutes are so often associated—an example of how she navigates to the "thing," while avoiding the word. Though published thirty-five years after "The Loudest Voice" and much more unconventional in its structure, "Midrash" also echoes young Shirley's description of the neighborhood Christmas tree ("decorated by a kind city administration") as "a stranger in Egypt" that informs her tolerant and sympathetic response to "all the poor Christians" for whom she prays. Though the reference to this Biblical passage strikes a comic note coming from Shirley and indicates a more serious soul-

searching for Faith, the theological point of acceptance of difference, or "strangeness," resonates through Paley's writing whenever she takes up the subject of those in need of care or protection at home or abroad. Moreover, the final line, "at least until the end of strangeness," implies a vision of something more ultimate and imperative—a moment when alienation, exclusion, and isolation will cease to exist, so that there are literally no more "strangers"—that exists in the religious sphere. This textual moment thus represents the way in which Paley's Judaism comes into play in her writing and thinking about the world, not through ritual or ceremony, but as an underlying system of theologically grounded values that inform and deepen her social ethic and political activism.

The value of extending kindness to strangers "because we were strangers in Egypt," also prefigures "Three Days and a Question," a piece that appears later in the same collection, which opens with a scene of a Holocaust survivor and political activist protesting on behalf of "strangers"— Palestinians from the Israeli occupied territories and a few dissident Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve there. The three episodes of "Three Days" hang together through the gesture of three men exposing their arms to make a statement about persecution and identity. In the first scene, a demonstrator supporting Israeli soldiers who have refused to serve in the occupied territories, shows his tattooed arm to signify his suffering in the Holocaust and thus, his Jewishness. In the second, a young man with AIDS rolls back his sleeve to reveal his lesions. In the third, a Haitian cabdriver makes the same gesture to underline the "question" referred to by the title: "Why you

hate this skin so much?" The Haitian's question reveals the similarity in the men's positions, for each has been cast as a hated Other, as symbolized by his skin. In all cases, the skin on the man's arm metonymically represents his identity, feared and loathed by the dominant culture. They are marked and thus, marginalized.

The Holocaust survivor occupies an interesting position in the text, however, in that the mark of his difference has been inscribed on him to ensure he is recognized as hated other (lest he pass as gentile), instead of being, like the Haitian's dark skin or the young man's lesions, a result of the body's own processes (natural in the Haitian's case and diseased in the young man's), which marks each as different from the dominant group. While the man suffering from AIDS and the cab driver expose their arms to explain how their very skin evokes hatred and repulsion, the protestor reveals his Holocaust number as a means of authenticating his identity as a Jew to a passer-by who accuses him of anti-Semitism. After the woman calls the demonstrators "[r]otten anti-Semites," the story continues:

> He held out his arm. Look at this.
>
> I'm not looking, she screamed.
>
> You look at my number, what they did to me. My arm…you have no right.
>
> Anti-Semite, she said between her teeth. Israel hater. (53)

Though on the surface, Paley's project metaphorically links the three men as representative of persecuted peoples, the incident with the Holocaust survivor, as

Michael Rothberg has noted, is privileged by virtue of appearing first and setting the action in motion (267). Further, this episode is more complex in its allusion to multiple oppressions, including that of the Holocaust survivor, those of the Palestinians and finally, those of the Israeli soldiers he supports. That the confrontation occurs between two Jews on opposite sides of the political fence also highlights the complications that occur specifically around Jewish identity. The protestor points to his tattoo because Jewishness, unlike the Haitian cab driver's race, is not always legible; more significantly, in identifying him as a survivor, his number also aligns him with those who have been victimized because of their Jewishness. Yet for the female passer-by, Jewish identity is (or should be) linked with an unequivocally pro-Israel political position and so she deliberately turns away and refuses to see evidence of the activist-survivor's own suffering as a Jew.

The story touches on violence inflicted based on ethnic identity, as do the other incidents, but more complicated and specific to the problems of Jewishness, also on the way political positions create debates around Jewishness that call that very identity into question. As Rothberg points out,

> "There Is a Limit" is the name of the group [of Israeli soldiers] for which the demonstrators rally, a name that in its Israeli context refers to a geographical and moral topography and that, in this story, comes to refer as well to the boundaries of ethnic identity and figuration. (268)

Thus to draw on Rothberg's term, Paley's story conveys an "anti-anti- essentialist" position, wherein Jewishness can neither be reduced to an essential unified

identity nor, given its bodily inscription, refuted as such. Further, social activism, ethnic identity and religious identity are here shown to be inextricably linked: "the survivor's referential gesture is also an activist's gesture" (Rothberg 271). I would add, too, that activism—Paley's to be sure, and perhaps the demonstrator's of "Three Days"—is rooted in a Jewish system of ethics that cannot be separated from religious teachings, as articulated by Paley's alter-ego, Faith, in "Midrash on Happiness," which opens, and thereby sets the tone of Long Talks and Intimate Walks.

Paley's attachment to Jewish cultural identity and social ethics often overshadows the tensions in her feeling toward Judaism as a religion, which leads her to say that she is "[s]ometimes … against the word, not the thing itself" (Hulley 37). Her interviewers and biographers tend to focus on Paley's Jewish identity as it relates to her activism, spending less time on the question of Judaism as a specifically religious practice, yet Paley's own stories in her interviews reveal most about what prompts her to pull back from the word *religion*.

Certainly, loyalty and love for her socially-conscious father, a self-made man who "would spit if he saw a Chassid walking down the street as well as a priest," and for a mother who "was firm in her disbelief and unmoving" must have weighed heavily on the side of secularism (Satz 196). But equally instructive are Paley's comments to interviewers on how feminism informs her response to Jewish tradition and ritual. When she explains that she attends services in Vermont because the rabbis are "kind of open, receptive, you know," the specific examples she cites all bespeak changes in the gender dynamics of the

services. In one instance, Paley expresses appreciation for a Rabbi there who "kept trying to say humankind instead of mankind." "He was really working on it. …[though] [e]very now and then he slipped," she notes (Kaye 154, 156). In another, she explains the shifts in gender roles she has witnessed in this synagogue and their effect on her feeling about religious services:

> There's a woman cantor. And women read from the Torah. And I've even gotten up there and read stories. Women are very welcome in every way. And little girls read Hebrew very well. There's one little girl…every year she reads pages and pages of the most beautiful Hebrew. There are boys who read, but not half as well. So I think it's the voices of women in the synagogue that has changed things for me. I don't think I could go back to those narrow places. (Satz 197)

Though "The Loudest Voice," written early in her career, precedes the second-wave feminist movement and thus does not directly address the feminist issues so many of her later stories do, we see in this story a hint of what's to come. Jacqueline Taylor notes that Paley's narrative strategies frequently "borrow from a rich Jewish tradition of subversive humor in her woman-centered contradictions of male dominance" (Taylor 67). The plot of "The Loudest Voice" illustrates Taylor's theory on the mechanics and efficacy of Paley's humor, through the dominance of Shirley's voice throughout the story and the Christmas play in her role as a double narrator. Further, as the voice of a patriarchal God, Shirley's position in the text overturns male dominance within and without religious

structures, appearing as an oblique precursor to the little girls who read Hebrew so well and the "voices of women in the synagogue."

Even as the opening up of religious gender roles within liberal Judaism has enabled Paley to become more comfortable and involved with the "thing" of religion, her commitment to community activism and social justice that Judaism emphasizes, ironically sets her at odds with religion in America, as she perceives it—the "word" as distinct from the "thing." As Paley explains,

> That normal American emphasis on individualism and pride and religion—positions that seem anti-political, are very political really. They come from the ideology and structure of capitalism—a wholly private emphasis. The general mode is one of thinking individualistically. It's the only value; it becomes *the* value. (Hulley 151)

Individualism becomes conflated with capitalism which becomes conflated with religion in America—and in addition, the very values that underlie capitalism take on an almost religious valence. Paley's aversion to the term "religion" thus stems from its specifically American associations, which stand in opposition to her valuing of community organization and social consciousness and activism.

Paley's self-conscious weighing of her own relationship with America is no doubt founded in part on her parents' perspective as immigrants and their conscious refusal to attempt to assimilate, despite their secularism. For, as Arcana reports,

> Unlike Judaism, *Jewishness*, Jeanne [Grace's older sister] says, 'was a given' and was never given up. The Goodside family was not

> unconsciously seduced by the insidious force of American assimilation. They chose to live as the kind of secular Jewish thinkers—intellectually, philosophically, and politically inclined—they had already become in Russia.

…[T]hey maintained a secular perspective, adapting those elements of the religious tradition that suited their convictions without the trappings of belief (14). That this was Paley's model, coupled with the paradoxical image of America as self-avowedly secular, and yet dominantly Christian, undergirded by a religion of radical individualism, sheds light on Paley's own vacillation as a response to both her family history and the dominant culture of her country. Embracing Jewishness as an ethnicity and ethic on which to base her activism while rejecting Judaism as a religion, carrying on her family's tradition of socialism even as she exceeded them in the degree of her activism, vexed in her relationship with America, yet deeply engaged with its social problems at home and abroad, Paley negotiates between seemingly contradictory positions, consistently choosing the thing over the word. These tensions in Paley's own understanding of her religious identity provoke the questions she raises in her texts on the intertwining of religion and ethnicity, and the ways in which this identity may silently serve as a foundation for an ostensibly secular social and political ethic.

"Revelation" and the Racialized Body

Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," winner of the O'Henry prize in 1964, despite its parallels to Paley's "The Loudest Voice," proceeds from a premise that is almost the exact inverse. For O'Connor, the threat to American society lay in

its increasing secularization and even nihilism, and could be remedied only by the spread of Christianity, specifically as outlined by Catholic dogma.[11] Her project of rousing her readers to their need to accept Christ contrasts greatly with the perception of Christian culture as dominant and even threatening, portrayed by Paley. Yet like Paley, O'Connor faced religious marginalization, as a "Catholic novelist in the Protestant South,"[12] a position that she obscures in her fiction, while highlighting it in her letters and talks, a problem to which I'll return later. A further link to Paley may be found in O'Connor's representation of contemporary American religious belief as bound up with the social problems of her day, and these problems manifest in racial divisions. Though O'Connor foregrounds this entanglement of religion, race and class, she shifts the focus from the religious crises of the socially and economically oppressed to those of the dominant group, and thus sheds light on a very different aspect of the relationship between race and religion in American culture.

In "Revelation"— her last story and one of the few in which she allows her protagonist to find redemption without undergoing death or permanent disfigurement—O'Connor's positions on Christianity and racial relations intersect and even function symbiotically. "Revelation" contains all the characteristic elements of O'Connor's fiction: self-righteous Northern-educated youth, a landscape of racial and class-based strife, and moments of epiphany brought on by violent crises. Like so many of her stories, the plot pivots on the exposure of

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[11] Henry T. Edmonson suggests O'Connor's writing be read primarily as a negative critique of nihilism in Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism. (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2002.)

[12] the title of one of her more famous lectures, published in Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose. (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.)

an individual's self-righteousness that provokes a deeper spirituality. It is as though O'Connor places her characters in a crucible to burn away their dross of complacency. So her heroine, Ruby Turpin, must be literally knocked on the head and throttled in order to have a true spiritual vision. And the primary means of communicating both the gross smallness of her Christianity before her revelation and the change that ensues following it is through the racialized body.

In the opening scene of "Revelation," Mrs. Turpin, an overweight complacent Christian woman enters the waiting room of a doctor's office with her husband Claud, who has been kicked in the leg by a cow. While waiting, she occupies herself with assessing and categorizing the other patients by class, sizing up their shoes, and chatting with the one woman she considers to be her equal (and of whose shoes she approves). The others, she labels and refers to internally throughout the story as "white trash," "common," or, when complaining of her farmhands, "niggers." Mrs. Turpin's race and class based snobbery thus become immediately apparent as her most salient characteristics. It would be easy to see the racism and classism as countering her avowed Christianity or revealing the hypocrisy of it, but what is revealed instead is how in actuality the two support each other. So immediately following her silent observation that the poor whites in the waiting room are "[w]orse than niggers any day," Mrs Turpin "supplied the last line mentally" of the gospel tune playing on the radio, "And wona these days I know I'll we-eara crown" (490). This irony that the line Mrs. Turpin sings expresses confidence in her own piety is deepened by the fact that the music she sings along with is gospel, music originated and sung by the very black

Americans Mrs. Turpin sees as inferior. Yet the confidence in her spiritual superiority expressed in the hymn does not contradict Mrs. Turpin's racism and classism, but is, in fact, predicated on it. To drive the point home, we learn in this scene, too, that Mrs. Turpin regularly spends sleepless moments at night mulling over whether she would prefer, if God gave her the choice, to be a "nigger" or "white trash" (not to be confused with being simply "common," another category for whites who have less than she does). In her hypothetical conversation with Jesus, she relents to becoming black, but, she stipulates, "'that don't mean a trashy one'" and tellingly concludes that "he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black." This emphasis on "neat" and "clean," coupled with her dissection of every detail of the poor whites' unkempt dress and soiled faces and bodies signals Mrs. Turpin's nearly obsessive aversion to dirtiness—one reinforced when we learn she and Claud hose their pigs down every night and keep them in a concrete "pig parlor" where, Mrs. Turpin explains with pride, "their feet never touch the ground" (493).

Her disgust with the dirtiness of others suggests that cleanliness is Mrs. Turpin's real religion, an equivalent of piety that signals a deeper anxiety about racial mixing, a preoccupation Patricia Yaeger reads as representative of a community "obsessed with [racial] pollution" in her study of Southern regionalism and gender, Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990 (161). Mrs. Turpin's anxiety about dirtiness, in fact, stands in for her apprehensions about the de-stabilization of class and race hierarchies in

the South. For even in her nighttime musings, during which she lies awake ranking people by category according to race, money and land,

> the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot [of] money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (491)

She complains of finding help to pick the cotton on her farm, "You can't get the white folks to pick it and now you can't get the niggers—because they got to be right up there with the white folks" (493). And in a revealing exchange between Mrs. Turpin and Claud in response to the "white-trash woman," whose solution to the race problem is to send the blacks back to Africa, Mrs. Turpin explains,

> "they're going to stay here where they can go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color. That's what they all want to do, every one of them, improve their color."
>
> "You know what comes of that, don't you?" Claud asked.
>
> "No, Claud what?" Mrs. Turpin said.
>
> Claud's eyes twinkled. "White-faced niggers," he said with never a smile. (496)

Claud's "joke" echoes Mrs. Turpin's late night contemplation of how she would have demanded to be "herself but black," had Jesus given her the choice between being black or a poor white. Race categories, it's implied, signal more than skin color. That there could be a black Ruby Turpin and in the case of

intermarriage, "white-faced niggers," as Claud puts it, raises questions about the nature of identity and what race categories really signify: how skin corresponds (or doesn't) to the self—in this case, the Christian "soul." Mrs. Turpin's ruminations on the contemporary complexities of who fits where in the social order, and the image of a black-faced Mrs. Turpin juxtaposed with that of the "white-faced niggers" in New York expose how threatening the contemporaneous social unrest of the Civil Rights movement was not just to the Southern socio-economic order, but to white Christians' more intimate sense of the soul and self.

With race and class based hierarchical categories in danger of breaking down, Mrs. Turpin's religiosity serves for her as a comforting marker of her own superiority. To herself, Mrs. Turpin is the consummate Christian because she helps those in need "whether they were white or black, trash or decent," and expresses gratitude to Jesus for making her neither a "nigger or white-trash or ugly" (497). The logic is circular: Her feeling that she's more of a Christian than the others in the room supports her feeling of superiority; that she believes she is superior makes Mrs. Turpin feel gratitude to Jesus; and she sees her own Christianity evidenced in her help of those to whom she feels superior. Thus O'Connor reveals race and class distinctions at the heart of Mrs. Turpin's prayers, an innate part of her spirituality rather than an outside force that infects or perverts them. Mrs. Turpin's reflections evoke Jesus' parable of the Pharisee who thanks God that he is "not as other men are…even as this publican." The parable hinges on a reversal: the publican who beats his breast and declares himself a sinner will be saved, not the righteous Pharisee: "for every one that exalteth

himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18.13-14). Mrs. Turpin's anxiety over race and class coupled with her self-righteous complacency, all under the guise of Christianity, prompt her to exclaim to the woman she converses with in the waiting room, "When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got,…I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'" (409). This gratitude that she possesses what others lack and that in a world of unjust socio-economic hierarchies, she is perched relatively near the top, is the state of mind that is jarred by the attack on her and the nature of the Christianity that is displaced by her revelation.

While Mrs. Turpin has been criticizing the others in the waiting room, an ugly young woman reading a thick book has been steadily glaring at her. This woman is Mary Grace, the daughter of the well-to-do white woman to whom Mrs. Turpin has directed most of her conversation. In the midst of calling out her thanks to Jesus, Mrs. Turpin receives her comeuppance in the form of a book (titled, significantly, Human Development) that this young woman hurls at her from across the room and which hits her square on the head. Mary Grace—ugly, intellectual, and Northern-educated—a type who makes frequent appearances in O'Connor's stories[13]— is aptly named as the means by which Mrs. Turpin will see the errors of her ways and eventually achieve grace. After throwing the book at her, Mary Grace literally leaps on Mrs. Turpin and throttles her. (Just after this attack, we're treated to an ironic echo of Mrs. Turpin's own earlier Pharisaical prayer, when the "white-trash" woman exclaims, "'I thank Gawd…I ain't a

[13] Joy/Hulga of "Good Country People" is the most obvious precursor.

lunatic.'") Convinced that Mary Grace knows her intimately and spiritually, Mrs. Turpin does not dismiss it as raving when Mary Grace calls her an "old wart hog" and tells her to go back to hell, but hears it instead as a message from God—"a revelation"—however violently delivered and unwelcome.

Back at the farm, O'Connor introduces readers to the black field hands Mrs. Turpin has claimed she humors in order to coax work from them, and we witness the actual nature of their interactions with her. Confiding in them about her assault by Mary Grace and calling on their sympathy, she nonetheless feels thwarted by the obsequiousness of their overly solicitous response. Ironically, one of the field hands remarks of Mrs. Turpin, "Jesus satisfied with her!" thus raising the question Mary Grace has already forced Mrs. Turpin to ask herself—*is* Jesus satisfied with her? (505). Hilton Als observes in "This Lonesome Place: Flannery O'Connor on Race and Religion in the Unreconstructed South" that the overly-concerned and complimentary responses of the hands are "part of the Southern code of manners designed to keep her out of their business and circle" (87). These are the bodies she cannot penetrate; those she claims to humor through her superficial politesse are in fact only humoring and thus eluding her.

Though Mary Grace delivers her message in a sudden violent act typical of O'Connor's stories (one thinks here of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or, an even stronger parallel, "Everything That Rises Must Converge"), the actual revelation Mrs. Turpin experiences arrives through and pivots on the black bodies she fears and finds incomprehensible. Remarkably, she never doubts that Mary Grace's words have a spiritual source and so takes her indignation straight to God,

who she rails at in a wonderfully confrontational prayer out by the pig-parlor at sunset. The fact of Mrs. Turpin choosing the pigs for her companions serves to remind the reader both of her obsessive cleanliness and of Mary Grace's curse, and further resonates with the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, who at his lowest point at which he is furthest from his father, finds work feeding swine—not the best occupation for a nice Jewish boy. Mrs. Turpin is thus implicitly aligned with the soon to be repentant son, who has by dint of his own pride, left God and who, in the act of feeding the swine, has his epiphany and repents and returns to his father's house.

Relying on volume and the pure force of her personality to gain God's ear, Mrs. Turpin thus delivers her final prayer, which consists of a ferocious litany of all her respectable Christian ways sandwiched between defiant and sarcastic demands for an explanation for the attack:

> "What do you send me a message like that for?" she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury.…[H]er voice rolled out over the pasture. "Go on," she yelled, "call me a hog! Call me a hog again." (506-7)

Yet grace arrives in an answer in the form of an epiphanic vision of humanity entering heaven, poor whites and blacks leading the way, newly clean and robed, with the "respectable" folk, with whom Mrs. Turpin identifies, following—a vision that signals a dramatic shift in her perceptions of race and class. Of those like herself and Claud, who bring up the rear, "she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away," for the souls have

mounted through “a field of living fire” (508). O’Connor refers here to purgatorial fire by using burning as the primary image associated with the souls mounting heavenward. Virtues are consumed alongside vices, as though in a crucible, the path to heaven burns with fire, and white and black mingle in the procession. Attitudes towards race thus become a litmus test for the authenticity of Christianity.

Mrs. Turpin, initially found wanting, is here remarkably transformed—and more remarkable still for an O’Connor story, Mrs. Turpin lives to tell about it. Where she will take her newfound vision of humanity is anyone’s guess and territory into which O’Connor does not venture. While we hardly imagine Mrs. Turpin founding an interracial commune, the mere fact of her surviving both her encounter with Mary Grace and a vision in which her world is turned upside down sounds a note of hope, as does the closing line of the story, which reads:

In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah. (509)

The spiritual insight she has gained overshadows the material world around her, overturning her sense of social and racial hierarchies. In watching the purification of these souls as they pass through living fire, Ruby Turpin herself is purified of her own snobbery and smallness. The starry field suggests a broader and spiritualized vision that Ruby Turpin has embraced. The fact that she continues to hear the voices of these souls, even as she returns to her home, implies that this vision will stay with her.

O'Connor occupied a more mainstream position in America than did Paley, coming as she did from a long-established Southern gentile family; yet as a Catholic growing up in the protestant South, then a lone Southerner among Northern intellectuals, and in the last years of her life, an intellectual in her mother's home and social circles, O'Connor was located on the peripheries of the worlds she moved in and represented in her writing. Southern-ness, she chose in her fiction and prose alike as the mark of difference with which she most strongly identified. This identification with her region, however, complicated her position on race. O'Connor is often criticized for her placement of blacks at the margins of her stories where they appear to exist only to provoke the imaginations of her white characters, rather than as three-dimensional individuals with their own stories to tell. Hilton Als counters this critique by noting the "clums[iness]" in her rare attempts to represent blacks in their interactions with one another in their own communities, as evidence that the fact that "she rarely tried to cover this ground [was]…a prudent decision, given the murky and not altogether constructive works of some of the white liberals who did" (86). Yet focusing on her correspondence, Jon Lance Bacon, in his analysis of the influence of Cold War culture on O'Connor, argues that her subject matter was influenced less by lack of experience and more by a regional alliance. "Although her status as a Southern writer gave her a position from which to criticize U.S. society, it enrolled O'Connor in the regional consensus on race," he counters, noting that clergy who were pro-integration could be forced to resign, so great was the sense that segregation was fundamental to Southern identity (Bacon 110-111). Citing

O'Connor's disgust at Eudora Welty's story, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" written in response to Medgar Evers' murder in Mississippi, Bacon concludes that, "One thing did remain consistent: in her correspondence, O'Connor always seemed less concerned with the question of racial justice than with the question of regional identity" (109).[14]

Yet O'Connor's allegiance to the South did not entirely preclude her dissent from the white supremacist attitudes that prevailed there or even from the "implicitly sanctioned…political quietism" of her literary predecessors, the Southern Agrarians, who "could make social problems…seem just sadly inevitable" and valued "not imagination or energy or moral awareness, but…*endurance*" (Grammer 131). O'Connor instead became, as Gilbert Muller terms it, "a very special kind of regionalist…one who both utilizes the South's special resources and who is decidedly at odds with it" (45). O'Connor's fiction offers a critique of Southern communities as functioning without a spiritual foundation and so characters like Mrs. Turpin

> traipse their fields, pastures, and woods with a single minded sense of righteous proprietorship that prevents them from recognizing a fundamentally spiritual estrangement from their surroundings, an estrangement rooted in their inability to act charitably toward their neighbors. Unaware of their alienation, these ordinary individuals are extremely vulnerable to extraordinary events which test their harshness and rigidity of spirit. (45-46)

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[14] "What I hate most is its being in the New Yorker," O'Connor wrote upon the publication of Welty's story, "and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland" (Habit 537).

O'Connor's critique of community is specifically grounded in region, yet at odds with her Southerness in the attention she gives to racial tensions throughout her stories. The dearth of spirituality in Mrs. Turpin's "communal life" is manifest specifically in racist and classist views and interactions, which must be corrected by a spiritual vision that revolves around a reversal of a social order that includes but also transcends her immediate community.

Though O'Connor rarely focused on African-American characters or communities in later years, she did compose a story while still a student at Iowa about a black couple in rural Georgia, told in the third person, but from the wife's point of view. In "The Coat," a wife becomes convinced her husband has committed a murder when she discovers a coatless dead body, and her husband arrives home drunk, having traded a coat he found on a path for a bottle of wine. While her husband buries the body at his wife's urging, a group of white hunters happens upon the man and kill him, and the wife only later learns of his innocence when she discovers that one of her customers had been the one to lose the coat in question (Cash 104).

This story, though the work of a student, was written at a time when O'Connor's work was beginning to be published and thus raises the question of how her literary mentors and fellow students' responses to her stories might have influenced which subject matter or stories O'Connor chose to develop further. She had sent "The Coat," along with "Wildcat," to Allen Maxwell for publication in The Southwest Review. Though Maxwell rejected both, "Wildcat" still appeared in her M.F.A. thesis with her first published story, "The Geranium," and

was later published in *The Complete Stories*, whereas "The Coat" only appeared in print in 1996 in Doubletake. [15]

The atmosphere at Iowa, appears to have been one that would provoke at best an ambivalent response to O'Connor's exploration of this theme of black American life. James B. Hall describes Iowa as a "racist campus" and relates how the barbershops on campus refused to cut blacks' hair and the President of the university was reluctant to force them to do so. "At that time no Blacks (including star athletes) were allowed to live in the dormitories, no barbers on or off campus cut black students' hair and married Black students had difficulty finding housing in the town," Hall reports (qtd in Cash 84). Among the faculty and students in the Writers Workshop, responses to O'Connor's treatment of race appear to have been complex and sometimes strained. O'Connor once related to her close friend Robie Macauley that John Crowe Ransom, when reading a story of hers aloud for a class, substituted the word "Negro" for "nigger" throughout. "'It did spoil the story,' Flannery said, 'the people I was writing about would never use any other word. And Mr. Ransom knew that quite well. But he did the only thing a good man could do'" (qtd in Cash 101).

The complexity of O'Connor's own racial politics at that time emerges in the above quotes and in other anecdotes, as well. Though she is reported to have used the word "nigger" in casual conversation, Herbert Nipson, a former editor of *Ebony*, also recalls students at Iowa applauding her "dignified" fictional treatment of a black servant in a story they were discussing in class. When asked "if she

[15] *Accent* published "The Geranium" in 1946 (Cash 104).

had done this to make a point," Nipson recalls that she responded, "No. That was just the way he was" (qtd in Cash 83-84).

Though throughout the rest of her career, O'Connor avoided centering her narratives on black American life, nearer the end of her life she clearly referenced the contemporary Civil Rights movement she was witnessing. She may have been far from the action herself, yet televised protest marches as well as gospel radio informed O'Connor's image of Ruby Turpin's sunset emblazoned vision of the true order of things (Elie 355). Just as "Everything that Rises Must Converge" evokes Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, Mrs. Turpin's epiphany in "Revelation" alludes to the push for integration that Civil Rights activists agitated for largely and most visibly through marches.

Significantly, "Revelation" also alludes to racialized bodies through a reference to the Holocaust when Mrs. Turpin, after ruminating on where she and Claud belonged in the social-economic and racial hierarchy, would fall asleep with "all the people…moiling and roiling around in her head, and …would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (492). Jill Baumgaertner explains of O'Connor,

> That she was critically aware of the concentration camps is evident in the many references throughout her stories to the European boxcars crowded with people being carted to the gas chamber. It is a picture that appears often enough to be considered an informing metaphor, if not an emblem, of modern civilization. (119)

Upon reading Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem, O'Connor herself remarked that she had "always been haunted by the boxcars, but they were actually the least of it" (Habit 539). Another way to understand O'Connor's Holocaust reference in "Revelation"—given that it appears after Mrs. Turpin's fantasy of asking Jesus to make her "herself, but black," and her attempts to order the social and racial classes of her community—is as a more deliberate connection of an American racist and segregationist mentality to Nazi-ism, and a warning that such mindsets ultimately lead to genocide. Although, as a self-avowed Southern writer, O'Connor would not preach dogmatically on race relations to her motherland like Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the Christian epiphany at the heart of "Revelation" nonetheless hinges on a critique of the segregationist mentality that dominated the South.

The tension between O'Connor's self identification with Southern-ness and departure from the ideological norms of southern culture also appears in her depiction of gender for both Mrs. Turpin and Mary Grace, the latter of whose ugliness reverses the image of the "southern belle." As Patricia Yaeger argues in "Flannery O'Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture," O'Connor's ugly women, including Mary Grace,

> refuse to be socialized into pale southern beauties. Each of these characters tells a bitter story of gendered anger; their lives are filled with hateful emotions unacceptable to a southern lady. …[L]ike Mary Grace [O'Connor] throws the book at a southern world in which women are not allowed to be angry, ill-mannered, intelligent, or visionary. (199)

Yet the redemption Mrs. Turpin finds and for which Mary Grace provides the impetus complicates this picture so that Mary Grace works not only as an outlet for rage and rebellion against the southern system of gender and class, but as a locus for spiritual insight. Mary Grace sees inside Mrs. Turpin's thoughts and ultimately prompts her to a deeper introspection, which catalyzes her more inclusive spiritual vision. That this insight is coupled with her ugliness is not accidental. In a letter to her longtime anonymous correspondent, "A," O'Connor relates that, "Maryat's niece asked her why I had made Mary Grace so ugly. 'Because Flannery loves her,' said Maryat. Very perceptive girl" (Habit 578). O'Connor's affectionate representation of these decidedly strong, abrasive and physically unattractive female characters as the loci of religious redemption undercuts images of passive graceful women as a southern ideal. O'Connor's love for Mary Grace in particular, manifests itself in the discerning and critical eyes she casts toward Mrs. Turpin's racism, classism and superficial Christianity and the abrupt and violent act by which she sets the latter on the road to her revelation.

Until recently, O'Connor's texts have rarely been viewed through a feminist lens, as Yaeger does in her analysis of Mary Grace, given the extent to which O'Connor makes male characters the focus of her novels, often representing women as foolish, condescending and blind. Katherine Hemple Prown, however, has observed that O'Connor's earliest unpublished work represents female characters who are more complex and sympathetic, and speculates that her shift to a largely male cast of protagonists and an often

misogynistic treatment of her female characters resulted from the influence of the Fugitive/Agrarian writers among the faculty when O'Connor was at Iowa.[16] The Agrarians dismissed "abstraction, progress, industry and science," while they valued "a pious acceptance of the givenness of things, and affirm[ed] tradition, leisure religion, and myth" (Grammer 130). Except for three other women, the students accepted to the Writers' Workshop in the year O'Connor began her degree, were older male war veterans and the men "collectively approved each other's war stories:" on at least one occasion, as Kay Burford recalls, they gave O'Connor's story "less attention than it deserved" (qtd in Cash 82-3). Former classmates agree that O'Connor was generally quiet in class, even when she came to be recognized as an exceptional writer, a fact which may testify to her alienation from these older men "who often drank heavily, had fervent interest in 'bop jazz,' and possessed little religious interest or faith" (Cash 83). Jean Williams Wylder, another of O'Connor's classmates explains that "the women felt alienated by the greater age and experience of the men as well as by their interest in 'New Criticism theories,'" while Andrew Lytle suggests that O'Connor's genius "scared the boys" (Cash 90; 86) This atmosphere, coupled with the fact that among writers, "African-Americans…or those who were politically radical, progressive, or overtly feminist…did not fit comfortably into the Agrarians' definition of *Southern,*" likely caused O'Connor to diminish the role of her female characters, as she also appeared to have diminished her black characters (Grammer 130). The Fugitive/Agrarians' "nostalgic view of the

[16] Prown, in particular, traces the systematic diminishment of female characters throughout each successive draft of Wise Blood (7).

authentic southern past" affected her fictional approach to race and gender. She moved her black characters to the margins of her stories and increasingly associated her female characters with the narrow, domestic and particular, rather than with universalized spiritual transcendence (Prown 2, 4, 7).

Though these qualities prevail in many of O'Connor's female characters, some of these women also offer an oblique protest against masculine hierarchies through religion. Through much of "Revelation," Ruby Turpin fits this unflattering portrayal of women, yet she nevertheless does transform into a figure of universal spiritual transcendence by its conclusion. In fact, despite the violent rebukes O'Connor's women receive, Ruby Turpin and others serve as "good examples of females overcoming patriarchal authority through private strategies," as Marshall Bruce Gentry comments in "Gender Dialogue in O'Connor." Gentry cites Mrs. Turpin, among several other female characters, as exemplifying this claim, and explains,

> Each may appear to suffer a chastening in the course of the story, but they can also be read as creators of alternate, unorthodox, personal religious systems that give them as much control over their lives as men have over theirs. It's no coincidence that many of O'Connor's female characters have taken the 'man's place' on a farm. (64)

In the process of attaining her religious redemption, Ruby Turpin thus becomes a universal figure, symbolizing humankind's alienation from God and salvation through grace. Mrs. Turpin especially exemplifies the type Gentry describes in that grace and spiritual growth come to her not unbidden, but in large part as a

result of her direct appeal to God through her final prayer. Though Mary Grace's attack mirrors O'Connor's fictional pattern wherein grace comes violently and unexpectedly through the grotesque, "Revelation" departs from this formula in that the story does not end there. Mrs. Turpin instead is shown to have a spiritual agency that provokes the vision she receives as much as or more than Mary Grace's assault.

It has long been remarked that O'Connor's fiction appears more Protestant than Catholic in nature, due to her portrayal of individualized salvation like Mrs. Turpin's, which falls outside the bounds of redemption through proscribed Catholic means of Eucharistic communion or in confession, as administered by the priesthood. John Burt, summing up the critical consensus on O'Connor, explains,

> the character of her faith, at least when it expresses itself in her fiction, seems more radically Protestant than Catholic, insofar as faith is disclosed primarily to the inner light through intense experiences of emotional upheaval neither originating in nor shaped by the pastoral traditions of religious institutions. (349)

O'Connor herself acknowledged her departure from Catholic theological norms that filter the activity of grace almost exclusively through the Church, and justified her approach by explaining, "I can write about Protestant believers better than Catholic believers—because they express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action which is obvious enough for me to catch" (Habit 517). Certainly, if O'Connor had any interest in portraying a woman who attained spiritual

enlightenment through the strength of her own initiative and a direct personal appeal to God, she needed to write a character who moved in a world apart from the male hierarchies of the Catholic Church and its institutions.

Though O'Connor asserts in her prose that the Catholic Church is the only means to redemption, her writing also shows a slight bent towards ecumenicalism, occasionally suggesting that the truth the Church represents may exceed the boundaries of the formal institution. A letter written to Sister Mariella Gable in 1963, the year before "Revelation" was published, captures this tension:

> I'm glad your paper is going to be on the ecumenical side of my writing. I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestants have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God or our obligation to him. (Habit 518)

She also notes critically in this letter the more specific qualities that prevent her use of Catholics as a subject for her fiction:"[o]ur Catholic mentality is great on paraphrase, logic, formula, instant and correct answers. We judge before we experience and never trust our faith to be subjected to reality, because it is not strong enough" (518). Yet despite her description of the typical problems of the Catholic mindset, O'Connor carefully phrases her explanation of her interest in her Protestant characters to reinforce implicitly that Catholicism is synonymous with Truth:

> When you leave a man alone with his Bible and the Holy Ghost inspires him, he's going to be a Catholic one way or another, even though he

> knows nothing about the visible church. His kind of Christianity may not be socially desirable, but it will be real in the sight of God. (Habit 517)

O'Connor thus draws a distinction between the Church and God and asserts that one can reach the latter without of the former—a move reminiscent of Paley's desire to distinguish between religion as a "thing" and as a "word," but a far riskier position for a Catholic to assume.

Ironically, however, her literary ambitions may also have led O'Connor to avow Catholicism strongly in her talks and correspondence, even as she wrote of non-Catholics in her fiction. Her desire to align herself with Southern regionalism in the literary sphere likely affected her fictional treatment of religion, for to write explicitly of the Catholic Church and the practices of its adherents would have been to separate herself further from the writers she saw as her compatriots. As Prown notes, the recurrence of violence in her fiction further aligned O'Connor with the Fugitive/Agrarian writers, though the rationale O'Connor herself provided—that violent images were needed to jar secular society out of its complacency— deliberately rested on the fervor of her Catholicism (9, 20-21). To play with the big boys of the literary world, yet to avoid being faulted for writing in an "un-feminine" way, may have created a double-bind for O'Connor, one which she could resolve only by emphasizing her Catholicism and her disgust with an amoral and unspiritual world as an acceptable defense of the very style and subject matter that allowed her to succeed in this largely masculine professional literary world. This is hardly to suggest that O'Connor's Catholicism was inauthentic, but simply that it was perceived as an

acceptable motivating force for a young woman writer's literary choices, and as such proved strategic for O'Connor to dwell on in an era when the idea of either anger or ambition motivating a woman was much less acceptable. Significantly, in the fictional world O'Connor creates, it is Mrs. Turpin's anger and a spiritual persistence that feels much like ambition that enable her to achieve the spiritual heights she does.

While Gentry suggests that O'Connor's women often allude to male Christian figures and refers in particular to Mrs. Turpin's "prophetic abilities," I would reiterate and expand on my earlier suggestion that O'Connor aligns Mrs. Turpin closely to the figure of the prodigal son. The extent to which pigs become a focal point of the story—their cleanliness a point of contention in the doctor's waiting room, the act of hosing them down symbolic of the Mrs. Turpin's conflation of cleanliness with racial purity, and their pen the setting for her revelation—alludes to the low point in the prodigal son's career when, hired to feed pigs, yet starving himself, he has the epiphany that leads him to return to his father's house. Just prior to Mrs. Turpin's vision, "[a] red glow suffused" the pigs, the color of which W. R. Martin traces through the seven story cycle of Everything That Rises Must Converge as symbolizing a "divine influence," a mark of sin, but also of humanity, also suggested by the name "Ruby" (23).

Ironically, however, Mrs. Turpin in certain ways shares more characteristics of the older son of Jesus' parable who diligently but self-righteously works on his father's farm while his profligate younger brother spends his inheritance, and who refuses to celebrate his younger brother's redemption

when he returns home. Combining these two figures in the person of Ruby Turpin makes for a more pointed rebuke of self-righteousness and the condemnation of others, which here, particularly in the racist and classist form it takes, becomes the sin that most alienates humankind from God. Even in the procession heavenward, which Ruby witnesses at the conclusion, the singing and clapping of the processors suggest not only a march, but also a celebration not unlike the one the father of the parable throws for the prodigal son upon his return. Ruby Turpin may be last in line with the other respectable folk she identifies as "like herself and Claud," but the fact that she returns to her home while hearing "the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah," and that this line concludes the story, suggests her spiritual inclusion in the celebration.

This vision illustrates an ultimate "end of strangeness," as evoked by Paley's Faith in "Midrash on Happiness," a view of humanity in which injury to others may be altogether eliminated, difference earns goodness rather than hostility or isolation, and "strangeness," that is, alienation and exclusion, will ultimately cease to be. The radicalness of Paley and O'Connor's visions in these texts thus has its roots in religion, but branches out into societal transformation.

Chapter Two:

Ritual, Rereading and Forgiveness: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Mary Gordon's *The Shadow Man*

> To come back to the source, we must remember that in religion—since the term comes from a perspective that is essentially religious—forgiveness is understood to be the suspension of judgment. It is the act by which one forbids judging and stops time, which proceeds toward vengeance, and allows the person who committed the reprehensible act to begin anew, to take up another life and another activity.
>
> …
>
> How can this rebirth take place? In my understanding, there is only one possibility, and that is to give an interpretation to the act.
>
> Julia Kristeva, "Forgiveness: An Interview"

Julia Kristeva's analysis of forgiveness—how it is arrived at and what it may accomplish—emphasizes the act of interpretation, the affect of empathy, and the objective of renewal. As seen in the quote above, Kristeva also recognizes the deep ties of the concept of forgiveness to religious tradition, noting too, that analysis has been seen as a continuation of the religious practice of confession (286). Speaking of analytic listening and the act of writing, Kristeva notes that with both, "it is a question of coming back to the place of a trauma, something that is nonsensical and seems inexpressible, and symbolizing it" (284). For Kristeva, "speaking of trauma is crucial to forgiveness," as her interviewer Alison Rice explains (280). In Kristeva's discussion of forgiveness, she thus sheds light

on the narrative and interpretive elements of religion that come to the fore through forgiveness and transcendence, as a means overcoming trauma, and on the links between religion, analysis and literature.

Ceremony, as "an outward rite or observance, religious or held sacred," has emerged as a point of convergence for these elements of religion, most notably in Leslie Marmon Silko's first novel Ceremony (1977), and Mary Gordon's 1996 memoir, The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for her Father ("ceremony"). Departing from the "disparaging" associations of the term as "merely formal or external" or "an empty form," Silko and Gordon cast ceremony as a symbolic process by which to revisit and interpret, and thereby, comprehend and move beyond the traumas they or their subjects have undergone ("ceremony"). The ceremonial process as recorded through narrative and, more significantly, as constituted *by* each narrative, illustrates Kristeva's assertion, "Because it is forgiveness, writing is transformation, transposition, translation" (qtd on 287).

Silko and Gordon, authors of the same generation who published first novels within a year of each other in the late 1970s, have created narratives that both constitute and explore the healing potential of ceremony. Though the Catholic religion plays a major role in all of Gordon's novels, her memoir shares many more thematic elements with Ceremony than do her novels, and in The Shadow Man, Gordon often blurs the line between autobiographical and fictional writing. Because of the unsavory facts of her father's life that she uncovers, Gordon attempts to imagine and identify with her father, so that she may maintain

her affection and loyalty toward him. By engaging in an empathetic fictionalizing of her father's life, Gordon's memoir reflects Kristeva's theories on the necessity of temporarily identifying with the perpetrator of a crime in order to forgive. Gordon's effort to forgive her father provokes an experimental structure to her memoir, which contains sections in which she fictionalizes his life and even "impersonates" her father by writing in the first person as though she were him (170). The Shadow Man's form, more unconventional than Gordon's realist novels, also reflects her treatment of the act of writing about her father as part of a larger healing ceremony. Gordon's view of writing as a spiritual act intersects with Silko's understanding of narration as a religious ceremony. Silko's view of storytelling as innately spiritual derives from Native American theology and catalyzes the experimental and circular form of Ceremony, which departs from traditional Western models of the novel.

Silko and Gordon write of ceremony as a transformative act within the Pueblo religion and Catholicism. The centrality of ritual to these systems of belief has been amply recorded, as by the anthropologist Elsie Clewes Parsons, who studied the Pueblo culture in the 1930s and observed, "Ceremonial or ritual outlasts ideology or theology. It is not surprising that highly ritualized religions like Pueblo religion and Catholicism have lasted a long time" (158). Parsons's statement alludes to the close ties of religious ritual and ethnic culture that appear in Silko and Gordon's texts. Though Silko and Gordon illustrate the deep interrelation between ritual and ethnic culture Parsons's statement implies, they diverge from the usual understanding of ceremony as by definition, wed to "a

prescribed form." Instead, the two portray ceremony as a process that changes with time and the needs of the individual in his or her particular circumstance, and may even serve as a point of cultural convergence.

The rituals at the heart of Ceremony and The Shadow Man depart from the usual form they take in the religion with which each is associated. The ceremonies that are central to each text reflect the theological beliefs of the author and the particular psychological needs of the protagonists—Tayo in Ceremony and Mary Gordon herself in The Shadow Man. The freedom with which Silko and Gordon transform rituals derived from Laguna Pueblo theology and the Catholic Church echoes the American tradition of religious questioning and dissidence that appears throughout much American literature, but can also be traced more directly to the particular personal histories of each author and the social and political movements of their youth. Though Silko and Gordon come from utterly different backgrounds, each emerged from a family with a mixed religious and ethnic background. Silko, of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican and Anglo-American ancestry, grew up on the New Mexican Laguna Pueblo reservation, but had Presbyterian great-grandparents and commuted to Catholic school in Albuquerque (Evers and Carr 11). Gordon, half Russian-Jewish and half Italian-Irish-Catholic, also spent her youth in Catholic schools and in her grandmother's Catholic neighborhood in Queens, but with an acute consciousness of her father's Jewish ethnicity, which her mother's family referred to derisively. Mary Gordon's absentmindedness and intellectual bent were associated with her father and his Jewishness, and seen as negative traits. Growing up steeped in insular

religious communities, yet participating in them self-consciously as "half-breeds," Silko and Gordon create narratives fueled by religious beliefs, which the two draw on for psychological healing.

Ceremony, which is comprised of multiple narrative threads, centers on Tayo, a young World War II veteran who lives with family on the Laguna Pueblo reservation. Tayo also reflects Silko's mixed religio-ethnic background and the depression she battled at the time she was composing Ceremony, which took the form of migraine headaches and nausea (Fisher 24). The primary narrative follows the long psychological and physical process by which Tayo overcomes his sense of inferiority, derived from his illegitimacy and mixed-racial identity, and describes his recovery and reintegration into the reservation community through religious ritual and a re-interpretation of the significance of events that shaped his past.

Like Ceremony, The Shadow Man traces the liberation of its protagonist (here, Gordon herself) from a traumatic past through her re-examination and interpretation of her father, who died when she was seven, and her childhood, enacting a series of unconventional rituals that culminate in a ceremony. Mary Gordon's narrative details her journey as she peruses her father's writing, scours archives, interviews colleagues and family members, and ultimately uncovers more uncertainties than truths. The memoir concludes in the fulfillment of Gordon's wish to have her father disinterred and reburied in a cemetery apart from her mother's anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual family, and an elaborate

funeral service —the final ceremony of her book, which she designs and conducts with a longtime friend and priest.

Religion has been traced etymologically to *religare,* to bind*,* and alternatively, to *relegere,* to read over again ("religion"). Silko and Gordon explore the binding elements of religion—"usually favored by modern writers in explaining the force of the word by its supposed etymological meaning"—as it ties one to family, community and tradition in ways that may be restrictive; yet the ceremonial process each portrays resonates more deeply with the idea of religion as rereading, making new meanings of the past through re-examination and re-valuation. Tayo, with the aid of the unorthodox medicine man, Betonie, engages in a rereading of his wartime experience and the natural and cultural symbols around him; and Silko herself treats storytelling as sacred, illustrating the spiritual links of the world through the structure she gives her book and calling on the reader to participate in her project as audience. Gordon's ceremony includes, but is not limited to, her father's funeral. Her larger ceremony is constituted by both the actual research and reading of texts her father authored, and by the act of exploring her own memories and emotions on the page, an endeavor she, too, endows with a sacredness of purpose.

Both ceremonies, because of their ties to self-conscious acts of interpretation and storytelling, provoke their authors to experiment with narrative form. The problems that arise from the sense of internal division engendered by their bi-cultural backgrounds in particular, catalyzes an innovation in language and narrative structure to mediate between multiple understandings of truth and

articulate a particular idea of God. Experimenting with narrative form to explore the theological underpinnings of their cultures, these texts illustrate the phenomenon Wendy Steiner describes, in which female and ethnically marked writers have "responded in new ways to the modernist givens," especially to "the importance of the medium of language in shaping thought and action" (441). A threat of dissolving subjectivity appears in both texts, but for reasons attributable to the particular social injustices Silko and Gordon address: in Ceremony, the dominance of Euro-American culture that promotes self-interest and violence and erases those who are racially and culturally different; and in The Shadow Man, the mid-century anti-Semitism and xenophobia that would prompt Gordon's father to abandon his immigrant family and reinvent himself entirely. The ceremonies that run through each text work as an attempt to lead Silko's hero and Mary Gordon (who herself has a crisis of identity when she uncovers the secrets and lies of her father's life) to a stable sense of self from which each may experience resolution and forgiveness.

The end goal is transcendence and love, the qualities Kristeva connects with writing on both a religious and psychological register. As Kristeva explains, writing serves as mediation, "a way of coming out of the trauma, of forgiving oneself or the other and translating it for someone else" (287). Love—"not idealization but an accompaniment of the loved subject in his or her traumatisms"—opens the door for forgiveness (280). It is this accompaniment into trauma that both authors represent and invite their readers into, in an attempt to forgive and thus restore what appears lost or irreconcilably divided.

Ceremony: Cultural Convergence and Religious Conflict

> "[D]rawing my strength from this forgiveness (giving meaning beyond nonmeaning), I reweave the fabric of my own story, I prepare my eventual rebirth."
>
> Julia Kristeva, "Forgiveness: An Interview"

Critics have often compared the structure of *Ceremony*to a web. Silko interweaves different literary styles and separate narratives, including Pueblo religious stories. The text coheres as a novel, however, through the main spiritual quest of Tayo (into which the other stories are interpolated), who must perform an extensive ceremony to move beyond the trauma he suffers from his recent participation in World War II and the childhood loss of his mother. A crucial component of Tayo's ceremony rests in his rereading—his revisiting and interpreting anew—the painful elements of his past and his identity through the help of the medicine man, Betonie. When Tayo learns to attribute a different meaning to his past and his mixed-blood heritage—to "reweave the fabric of [his] own story"—he is released from constantly reliving the past through the chaos of chronic nightmares, and is reborn as a fully integrated member of the Laguna Pueblo community. Betonie, an unorthodox religious figure and spiritual mentor, also serves the function of an analyst, as Kristeva describes the analyst's role, offering Tayo "interpretive listening," as well as guiding him in the cosmologically oriented ritual acts that comprise his ceremony (284). Silko has spoken of the process of writing the novel itself, too, as a healing ceremony that lifted her out of a depression much like Tayo's, here touching on Kristeva's

understanding of the act of writing as potentially sharing the therapeutic aspect of psychoanalysis.[17]

The nightmares and nausea that plague Tayo stem from his grief over the death in the Philippines of his cousin, Rocky, a brother figure and promising athlete who convinced Tayo to enlist in the army with him, and that of his uncle Josiah, an affectionate father figure who died while Tayo and Rocky were away fighting in the Phillipines. Guilt for his participation in killing in the war and for leaving Josiah, who lost the herd of cattle which Tayo had promised to help care for, also contributes to Tayo's illness. Further, Tayo's sense of identity and self-worth has been undercut by his childhood abandonment by his mother and his indeterminate status as an illegitimate "half-breed," whose very existence brought shame to the family, as his aunt regularly reminds him. Prior to his meeting Betonie, these conditions of his life signify loss and guilt to Tayo, leaving him unable to eat or sleep, and prompting him to drink with the other veterans on the reservation.

Tayo's mixed-ethnicity, which mirrors Silko's own Mexican, Laguna Pueblo, and white ancestry, is a source of shame to him; but Betonie—himself also of mixed ancestry—leads Tayo to revise his impression of his bi-racial heritage by telling him of Betonie's own grandfather, Descheeny, who married a young Mexican girl with hazel green eyes like Tayo's and together with her plotted the course of a ceremony that would "take a long long time and many more stories like this one before they are laid low" (150). The "they," though

[17] Kristeva, however, emphasizes the distinctions between the two because the analyst intervenes, whereas in writing, "I am not alone, but I am not in a listening relationship like that of the analytic cure either" (284).

Silko deliberately gives the pronoun no antecedent, refers to those who participate in "witchery" that perpetuates chaos and violence in the world and not to any one specific race, for Betonie instructs Tayo not to "write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians" (128). As Betonie recounts his stories of being left as an infant in a trash pile by villagers who feared the racial mixing revealed by his own green eyes, and later being reclaimed and raised by his grandmother, he enables Tayo to reread his own bi-racial heritage and childhood exclusion as a mark of a spiritual potential to heal that places him in the continuum of participants in the larger ceremony.

Silko's dedication to Pueblo culture appears throughout the body of her work, yet as is evident in Tayo's and Betonie's stories, she expresses a strong interest in racial mixing and cultural syncretism throughout *Ceremony*, likely informed by her own white ancestry, which can be traced back to the marriage of the brothers Walter and Robert Marmon to Laguna wives in the 1860s (Parsons 888). Silko's multi-ethnic identity thus catalyzes an especially strong desire to see hybridity celebrated and tolerance fostered, prompting her critique of the static quality of the Laguna Pueblo traditions, alongside her harsher critique of Anglo-American religio-cultural imperialism that would snuff out or exoticize native ways of life. Noting the influence of a bicultural experience on many native American writers, Catherine Rainwater explains, "American Indian narratives emphasize flexibility and fluidity as important values; indeed, contemporary Native American writers often equate such malleability of self with the dynamic motion of nature" (65).

The relative ineffectiveness of ritual that remains static can be seen in Tayo's meeting with Ku-oosh, the traditional Laguna healer his grandmother originally calls on to help him. Though Tayo derives some benefit from Ku-oosh, his treatment fails to restore Tayo entirely because it had not been designed to counter the particular evils of modern warfare (Chakvin 6). It is Betonie, as a mixed-breed and more unorthodox practitioner, who leads Tayo to a complete recovery through a ceremony based on Laguna Pueblo theology and traditions, but which integrates objects from white culture and is thus transformed to meet modern needs. Betonie explains to Tayo,

> after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (126)

The altering of traditional ceremonial practices that Betonie advocates also arises out of a belief that change is crucial for ceremonies to be effective because change reflects the growth and transformation all living things undergo. To adhere too strictly to every element of ritual is to fall prey to the very fear and evil that the ceremonies are meant to combat. Likewise, adjusting the rituals is important, Betonie explains, because "things which don't shift and grow are dead things" (126). So Betonie's dwelling is a mass of bi-cultural detritus arranged in circles—phone books, coke bottles and Western calendars next to boxes of dried roots and twigs, capturing emblems of white culture and white systems of time

and space alongside the traditional Indian medicinal use of nature, in circles that signify unity and eternity.

This convergence of multiple cultures and of tradition with modernity has largely been cast as the dominant theme of Ceremony.[18] Further, much of the critical interest generated since the publication of Ceremony has focused on tracing the Pueblo mythology and sacred rituals, or interpreting spiritual allusions and symbols to Pueblo theology.[19] Silko's readers, however, have generally neglected to consider her treatment of Christianity, certainly because it is less ubiquitous than the Pueblo mythology and less "exotic" for most readers, and perhaps also because Silko's representation of it is so unequivocally negative that it appears uninteresting to explore.[20] Given the centrality of cultural convergence as a theme, however, it becomes important to examine why it is that religious syncretism in Ceremony appears neither feasible nor constructive.[21] I would suggest that while Silko emphasizes the power of cultural syncretism by bringing her most spiritually dynamic characters into contact with other ethnic cultures

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[18] James Ruppert, for example, notes that the mixed-blood cattle Josiah raises and Tayo recovers benefit from the "best qualities of both worlds," like Tayo and Silko (89). Catherine Rainwater, too, argues that many references to colors and the earth resonate with both Euro-American and native myths and cultures.

[19] A description and explanation of the significance of symbols in Ceremony would fill a chapter itself, and is ground that has been well covered. See Louis Owens for the most comprehensive discussion, which includes the significance of colors and the myth of Winter (the Lion), Yellow Woman, and Summer. Kenneth Lincoln also discusses colors, in addition to the meaning of seasons and orientation. Robert C. Bell, sheds light on the ways in which Tayo's injuries and healing ceremony parallel those of the Pueblo religious mythology of Coyote and the Navajo Red Antway tradition and Paula Gunn Allen focuses largely on the feminine spiritual significance of the land.

[20] Paula Gunn Allen also discusses the problem of students' salacious interest in the details of Pueblo religious rituals in "Special Problems in teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony," which problematizes Silko's divulgence of sacred tribal secrets.

[21] This becomes an especially interesting question in light of the extent to which the Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich *does* find it possible and productive to allow her characters to hybridize Christianity with the beliefs of native peoples in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, as discussed in Chapter 3.

through (or as the offspring of) interracial coupling, religions are excluded from this convergence due, first, to institutionalized Christianity's ties to internal colonization in America and, second and more subtly, to the antithetical elements of Christian and Pueblo belief systems. Silko's interest in bringing out the ways these two broad theological systems underlie and inform the different attitudes and interactions of Anglo-Americans and native peoples and their effects on the larger socio-political and environmental spheres complicates the celebration of convergence that appears elsewhere in the text.

Working in the field of genre studies, Richard Dasenbrock challenges the reading of Ceremony as an unambiguous celebration of cultural convergence, though he does not address religion in the text. In "Forms of Biculturalism in Southwestern Literature: The Work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko," Dasenbrock reads Silko's text geographically, pairing it with the Chicano author Anaya in order to contextualize it within Southwestern literature. Finding most characterizations of Southwestern literature inadequate, he argues,

> The standard line about the Southwest is to call it tricultural, as all of the tourist brochures do, yet in the very way they say it, like Catholic theologians they seem to make the three into one, implying that a harmonious convergence has taken place producing a unified culture with tricultural origins. … The Southwest is less a region with *a* culture of its own than a zone of cultural contact…. (72)

Dasenbrock finds Ceremony to be representative of Southwestern literature in that it enacts a pattern of "conflict and contact," rather than convergence (73).

Dasenbrock's conclusion proves useful in exploring Silko's treatment of religion, for convergence here appears neither possible nor even desirable, unsurprisingly, given the aspects of Christian doctrine that are clearly antithetical to Pueblo social and religious beliefs. Among these are "the conception of a high god," and "the story of the Crucifixion with the dogma of redemption, and concepts of hell and heaven," which conflict with the structure of the Pueblo divinities, which are "departmentalized" rather than structured into a "pinnacle" (Parsons 1101). According to Elsie Clewes Parsons, the concept of sin, too, is utterly alien to the Pueblos, for behavior is measured by its helpfulness or hurtfulness to the community rather than through the lens of personal salvation; thus, there is also no confession or belief in absolution. The Pueblo idea of an afterlife as a continuation of earthly life also stands in opposition to the notion of sin and redemption, since there is no hell from which to be redeemed or heaven with which to be rewarded. Such theological conflicts between the Pueblo and Catholic religions coupled with the longstanding interrelation of Catholic missionary work and Euro-American political dominance of native peoples and the decimation of their political and religious structures, lead to a unilaterally negative representation of Catholicism in Ceremony, despite the novel's emphasis on the positive potential of hybridity and change in order to achieve redemption and transformation.

Ceremony is so deeply rooted in Laguna theology that this theology is embedded in the very structure of the text. LaVonne Ruoff notes that in native American culture, "it is difficult to distinguish between literature and

religion…[b]ecause sacred oral literature is so closely interwoven into the fabric of traditional Indian religious life" (142). The tradition of oral literature—whether poetic chants or stories—carries religious resonance because in native religions, words themselves are considered forces that shape the world we experience. As Ruoff explains,

> American Indians hold thought and word in great reverence because of their symbolic power to alter the universe for good and evil. The power of thought and word enables native people to achieve harmony with the physical and spiritual universe: to bring rain, enrich the harvest, provide good hunting, heal physical and mental sickness, maintain good relations within the group, bring victory against an enemy, win a loved one, or ward off evil spirits. … Because of their power and because words can turn back on the speaker, for good or evil, thought and word should be used with great care. (7)

Ceremony both replicates this worldview in its narrative form—through the Pueblo myths that are interwoven with Tayo's story, and the blurring between the mythic and actual—and represents it in its plot through the stories and chants that can be employed medicinally to heal and bless, or as witchery to curse and destroy.[22] When the Laguna medicine man, Ku'oosh, visits Tayo, his speech reiterates this point:

> The word he chose to express "fragile" was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven

[22] Louis Owens discusses this breakdown of boundaries between the mythical and actual in " 'The Very Essence of Our Lives': Leslie Silko's Webs of Identity.'"

> across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. (35)

The very structure of the novel, in its replication of a web with various interconnected narrative threads, rather than one linear narrative, also reflects the Laguna Pueblo concept of creation as a "fragile web" which emanates from "Spider-Grandmother." We see this foregrounding of language (the importance of which is crucial for Tayo to understand in order to re-interpret his own story) and its role in creating and maintaining the world in the very first page of Ceremony, in which "Thought-Woman, the spider,/ named things and/ as she named them/ they appeared" (1).

Further, through beginning with Ts'its'tsi'nako—Spider-Grandmother or Thought-Woman—as the ultimate author and creator, Silko establishes both the Pueblo idea of God as the ultimate mother "who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family" and the matriarchal structure of the Pueblo religion and culture, another significant element of religion and culture at odds with Christianity. Among the Pueblo people, Ts'its'tsi'nako consistently appears as "the universal mother" who has given birth to the other spirits and their descendants, as well as to humanity. Throughout Pueblo mythology she appears as "a benevolent, helpful old woman who takes care of stray girls (even the Earth mothers) or bereft husbands or anybody in distress, having ideas or medicines for

all emergencies" (Parsons 193). Under the direction of Ts'its'tsi'nako the world is completed by the sisters Nautsiti and Iyatiku, associated with the sun and corn respectively. Ts'its'tsi'nako thus combines authorial and maternal power and care.

One can see the matriarchal nature of Laguna Pueblo theology from the creation story, which serves as a foundation for a broader matriarchal culture. As such, the Laguna community provided Silko with strong models of women on which to draw for her characters. She explains that "at Laguna, a lot more is expected of women; women are expected to be strong, to manage the property. Children belong to women and to their families. Women do the plastering" (Fisher 28). In addition, she compares the situation of most Anglo-American women to her own immediate community, and notes,

> [t]he kinds of things that cause white upper-middle-class women to flee the home for awhile to escape or get away from domination and powerlessness and inferior status, *vis-à-vis* the husband, and the male, those kinds of forces are not operating, they're not operating at all. (77)

Pueblo women make business decisions and own and run households, and Silko attributes the gender dynamics of Ceremony to the power held by Laguna women, in general, and the women in her own family, in particular.

Yet Silko's representations of women are surprisingly problematic, despite the ways one might imagine the matriarchal culture and the second-wave feminist

movement would deepen her characterizations.[23] According to Silko, however, it is because of and not despite the Laguna manifestations of a matriarchal religio-culture, that her female characters are not as fully developed as the men, nor are we, as readers, drawn into sympathy with the women to the same degree. Silko herself admits that

> people have talked about how my male characters have vulnerability and all kinds of complexities and the women…they're not as vulnerable. You have to have some vulnerability in a character for readers to be able to establish some kind of link with them. (Barnes 78)

Silko explains that because women own and control the home, fathers have less say in Pueblo households and thus tend to be more nurturing and less authoritative. Mothers, by contrast, are dominant, contributing to her portrait of women as powerful and even threatening. In Silko's home, "If someone was going to thwart you or frighten you, it would tend to be a woman" (Barnes 78).

I would argue that the limitations in her representations of women, however, also appear to stem in part from the pattern of cultural "conflict and contact" Dasenbrock identifies, as it emerges in the sphere of religion. Silko's female characters are largely shaped by their response to Christianity, or conversely, by their embodiment of Laguna spiritual powers, which in turn serves to flatten out these characters.

Among the women in the story, this tendency to intimidate and thwart that Silko attributes to women, emerges most clearly in the character of Auntie, who,

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[23] Silko credits the second-wave feminist movement with benefiting her "in the sense that anything that undermines the stereotypes perpetrated on all of us by white men is helpful" ("Conversations" 28).

significantly, is the one character who is a devout Christian convert. Auntie spoils her son, Rocky, while shaming and excluding Tayo, tries to prevent Tayo's uncle Josiah from seeing his Mexican lover, and spends most of the book complaining about the family's fallen standing in the community. That Auntie espouses Christianity is Silko's means of highlighting what she sees as the problems with Christian theology and the ways it has been used to justify modes of behavior injurious to the social and natural world.

As Tayo's ceremony begins, he begins to read a new significance in Auntie's devout Christianity:

> although she told him that she prayed they would be baptized, she never asked any of them, not even Rocky, to go with her. Later on, Tayo wondered if she liked it that way, going to church by herself, where she could show the people that she was a devout Christian and not immoral or pagan like the rest of the family. When it came to saving her own soul, she wanted to be careful that there were no mistakes. (77)

Auntie's Christianity then is based on a desire to uphold her reputation and bespeaks a competitive, rather than cooperative, approach to the community and the family.

Old Grandma, who speaks much less than Auntie, but gives voice to some of the most important lines of the novel, reveals whose side she's on when she remarks to Auntie, "Church…Ah Thelma, do you have to go there again?" (77). Whereas Auntie's Christianity is a matter of preserving appearances, Grandma "didn't care what anyone said."

She liked to sit by her stove and gossip about the people who were talking about their family.

> "I know a better one than that about her!" …She pounded her cane on the floor in triumph. The story was all that counted. If she had a better one about them, then it didn't matter what they said. (89)

In a more damning reading of Christianity's effect on the Laguna tribes, the narration, in this instance meant to reflect the collective perspective of the Laguna people, portrays Tayo's mother's descent into drunkenness and promiscuity as tied to the Christian theology used to colonize the community:

> Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul …
>
> The Catholic priest shook his finger at the drunkenness and lust [of Tayo's mother], but the people felt something deeper: they were losing her, they were losing part of themselves. (68)

Priests in Ceremony fill Tayo's mother with self-loathing for her people and culture, condemn her for her drinking and promiscuity, and feed Tayo's Auntie's self-righteousness. It is at Catholic school that "holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians" taught Tayo's mother to style her hair and make-up as white girls did, implicitly encouraging her to value the attention of white men, and "urged her to break away from home" (68). The perception of Jesus Christ as a figure who stands apart from his own family and community and requires that others do the same to attain salvation, stands in stark contrast to God

as the Mother who thinks the universe and the inhabitants of it as interdependent, requiring that they acknowledge this interdependence in their lives. From Silko's perspective, Christian theology denies this interconnectedness and those in its thrall instead preoccupy themselves with identifying the sins and virtues of the individual in a sort of capitalistic spiritual competition. Silko thus emphasizes the ways in which Christianity is interwoven with the psychological violence of Anglo-American cultural imperialism, which destroys the sense of identity and ultimately, the life of Native American peoples.

These passages on Tayo's Auntie and mother reveal as well the specifically gendered ways in which a deeply patriarchal religious tradition like Christianity affects the dynamics of a matriarchal culture like that of the Laguna Pueblo peoples. Auntie, a dominant figure like the women who raised Silko, is shamed by the clergy's response to her sister's behavior and her strength becomes channeled into self-righteousness and competitiveness with her family and community. Tayo's mother experiences Christianity conflated with the promotion of normative mid-century Anglo-American gender roles that enculturate women to value men's approval above all else and attempt to win this approval through sexual desirability. Her plight is echoed in the character of Helen-Jean, a young native woman Tayo's friends Harley and Leroy pick up, who is spiraling towards destruction because she has no means of economic support other than cajoling money from her drunken suitors—a type of de facto prostitution. The only women who do express autonomy in a constructive way, then, are Grandma, who represents an older generation not indoctrinated by Christian culture; Josiah's

Mexican lover and Descheeny's Mexican wife, both of whom have spiritual powers and appear almost supernatural; and Ts'eh, who most critics read as "Yellow-Woman," a divinity and redemptive figure for Tayo, rather than an actual person. The other female characters become two-dimensional and distanced from the reader as Silko uses them primarily to show the misogynistic effects of Euro-American religion and culture on native women.

As seen through these figures, Silko's project in writing *Ceremony*is as political as it is religious, and her use of ceremony as the central motif points to the potential of ceremony as a point of convergence for these religious and political spheres, for the religious practice of native peoples has been long interwoven with their political structures. Most European-Americans, in fact, historically could not distinguish between religious and governmental ceremonies, and as activist and author Vine Deloria explains, "the Indian tribes could not be broken politically until they had been destroyed religiously, as the two functions supported each other to an amazing degree" (218-19). The process of breaking the tribal religions began with the seventeenth-century settlements of Spanish missionaries whose goal had been to convert the Indians and establish "civilization," often by physical force as well as psychological or economic coercion.

> When religious ceremonies were banned and the reservations turned over to missionaries and political patronage appointees, the decline of both the traditional political leaders and the religious solidarity of the people was accomplished in a very short time. (Deloria 218-19)

Even before the Dawes Act of 1887, the 1871 amendment to the annual Indian Appropriations Bill led to a *de facto* ban on religious ceremonies and leadership by eliminating provisions for separate Indian governments and tribal sovereignty and giving the United States jurisdiction over American Indians.[24]

Silko, who was born in 1948, fifteen years after the Indian Reorganization Act allowed tribes to resume the practice of their own religions, was one of the first generations of native people born into a tribe that could openly practice its religious ceremonies. A renewed interest in ceremonies for healing purposes emerged in the 1950s, while a period of increased activism grew in the 1960s, as native peoples modeled their political protests after black civil rights activist movements (Deloria 253). LaVonne Ruoff connects these political movements to the resurgence of native literature, noting, "[t]he revitalization of Indian pride in the 1960s ushered in an era of creative writing whose quality and quantity were unequaled in the history of Indian literature written in English," beginning with the publication of N. Scott Momaday's The House Made of Dawn in 1968 (AIL 76). Emerging from this period of increased activism and open religious practice, Silko's text met with a public increasingly interest in all things Indian, and the critical approach Ceremony takes to modern warfare resonated with readers, due to American involvement in Viet Nam.

The 1960s also became a period of increased government inquiry into the social and economic status of Indians to investigate what measures could be taken

[24] The Dawes Act, passed by Congress without consultation with or consent by any tribes, split native land into allotments intended by policymakers for farming and grazing. It effectively destroyed the reservation system by decreasing native landholdings from "138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million acres in 1934," often leaving tribes with only desert or semidesert land (Gunn).

to improve their condition.[25] Americans witnessed the Indian occupation of Alcatraz in 1964 and 1969, and the week-long occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC in 1972, in keeping with the growth of more radical action among student and civil rights movements. These events stemmed from the youth movement within the larger American Indian Movement, parallel to nationwide student activism, but a more significant departure from tradition given the extent to which deference to elders was ingrained in native culture. Along these lines, in 1961 the American Indian Chicago Conference in Chicago spawned the National Indian Youth Conference, which formed in Gallup, New Mexico (where Silko locates Betonie's home), to defend Indian rights and establish and outline a strategy of moderate radicalism to draw public attention to support reform of policies toward and conditions of Native American. This coalescence of the larger Indian population, increased activism, and re-establishment of religious ritual and tribal autonomy were occurring all through Silko's teens and early twenties.

Religious structures and political ideologies thus converge within each separate culture in the landscape of Ceremony to a much greater degree than religious systems or beliefs converge *cross*-culturally. Silko's main critique of Christianity—that it values individuality at the expense of community, thus fostering alienation and a destructive competitiveness—appears both in the negative remarks that appear through the narrator's or Tayo's consciousness, and

[25] Reports issued under the Kennedy administration prompted Johnson to refer to Indians as "forgotten Americans," and led to legislation that included the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act (1972), the Indian Financing Act (1974), The Indian Self-Determination Act (1975), and the Indian Education Act (1972).

more obliquely in the degree to which Silko highlights the collective emphasis of Pueblo religion and culture, as in her use of the term "the people," when she describes the loss of Tayo's mother.

This underlining of collectivity appears as important from the opening of the book, as well. Following the creation story of Ts'its'tsi'nako, before Tayo is introduced, an anonymous male character explains the power of stories ("I will tell you something about stories/ [he said]"), and a woman speaks of the power of a ceremony ("The only cure/I know/is a good ceremony,/that's what she said"). The "displacement of the individual author onto the Pueblo deity Thought-Woman," coupled with the nameless voices that follow, draws attention to the story as a collective product—both of the "he" and "she" who speak and its original derivation from Thought-Woman and her sisters who create universe and worlds (Rainwater 6). Silko thus advocates solidarity over singularity through a group of anonymous voices, an allusion to traditional native storytelling—in which stories are passed down through the people—that overturns Western ideals of originality and lone authorship. Setting up the stories to come through these multiple voices reinforces the theology that views individual well-being as interdependent and inextricably linked to community and spirituality, rather than as dependent on self-interest for self-preservation.

Further, by including Pueblo religious stories spliced into Tayo's quest through what Louis Owens characterizes as a type of Bahktinian heteroglossia, ways of knowing are called into question, deliberately foregrounding the problem of competing and conflicting epistemologies and undercutting the notion of a

fixed universal truth.[26] Silko strives to be a "transmitter" rather than an originator through her use of heteroglossia; yet Owens distinguishes her from the Bakhtinian prototype because of her belief in a "sacred center," instead of one dominated by centripetal force (172). Further, Catherine Rainwater notes that though novels by native peoples often coincide with postmodernist styles in their "disjunctive and self-referential features, including their metasemiotic tendency to question the legitimacy of interpretive practice in general," they do not share postmodernism's "antifoundationalist energy or conclusions" (52, 70-1). Tayo's illness stems from his encounters with these tangled and competing versions of reality. For Silko, however, the Pueblo way of reading the world leads to harmony and a discernment of how to defend oneself against harm, whereas the teachings of Christian theology lead to rootlessness and destruction. In order to obtain healing, Tayo must learn to discern the spiritual underpinnings of his own identity and the world around him, and craft a new story informed by this knowledge.

Tayo's recollection that "the white doctors had yelled at him that he had to think only of himself and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us'," constitutes a critique of Western medical practices that dovetails with Silko's reading of Christianity. Here, too, the overvaluation of individuality Tayo learns to detect in Western medicine, stands in opposition to the emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things, and the concomitant theological concept that damage done to wide segments of the population and the natural world results in injury to each person's and community's psychic and physical health (125). Tayo's rereading of his own

[26] James Ruppert also characterizes Silko's strategy as a form of Bakhtinian dialogism (78).

story, and that of the Laguna people, centers on a recognition that Anglo-American science and religion comprise the same fabric of white culture, implicitly tied to capitalism in their emphasis on an individual's duty to put his own survival or "salvation" first, even at the expense of others.

In American Indian Literatures Ruoff quotes the Sioux, Lame Deer, as describing "a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one" (Ruoff, qtd on 7). Silko's universe corresponds to this description in the pervasiveness of religious references and signs, which reveal a vision of the world as fundamentally spiritual, with no rigid divide between ceremonial and quotidian and no arena that is purely secular. Some symbols or cosmology point to a more dramatic stage of Tayo's ceremony, as when the night of the ceremony's completion occurs on the solstice. But others appear more subtle and accidental, as when early in the novel Tayo steps in a half-buried barrel hoop—a symbol of the wholeness of the universe and a reference to the Pueblo image of man in the universe as a hoop dancer (Owens 176-7). Tayo's later encounters with Mountain Lion (also called The Hunter or Winter) and T'seh (Yellow Woman) add another dimension to the ubiquity of the spiritual in the lived world, as the three act out Pueblo mythology.[27] James Ruppert characterizes Silko's interpolation of these narratives as a collapse of the boundaries between reality and "myth." "Silko, of course, never separates the two perceptual fields," he writes, but "instead, in the novel, she refers to them both as 'story'" (82). What Ruppert refers to as Tayo and the reader beginning to "live the myth"—that

[27] Allen sees this process of healing and reunification as occurring primarily through Tayo's encounters with T'seh, and the symbols related to her.

is, the Laguna paradigms—once he breaks out of the whites' story at the conclusion of Ceremony, indicates that Tayo has learned to interpret and translate these religious signs embedded in the natural world (84).

As heavy handed as Silko's representation of Christianity is in Ceremony, her critique of Christian theology and its relation to capitalistic culture in North America emerges still more damningly in her second novel, Almanac of the Dead (1991). Here, native and African-American characters analyze and criticize the roots of Christianity more extensively, attributing to its mythology modern attitudes that have resulted in social and environmental ills. Two passages in particular illustrate this point and are worth quoting at length, for the seeds of the ideas expressed here were nascent in Ceremony. First, Silko's narrator describes an elderly native American's investigation into the ways Christian stories, especially the foundational myth of Adam and Eve, inform their treatment of the land and one another, as he explains it to his grandson:

> That old man had been interested in what the Europeans thought and the names they had for the planets and stars. He thought their stories accounting for the sun and the planets were interesting only because their stories of explosions and flying fragments were consistent with everything else he had seen: from their flimsy attachments to one another and their children to their abandonment of the land where they had been born…. Their God had created them but soon was furious with them, throwing them out of their birthplace, driving them away. … They failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans were like their first

> parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them. (258)

Here, as in Ceremony, Western science and Christianity are not posed as antagonistic systems, but work together to shape Anglo-Americans' restlessness and recklessness, and the Judeo-Christian God becomes an accuser, rather than the nurturing parent of Pueblo legend.

Later in Almanac of the Dead, Clinton, a radical black Viet Nam veteran, offers another explanation with a similarly negative spin, which stems from his racial and political position:

> The slave masters thought Africans would be isolated from their African gods in the Americas because the slave masters themselves had left behind their God, Jesus, in Europe. The Europeans had been without a god since their arrival in the Americas. Of course the Europeans were terrified, but did not admit the truth. They had gone through the motions with their priests, holy water, and churches built with Indian slave labor. But their God had not accompanied them. The white man had sprinkled holy water and had prayed for almost five hundred years in the Americas, and still the Christian god was absent. Now Clinton understood why European philosophers had told their people God was dead: the white man's God had died about the time the Europeans had started sailing around the world. (416-17)

Whether the creation myth is itself the root of the problem—white men called into being and then condemned by an insane God—or the problem is that the

imperialist project necessitated that whites leave their God behind morally and geographically, Silko represents Christians as a people whose alienation from their God results in anti-social behaviors and destructive economic and political structures. Here is simultaneously a critique of Euro-American culture and ideology and an attribution of its problems to Christian mythology and theology. Silko condemns the philosophical basis of Christianity as antithetical to Indian religious values—to the ecological conservation and community based governance that stem from a vision of the ultimate spiritual force as a mothering one and the universe as a "fragile web." Reasoning back from effect to cause, she looks at the impact Europeans and Euro-Americans have had on the earth and other peoples, and concludes that the Jesus of Christianity must be a flawed concept.

Silko saw the narrative she crafted in Ceremony as medicinal in its resistance to Christian capitalistic culture and the images of native peoples it perpetuates. Tayo's project again parallels Silko's, and carries a religious resonance evident in Ku'oosh's careful choice of words in his earlier attempt to heal Tayo; both Tayo and Silko must imagine an ending for Tayo other than that of the drunkenness, poverty, and violent destruction attributed to the native population, held up as typical and inevitable by the Anglo-Americans and reinforced through native American social realist literature like James Welch's The Death of Jim Loney.

Silko does grant a new for ending to Tayo as part of the ceremony she has set in motion. Although he must take a series of difficult physical steps to

recover Josiah's cattle, the more significant part of what Tayo must accomplish takes place in the emotional and psychological realm, which in the economy of *Ceremony,* determines the outward and actual. The witchery Tayo must counter comes primarily through Emo, a full-blood native veteran, whose misogyny and aggression reflect his internalization of Euro-American values and envy of their lifestyles, and whose stories have previously lured Tayo into a violent encounter with him. Significantly, when Emo tells self-aggrandizing tales of his sexual and military conquests, Silko formats them on the page like Pueblo chants and stories (a method legible to the reader from the context of the religious stories that appear earlier). Emo has been spreading lies that Tayo is crazy and violent, which others believe because, as Ts'eh tells him, "this is the only ending they understand" (232). Tayo's cure culminates in his refusal to lash out in violence against Emo or to succumb to Emo's story and doubt his sanity—a strength gathered from his new reading of his identity through Betonie and Ts'eh's guidance. Tayo has thus "stop[ped] time which proceeds toward vengeance" (281).

Resisting violence allows Tayo to experience rebirth, enabling him to break free of a pattern of loss and violence, and leading him to forgiveness, manifest in his accompaniment by the spirits of Rocky and Josiah as he travels home after eluding Emo and his cohorts. Ruppert notes that time and space have collapsed here and Tayo has entered "Sacred Time" (84). In describing the "atemporality of forgiveness," Julia Kristeva argues that linear time is fundamentally a Judeo-Christian concept in which individuals "make cuts: promise or forgiveness" (285). Significantly, non-Western religions, she notes,

do not have this same sense of temporal causality and continuity, and instead "suspend time, and then the question of forgiveness isn't asked, since there is no judgment" (285). "This provides states of communion with nature," Kristeva continues, "very intense subjective or collective sensory experiences." It is just such a communion with nature in a world without judgment, which Tayo arrives in through his ceremony. Until this point, he has condemned himself for leaving Josiah to tend the cattle and ranch alone, for surviving when Rocky was killed, and even for being a bastard and "half-breed." Now in completing his ceremony he has left the space of his trauma and linear time and causality give way to infinity, and alienation to connection.

Old Grandma, who is given the final line of dialogue, sighs and says, "It seems like I already heard these stories before...only thing is, the names sound different" (260). The stories themselves are cyclical but in order to remain powerful in combating evil, Silko's story, like Betonie's ceremony, must evolve and adapt to address the specific needs of the times. Part of what has made Ceremony a celebrated and enduring text is its interpolation of contemporary historical-political subject matter with traditional ritual and myth, and its suggestion that the latter can serve as a spiritual base for healing the conflicts of the former. Again, Tayo is aligned with his author and creator by sealing his ceremony through telling a story—his own story, to the tribal elders—his final act that simultaneously reinforces tradition and introduces new elements, and one that allows for his rebirth as a fully integrated member of the community. Transmitting the story—a translation of meaning—signals his newfound authority

and wins him respect in the community. His mythological-autobiographical storytelling works as the final step of his ceremony for his community, just as Silko designed her novel to be for herself, and her tribe and nation.

***The Shadow Man*: Searching for God the Father**

> "[Forgiveness] does demand a partial, temporary identification with the subject of the act and with the act itself. …This affective identification matters.
>
> …
>
> Even if the writer's story turns in circles, writing is nonetheless a way of coming out of the trauma, of forgiving oneself or the other and translating it for someone else."
>
> Julia Kristeva, "Forgiveness: An Interview"

"I will make my father legible," Mary Gordon states in her memoir, The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father, suggesting that, "by getting him properly into words, I can finally allow him to be dead" (261). Thus embarking on a project of locating her father, primarily through reading his writing alongside legal records, photographs and an assortment of other clues to his identity, Gordon attempts to comprehend the strange fabric of his life and release herself from the unanswered questions and painful memories of her past. The idea of translation that Kristeva articulates is central here, both in Gordon's attempt to interpret, or give meaning to, her father's life and in her tracing of the steps she herself takes to do so, as a means of interpreting them for her readers.

A scarce half-dozen pages into the preface of The Shadow Man, Gordon recalls that her father told her when she was six, "I love you more than God," and comments, "I didn't know, and still don't, if he meant he loved me more than he loved God or more than God loved me" (xviii). This expression of paternal ardor echoes through both her autobiographical and fictional work. It is the one event transplanted from her life to her first novel, Final Payments, where Gordon adjusts the fictional father's statement to read more unambiguously, "'I love you more than I love God. I love you more than God loves you'" (260). There the narrator and protagonist Isabel speaks of loving her father with a peculiar intensity—"the passion of mind and soul that he reserved for God" (41).[28] Gordon and her father's relationship thus becomes mediated through God as God becomes the measure of her father's love—and her father's love the means and measure of imagining the nature of divine love. By endowing her father with this much power and presence in her life and enshrining his love for her as the most passionate in her experience, Mary Gordon's father becomes conflated with God in her memoirs. Because of the Jewish representation of God as father, distinct from the Catholic emphasis on God as Christ, the Son, Gordon's conflation of God and her father reflects her attraction to Jewishness, as it represents David Gordon's heritage for her. It is nonetheless a peculiar position for a liberal feminist to occupy at the end of the twentieth-century and creates tensions throughout her work such that Gordon feels compelled to revisit the question of

[28] I will occasionally refer to Final Payments for insights into Gordon's approach to Catholicism and relationship with her father, given that elements of Catholicism that disturb the protagonist, Isabel, parallel those Gordon objects to elsewhere and that she herself has noted that "the father in Final Payments has [David Gordon's] politics" (SM xiv).

religion again and again, continually demarcating areas of Catholicism with which she aligns herself and from which she feels alienated.

God, however, is by no means a stable term in Gordon's memoir. A few pages into her first chapter, while describing anxieties that kept her awake at night during the period following her father's death, she refers to God as "one more instance of failed language," grouping it with words she suddenly finds herself questioning like "mean," "alive," and "I" (7). God is a term which has been abruptly emptied of meaning, one she accepted instinctively before her father's death but which now has been called into question. For God is not a concept that Gordon rejects upon her father's death or even later as an adult, but one that becomes slippery—an unresolved and irresolvable question, wrapped up in her memory of her father and her desire to evoke him. Mary Gordon's physical and psychological journey is thus permeated by the question of God's presence and absence, and as her quest for her father slips into a search for God, the lines between God and father blur. In her spiritual quest, Gordon's catharsis is achieved through storytelling and culminates in a religious ceremony that brings a sense of peace about her father.

It is her father's death that places Mary (I'll use her first name to refer to her as a protagonist, as opposed to the author) in a foreign environment during her childhood: when her father died, Mary and her mother moved into her grandmother's house. The sense of alienation she feels is directly related both to the shock of her separation from him and to his position outside the home she now inhabits, which leads to her sense of not belonging and desire for connection

to a spiritual father-figure. Mary's mother's disapproval of David Gordon stemmed largely from his Jewishness, and Mary's sense of alienation in her mother's home arose from her sense of her own Jewishness as her father's daughter. Gordon's bi-cultural and -religious identity then allows her some distance from and insight into the community in which she was raised. Despite the fact that she grew up in an almost exclusively Catholic environment, as a child Mary felt "split at the root," as Adrienne Rich put it when describing her ambivalence about her own father's muted Judaism and mother's Southern Gentile background into which he assimilated. Mary Gordon associates herself with Judaism in part as a means of allying herself with her father in his earlier life, but also because her mother's family insisted on her Jewishness as a fact to which they attributed any traits they perceived as negative. Her bookishness, not held in high esteem among the family, was a sign of her Jewishness, as was her dreaminess and lack of "common sense." "That's the Jew in you," is the accusation that reverberates throughout the childhood scenes of her life with her mother's family.[29] Gordon's novels and essays frequently refer with frustration to the anti-intellectualism—the fear that "secular learning will undermine religious faith"—that she claims is pervasive among American Catholics of Irish descent (252 Labrie).[30]

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[29] An 1979 essay titled "I Can't Stand Your Books:' A Writer Goes Home" confirms that her family's assessment of her intellectual pursuits did not change much, even following the success of her first novel.

[30] Labrie refers to American Catholics in general as experiencing "ethnic isolation" (256). Also, see Willliam Keough's essay, "X Rays of Irish America: Edwin O'Connor, Mary Gordon, and William Kennedy," in Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures, eds. Amritjit Singh and Joseph T. Skerrett, for a reading of Gordon's novels as primarily informed by and in dialogue with her Irish-American heritage.

Mary Gordon casts herself as an outsider in her childhood home and neighborhood, the only child in a house of adults, an aspiring scholar among anti-intellectuals, a Jew among Catholics. Her memoir thus deals with religion in its cultural, relational dynamic as it relates to the formation of identity as well as in its more interior spiritual dimension. For Gordon, her father remains Jewish in ethnicity, if not in his spiritual views, and she thus inherits and associates herself with two very different cultural heritages, epitomizing Rich's anxiety producing "split."

This split forces a self-consciousness about her Catholic upbringing that in turn leads both to Gordon's attachment to Catholicism and paradoxically, to her criticism of the insularity of Catholic communities and staid character of its theology and attendant rituals. Coming of age in a time of movements toward a greater openness within the Catholic Church and within American society as a whole, in particular with regard to women's positions, strongly influences Gordon's discussion of religion within the narrative she recounts. Emphasis on the need for sociopolitical change and a discerning of what she finds useful and what she rejects in the Catholic tradition and theology underlies much of The Shadow Man.

Mary Gordon was an adolescent when the Second Vatican Council was convened by Pope John XXIII from 1962 to 1965. Though Gordon herself claims that due to her youth, she had little opinion about Vatican II at the time it occurred, critic Ross Labrie reports that Gordon has been "dismayed at the post-Vatican II church for its low aesthetic standards and for its loss of the deeper

spiritual and psychological appeal that she experienced as a young Catholic," yet has "endorsed the contemporary church's enlarged social consciousness" (248).[31]

Gordon, however, has a much more vexed relationship with the contemporary Church than Labrie's characterization implies. Her political views, which reflect the political ferment of the late sixties and early seventies dominant in youth culture during her college years at Barnard, conflict with many of the Church's political positions and those she associates with its laity. So Gordon curtails her own nostalgia for the traditional forms of the pre-Vatican II church services, recognizing their place in a larger ideological reactionary impulse. "I don't want [the clock] turned back," she explains, "because the people who are plumping for the reintroduction of Gregorian chant into the liturgy are also funding the contras in Nicaragua, and they're doing it for the same reason" ("Getting Here" 175). Likewise, the second-wave feminist movement that took root during that same period hardly jibes well with the Church's hierarchical structure in which men hold exclusive decision-making power. Voicing her aversion to this system, she asserts,

> I was born into a church shaped and ruled by celibate males who had a history of hatred and fear of the body, which they lived out in their lives and in the rituals they invented. They excluded women from the center of their official and personal lives. (161)

In keeping with second-wave feminism, she asserts her criticism of the Church's opposition to abortion, divorce, pre-marital sex, and contraception.[32] She has

[31] For the passage that prompted Labrie's comment, see Gordon's "Getting Here from There: a Writer's Reflections on a Religious Past," especially p. 169, in Good Boys and Dead Girls.

published essays and articles with titles such as "Abortion: How do We Think About It?" and "Abortion: How Do We Really Choose?," "Offenses of the Pope," and "More Catholic than the Pope," that support pro-choice policies and take issue with certain of the Church's more egregious international political positions. Elsewhere, however, she attributes her feminism to Catholicism, pointing to female role models such as Teresa of Avila, who initiated the reform of the Carmelite Order by opening a convent and advising others on how to pray throughout her extensive writings, and the Virgin Mary, whom she describes as having a creative power that operates independently of man. Gordon even credits her feminism to a concern with justice cultivated by her upbringing in Catholicism (Labrie 272). So in The Shadow Man she asserts her disbelief in hell (contrary to her father's fervent belief in it) and her support of the Miramax movie Priest, which was protested by many Catholics because of its protagonists, a gay priest and a priest in an interracial common-law marriage.

What is interesting and notable about Gordon's writing then, is that in an era when the most salient feminist and liberal political positions would seem the antithesis of Catholicism, she remains determined to identify as Catholic, even while publicly wrestling with the Church's theology and political positions. I cite the quotations above not so much to delve into the specific issues on politics and gender that she brings up, but as representative of a pattern that emerges throughout her non-fiction and fiction. This pattern is one of alternatively claiming and rejecting very specific positions the Church takes and thereby

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[32] See the essays in Good Boys and Dead Girls, as well as Isabel Moore's positions in Final Payments.

negotiating between what late twentieth-century American feminisms advocate—namely social, economic, and sexual autonomy for women—and the conservative, and even reactionary, sexual and social politics associated with Catholicism.

Why does Mary Gordon devote so much energy not just to writing descriptively about growing up in the Church—as one might expect of any author raised in an insular religious community—but to sifting through the wheat and chaff of Church ideology and liturgy so extensively and establishing her own position in relation to it? I would suggest that her deep investment in maintaining a bond with the Catholic Church stems from her investment in feeling connected to her father. Like her relationship with the Catholic Church, Mary Gordon's relationship with her father is at the heart of much of her fiction and autobiographical writing, and it too is a deeply conflicted one. Yet as she tells her readers many times over, it is the relationship by which she primarily identifies herself. The title of her memoirs testifies to Gordon's sense of her father as an elusive figure. Many of the facts of his life are either uncertain or unpleasant. Part of her project in The Shadow Man becomes to find something salvageable among the mass of embarrassing, or even just embarrassingly "ordinary" (her word) information she uncovers about her father. Although he did not "make it," that is, have a successful career or acquire financial stability, David Gordon was nonetheless a self-made man in the most literal sense of the term. And in addition to inventing a name, education, and cosmopolitan past for himself that he equated with a certain ideal of American masculinity, David Gordon's primary means of

re-inventing his identity was through religious conversion and through his writing.

David Gordon was an intensely religious man. One means to reach the father she knew, loved and could comprehend, lay in his devotion to the Church and fervent belief in God. This aspect of her father was accessible to Mary Gordon as a girl who grew up in Catholicism and remembers this side of her father, and as a woman who rather than rejecting Catholicism altogether, continues to rely on certain beliefs and rituals. Thus, despite the aspects of Catholicism Mary Gordon balks at, she is heavily invested in maintaining some version of her father's God for herself and in somehow affiliating herself with the Catholic Church that he loved. The attempt to figure identity through religious background, beliefs and affiliation shapes Gordon's writing of her father's self and life, and factors considerably into the way she constructs her own identity and the terms with which she discusses feminism.

Her position becomes even more unusual, in light of her father's earlier identity as a Jewish immigrant at the turn of the century, the anti-Semitism that pervades his writing following his conversion, and her own identification with Judaism. Remembering, researching, and elaborating on her father's character thus requires Mary Gordon to investigate and empathize with the effects and implications of a Jewish immigrant childhood and an adult conversion to Catholicism, and the ways in which these were inextricably tied to his political positions and his desire to be American.[33]

[33] Ironically, David Gordon's integration into the Catholic community, in part through marriage to a woman of Irish Catholic descent, rather than moving his family closer to mainstream America,

As Mary Gordon discovers through her inquiries as an adult, her father was a Lithuanian immigrant who arrived in Lorain, Ohio, at the age of six. David (né Israel) Gordon spoke Yiddish as a child and lived with other recent immigrants (referred to as "foreigners," in town documents) in a segregated area in town. He did not attend high school, presumably due to poverty. Instead, as a young man Gordon went to work as a clerk for the B. & O. railroad and was largely self-educated—though until conducting her research for The Shadow Man, Mary Gordon was under the misapprehension that her father had attended Harvard and later traveled in Europe—part of the fabric of his life she had grown up "knowing."[34]

Gordon is uncomfortable claiming Judaism as her heritage given her upbringing in and primary identification with the gentile world, yet she is also acutely aware of being more than Jewish enough to have been persecuted had she lived in Europe during the Holocaust. In "Split at the Root," Adrienne Rich describes the Jewish people as one "whose traditions, religious and secular, included a hatred of oppression and an imperative to pursue justice and care for the stranger—an anti-racist, a socialist, and even sometimes a feminist vision" (118). A similar association of liberal, tolerant attitudes with Judaism, coupled with her desire to connect with and claim her father's past, at one point sends Mary Gordon to a rabbi in order to convert to Judaism. ("Remain a righteous

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actually placed his daughter in a position to be included in anthologies on "ethnic" literature, such as Amritjit Singh and Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr.'s Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays In Ethnic American Literatures.

[34] It's unsettling to encounter in essays that pre-date The Shadow Man a sentence that reads in her father's breezy style, "In any case, my father went to Harvard in 1917" (see especially "Getting Here from There: A Writer's Reflections on a Religious Past").

Gentile," he tells her. "We need you more there" (188).) This identification with Judaism—her sense of her own bi-cultural status, despite her unilaterally Catholic upbringing—contributes to Gordon's critical attitude toward Catholic culture.

Mary Gordon's discussion of her father addresses the oft unexamined connections between religion and class in American society, again intersecting with Adrienne Rich's exploration of this subject. The Shadow Man, Gordon claims, is "a book about America" (xxiii). The type of extreme self-re-creation her father David Gordon strives for is one that was both desirable and attainable for an immigrant to America in the early twentieth-century. Like Adrienne Rich, Mary Gordon reads her father's abandonment of a visibly Jewish identity as an attempt to rise in class status.[35] It is significant that Arnold Rich, the more successful of the two in terms of the professional and economic status and degree of assimilation he achieved, did not convert to any Christian denomination, but dropped religion altogether in order to enter a Protestant world.[36] In speaking of the desire to deny one's own ethnicity and religion and to disparage those who remain in a visibly religious community, Adrienne Rich writes: "I wonder if that isn't one message of assimilation—of America—that the unlucky or the unachieving want to pull you backward, that to identify with them is to court downward mobility, lose the precious chance of passing, of token existence" (111). David Gordon, if not exactly assimilated into mainstream culture,

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[35] Whether this is a fair assessment of David Gordon's motive is arguable given that the Catholic community was almost as segregated and stigmatized as the Jewish community throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Arnold Rich, by contrast, assimilated into a Southern community by becoming an nonreligious Protestant and successful doctor.

[36] It is also noteworthy that despite Arnold Rich's assimilation, he was never promoted to the professorship of pathology at Johns Hopkins, long after such an advancement would have been seen as his natural due—and that at that time, in 1948, no Jew had ever been appointed to such a position there (Rich 110).

effectively distanced himself from his Jewish heritage both through his conversion and a total break from his family.

In the process of becoming a self-styled American, David Gordon wrote poetry and cultural criticism, much of which gave voice to xenophobic and anti-Semitic right-wing political positions he had adopted and which, still more disturbingly, were published in the years around World War II. Mary Gordon includes many instances of her father's political extremism in her memoirs, including a 1937 letter to the editor of the magazine America, which offers a representative sampling of his views at the time. He writes:

> I myself think that Mussolini's Italy is today the best governed large nation in the world. And I can continue believing so and be in temper with the Church and the Pope. But the back-handed compliments toward Marxism of the collegiate Catholics put them on dangerous ground.
>
> Popularity with the "civic" people who send Jewish soldiers to Spain to help murder nuns in Lincoln's name is not worth having.
>
> […]
> I am neutral, I confess, not because I am against bloodshed—there are crueler men than soldiers; men who slay souls rather than bodies. I am neutral because in a conflict between two pagan and brutal forces, I can wish for no decisive victory for either of these forces. (83)

Throughout David Gordon's adult life, he associated such extreme political ideologies—ones that cast Communism as the ultimate evil and Joseph McCarthy as heroic, and supported any government affiliated with Christianity, however

nominally—with his allegiance to the Catholic Church and desire to preserve a certain ideal of America. This is a theme Mary Gordon returns to repeatedly, exposing and dissecting the structures of thought that enable some reactionary Catholics to support Franco or "certain South American dictators" because they "establish…law and order or, with regard to Franco, …preserv[e] some modicum of Catholic life in the nation as such" ("More Catholic than the Pope" 186). David Gordon's image of America specifically marginalized and demonized Jews, in keeping with the times in which he lived, but still disconcertingly given his own family's Jewish heritage and the proximity of what he published to the Holocaust.

Mary Gordon finds, for instance, that in 1943 her father was writing of Jews in Hollywood as a threat:

> The trade is in the uncontrolled hands of non-Christians. This is what nobody denies. It exerts as much influence on the adolescent mind as the schools do. No one can deny that. We do not allow Jews, even of the highest caliber, to control our schools, but we allow the worst class of them to control the mind-molding amusement of old and young, boy and maiden, indiscriminately. (91)

As if such writing were not hard enough for a liberal feminist who came of age in the sixties to stomach, Mary Gordon also discovers that her father spent several years in the twenties and early thirties prior to his conversion, publishing his own pornographic humor magazine, The Hot Dog Annual, under the pseudonym "Jack Dinnsmore." His politics were in evidence even in Hot Dog,

which by 1933, as American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals notes, had been "cheapened" literally and figuratively by "more nudie photos and cartoons and somewhat increased political content" (73). Among the copies of Hot Dog, the disparagingly jokey writing about "the Jew Einstein," the political diatribes against the "Reds," and the lies about time spent at Harvard or afterwards traveling in Europe, there is very little Mary Gordon finds that she can associate herself with or feel proud of. This is a central problem of The Shadow Man, which almost of necessity becomes more about a daughter and her "search," than about the actual man who was her father.

Mary Gordon is understandably appalled by her father's political positions and bewildered by his anti-Semitism. She opposes every ideological point she uncovers in his publications, and expresses mortification at the sexism and bad taste of Hot Dog and the weakness of David Gordon's writing. The crisis Mary Gordon faces in The Shadow Man is provoked by her adult response to the offensive information she uncovers about her father, and her inability to reconcile what she learns of David Gordon's past and politics with her memory of the man who adored her and whom she idolized as a child.

The steps that Mary Gordon takes to come to terms with and forgive her father's history are religious and writerly, described in writing but also occurring through the act of writing. Together they constitute a type of healing ceremony that culminates in the actual religious ceremony of the funeral she designs for his reburial. The Shadow Man is a compelling read in part because of its mixing of different narrative techniques, an integration that has become more and more

common in memoirs of the postwar period. Much of Gordon's memoir is spent narrating her own desire and attempt to investigate and imagine her father's life, rather than any detailed description of her childhood. To this end her book weaves together such disparate forms as literary analysis of her father's writing and contemporaneous writers, photographs and letters, the recording and analysis of dreams, and "impersonation," that is, fictionalizing of her father's story through first-person narration.

Gordon's reliance on imagination and fictionalization serves two purposes in the text: one is to fill in the many gaps in the record of his life; the other is to explain and justify much of what she does uncover, in particular David Gordon's abandonment of his native religion and family and reinvention of his own identity and background. Part of Mary Gordon's project is to forgive her father, and so this formulation of an explanation through fictionalization is crucial to her process of healing. As Julia Kristeva argues, speaking of the interrelation between narration, trauma and forgiveness, "Even if the writer's story turns in circles, writing is nonetheless a way of coming out of the trauma, of forgiving oneself or the other and translating it for someone else" (287). In the narrative that Kristeva constructs, trauma must be forgiven, in order to be overcome. Forgivness occurs by revisiting it symbolically, whether through writing or psychoanalysis, and through identification with the perpetrator of the act that caused the trauma. Mary Gordon's story in many ways epitomizes this idea, often turning in circles in her narration, but ultimately enabling her to forgive her father through her translation of his experience for herself and her (implied) reader.

More specifically, Kristeva notes that forgiveness "does demand a partial temporary identification with the subject of the act and with the act itself" (281). Many of the examples she draws on to articulate her theory are horrific political crimes—violent acts perpetuated by individuals that killed and traumatized others, including the Holocaust and apartheid.[37] Given the violent nature of the acts she refers to, Kristeva is careful to explain that the forgiveness of the perpetrators does not constitute a rationalization, but rather an "affective identification" that allows for "renewal, rebirth" (281). Gordon devotes a section of The Shadow Man to such identification through narrative, which becomes for her a means of forgiving her father for his political crimes, as violent in theory, if not in practice. A section in The Shadow Man entirely devoted to such empathetic fictionalizing, titled "Seeing Past the Evidence," is comprised of many fragments, some less than a page in length, with headings like "To Catch the Criminal, I Decide to Impersonate My Father" and "I Am My Father." Here Gordon shifts between the poles of "fact"-based historical writing and fictionalizing. In looking beyond the records, documents, and testimony at hand, she attempts to flesh out her father by imagining his experience of prayer in a page titled, "The Faces the Police Artist Cannot Create." Gordon's attempt to explain her father's reactionary politics and anti-Semitism compels her to cross over into the realm of fiction and first to imagine forms of oppression he might have endured himself—the anti-Semitism he may have suffered from, the overbearing father who might have humiliated him, the prejudices directed at immigrants of his day and the impoverishment he

[37] Kristeva's interview was conducted in 2000 in response to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the widespread phenomenon of nations apologizing to groups of people they had oppressed (Kristeva 278).

must have felt. “Could you drown out the words of your father and the words of the accusers only in the silence of the Christian God?” she implores her now absent father. Gordon thus renders him a victim in order to excuse his politics and conversion, and represents Christianity as a potential refuge (191).

But Mary Gordon is in love with her father, with the memory and idea of him, and wants to do more than excuse. She needs to vindicate him, and this is not an easy task faced with the few grim ascertainable facts of his life. Gordon’s project exemplifies Kristeva’s assertion of the need for love in order for forgiveness to take place: love that is “not idealization but an accompaniment of the loved subject in his or her traumatisms and states of dereliction” (286). By this definition, Gordon is attempting to play a psychoanalytic role to her father, to imagine and thereby accompany him through his trauma. This aspect of therapy, as Kristeva is quick to point out, is derived largely from a JudeoChristian tradition. In addition to referring to the ties between confession and psychoanalysis, Kristeva observes that “the Christian standpoint, … insists on the responsibility of the subject, who must begin by forgiving others or by forgiving himself or herself before God intervenes” (281).

Gordon wants desperately to believe in the individual who was her father and her strategy for doing so is finally to step away from the facts that would vilify or victimize him, and to use what she knows of his deeply religious nature and imagines of his relationship with God to accomplish the task:

> There is some residue. After all the words, the accusations, the explanations. Something that grows up in silence. Something neither

> pathetic nor repellent. There was something that you heard and saw. Something that partook of beauty and that was your own.
>
> I believe that in the midst of the tumult, the vilification and self-hatred, the immigrant's terror, the weak son's dread, the Eastern Jew's abasement—or perhaps because of and including all of it—there was something else. You didn't get it from your accusers; it was neither pitiable nor the stuff of shame. Perhaps it was the voice of God. The God of singleness and silence. The font of pure, accepting love. (192)

Through imagining her father's communion with God, she has created, too, a scenario of beauty and grace that displaces, at least momentarily, the repellent images from Hot Dog and the echo of his vitriolic words that lash out at Jews, Communists, and intellectuals who are not "regular guys." In a world that did not accept David Gordon, an environment she imagines as full of accusation, she has imagined God as a source of silence and acceptance for him that supercedes the world.

What happens in the passage that follows, titled "The Faces the Police Artist Cannot Create," is more complicated as Gordon appeals to a "something" of her own, indistinct and immaterial, somewhere between an absence and a presence, that is a conflation of God and her father:

> To this face I must say:
>
> I cannot know my father looking on the face of God in prayer. I cannot know this silence, or this whiteness. This place where, I think but do not know, he may have gone from time to time, and been at peace….

> Between my father and the face of God there is a curtain far more forbidding than the one I draw before my father with a woman. It would be far more permissible to watch my father having sex, even watch him spurting the very fluid that created me, than to watch him in the presence of the face of God….
>
> To this face that is a blank, a flame, I must ask the final question: "Does it matter what, if I looked at my father, I would see?"
>
> And receive the answer: "The dead have lost their faces." (192-3)

This face of God or the effect of looking to a God that is silent (repeated for the third time here), blank, a "place" someone can go to periodically for respite or escape, feels less derived from traditional Catholic representations of God as father, than it is connected to Gordon's identity as a writer. This blank white silent place that is the face of God also sounds like the description of a page—the page as God, the ultimate audience, and writing as prayer. To pray for Gordon then is to imagine, to narrate, and thereby to enter a peaceful place, a place of intimacy so extreme that it surpasses sexual intimacy. Mary Gordon prided herself on the fact that David Gordon identified as a writer, too. To imagine him in a deeply spiritual state is for her also connected with the act of writing. If writing is religious, and more intimate, private and meaningful than sex (to take her at her word, however disturbing Gordon's notion of watching her father have sex may be), then Mary Gordon has placed herself in a position closer to her father as a fellow writer, than her own mother or any other woman could be. Gordon's final answer, "The dead have lost their faces," nonetheless evokes loss,

but it is a loss that does not leave her bereft. In equating death with the loss of a face—in losing her father's face—he becomes more like the God she began with: a faceless being, a disembodied incarnation of beautiful opposites, poetic images without history. And she gains in becoming a writer.

Elsewhere Gordon relies on religious images and metaphoric language more peculiar to Catholic ritual and ideology to evoke her father and explain their relationship. In describing the idealized image of her father that she held prior to disillusioning herself, she uses the idea of transubstantiation as a trope. In this element of Catholic liturgy, one that differentiates it from other forms of Christianity, ordinary materials such as bread and wine, are transformed into something holy, specifically Christ's body and blood, for which the ordinary outward form is only accidental. Her father's life and identity had been a mystery that fascinated Gordon and which she endowed with great power, much like the mystery of the sacrament. His very incorporeality after his early death, reinforced her vision of him as purely spiritual, intangible yet omnipresent. So Gordon explains, "…I wrote my father's history as one of the Lives of the Saints" (10). The language and concepts of the Church provide her with a framework that enables her to make sense of her previous perception of and relationship to her father and his life. To reconceive of her father as a saint—a blameless and holy man, whose early death is a type of martyrdom—makes him untouchable, and Gordon compares her enshrining of him in the "Lives of the Saints" to the sacred containers used by the Church: "chalice, ciborium, monstrance, pyx; …containers to enclose, keep safe, keep intact, keep protected from the world's

contamination the sacred matter" (10). Her process of research and writing her father's life with all its flaws and failures, leads her to perceive how the ecclesiastical rituals and structures embedded in her way of seeing the world have allowed her to re-shape a life she herself refers to as "ordinary" into an elevated and tragic form.

Gordon does not abandon the use of Biblical tropes here but plays on them throughout her writing. Later she speaks of her tendency to lose things, noting that she has lost even a lock of his hair, the last remnant of her father's body. But later she observes that her father, too, was prone to lose things and that in this way she is "about [her] father's business," transforming the loss of her bodily father into a unifying of their spirits by playing on the Biblical language Jesus used to refer to God (31).[38] Here again, Gordon's metaphor conflates her father with God—ironically, as Jesus's original statement was meant to do just the opposite: to draw a very clear separation between his heavenly father and his human one and to highlight that obedience to the former displaced any allegiance to the latter. Gordon's Biblical allusion reverses this meaning, allying her with her human father, and making him her God. "I know it's blasphemy to invent an inner life for a father, whose inner life literally produced you," she writes. To her mind, she commits the sin of sacrilege toward her father in that by re-imagining him on the

[38] This story is significant, too, as the only one the Gospels recount of Jesus's childhood: "And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions….And when they saw him they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them." (Luke 2. 46, 48-9)

page, she thus places herself in a position of literal authority over him, giving birth to him, granting him forgiveness when he has not asked for it.

Regardless of her discovery that her father was all too human and flawed, Gordon's appropriation of a religious register to discuss him casts her father as sacred, moving him back into the realm of the divine. And by using the language and structures of the Catholic Church to make sense of her relationship to her father, she reinforces her own intimacy with that institution and mode of thought in which her father was so invested.

Gordon's characterization of the funeral service itself highlights both her attachment to ceremony and her need to adapt it to her present purposes:

> I don't know what I believe about the fate of the life these bones represent. But the form of belief seems deeply precious, irreplaceable. The form can contain more than most forms and is therefore conducive to more beauty, more truthfulness.
>
> Is this a hateful, a cowardly, hedging of the bets?
>
> Whatever it is, I will not give up these forms, these words. (269)

Gordon raises this question of belief only to resolve it herself by distinguishing between the "form" and "substance" of belief. Gordon does not know what she believes in substance (and this feels to be the perpetual state of her faith rather than an unusual crisis), but sets great store by the rituals in which Catholic religious belief takes shape. This passage, less about conviction or faith, is wrapped up in aesthetics—in Gordon's sense that beauty, here of the Requiem Mass that will be delivered at her father's burial, must bring her closer to some

kind of truth.[39] Shying away from the more absolute terms of Right, Holy, or True, Gordon instead attributes her decision to hang onto certain structures of Catholicism to its being "conducive"— helpful or advantageous in evoking "truthfulness"—a phrase more tentative than what is ordinarily associated with religious conviction. Choosing the order of service and what texts to include allows Gordon to draw on the more formal and traditional forms of the Church, yet to tailor them to her tastes and beliefs. She can eliminate "the sin-ridden prayers of the old lectionary," and yet decide to include the "*Dies Irae*, or Day of Wrath…[b]ecause terror is a part of death" (269). "These are formal words," she explains, "emptied of their particularity" (268).

All the aspects of Gordon's ceremony, too, remain tied together by the act of narration, which refers back to her identity as a writer, another link to her father. Her reference to the act of reburial as giving her father "a local habitation and a name," is a reference to the accomplishment of the poet's act of composing from A Midsummer Night's Dream. Her father had been buried in her mother's family plot under their family's name, alongside those who despised him. Gordon unearths and reburies her father literally with all the "complicated" steps that disinterment and reburial entail, and metaphorically through her narrative.

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[39] As noted earlier, many of Gordon's criticisms of the modern Church (that is after the Second Vatican Council) are not only political, but aesthetic. Labrie discusses Gordon's concern about the "aesthetic failure" of the modern Church fairly neutrally, whereas Pamela Smiley judges Gordon more harshly for being "drawn to the trappings of …privilege," which stem from class ("The Unspeakable: Mary Gordon and the Angry Mother's Voice" in Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression 134): In "Getting There from Here," Gordon herself expresses distress over the lack of beauty she feels followed Vatican II's reforms, and Final Payments' Isabel is full of aesthetic commentary, often humorously scathing, of both a secular and religious nature.

Mary Gordon leaves the cemetery with the phrase "Love is stronger than death," echoing in her head, a concept expressed near the denouement of Ceremony, as well, when Tayo finds himself accompanied by the spirits of Rocky and Josiah after the culmination of his own ceremony. In their coupling of ritual, interpretation and narration, Gordon and Silko's ceremonies have provided healing and closure, making it "possible to bid a farewell" and for each author to experience a type of rebirth. Interpretation and narration thus operate cross-culturally as a means of healing—a ceremony symbolic, literary and sacred. Significantly, the last words of The Shadow Man are advice from Gordon's son to "write that down before you forget" (274).

Chapter Three:

Performative Acts and Religious Community: Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park* and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

> Dear, dear!…I wonder if I've been changed in the night?…I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!
>
> Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

> I just felt so peculiar and expectant and clean and yet strung out. There I was, dressed up like Alice in Wonderland….The newest girl at the orphanage.
>
> Allegra Goodman, Paradise Park

> Between these two, where was the real self? …What sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?
>
> Louise Erdrich, The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

Paradise Park and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse share a set of questions and concerns around identity and its formation that are generated by their heroines' pursuit of a religious life. This engagement with religion leads each to transform her appearance and lifestyle in accord with religious law in ways that denaturalize her sense of subjectivity, and in particular, her sense of gender. Though Alice in Wonderland is mentioned only in passing in Paradise Park, Lewis Carroll's metaphor is an apt means to comprehend the uncanny sensation Goodman's Sharon Spiegleman and Erdrich's Agnes DeWitt experience, upon their own transformations. By bringing these protagonists into

contact with patriarchal structures that dictate the form religious practice takes in the daily details of their lives, Goodman and Erdrich highlight the way religion invites "dressing up" and performing a role, and raise the following questions: To what extent is religion crafted on the body, through gender roles, ethnicity, dress and ritual acts—and what is the relationship of these physical components of religion to belief? In what ways does the performance required by religion create a deeper spiritual communion and unity between the protagonist and her religious community, or conversely, cause the protagonist to feel alienated from that community, and even from herself? Alice in Wonderland is an innocent, yet rebellious figure who questions the rules of the world she enters, and Sharon and Agnes also mirror Alice by questioning and subverting the rules of their respective religious worlds. Through the tensions between these protagonists' commitment to a religious life and community and their more or less subtle departures from the observance of the rules of these religions, Goodman and Erdrich explore the influence of organized communal religious practice on an individual's sense of her religious identity—and the influence of an individual's sense of her own spirituality on her participation within an organized religious community.

Paradise Park: Birds and Brides

The title of Allegra Goodman's novel refers to the central metaphor that runs through her narrative, that of the spirit as a bird in flight. Bird imagery and actual birds appear throughout the book, alluding to the soul's spiritual aspirations to rise above the earthly and Goodman's heroine's quest to find God. Sharon

Spiegelman is a twenty-year old college drop-out from Boston University, whose adventures begin with her estrangement from her humorless father and take her through a series of odd jobs and disastrous relationships in Hawaii until she enters an Orthodox Jewish community, meets and marries a Russian immigrant and struggling pianist, and returns to Boston. Her religious quest, however, serves as the focus of the novel and shapes her romantic encounters and marriage plot. Sharon herself first becomes aware of birds in studying red-footed boobies on a remote island with a team of graduate students, where she combs through her battered copy of the Norton Anthology, noting the bird references in the poetry of Blake, Yeats and Coleridge with delight. ("Dig this—there's a whole poem about an albatross in here!" she exclaims to the non-plussed graduate students conducting the research [35].) Later in her spiritual journey, while studying Hasidic Judaism, she quotes from the *Tashma,* "Fear of God is one wing and love of God is another," and concludes, "if you put fear and love together, you get the whole bird"—"a soul that can fly" (215).

Although by the final sections of the novel, Sharon has come closest to finding "the whole bird" in Hasidic Judaism, much of the narrative traces her forays into other religious institutions, including the Pentecostal revivalist Greater Love Salvation Church, the Tibetan Buddhist Consciousness Meditation Center, Unitarianism, the University of Hawaii's world religion courses, and the Torah-Or Institute in Jerusalem. Sharon may set out to soar, but her religious practice is initially as desultory as her jobs and relationships.

Sharon's restlessness lands her in Hawaii, where the bulk of Paradise Park takes place, a setting that is the locus of a wide array of religions existing in close proximity. In Hawaii, religious diversity appears even more concentrated than on most of mainland America, offering Sharon, who attempts to float free of her past, a place in which many traditions converge. Hawaii's clichéd image as a literal physical paradise deepens the irony of Sharon's quest for a metaphysical paradise.

"Paradise Park" refers to a set of aviaries that Sharon visits in Hawaii early in the novel with her then boyfriend, a marine named Wayne, who brings her there because he knows Sharon has loved birds ever since her experience studying red-footed boobies. Wayne assumes she will love the aviary, as to his mind the birds in Paradise Park have "the good life": they are fed and protected from predators in a beautiful setting. Sharon, however, is distraught by her perception that the birds are trapped in an oversized cage. This image returns to her more than ten years later through a dream when she is facing hard times, newly married and pregnant, living in a cramped apartment owned and occupied by her unemployed husband's aunt. One night, Sharon dreams that she and her husband, Mikhail, are birds that are soaring upwards, only to hit an invisible barrier and come crashing down to earth in a pile of broken glass and tangled wire.

The name "Paradise Park" and the aviary's nature as a lush, tropical garden play on the Hebrew Bible's first paradise of Genesis, but Sharon's dream points to the fact that the aviary is an artificial structure that in protecting its inhabitants, also constrains their movement. Sharon's quest throughout the novel

is for a kind of metaphysical paradise—a system of religious observance and community in which she can find her way back to certain transcendent moments when she has felt God's presence. The novel opens with the first of these occurrences, when Sharon experiences a blissful sense of spiritual peace as she lies in bed in the morning. When she awakens more fully, however, and remembers that she has been abandoned by her boyfriend in a cheap hotel in Waikiki, Sharon loses sight of the deep spiritual peace she felt and sets out simply to find a means of paying her hotel bill. Only years later, after she has had another spontaneous spiritual vision, this time on a whale-watching boat, does Sharon embark in earnest on her spiritual quest.

Though Sharon's sightings of the divine occur unbidden and independent of organized religion, it is to organized religion that she turns in an attempt to retrieve those transcendent moments. Each religion promises her a spiritual paradisiacal home, but imposes regulations, which attempt to form her spiritually, but that Sharon perceives as restricting her freedom. Though not included in Goodman's novel, it is interesting to note that the root of *paradise*is the Avestan word *pairi-daeza*, meaning "enclosure," and is broken down into *pairi*—"around," and *daeza*—"wall."[40] Sharon's experience of religion as a kind of Paradise Park resonates with this derivation, as a place whose beauty, peacefulness and protection initially seduce her, but that sets up a grid of rules, which she sees as inhibiting her soul's flight and against which she inevitably butts her head.

[40] Avestan is an eastern dialect of Old Iranian ("paradise").

Significantly, the birds in Paradise Park earn their way by performing for the audience of humans, and Sharon is upset not just by their lack of physical freedom, but by her perception that they are "brainwashed," "tame," and overly "eager to please" their human trainers. According to Sharon, the birds' natures have changed due to their lack of freedom and training as "performers" whose trainers "put… those captive spirits through their paces" (74). It is at Paradise Park that her self-identification with birds prompts Sharon to chide herself, "Just look at yourself! Can you honestly say you are the seabird you always thought you were? Or are you actually just a parakeet? Do you travel on the wings of gulls? Or do you chirp?" (75).

These religious rules that Sharon consistently breaks tend to be initiated and enforced by male authority figures, and Sharon, influenced by her feminist sensibilities, and in particular by her dysfunctional adolescent relationship with her father, consistently resists being disciplined by patriarchal figures and laws. In almost every religion that Sharon ventures into, then, she becomes embroiled in a conflict with a male spiritual leader who attempts to discipline her. Sharon's pattern of conflict, though it stems in part from her own restlessness and intellectual naiveté, nonetheless offers a critique of the patriarchal nature of so many religious structures and institutions.

Sharon establishes her subjectivity through religion, but often by defining herself against the rules of a particular system in the name of personal freedom. In this sense, Sharon's response to religion and her anxiety about the walls religions construct, have a peculiarly American resonance to them in an over-

valuing of freedom and personal fulfillment. The elation of a new possibility of transcendence fuels her forays into each new theological system, yet her approach to religion as a product meant to satisfy all of her desires leads inevitably to disenchantment. Of an early religious venture in which she kneels at the front of the church to be "saved" by a Pentacostalist preacher, Sharon explains that she felt "an electric thrill right through his fingers all the way down to the tips of my hair, and all the way down my spine" (98). However, by the following morning, Sharon has come down off her spiritual high, lamenting the loss of "that unbelievable feeling of joy and ecstasy," and crashes with a week-long binge of drugs and sex.

In her next religious adventure, Sharon allows herself to be walled into a particular paradise separate from the secular world, when she abandons all her material goods to join the monks at the Consciousness Meditation Center, and after some initial rebellion, even submits to vows of silence and fasting. Three days of fasting, however, evokes even more restlessness in Sharon, who again forms her subjectivity in resistance to the empty, peace-filled vessel the fasting was meant to produce. This self, Sharon refers to as her "imagination" and even conducts a dialogue with it, in which the imagination demands "sprinkles on top" and "garnishes," and complains, "I'm so bored" (120). Rather than performance producing Sharon's spiritual self, Sharon thus sediments her sense of her own soul through repeated rebellions against the regulations religious systems enforce.

While her quest for religion is colored by values associated with American post-war culture, such as individuality, personal satisfaction and innovation,

Sharon's experiences nonetheless provide a critique of the patriarchal structures in place in religious institutions through her conflicts with the male authority figures who create and enforce the rules Sharon seems destined to break. Prior to Sharon's departure from the Meditation Center, her studies there include regular explosions with her instructor, Michael, which represent this pattern of conflict with male authority. Soon after her arrival, Sharon infuriates Michael by breaking her vow of silence to pepper him with questions about the rationale behind the rituals they perform. Michael is an ex-corporate lawyer, and though Sharon is out of bounds in her interactions with him according to the rules of the monastery, she accurately perceives that he is uptight and controlling beneath his layers of calm. Informing the reader as much about her own behavior as she does about Michael's, Sharon explains,

> if by some chance you were late for meditation, he got all tense, and he looked at you, and he glared this unmistakable glare, like all the neurotic New Yorker was coming out in him, and he was bringing it to bear on you. And if you happened to interrupt him in class because suddenly a question or a burning insight came to you, he'd blow his top! And he would say, "Sharon!" in this sharp tone of voice like the crack of a whip, like the tone my own dear dad would take when I was thirteen and reeling around in my pubescent fumes. "Sharon!" As in, How dare you. (113)

Sharon's description shows Michael to be authoritarian, but also shows her own restlessness and transgressive nature. Slipping from a description of her interactions with Michael into recounting her adolescent conflicts with her father,

Sharon reveals that her conflicts with religion stem from her own desire to have agency, which provoke her resistance to the rigidity of male hierarchies.

Similarly, when Sharon enrolls in the University of Hawaii's religion program, she clashes with a male professor, fails his course and drops out of the university. She refers to Professor Friedell and his class as "the big phallus," arguing in a letter that "people's feelings are on the line there in your class, whether you realize it or not, and people's sparks of creativity, which you can either fan constructively or snuff out with irony and intimidation" (171). As Gloria L. Cronin notes in "Immersions in the Postmodern," "Goodman illuminates Sharon's intellectual and spiritual innocence as she applauds her spirit" (257).[41] Even the handwritten letter, which Sharon submits in the place of a research paper, is a "typically feminine form," constituting a protest against the phallogocentrism of the university's religion program (Cronin 257).

Sharon's past converges with the problems of male dominance in many religious traditions, reinforcing and complicating her resistance to men in power. A high school delinquent and college drop-out—raised by an alcoholic mother who abandoned her, then a father and stepmother with whom she was constantly embattled, and haunted by the ghost of a brother who died as a youth—Sharon appears to suffer from the instability of her youth. Though she admits to an assortment of destructive behavior that would alienate any parent, she also refers to her father "beat[ing] the you-know-what out of you," revealing that he was likely abusive (133). (Later in the novel, in the one scene in which he appears,

[41] Cronin is writing of Goodman's short story "Onionskin," which is comprised entirely of Sharon's long autobiographical letter to Professor Friedell. A variation of this story appears as a chapter of Paradise Park and was the precursor to the novel.

the reader witnesses directly her father being cold and withholding towards Sharon when she returns home to ask his permission to marry, after a twenty year hiatus.) Her father's authoritarian nature and Sharon's rebellious teenage years suggest that Sharon is repeating a pattern by drifting into religious organizations in which a male authority figure lays down rules which she then proceeds to break.

In her adult life, religion becomes the field for her struggle for control with patriarchal figures. Pentacostalism, Zen Buddhism, and even the academic pursuit of religion, offer rebirth, a chance to begin anew and shed the mistakes of the past. In each system, however, Sharon chooses the role of rebellious daughter and is defined mostly by her pattern of joining, causing trouble and leaving. Even Hasidic Judaism, the religion with which she has the most complex relationship, replicates this pattern, holding out the promise of rebirth, but catalyzing Sharon's resistance with its patriarchal codes. This becomes evident in her description of the class she's enrolled in during her visit to Jerusalem: "there was Kitchen Woman and there was Rabbinic Man (being the one who'd invented the realms in the first place)" (184).

The pattern of Sharon's seduction by the promise of beginning anew, followed by her rebellion against male authority, occurs most dramatically in her break with the Bialystokers, who practice a form of Hasidic Judaism established by rebbes whose seat was in Bialystok, a city on the border of Russia and Poland. Sharon becomes acquainted with their community through the mentorship offered her by Dovidl and Ruchel, a young couple newly arrived in Hawaii from

Brooklyn. Though attracted to Hasidim—enthusiasts and ecstatics, who are keenly interested in joy and vision—Sharon wavers in her commitment to the actual Hasidic practices of the Bialystokers. Rather than being motivated spiritually, her formal entry into the Bialystoker community is fueled primarily by a desire to escape and erase the past.

This more practical benefit of religious conversion exists subtly throughout all Sharon's religious ventures, but emerges most clearly in this decision to enter into a program of study run by a Bialystoker family at the Bais Sarah School in Seattle. Sharon's enrollment at the Bais Sarah School had been long urged by Dovidl and Ruchel, who have even applied for her to receive a scholarship. Sharon, however, decides to take advantage of this opportunity only after she engages in a drunken one-night stand with a married friend and consequently severs her own long-term relationship with her boyfriend, Wayne, who knocks her unconscious when he learns of her infidelity. The very language Sharon uses to explain her attraction to the Bialystokers reveals its roots in her desire to escape her past and take shelter far from the threat of Wayne's abuse:

> So naturally I was terrified by the idea of going back to Honolulu. I just wanted to erase everything I'd ever done. I just wanted to forget the person I had once been. … It wasn't just that Hasidic Judaism *promised me a new life and new identity* The Bialystokers promised me a new world as well. They were holding out to me a new earth and diet and language. They were providing *an entire protective bubble—more protection than I'd ever found anywhere else*. (emph mine, 250)

The appeal of the Bialystokers for Sharon lies largely in the safety they offers as a destination to which to flee. The possibility of a new identity dovetails with the security provided by a religious community, which offers a protected space like the aviary. Sharon will come to find the Bialystoker community confining, as she does the aviary, and will desire to leave it. Initially, however, the support the program at Bais Sarah affords her, by feeding and sheltering her (again, as the aviary does the birds), and the protection it offers from "predators" like Wayne, overshadows the threat of confinement.

Judaism offers Sharon security on a deeper spiritual level, as well as a practical one, by granting her a more stable sense of identity and interpretation of the trajectory of her life. Sharon first encounters a call to return to her Jewish roots when the Rabbi Everett Siegel speaks at a joint Unitarian and Quaker seminar that Sharon attends. Calling aloud the names of about half of the audience members, Siegel says "slowly, like he was telling the slowest saddest joke in the world, 'Some of my best Jews are Friends'" (147). Though Sharon initially balks at Siegel's condemnation of religious intermarriage and his declaration that non-practicing Jews like Sharon are ignorant and "plagued with amnesia," she later agrees to teach dance lessons at Siegel's temple and to take instruction from him. In their first meeting, after a debate on the meaning of the Song of Songs, Sharon has her first revelation about the familial foundation of Judaism:

> I looked at the rabbi and that was when I realized: This man is reaching out to me, but not just because I'm a sinner, or a loser, or a returning

> student. This person is seeking me out because we are related. Because somehow, somewhere, we come from the same Jewish place…He knows the Hebrew at the bottom of the Bible. He knows the text and the letters and the sound and the voice, and deep down he knows me, because I am his relative! He knew me first. (156)

Sharon has noted earlier that Rabbi Siegel's voice reminds her of her Grandfather Irving. His familiarity and the effort he makes in extending himself to Sharon attracts her, even as she resists the implications of a religious identity that is based on family and blood-ties, rather than her own individual beliefs and agency.

Later, she experiences the same attraction and reservations when she encounters Dovidl and Ruchel. When Sharon describes her religious adventures, concluding, "religions just tend not to take on me," Dovidl's response echoes Rabbi Siegel's, but makes the familial and thus, ethnic, root of Sharon's Jewishness even more explicit:

> Dovidl didn't even blink an eye. He just nodded, like what I was saying made all the sense in the world. He said, 'That was because of your *Yiddishe neshama*—your Jewish soul! You have a *Yiddishe neshama* inside of you, so naturally, no matter how hard you tried, no other religions in the world were going to stick to you. That's the way it is with us. Once you're born a Jew, a Jew you will be, no matter what things you do or religions you try. Your parents are Jewish, therefore so are you. As simple as that. (213-214)

Sharon's reaction, anything but simple, is an ambivalence born of her attraction to the idea of a clear, stable religious identity, which transforms a chaotic and unproductive past into a meaningful part of a greater design, and her resistance to a pre-determined identity based on biological birth, which undercuts her sense of agency.

On nearly all fronts, Goodman has created in Sharon a heroine very dissimilar from herself, as is most apparent in her ironic handling of Sharon's restlessness and lack of intellectual and spiritual rigor, which stand in stark contrast to Goodman's own Harvard education, early professional commitment to writing, and longtime commitment to Orthodox Judaism. Yet the plot of Paradise Park suggests that Goodman may share with her heroine some ambivalence about the construction of Jewish identity. The very fact that Sharon finds her spiritual home in Judaism, after testing Christianity, Buddhism, and even a secular academic approach to religion, suggests that Sharon's Judaism is intrinsic because of her family's Judaism. Yet despite the fact that Goodman's overall plot structure supports the ethnic basis of Judaism, at other moments she appears to call this concept into question.

Goodman especially complicates this question through Sharon's engagement to Mikhail, whose mother, it is discovered just prior to their wedding, had converted to Judaism, rather than being born into it. Sharon's pairing with Mikhail is not a side issue, nor simply a concession to a marriage plot, but deliberately brings the issue of the ethnic basis of religion to the fore. Sharon and Mikhail have met at a Hasidic wedding where they fall in love over their mutual

desire to study and live a devout Hasidic life and the fact that both are in the early stages of this process. The conflict around their marriage, however, brings to the surface the political dimension of Jewish identity. Mikhail had withheld from his rebbe the information that his Aunt Lena, with whom he lives, is Catholic, as was his mother, "because he had the fear that, given their stormy history and theological differences with a lot of Russian Christians, somehow the Bialystokers might not accept him into the bosom of their community if he brought up the subject of his aunt's religious faith," as Sharon puts it (297). Sharon's refusal to submit to a delay in their marriage in order for Mikhail himself to go through a formal conversion or have his background checked, marks a more overt dissent from the ethnic basis of Judaism and again, a rebellion against male religious authority.

It is Dr. Karinsky, the patriarch of the family with whom Sharon has been living, who expressly forbids her marriage and is adamant that the family must research Mikhail's background to confirm the legitimacy of his mother's conversion to Judaism, or that Mikhail must himself go through a formal conversion. Sharon's decision to marry anyway marks her break with the family and community, and her question, "Isn't it what you feel in your heart that ultimately really matters?" presents her argument for religion's basis in belief (306). The answer for Dr. Karinsky is, of course, an emphatic no, because for him, "it is not a question of how Mikhail perhaps feels," but "a question of the future," and "generations to come" (307). Thus he refuses them the *ketubah*, or marriage contract, and his "voice was one of laying down the law" (308). Dr.

Karinsky's voice, in fact, *is* the law—and as such, represents the male authority figures that create and enforce the gendered hierarchies and ethnic basis of much organized religion.

Sharon's decision to leave the Karinskys with Mikhail in tow constitutes her ultimate transgression, and the one in which she comes closest to an awareness of the connection between religious leaders as father-figures and the strictures of most religious communities: "If I had been one of the Karinsky's daughters, no question I would go upstairs and do as I was told," she reflects. "…Yet I knew I could not do as I was told. …My regular old wild heart was still beating inside of me" (308). Sharon's refusal to submit her own questions, desires and spiritual intuitions to the instruction and regulation of male clergy again works as a critique of the patriarchal structure and rigidity of religion and in contrast to this law, as in her break with the Buddhist Meditation Center, Sharon's sense of her own subjectivity emerges:

> My imagination that had been so fevered and dervishy was finally taking a little break, and it was so quiet inside of me. So peaceful.
>
> Hello, I heard.
>
> Who's that?
>
> Just me, I heard. It is I.
>
> Is that me? Hey, it's good to hear your voice.
>
> …I was getting in touch with my inner pronouns... (309)

The "inner pronouns" to which Sharon refers—a deep felt sense of subjectivity manifest as an inner voice—emerges when she resists religious authority, as with

Michael at the Meditation Center and Dr. Karinsky. By refusing to perform what is required of her, Sharon establishes her own subjectivity, and thereby slips through the bars of yet another religious cage, which would control her behavior, as the aviary controlled the birds.

Gender, however, emerges as a religious issue for Sharon in more than just the question of who holds the power in these institutions. Prior to her entry into the Bialystoker community, Sharon does articulate her desire to find "God—not being some abstract concept but appearing in the world," and "not just slam bam, thank you ma'am—but in a feminine way, too" (213). Sharon's embracing of Hasidus comes largely from reading the *Tashma* where she discovers, "There was a feminine and a masculine side to God, and they wove together the whole fabric of creation, just like warp and woof; they meshed together in this one sexy cosmic loom" and that, still more tellingly, "[t]here wasn't a line about cooking utensils in it" (214-215). Sharon's response to the *Tashma* reveals the appeal of the Hasidic vision of God and nature, as well as her resistance to the Orthodox rules and rituals pertaining to daily life. Though Sharon conforms to these gendered rituals of dress and domesticity until her expulsion from the Karinskys, she does so with a discomfort that raises questions about the purpose and function of these more gendered elements of religious culture. She accepts the way the Karinskys live, yet notes that their children are badly behaved and speculates that this is perhaps because there are so many of them so close in age—a reflection on the Hasidic practice of abstaining from birth-control. In the same vein, Sharon

notices Mrs. Karinsky's exhaustion and poor health, even as Mrs. Karinsky herself professes unconcern with her chaotic household.

At the Bais Sarah women's program, where Sharon lives prior to being placed with the Karinskys, though Sharon's Jewish faith appears to be in earnest almost to the point of zealotry, she nonetheless continues to raise questions about certain aspects of Orthodox rituals. This is especially apparent in relation to her dress. Sharon's new attire, complete with long skirts, tights, and white sneakers, she describes as a sort of costume she must self-consciously don.

> I got dressed in a white T-shirt and a long, pretty much ankle-length blue skirt, and my white socks and my blinding white athletic shoes. … I was wearing a slip. I just felt so peculiar, and expectant, and clean, and yet strung out. There I was, dressed up like Alice in Wonderland. There I was, thirty-eight years old. The newest girl at the orphanage. (238)

Sharon's outfit is meant to inscribe her firmly in the role of an innocent girl, regulated by religious patriarchal law, and to signify sexual and religious purity; however, if the Bialystokers function for Sharon as a witness protection program providing "a new life and identity" and "an entire protective bubble," then her outfit becomes her disguise. Significantly, she notes that all the women there, ranging from the age of seventeen to fifty-two, are referred to as "girls" and "[e]veryone was back in fresh clean skirts, like we were starting over, like we actually could be girls again" (238). This emphasis on girlishness in her attire and position in this community does double-duty, reinforcing that the attraction of religion for Sharon lies in being "born again" as a means of erasing her past, but

also revealing how the patriarchal laws that structure Orthodox Judaism diminish the autonomy of women. Girlhood embodies innocence, flexibility and the desire to please, non-threatening qualities set apart from the intellectual and political realms. When women are cast as girls, it implies a lack of access to political and economic power. The image of Alice in Wonderland evokes this girlishness and sexual innocence that Sharon does not fit yet is expected to represent. Alice, however, is also a rebellious character, and in this regard, the allusion seems more appropriate to Sharon, who throughout the text questions what appear to her as arbitrary rules.

Sharon's orthodox clothing feels to her and appears to the reader as a costume, revealing the ways in which religion invites a kind of "dressing up." In American culture, "Girls learn that 'dressing up' is a lot of fun," Nora Scott Kinzer notes in a description of women's socialization into the "beauty cult" (qtd in Lubin 244).[42] Yet Goodman's reversal of the standard associations of dressing up with a girl imitating a grown woman, draws attention to the moral and spiritual symbolism of dress. The emphasis on the whiteness of Sharon's socks and shoes and way in which her body is fully covered, in particular, highlights the centrality of sexual purity to women's religious identity. Lecturing to his students at Bais Sarah, Rabbi Simkovich, attacks "women's liberation" as a destabilizing social force, which breeds shallow relationships. Simkovich's persuasive rhetoric prompts Sharon to a bout of nostalgia "for that better, purer life from way back," which clothes come to represent, shown in Sharon's longing to "time-travel and

[42] From Kinzer's Put Down and Ripped Off: The American Woman and The Beauty Cult (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977, 22).

grow my sleeves out long, and let my skirts blossom around me" (241). The symbolic elements of her girlish outfit has produced in her, if not so much a sexually pure spiritual state, a desire to return to her virginal state that she herself admits was a "strange" and ironically, even a "sexy" feeling.

This strangeness underlies much of Sharon's experience among the Bialystokers. As Alice in Wonderland, a metaphor Sharon coins herself, she is transformed in odd and impermanent ways, reminiscent of Alice's query in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, "Dear, dear! … I wonder if I've been changed in the night? … I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!" (qtd in Lubin 255).[43] Sharon's dressing up also hearkens back to Lewis Carroll's (or the Reverend Charles Dodgson, as he was known outside the literary world) own strange pastime of dressing up Alice Liddell and other pre-adolescent girls and posing of them as subjects for his art. Speaking both of the fictional Alice and the subject of Seymour Guy's 1867 painting "Making a Train," a girl dressing up in an attic ("train" refers here to the train of a dress), art historian David M. Lubin remarks, "We see an alienation from self, in which the little girl spies upon her own body as though it were not hers but someone else's" (255). Sharon, though hardly a little girl at age thirty-eight, experiences this self-consciousness and alienation in being dressed up as a girl by the patriarchal codes of Orthodox Judaism. Her identification with Alice in Wonderland also hints at

[43] From Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, ed. Donald Rackin. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc, 1969), 123.

her sense of the larger body of religious codes she follows as arbitrary or bizarre, a parallel to Alice's fantastical encounters as well as her bodily transformations.

Kinzer's observation on dressing up, quoted above, is followed by the example, "A little girl prancing before her mother's dresser in mommy's dress grows up to be an excited young woman who twirls before the department store mirror in her bridal gown" (qtd in Lubin 244). Sharon's next moment of dressing up occurs when, in preparing for her wedding, she is forced into the "wedding-dress library" in the Karinsky's Aunt Malka's basement. Here again, clothing meant both to represent and produce the identity of a Jewish woman instead creates a feeling of alienation.

> My head was swimming with satin and satin-covered buttons and crystal beads. …Until at last, when I was worn out to the point that I could protest no longer, I tried on a monster that didn't just have beads and seed pearls, it had whole seedpods on it. The bodice and the sleeves were stiff—in fact the whole thing was so encrusted with gewgaws, the dress probably could have stood up by itself. And it came with a headpiece so puffed up on top, Cher might have worn it at one time. 'This!' Aunt Malka declared. "This fits!" …
>
> There I was in the mirror like some strange mannequin. Actually, like some very covered-up, very modest showgirl. No cleavage, no legs, no wrists, just solid glitz. …
>
> I said, "Okay. Fine." (300-301)

Though Sharon agrees to wear this wedding dress (a point which becomes moot when she and Mikhail elope and are wed in a civil service), Sharon's response to the dress belies Aunt Malka's: this dress certainly does not fit with Sharon's image of herself. Prior to this scene, Sharon herself has suggested while talking to the Karinsky's daughter, Estie, that since she is not a virgin, she should not wear a traditional wedding dress at her ceremony. Her discomfort with the ornate traditional wedding dress stems from her taste, but also from its symbolic function in establishing her religious identity through her sexual status. The wedding dress scene reveals the extent to which gender and religious roles are intertwined, so that Sharon cannot reject the former without compromising the latter. Sharon's wedding dress, rather than making her Jewish identity feel natural, estranges her from it. Such dressing up also raises broader questions of how religious affiliation is constituted, in particular in relation to gendered rituals and dress.

The parodic quality of Sharon's Alice in Wonderland girlishness and donning of the elaborate bridal gown cause these instances when Sharon "dresses up" to work much like a drag performance, destabilizing religious identity, much as drag reveals the hollowness of gender identity.[44] The sequined dress and headpiece Sharon wears, which seem to her reminiscent of a "strange" sort of showgirl, actually undermine her sense of religious identity. The wedding

[44] I come to this concept of drag through Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. Butler derives her theory largely from Nietzche, especially from his assertion that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (qtd in Gender Trouble 177 from On the Geneaology of Morals); and from J.L. Austin's discussion of the marriage ceremony as a "paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name" (qtd in Bodies that Matter 224).

ceremony, which will make Sharon and Mikhail man and wife, not only reinscribes heterosexual social bonds, but also serves to reify religious identity. The glitzy, yet-modest wedding dress is an aspect of this performativity meant to reify Sharon's identity as a Jew.

The ritual acts Sharon performs and the clothing she dons during her study of Hasidim, however, instead of making her feel more truly Jewish, raise questions about the nature of Jewish identity. The focus on recovering Jewish identity as an originary state of spiritual being emerges through Sharon's initial determination with the Karinskys to follow the letter, or law, and thereby transform herself by recovering her Jewishness:

> [A] lot surprised me, but you know, I was there to learn, and to be forged in the crucible of Judaism. I was there to lie down every night and wake up every day Jewish. To pray every prayer and observe every fast; to celebrate every new month according to the phases of the moon**.** *I was there to forget everything else I'd ever been, or rather, to remember everything I truly was.* (emph mine, 255)

The entire passage, and the last line in particular, captures the paradoxes at the heart of Sharon's religious project. Her "true" Jewish identity, which pre-exists and cancels out her past life experience, is something she must, ironically, work to attain, through prayer and fasting. In order to claim this authentic Jewish self, she must also erase something of her past life.

Yet the project of separating her present sense of identity and being from what preceded is, as Sharon acknowledges, impossible.

> There were the Karinskys feeding and sheltering and teaching me by their example. There they were, springing me from all my predicaments, and all they wanted was my soul. What a small price to pay. What a simple thing to give, if only you knew how to do it. If you only could extricate yourself from the person that you were before. (258)

Though Sharon feels drawn to the concept of God offered by Hasidic Judaism and to the security she obtains through her commitment to follow the Bialystokers' teachings, ironically, she cannot give up her "soul"—her sense of individual expression that departs from the strictures of Orthodox Jewish life and is wrapped up in her past.

Sharon cannot return to a core Jewish identity—"everything I truly was"—because none exists except in the form of longing. At a CHAI dinner hosted by Dovidl and Ruchel, everyone present feels this longing for a past they never had, from Dr. Sugarman, who was raised in reform Judaism, to Fred, a former Irish Catholic in the process of converting. When Betsy Sugarman implies that her husband has "some kind of nostalgia delusion," and asks "How can you be nostalgic for something that never was?" Sharon reflects, "that's the strongest nostalgia there is, when you're missing and reminiscing about what you never had" (212). Religious identity is shown to be produced by desire and imagination, rather than delineated by set laws.

Not only can Sharon not shed her past, she also has no real point of origin or authenticity to which to return. This is literally true in that Sharon's dysfunctional family was entirely secular, but more important, true in the sense

that the very concept of a religious originary point is undermined through this depiction of a false nostalgia. Each act she repeats in her practice of Judaism, instead of establishing her allegiance with an unbroken and complete tradition, actually reveals the groundlessness of such a concept. Any measure of a fundamental basis to Jewish identity is thereby lost.

By dressing Sharon in all the trappings of conservative Jewish culture but casting it as a disguise through the sense of mis-match Sharon feels, Goodman continues to raise questions about the relationship between individual belief and traditional communal ritual, even when her heroine is not consciously raising them herself. The description of Sharon's discomfort and ultimate inability to adhere to the bodily rituals of orthodox culture, especially those constructed through a gendered lens, destabilizes the concept of a true or absolute Jewish identity. In such scenes, as well as through the debate around Mikhail's Jewishness, Goodman suggests that neither Sharon nor Mikhail is unfaithful or inauthentic as a Jew, but that there is no stable fundamental Jewish position to occupy. Through these episodes, Goodman disturbs the distinctions between belief and form, revealing the problems posed by the politics of gender and ethnicity in modern religious culture. In both Sharon and Mikhail's cases, the body appears to take precedence over belief, whether by defining the sphere in which Sharon can practice religion and the forms this practice can take, or in Mikhail's, by his mother's blood threatening to cancel out his own deep commitment to the study and practice of Hasidic Judaism. Gender roles and ethnic purity thus become a barrier to religious practice rather than a means of

strengthening it. The body works in opposition to the expression of and commitment to religious beliefs, and alienates Sharon and Mikhail from the Bialystoker community, rather than uniting them with it.

The exposure of these problems coincides with a period of increasing frustration in Sharon and Mikhail's secular life as well. Following their initial elation over their elopement, the two find themselves with few financial resources and no home of their own (they live increasingly awkwardly in Mikhail's Aunt Lena's apartment), and when Sharon becomes pregnant, the need for money and space become urgent. Still more disheartening is their rejection by Mikhail's *rebbe,* who, upon learning of Mikhail's indeterminate religious background, treats the couple with a coolness that his entire congregation emulates.

This rejection by the Bialystokers sends Sharon and Mikhail to a more nebulous religious space, in which they still revere and follow Hasidic teachings on God and creation, but adhere only desultorily to the outer forms, often for practical reasons. The two find spiritual inspiration in more unorthodox and personalized forms of religion, through music and visions, which, though a departure from organized religion, remain in keeping with the enthusiastic and ecstatic quality of Hasidim. When Sharon has her dream of the two of them in flight, Mikhail interprets it as a call to move to their own apartment, a vision both spiritual and practical, which motivates them to work additional hours and save their money to this end. Mikhail lights on the town of Sharon as a destination due to his wife's dream, in which she hears a voice repeatedly calling "Sharon!" Though his interpretation is humorous given that the voice repeating his wife's

name was likely simply his own attempt to wake her up, Mikhail remains convinced that the dream is a vision sent by God directing them to move to the suburb of Sharon, Massachusetts. This reference to "Sharon" as a place name brings to the fore its derivation from the Hebrew word meaning sacred plain, that refers to a Biblical pastoral region, bounded by Mount Carmel and the Mediterranean, noted for its beauty and fertility ("Sharon" 233). That this is the derivation of our heroine's name is particularly ironic, given her rootlessness over the twenty years the novel covers. That her wanderings conclude with her settling in a suburban home in Sharon deepens the irony, by casting a Boston suburb as parallel to a sacred "Promised Land." Sharon's wanderings end when she is forty, alluding to the Israelites forty-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Sharon herself draws this parallel, but extends the metaphor to America and ecumenicalizes it by comparing herself and her husband to "the pilgrims themselves when they were called to the wilderness to dedicate themselves and to find their own personal American desert a new Sharon, and a new Canaan" (325).

Just as Mikhail is inspired by Sharon's dream, Sharon herself finds a moment of deeper inspiration through a *niggun*, or Hebraic wordless song, that Mikhail spontaneously composes at an informal Havurah Shabbat service they begin to attend:[45] "[A]t that moment in that wordless song, I could feel something I hadn't felt in a long long time. I could feel the presence of the divine. God was there in that niggun, pulsing through the room. God was arising and manifesting

[45] *Niggun* is used to designate a droning, formless intonation set to a text, and specifically the particular melody-type or prayer-motive to which a service is traditionally rendered, *e.g.*, the Sabbath Niggun. The Neo-Hebraic word means "to play strings," "make music," or more generally, "tune," or "melody."

in this sudden harmonic grace" (319). The *niggun* represents another personal mystical experience for Sharon like her visions on the whale-watching boat and in the hotel room in Waikiki, which originally sent her on her quest to find God.

The *niggun* is key to Sharon's relationship with religion. It represents a convergence of the personal and collective, of beliefs and the bodily, and of individuality and tradition, that has previously eluded her. This convergence generates a newfound spiritual inspiration for Sharon. The *niggun* does not constitute a disciplining of the body for Sharon or Mikhail, yet to compose, express and hear its music is intensely and necessarily bodily. The *niggun* is a pattern of repetition, yet is not ritual; it is an individual expression, yet occurs in the space of a religious community and is evoked by the communal worship. The *niggun* is personal and relational. It thus represents Sharon's arrival at a form of religion that allows personal expression, yet feeds her desire for communal support, and leads her later to conclude that it is actually God who is looking for her, but through "visions, dreams, prophecies, music" (358).

Though Sharon's inspiration through the *niggun* signals success in her quest for God, the position she occupies in terms of religion remains ambiguous. She and Mikhail still believe in the principles and ideals of Hasidic Judaism, and Sharon blissfully describes the evening prayers she and Mikhail say together, even as she explains that they were forced by economic necessity to sell their Orthodox clothes to a consignment shop. With typical nonchalance, Sharon relates, "We didn't look like Hasids anymore, but, oh, well. We didn't go to the Bialystoker *shtiebel* anymore either" (317). They attend a Havurah that Sharon

admits is disappointing to her because—in an irony Goodman must have enjoyed creating, given Sharon's tendency to question and digress—"anybody can talk as long as she wants about whatever issues happen to occur to her, whether or not it's relevant to the text" (358). They arrange for their son to have a bris, and give him a Hebrew name. It seems unlikely they are keeping kosher. Yet, Sharon tells us, "Since we'd been such religious Hasids, we didn't even dream of using birth control" (310). Further, Sharon and Mikhail begin to achieve financial stability through forming a band that plays at Jewish weddings. Sharon notes that couples begin to come to her for advice on the proper etiquette for a traditional Jewish wedding, and admits slyly, "when I didn't know the protocol for something, and the rabbi didn't care, then I'd just make up a few little new traditions along the way" (334). Sharon's newfound authority on Jewish wedding traditions, ironic given her own elopement and civil wedding service, as well as her off-handed attitude toward Jewish ritual and law, serves as a moment in which Goodman highlights Sharon's roguish qualities, yet through them subtly challenges the concept of "authenticity" in the traditions and rituals that make one Jewish.

Goodman centers this problem of religious authenticity near the end of the novel through a letter Sharon writes for her infant son to read when he reaches adulthood, in which Sharon questions the nature and stability of her own spiritual identity. Sharon's lifelong exploration of religion, rather than helping her to locate a stable authentic self, appears to have undermined her sense of identity. She writes:

> Maybe within one lifetime a person lives several lives. Maybe people have that in them, similar to cats. So you can say—those other times I was confused, but then I was reborn. Or that time I was reborn—that didn't work, but give me eight more births, and I'll get it right…because how can you know while it's happening which way your soul might grow?…But on the other hand, you might say, No! That's not right! It's a continuum who you become. Not first you're one thing and then another, but rather, your whole experience is woven together like a single golden thread. Because who am I to say the person I used to be was mixed up or wrong or somehow inferior?…what if, actually, they were all a part of God's design?…
>
> I mean, why can't you be a person with many different lives *and* a person with just one thread? Why can't life be both a wave and a particle? (345-6)

These final rhetorical questions point to Sharon's embrace of multiple truths, which accompany her abandonment of the belief in a stable authentic religious self. By the conclusion of Paradise Park, Sharon celebrates a God whom she describes as manifest for her "in all his myriad forms" (358). These myriad forms imply a plurality of meanings. Sharon thus finds her solution to the problem of the relationship between the person she was in the past, and the one she is at the close of the novel, in a celebration of multiplicity that allows for all the religious identities she has taken on and discarded.

The conclusion Goodman gives Sharon, however—in which she accepts the "spirit" of the Bialystokers, while rejecting much of the "letter" they proscribe

for daily life—points to the tension between Goodman's own identification with Orthodox Judaism, and her more critical treatment of the gender roles and the ethnic basis of Jewish identity through Sharon's escapades. Goodman's narrative solution is to allow her heroine to escape these gendered and ethnic strictures and find God along the margins of organized religion and its traditional structures, through collective, yet individualized, spiritual communion, as manifest most saliently in the *niggun*. Through this conclusion, Goodman asserts the importance of communal religion, even as she exposes its weaknesses, and in Sharon, she suggests that even a religious rebel may find spiritual communion through her own variation on the rituals and rules established by tradition.

***The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*: Agnes in Drag**

Like Sharon, Agnes, the protagonist of The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, experiences God most intensely through visions and music outside the bounds of normal religious structures, even as she remains deeply engaged with institutionalized religion over the course of her life. Rather than traveling full circle in her spiritual quest, as Sharon does, from a secular Jewish family in the Boston suburbs to her own newly formed religious Jewish family in the Boston suburbs, Agnes's adventures take her from a convent in rural Wisconsin to the remote reservation of Little No Horse in North Dakota, and leave her in an utterly different place from where she began in terms of her geographic location, gender identity, and theology. The Last Report on the Miracles Little No Horse, likeParadise Park , foregrounds the question of how identity is manifested in these overlapping spheres of religion, gender and

ethnicity. Erdrich also shares with Goodman an interest in tracing the process of conversion and its impact on a person's sense of identity, through her protagonist's participation in communal ritual.

The central image in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse is of water, and its attributes—its amorphous quality, depth and mutability—reflect Agnes's character. Part I of the book begins: "Eighty-some years previous, through a town that was to flourish and past a farm that would disappear, the river slid—all that happened began with that flow of water" (11). Water plays a major role in the form of the flood to which the first line refers, that erases memory, labor, and past; and water imagery recurs metaphorically throughout the novel. The words to the Catholic Mass that Agnes will repeat "flow…like the river" and the reservation of Little No Horse is "a place still fluid of definition, appearing solid only on a map" (68; 75). One of the final images of the novel is of a lake in which Agnes, who spent her life passing as a man in order to serve as a Catholic priest, is buried. "As the dark water claimed him, his features blurred," the text reads. "His body wavered for a time between the surface and the feminine depth below" (351). This wavering and fluidity capture the portrayal of gender identity and religious practice in this central character, who adopts the role of Father Damien Modeste. That at Little No Horse, Agnes, like the reservation itself, becomes "fluid of definition," illustrates Catherine Rainwater's claim that "American Indian narratives emphasize flexibility and fluidity as important values; indeed, contemporary Native American writers often equate such malleability of self with the dynamic motion of nature" (65). Further, by showing

Agnes's acceptance and relative effectiveness in the Ojibwe community, Erdrich contrasts such fluidity with the mapping, defining and categorizing, endemic to white culture, which leads to the destruction of nature and native peoples.

Louise Erdrich's plots are notorious for their twists and turns, and the intricacy of relationships among her characters—"people in a small community who have to get along with each other over time and who know all of each other's stories." The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse ties together plot-lines and characters from the tetralogy that includes Love Medicine (1984), The Beet Queen (1986), Tracks (1988), and Bingo Palace (1994), and unwinds many of the snarls from these earlier novels. Though The Last Report brings together Ojibwe characters from these previous narratives like Fleur Pillager, Pauline Puyat and Nanapush, this story centers around "Father Damien," as the character is referred to in these other texts, but who, the reader learns here, was previously "Agnes DeWitt," and for a time, "Sister Cecilia."

The plot spans from 1910 to 1996 and begins with a young nun and a skilled pianist, Sister Cecilia, who is driven by her passion for music to abandon her convent. Soon thereafter she readopts her former name of Agnes DeWitt and becomes a common law wife to a farmer named Berndt; and then, in a bizarre series of events in which Berndt is killed by a notorious bankrobber and their farm and the surrounding area are decimated by a flood, Agnes appropriates the robes and mission of a young priest she finds dead in the flood, and transforms herself into Father Damien Modeste. Binding her breasts and mimicking the physical

poses and gestures of men, she spends the rest of her life passing as a priest on the Ojibwe reservation of Little No Horse.

Unlike Sharon in Paradise Park, Agnes is able to express her excesses and unconventionality through adopting a male authority role herself, rather than having to defer to or even rebel against one. Erdrich has in this way created a protagonist whose spiritual path differs greatly from the one Goodman designed for Sharon. Though Agnes, like Sharon, must dress up to play her religious role, the tone of The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse is less comic than Paradise Park and readers are allied sympathetically with Agnes, rather than watching her from an ironic distance as we do Sharon. Agnes's initial venture into disguising her identity, however, is suggested by a character for whom the art of dressing up and performance is a heartless act—the bank robber who kills Berndt, her common-law husband. Though he appears in only a few brief scenes, this prototypical frontier outlaw catalyzes the continuation of Agnes's spiritual journey, and thrusts Agnes into a landscape of the picaresque.

Arnold "The Actor" Anderson, the first in a series of bank robbers who prey on small frontier towns like the one Agnes and Berndt inhabit, is so named because he commits his crimes by posing as "an old man, [at] other times, a pregnant woman, a crippled youth, someone who inspired others to acts of polite assistance" (23). When he enters the bank he will rob in Agnes's town, he is, ironically enough, disguised as a priest. "The Actor," as he is referred to throughout this section, prefigures the role of Father Damien, which Agnes will come to play at Little No Horse. Agnes herself is referred to throughout this same

section as "Miss DeWitt," putting her at a further remove from the reader and emphasizing the wit that is so active a part of her character. With her intimate knowledge of the Catholic clergy, it is Miss DeWitt who first sees through the Actor's disguise even before he has begun the robbery, due to "his ridiculous brown Episcopalian shoes" and the wrinkles in his robe "that no self-respecting Catholic lay or nun housekeeper would have allowed him to don" (26). Later, when the sheriff "Slow Johnny Mercier" arrives, the Actor pulls Miss DeWitt away from the other bank customers and tellers, "as though choosing a dance partner," and takes her hostage on a chase over the countryside, pursued by Berndt and Slow Johnny. The latter, who appears slow-witted as well as slow in speed, bungles his job by shooting Agnes in the hip when aiming for her captor, and in his dogged pursuit, finally prompts the Actor to shoot Miss DeWitt in the head. Berndt, however, continues to chase the Actor and finally kills him, though he himself is murdered in the process, much to Agnes's grief when she unexpectedly revives and survives.

The Actor brings to the fore the problem of disguise and deception that will preoccupy Agnes for the rest of her life. When first stepping out of the disguise of the priest, "the stooped old man straightened, magically broadened, and waved a hand across his face very much as [Agnes] herself had, in the road, to erase her thoughts. Only he erased his character" (25). This passage sets in motion the chain of events by which Agnes will change places with the Actor, and draws a parallel between Agnes and the Actor through the shared gesture of waving a hand across the face, whereby the two come to mirror one another.

Later, describing the Actor, Agnes relates, "I've seen evil…. The build is slight and I'd say the face, though not handsome, has an intriguing changeability about it" (35). Both passages stress the Actor's variableness, which, coupled with the malevolence that underlies it, are his most salient qualities. Though Agnes will adopt the Actor's "changeability," she will transform his malevolence into love, an inversion of the motivating force that will inspire her own performance.

Her mirroring of the Actor continues as Agnes, trapped in the back of the Actor's stalled car while he and his men attempt to pry it loose from the mud, tucks the stolen bank money into the ripped lining of her coat under cover of a blanket that conceals the money and her wounded body. She herself thereby becomes a thief, moving a step closer to occupying the Actor's position as rogue and thief.

As "Miss DeWitt," however, and in her participation in this fast-paced, cartoon-like series of events, Agnes remains posed at a distance from readers and even "[a]t a great distance from herself" (30). Her return to being "Agnes" coincides with the moment before the Actor shoots her, in which her "last thought about him was amazement that he did not regard her words or her life as important or even useful at all":

> This fact smote her as a marvel and a sorrow, and she knew it was because of what she saw, straight on, in the Actor that she so fervently loved Chopin. And God. Now, she had to give herself entirely to God's will, whatever that might be. And it was just as she wondered, indeed, if for

> her to die was that will, that the gun went off at her temple and blackness stormed behind her eyes. (30)

Agnes's insights on the heartlessness of the Actor and the absolute ceding of her will to God's plan, become the springboard to her transformation to her performative role as Father Damien.

The flood that sweeps away her farm and parts of her memory, and kills the first Father Damien, occurs soon after the robbery, and with Agnes's donning of Father Damien's robes, she steps into the Actor's position as an imposter, deceiving an entire community. Agnes's deception, however, is not for personal gain, but done in an attempt to benefit that community, suggesting that even if religion demands a performance, the performance need not signal the emptiness or hypocrisy of the person or institution. Agnes also departs from the Actor's behavior by showing a strong commitment to the community for whom she performs, staying to minister to the people despite epidemics, the temptation of a love affair, and even her own disillusionment with the Church's mission. This contrasts starkly with the Actor's flight from the scenes of his crimes, and even from Sharon's perpetual flight from the religious organizations she joins in Paradise Park.

Though Agnes demonstrates a remarkable degree of commitment to the Catholic priesthood, as a younger woman she fled her first religious commitment due to an excessiveness that conflicted with her vows, much as Sharon's passionate nature led her to leave the Buddhist Consciousness Meditation Center. Agnes's passionate performance of music particularly disrupted her religious life

in the convent as Sister Cecilia, though later in life, as Father Damien at Little No Horse, it enriches and deepens her sermonizing in the priesthood. Unable to stop playing Chopin as Sister Cecilia, Agnes grows to think of the composer's spirit as her lover and leaves the convent, believing herself to have been unfaithful to the original marriage to Christ she made in taking her vows. Though as Sister Cecilia, she fulfills her duties at the convent, her piano playing conveys and arouses emotional longing and sexual energy, disturbing the other sisters, and bringing Agnes herself to a sexual climax. This is the first, though not the only time, that sexual passion will threaten Agnes's religious commitment to Catholicism.

Following a long hiatus from her music after the flood sweeps away Agnes's piano and she loses her memory of her ability to play, a piano is unexpectedly donated to the reservation and Agnes again has the opportunity to perform, this time as Father Damien. The music Father Damien plays also evokes emotion in its performer and listeners, but of a nature that works with his religious purpose rather than disturbing it. Father Damien finds himself drawn to the energy of the piano, playing Debussy, Chopin and Schubert, and inadvertently drawing out the snakes that live in the rock beneath the church. Many of the Ojibwe, who consider the snake sacred and powerful, convert following this episode. More significantly, however, the religious space Father Damien has come to occupy among the Ojibwe authorizes the spiritual dimension of the music, and the Ojibwe themselves have no firm division between the spiritual and sensual, as there was in the convent Agnes occupied as Sister Cecilia. The music

that proved excessive and threatening in its emotional depth and sexual dimension to a Catholic institution when performed by a young woman, translates differently when performed by a male religious authority in the context of the Ojibwe culture, where spirituality is not set up in opposition to emotional fervor or sexual passion.

Through assigning Agnes a patriarchal and authoritarian role to perform, however, Erdrich, like Goodman, highlights the question of the relationship between performance and the gendered body with religious practice and identity. In the period immediately following the arrival of Father Damien on the reservation, we witness much of Agnes's self-conscious struggle to behave as a man would. Her religious role transforms her gender, just as her gender transforms her religious role:

> These days, Agnes and Father Damien became one indivisible person in prayer. That poor, divided, human priest enlarged and smoothed into the person of Father Damien. As though the unseen were a magnetic draw upon Father Damien's spirit, his thoughts leaped like iron filings. His requests, sharp black slivers of metal, pierced the sun, and his praises melted in his ears. (109)

Father Damien comes into being through the acts he performs and his recognition in the community, yet it is also through private prayer that Father Damien comes to the fore as a unified being: "Four times a day—on rising, at noon, later afternoon, and before going to bed," the narrator reiterates, "Agnes and Father Damien became that one person who addressed the unknown" (182). While

Sharon constructs her subjectivity—the "me" she calls her imagination—through resistance to certain religious rules, especially those determined by gender, Agnes's religious acts and dress authorize and reify her religious identity as Father Damien.

We see the effects of this performance on the first morning after Agnes arrives at the reservation when she administers her first sacrament. Referred to by the narrator as "Agnes" while we learn of her restless dreams of the previous night and her hunger and anxiety in the morning, Agnes's recitation of the Mass that precedes the actual distribution of wine and wafers becomes a site of a transformation of her subjectivity through ritual speech act. This performance of the Mass catalyzes the transformation from Agnes, the lapsed Catholic, to Father Damien, the authoritative figure of the Church who lays down the law. While there is a vacillation throughout the novel between Agnes and Father Damien, these moments of religious performance, as of the Mass, temporarily stabilize his identity as Damien and signal a rare moment of spiritual confidence, as an effect of the authoritative discourse. The narrator describes the recitation of the Mass as follows:

> The Mass came to Agnes like memorized music. …The phrases were in her and part of her. Once she began, the flow was like the river that had carried her to Little No Horse. In the silences between the parts of the ritual, Father Damien prayed for those women in his charge. *"Quam oblationem, tu Deus, in omnibus quaesumus, benedictam…*" He crossed his breast five times, within those words, and the next: *"Qui*

> *pridie quam pateretur, accepit panem in sanctas ac venerabiles manus suas…"* And lifted his eyes and said the words *"Hoc est enim corpus meum,"* and the bread was flesh.
>
> Of course it was, as it always was. (68)

From the speech act flows a binding power that reinscribes Agnes's subjectivity in a new role in the Church hierarchy, as conveyed by the shift in pronouns over the space of these few sentences, and reinforces that hierarchical structure and doctrine that stems from it. The fluidity of Agnes's gender parallels a religious fluidity in which the spiritual and symbolic flow into the realm of the outward and actual, for yet another effect of this authoritative religious discourse follows when "the dry thin consecrated Host turned into a thick mouthful of raw, tender, bloody, sweet-tasting meat…[and] the wine to vital blood" (69). The bread is, "of course," flesh—a flesh which becomes more than symbolic or an act of faith as Agnes (who is back to being Agnes in her astonishment at the transubstantiation) perceives it.

This first of the miracles at Little No Horse, which Agnes reports in a letter full of questions to the Pope, literalizes the salvation of Christ that the sacrament represents. The entire reservation is starving and the miracle Agnes evokes has saved her and the nuns from starvation. The bodily ritual thus produces an internal spiritual state—here, in the form of moral salvation—which is then translated back to the body, figured as an actual saving from starvation. Because, according to church law, women are barred from the priesthood, Agnes's female body delegitimizes the religious authority of her acts. The fact that a miracle occurs when Agnes breaks Church law by administering communion ironically suggests

that the ambiguity of Agnes's position, rather than the masculine authority she has come to embody, has given her a deeper spiritual effectiveness. As we have seen in *Ceremony*, Native American literature builds on the religious concept of a world in which the sacred is not relegated to a spiritual world or a particular place of worship, but pervades all aspects of daily life.[46] The fluidity around Agnes's gender identity thus corresponds to the fluidity between the realms of the spiritual and the actual in the Ojibwe culture.

Agnes's passing works as a resistance to conventional gender roles—including acts, dress, speech, movement, gesture, profession, coded "feminine" in modern Western society. Her daily gendered/religious cross-dressing works as a drag performance in its function for the reader, who is continually reminded that Father Damien was and in some sense still is (also) Agnes, and that the "femininity" of Agnes is comprised of gestures that, though assumed to be natural, may be adopted or abandoned at will. Agnes's act of dressing up and her performance, in contrast to that of the Actor, raises questions about the parts she plays, instead of about her own ethics or normalcy. Agnes's relative ease at stepping into the dress and gestures of a priest and a man, ironically, produces a similar effect for readers as Sharon's awkwardness in dressing in Orthodox Jewish clothing. In both instances, the role of the clothing and of performance in the formation of religious identity is brought to the fore, and in a way that highlights how conventional Euro-American gender roles support and are supported by Judeo-Christian religion. In other words, Erdrich uses Agnes's

[46] As noted in Chapter 2, Lavonne Ruoff quotes the Sioux, Lame Deer, who speaks of "a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one" (qtd on 7).

cross-dressing as a means of revealing to the reader the arbitrariness of gender roles and in particular, the arbitrariness of religious gender roles—specifically, the doctrine and custom that dictate that priests must be male. Agnes's passing works to the same effect as drag for readers who, like the drag-queen's audience, "know better" and who may simply be entertained by her disguise, but who may also have their sense of the supposed naturalness of gender norms disturbed.

Agnes's passing, however, does not function as drag in this way for the reservation community, most of whom do not question her gender identity; nor for the few who do intuit her biological femaleness—namely Nanapush, Kashpaw, Margaret and Mary Kashpaw—by virtue of the fact that they are not disturbed by it nor do they question the reason for it. In this way, Erdrich highlights the more flexible and open views of gender and religious roles among the Ojibwe peoples.

Within the world of the novel, another important function of Agnes's passing is that it forever destabilizes her sense of her own gender and religious identity. While her initial entry into the community may mark a hiding of Agnes-as-woman, the continuation of her performance does not leave Agnes intact and merely hidden away, nor does it mark an absolute displacement of Agnes with Father Damien. Instead, it forces a recognition of the artificiality of gender that destabilizes her entire sense of identity, as recorded in a section titled "The Loss:"

> She transformed herself each morning with a feeling of loss that she finally defined as the loss of Agnes. Ah, Agnes! She lived at night in the shelter of bedclothes. Disappeared in daylight, bandages wrapped as when

> she had been a nun. As she left the cabin, her thoughts became Damien's thoughts. Her voice his voice, which deepened as his stride lengthened and grew bold….
>
> Between these two, where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing? (76)

The question of identity that Agnes poses above is as pivotal to Erdrich's novel as is Sharon's question as to whether identity is a rebirth, continuum, or simultaneous wave and particle to Paradise Park. In both novels, identity is a dynamic interplay, not a solid unmoving entity, a very different understanding of the soul than that of traditional Jewish or Christian theology.

Though gender is made fluid, it can never disappear, and Agnes becomes more effective in ministering to the community because of the wider range of religious experiences open to her due to her vacillation between genders. As a priest, she not only finds herself wielding the male authority to perform Mass, but later wields a whip to control a mass of funeral mourners who are fast becoming a mob. Here, too, it is Father Damien's male priestly authority that enables her to do so, for in order to control the feud that threatens to explode, Agnes "at last threw her power into the voice and demeanor of Father Damien" before she ordered them out of the church. "Soon it would be told all through the reservation and the land how the young priest drove false worshipers straight from God's

holy presence with a scourge just like the adventurous Jesus whipped the zhooniya men in the temple" (167).

Whereas through the above scenes, Father Damien emulates Christ's authority, feeding the hungry and driving the hypocritical out of the church, Agnes, as a former nun, feels herself married to Christ, creating a different expression of religiousness. The central metaphor for a nun's commitment to the Church is this spiritual marriage, thus Christ comes to Agnes in a dream-like vision after she survives the flood that decimates her farm. He appears as a husband, feeding, sheltering and nurturing her, and even taking her to bed with him. Yet even after her transformation into Father Damien, Agnes experiences a similar vision during the influenza epidemic, after months of failed attempts to halt the death of hundreds of Ojibwe people.

Mary Kashpaw, a strong, silent girl whom Agnes has rescued from an abusive family, has become Father Damien's housekeeper and constant companion in nursing the sick, and in Mary, Agnes has a similar vision of Christ:

> One day, as Mary Kashpaw walked before the priest, thrashing through slough grass, the two of them aching for sleep, Agnes finally saw the one she had hoped for and cursed. …In that strange light, Agnes saw beneath the girl's disguise. She saw that the face of her constant companion, Mary Kashpaw, was the face of the man with the horn spoon. Then she knew. Christ had gone before the priest, stamping down snow. Christ had bent low and on that broad, angry back carried Father Damien through sloughs. Covered him when he collapsed at the bedsides of the ill. Christ had fed

> him hot gruel from a spoon of black iron. Protected him so that he never sickened even when the dying kissed his hands or coughed their last prayers into his face. Christ was before him right now, breaking the trail. An amazed strength flowed into Agnes's legs and she stumbled through the snow, reaching. Crying out, "Wait, wait, I am coming!" she lunged for Mary Kashpaw. But the girl watched impassively and when the priest drew near enough she turned away, continued walking in her ordinary form. (123)

Christ here, as after the flood, cares for Agnes as a husband would, yet the gender roles are complicated, first by the shift to "Father Damien" being the one who was cared for in the past, while Agnes perceives it in the present. Next, Mary Kashpaw, a woman, serves as the site for the activity of Christ's protection and nurturing. This role that Mary plays in relation to Agnes is reinforced when Agnes first takes her to the convent and feels "a curious twist": "Her theory of rescue was upended by an acute intuition. The girl's presence was all of a sudden reassuring. As Agnes approached and took the girl's hand she understood, with a positive prescience, that Mary Kashpaw had come to shield her and heal her—how, there was no saying" (118). This passage foreshadows the many levels on which Mary will help Agnes, by aiding in her recovery from a near deathly depression and sustaining her illusion of masculinity to the world—pretending to shave her when she is later immobilized by grief for several days and then burying her in the lake at the end of her life to conceal forever the evidence of Father Damien's biological femaleness.

The problem of Agnes's body that Mary helps to hide when Agnes is unable to, points to the larger way in which Agnes's relationship to gender is constituted by a negotiation between bodily femaleness, including heterosexual attraction and desires, and the maleness required by her priesthood. Early on, Agnes devises a list of "Some Rules to Assist in My Transformation," which, ironically, includes everything from stereotypical masculine attitudes and modes of speech ("1. Make requests in the form of orders./ 2. Give compliments in the form of concessions./ 3. Ask questions in the form of statements") to bodily gestures ("6. Stride, swing arms, stop abruptly, stroke chin"). While this list, coupled with the questions she asks in "The Loss," implies that Agnes's gender, male or female, is pure performance, it is belied by certain qualities associated with femininity in Western culture, which surface through Agnes's memory or longings. While at times Agnes appears to move fluidly between genders, as when she painlessly steps into Father Damien's persona and orders the feuding families out of his church, in other circumstances, her shift in gender appears as a more painful denial of qualities intrinsic to Agnes's self in order to preserve her priesthood.

The quintessential example of Agnes sacrificing a bodily element of her femaleness occurs just after "The Loss," when Agnes, on her way to visit Nanapush and Fleur for the first time, prays away her period:

> As she sprang along on the clever winglike snowshoes, she occasionally asked the Almighty, in some irritation, to stop the useless affliction of menstrual blood, so she could more confidently pursue the work cut out

> for an active priest. Her requests were heeded, for she definitely felt a lessening and then a near cessation. The heavy cramping faded until, stopping to change the cloth that she buried deep in the snow, she found it barely spotted with darkness. No sooner had the evidence vanished than she felt a pang, a loss, an eerie rocking between the genders. (78)

This "eerie rocking" captures much of Agnes's experience of gender, except for those daily spaces of prayer in which her being unifies as Father Damien. In this same expedition to see Fleur and Nanapush, Agnes stoops to wash herself with snow in order to clean off the last of her menstrual blood, inadvertently creating a masturbatory pleasure than reminds her of her former lover, Berndt. "She closed her eyes, tried to make the physical climax into a prayer, but her mouth dropped and she cried out in a quiet voice, feeling the ghost touches of her lost lover" (78). The traces of Agnes's femaleness remain in the body, manifest in what is lost and longed for, creating this rocking sensation.

If Erdrich makes a strong point of casting gender as a performance—showing Agnes's own realization of this fact through the list she makes of physical gestures, attitudes and speech that will code her as masculine to the rest of the community—then, why attribute to Agnes qualities and desires associated more particularly with femininity, that in turn work against the idea of gender as sedimented performance? Part of the answer lies in Erdrich's desire to depict Agnes's commitment to the priesthood as an endeavor entailing sacrifice—a labor of love—and part lies in the desire to keep her in an in-between space, never allowing her to inhabit fully and permanently Father Damien's masculinity. The

sacrifices that point to the overall selflessness of Agnes's endeavors on the reservation and suggest that she may, in fact, be a candidate for sainthood, relate back to her gender and sexuality. Agnes is lonely from the solitude of the priesthood, but even more so in the lie of her identity. Her relinquishment of the one lover she takes while on the reservation, in order to continue in the duties of the priesthood, nearly leads her to commit suicide. Her loneliness comes to be alleviated only by the relationship she develops with a few members of the reservation. Her baptism of babies, especially of Fleur's daughter Lulu, helps Agnes to "forget the burden of half-realized memory" of her past, and in Lulu's infant presence Agnes becomes a "connected being." Increasing her visits to Fleur after Lulu's birth, Agnes gradually falls in love with each member of the family—Nanapush, Fleur, and Margaret—whose love for Father Damien "pained him and soothed him" (185).

The greatest sacrifice Agnes makes in order to fulfill her duties as priest, however, is in her eventual refusal of Gregory Wekkle, another priest in training sent to Little No Horse to be mentored by Father Damien. After a period of growing camaraderie, then mounting sexual tension, the two begin an affair one night in the chaotic aftermath when the wall of books they've erected between their beds collapses. That Gregory begins their encounter unaware of Father Damien's biological sex, producing "the awful and appalling joy of knowing he was one of those whom the Church darkly warned against," suggests that sexual attraction exists independently of gender. His subsequent relief upon discovering Father Damien's female body in turn, producing "a dream-like reversal of who he

feared he was," plays on the theme of identity as shifting and malleable, which has appeared in Agnes's variableness of character (200).

The politics that underlie Erdrich's fictional approach to sexuality emerge still more strongly in her depiction of the responses of some of the residents of Little No Horse to Father Damien. When Kashpaw first picks up Father Damien from the train station, for example, he observes,

> The priest was clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, he thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other men and finally joined the family of a great war chief as a wife, where he had lived until old, well loved, as one of the women. Kashpaw himself had addressed Wishkob as grandmother. Kashpaw thought, *This priest is unusual, but then, who among the zhaaganaashiwug is not strange?* (64, italics in original)

Kashpaw responds to Damien's effeminacy without fear or aggression, highlighting the comfort the Ojibwe have with difference, in contrast to Euro-American culture. Kashpaw's allusion to the figure of Wishkob (whom stories are told of, like the trickster, Nanabozho) reveals more specifically that the Ojibwe accept homoerotic sexuality in their society. Kashpaw's thoughts show that a man living "as one of the women," is perceived as acceptable, if not common, in the Ojibwe culture.

The open attitude Kashpaw exhibits on gender and sexuality, representative of the Ojibwe point of view in general, is reinforced later in the novel, in a conversation over a chess match between Agnes and Nanapush.

When Nanapush asks why Agnes is "pretending to be a man priest," he too refers to Wishkob as a point of reference for cross-gender behavior. Nanapush continues to talk while Agnes sits first in stunned silence, and then in tears of relief, and treats what is for her a terrible secret, in an altogether cavalier fashion:

> Something struck Agnes, then, and she realized that this moment, so shattering to her, wasn't of like importance to Nanapush. In fact, she began to suspect, as she surveyed the chessboard between them and saw the balance tipped suddenly in her opponent's favor, that Nanapush had brought it up on purpose to unnerve and distract her. (232)

Whereas Agnes's disguise would have been scandalous to Anglo-American society, due both to women's exclusion from the clergy and the questions it would raise about her sexuality, among those Ojibwe who have detected her biological femaleness, there is no judgment or fear, but simply a mild curiosity. Several factors contribute to this response, including the foreignness of the concept of sin to native theology, and the matriarchal aspect of their culture, as seen in a character like Mashkiigikwe, one of Kashpaw's wives who hunts for the family.[47] The native American tendency to value flexibility and fluidity makes it still more natural for the Ojibwe to be comfortable with Agnes's bending of gender roles in her appearance and her priesthood.

This fluidity spills over as well into the realm of Agnes's religious practice in a negotiation between her native Catholicism and the Ojibwe beliefs and

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[47] As noted in Chapter 2 of the Pueblo tribes, the entire Catholic concept of sin is alien to native American theology since behavior is measured by its helpfulness or hurtfulness to the community instead of in regard to personal salvation. Likewise, the native understanding of the afterlife as a continuation of earthly life conflicts with the notion of sin and redemption, due to the absence of heaven or hell from their theological system (Parsons 1101).

practices. Though, like Silko, Erdrich highlights the deleterious effects of missionary work on native culture and community, she nonetheless shows the possibility of a convergence between Christianity and native American religion that Silko rejected in Ceremony. This only proves possible by Erdrich's drawing a distinction between Christian beliefs and the missionary project's role in the internal colonization of native peoples. The harmful effects of Catholic missionary work manifest themselves most clearly in the relatively minor, but memorable, character of Mashkiigikwe, one of Kashpaw's wives, whom he is forced to relinquish because of pressure from the Church in the form of a visit from Father Damien. A proud and quick-witted character, she airs her disgust at the colonizing role of Christianity to Father Damien soon after he has arrived at the reservation:

> "Why do the chimookomanag want us?" she growled. "They take all that made us Anishinaabeg. Everything about us. First our land, then our trees. Now our husbands, our wives, our children, our souls. Why do they want to capture every bit?"
>
> Father Damien, whose task it was to steal even the intangible about the woman beside him, had no answer. (100)

The "intangible" to which the narrator refers is Mashkiigikwe's soul, for the missionary project means that Father Damien must win the hearts and minds of the Ojibwe people away from their own beliefs and traditions to convert them to Christianity. Years later, Damien encounters Mashkiigikwe in Fargo and barely recognizes because of the physical deterioration she has undergone from drinking.

When he questions her, Mashkiigikwe responds, “Winos don’t have names, priest. Go back and save the others like you saved me,” even in her stupor, intuitively attributing her state to the Church’s missionary project. Dismayed, Damien chases after her to protest in anger that he never made her take to drink. His confrontation provokes the following response:

> The old woman’s mouth had dropped wide open in astonishment, but now she closed it to a firm line and her eyes flickered. Her face unblurred and just for a moment her features composed into the real face of Mashkiigikwe, aware, intelligent, bewildered to find herself in hell.
>
> “Who did it then?” she asked the priest. “How did it happen? For I don’t like to be this way, and yet, Father Damien, I am.” (305)

The missionary project of conversion is shown here to be devastating to the native people’s sense of identity and culture. Damien makes it clear that he understands the harm it does and remains to attempt to alleviate its ill effects, rather than out of a belief in its value.

Speaking to Father Jude, a priest who has come to interview him near the end of his life about the possible sainthood of one of his nuns, Pauline Puyat, Agnes explains of her decision to remain on the reservation, “I believe even now that the void left in the passing of sacred traditional knowledge was filled, quite simply, with the quick ease of alcohol. So I was forced by the end to clean up after the effects of what I had helped to destroy, Father Jude. That’s why I stayed” (237). Thus, Agnes articulates the connection that Mashkiigikwe senses between the Christian project of “saving” and the desperation of so many native

people that drives them to drink: a community deprived of its religious culture and particular sense of the sacred, is damaged collectively psychologically, catalyzing self-destructive behavior.

Though his stance on missionary work emerges clearly, the place Father Damien finds himself in relation to Christianity by the end of his life remains more difficult to determine. As she performs more and more daily acts that are a part of Ojibwe culture, and credits certain of the Ojibwe theological concepts, even while she continues to dress in priestly garb and perform the rites that are her duty as a priest, Agnes's religious identity begins to vacillate. As with her shifting gender, what at first appears to her as religious division or betrayal prompts discomfort. Later, as Agnes reconciles herself to the apparent paradox of believing in Christ and Christianity and the Ojibwe theology, what she identified as a division she comes to accept as a point of departure for a more complex and dynamic interaction of beliefs and practices.

The earliest hint of a religious hybridity appears through Mary Kashpaw, in the scene cited earlier in which Agnes has a vision of the Christ in Mary. That Agnes sees Christ in Mary, a woman and an Ojibwe, signals the beginnings of the possibility of convergence between the two belief systems. The hybridized religion that Agnes begins at first unconsciously to adopt emerges more explicitly in a passage describing the daily prayers of "that poor, divided, human priest":

> He prayed, uneasily, for the conversion of Nanapush, then prayed for his own enlightenment in case converting Nanapush was a mistake…She asked for answers, and for the spirit of the language to enter her heart. Agnes's struggle

with the Ojibwe language, the influence of it, had an effect on her prayers. For she preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, anama'ay, with its sense of a great motion upward. She began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction—those who sat at the four corners of the earth. (182)

Over the near century she lives on the reservation, Agnes thus comes to commune most deeply with God in an in-between space that straddles Ojibwe and Catholic theology and practice.

Gradually relinquishing the colonizer's role of self-appointed spiritual advisor to the native peoples, Agnes inhabits such an in-between space on many fronts. These areas are not discrete, by virtue of the way gender and ethnic political affiliations intersect with religion and each other, so that the destabilization of one problematizes the others. Were Agnes not passing, and were it not for the power of the speech act, she would not be in a position to convert, baptize, administer communion and perform marriage ceremonies–all gestures of authority possible only from both a specific gendered and religious position, which reinscribe the power of the Church and certain institutions and kinds of Christian discourse. Yet were Father Damien not biologically a woman, he would not be so uniquely positioned to question and subvert the Church's authority.

Agnes's own gradual conversion, however, occurs as much through her need of spiritual healing and support as through a questioning of Church methodology or an attraction to Ojibwe beliefs about the universe and spirit world. Following the departure of her lover, Father Gregory, Agnes enters a long

and incapacitating period of depression that leads her to contemplate suicide. Her first rescue is undertaken by Mary Kashpaw, as was foreshadowed when Agnes first intuited that "Mary Kashpaw had come to shield her and heal her" (118). After Agnes has drugged herself into sleep, following a long period of anguish and sleeplessness, Agnes remains unconscious for several days, "wandering mightily through heaven and earth … exploring worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic" (213). Losing her way in dream after dream, Agnes finally lights upon "the one who followed him in to guide him back: Mary Kashpaw" (213). It is Mary Kashpaw who has remained next to Father Damien throughout his sleep, keeping a lantern lit and a mug of shaving soap on hand to preserve the illusion of his masculinity.

The second part of Agnes's healing comes again through the Anishinaabeg religion, this time through Nanapush's guidance. En route to end his life with strychnine, Father Damien turns to Nanapush, and soon thereafter finds himself in a sweat lodge constructed for his sake, which Nanapush refers to as "our church" (214). Despite some anxiety about the disobedience to Church doctrine that attending to Nanapush's Ojibwe prayers may constitute, Agnes joins the men in the sweat lodge (remaining clothed in a shift she wears under her robe, so that her biological gender remains disguised). There, she finds spiritual restoration. "It wasn't as though she made a choice to do it—Agnes simply found herself comforted" (215). This event is a turning point in her sense of religious identity for just prior, the narrator informs us that "[t]he way Damien understood it, he was to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the

Anishinaabeg. Not the other way around" (214). Yet through the prayers, the "sharp medicines that gave off a healing smoke," and the support of the men who surround her, Agnes finds herself cured of her despair, with "an utterly relaxed spirit" (215). The Ojibwemowin prayers and rituals become a conduit for Agnes's God, in contradistinction to the confused agonizing that constitutes Father Damien's private prayers and letters to the Pope. That shift in Agnes's thought to crediting the Ojibwe community with practical spiritual insights and traditions, however, is not merely a romanticization of native culture or, conversely, a demonizing of Catholicism as representative of coercive white culture. Instead, Agnes represents a more complicated conception of religious identity as both shaped relationally and situated geographically.

Throughout the rest of his life, Father Damien continues to conduct Catholic services and subscribe to Catholic doctrine, but also to integrate more Ojibwe metaphysics into his thought and terms into his speech, to consult and debate with Nanapush, and to participate in practices like the sweat lodge. Near the end of her life, though at the beginning of the novel, Damien asserts in a letter to Rome, "The ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ" (49). From the beginning of the novel then, readers are aware that Father Damien has been drawn to support native religious practices, even as we read on to learn how this came to be. Christ and Christianity are not rejected, but after much contestation, are integrated with Ojibwe theology in Damien's daily practice, in a redefinition of the idea of religion. Agnes's in-between gender identity that evolves from the

convergence of her masculine gender articulation with her female body and past becomes the site of this religious innovation.

Louise Erdrich is herself bi-racial, her mother French Ojibwa, and her father, a German-American (both worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs as teachers on a North Dakota reservation), and Erdrich's interracial background fuels her interest in exploring multi-racial identity and cross-cultural experience, which produces a state of perpetual transition. Though Agnes is not racially a "mixed-breed," as other of Erdrich's characters are, her long immersion in the reservation community nonetheless places her in a similar position to a bi-racial character. Her straddling of two cultures prompts her to develop flexibility and openness in her interactions with both. Erdrich thus moves away from dualistic thinking with Agnes's story in the shift of her religious belief and the forms it takes over the course of her life.

Erdrich not only aligns the reader sympathetically with Agnes's in-between-ness in religion and gender, she highlights the problems with inflexibility through the character of Pauline Puyat, the nun being considered for sainthood, whose religious rigidity approaches fanaticism. As in Silko's Ceremony and consonant with much Native American theology, inflexibility, especially in terms of religious tradition, is cast as a source of evil whereas adaptation, accommodation and integration are valued. Pauline works as a counterpoint to Agnes: as a bi-racial member of the indigenous Puyat family, she is technically a more integral member of the reservation community than is Agnes, but in an inverse relationship to Agnes, Pauline alienates herself further and further from

that community by her Christian fanaticism that appears founded on an over-valuing of whiteness.

Pauline's religion's zealous quality is based on a deliberate and violent rejection of Ojibwe ways. Speaking of Pauline's "countless episodes, or bouts, or visitations" once she becomes a nun, Father Damien attributes them to a "*piggish* involvement with God," emphasizing that any incapacitation of Pauline burdened the sisters around her with more work (238). Rather than working relationally, adapting and shifting in response to those around her, her piety sets her apart from the community, like a more extreme and dangerous version of Auntie in *Ceremony*. Pauline is also like the Actor in her lovelessness and lack of regard for the individuality of the lives around her, and thus she serves as a destructive force throughout The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse and in Erdrich's other novels.

In contrast, Agnes rejects dualistic thinking and her personal religious reformation becomes the site of deliberate ambiguity, based on love for the individual and community and even "the very thingness of the world" (215). In making Agnes's spirituality foremost in her thought and story, Erdrich poses pluralistic thinking and religious practice as a deliberate rather than a makeshift solution for her. Agnes's ending, a death she invites accompanied by spirits of those she loved, in conjunction with Ojibwe beliefs, encompasses her previous visions of Christ as well. Having rowed herself out to an island to die alone and preserve the secret of her female body, Agnes drinks wine beside a fire she builds,

and while laughing at her memories of Nanapush, feels a blood vessel burst in her head:

> Sightless, now, she sank to earth and felt the heat of the leaping fire on her face. *I am going, I am going*, she thought. Underneath her and before her, a wide plain of utter emptiness opened. Trusting, yearning, she put her arms out into that emptiness. She reached as far as she could, farther than she was capable, held her hands out until at last a bigger, work-toughened hand grasped hold of hers.
>
> With a yank, she was pulled across. (350)

In Agnes's first vision of being fed and sheltered after the flood, she describes Christ's hand as "brutalized and heavy from work," yet in that scene, too, we are told that she recognized the smell of "resin from the wood he'd chopped, of metal from the tools he'd used, of hay, of sweat, of great and nameless things that she'd known, as in a dream, in her human husband's arms" (43). The hand that pulls Agnes could be read as belonging to Berndt—the spirit of her human husband gone before—or to Christ, who she considers her true first husband. Erdrich thus aligns the most profoundly spiritual moments with both Catholic and Ojibwe beliefs. The form religion takes, whether in prayer or visions, may waver, as the gendered body does in the lake in which Mary buries her priest, but this ambiguity generates a deeper spiritual communion and a more effectively loving religious practice.

The novel ends with an epilogue following Father Damien's death and burial, in which a letter arrives from the Pope with ironic belatedness

commending Father Damien for "your love for the people in your care" and "all the good you have accomplished" (355). As Father Damien, Agnes spent a lifetime pouring out her heart to several Popes by writing letters filled with agonizing questions about the purpose of her mission and the rightness of certain decisions, yet never received an answer. This one-sided correspondence provides an extended metaphor for faith. The letters are addressed to the Pope, as prayers are to God, a figure who does not answer questions in any concrete form and who even the most dedicated follower may doubt hears her words. Yet the irony of the arrival of this letter is softened by the commendation it contains, even if received after Father Damien's death. The inclusive and deeply committed love, to which the Pope refers, vindicates Agnes for the disguise she adopted throughout her life.

The Epilogue informs us that Father Jude, the priest originally investigating Pauline Puyat's possible sainthood, has abandoned that cause, but remains in Father Damien's stead, now building a case for Damien's sainthood, and that Mary Kashpaw has turned his house into a modest shrine. The papers that remain on Damien's desk include words from a sermon he preached, "*What is the whole of our existence but the sound of an appalling love?*" Mary, having saved her priest from discovery, "often took refuge in his house and sat beside his bed," where "she still felt the comfort of his presence," and in her sleep, "dug her way down with a teaspoon toward her priest, her love, through the layers of earth" (355). This final image captures the reciprocity in this and the other significant relationships Agnes forged in Father Damien's mission. The two save each other, and Mary witnesses the Christ in Agnes, as Agnes did in Mary, and the fluidity of

their religion and relationship, like Agnes's identity, leads to a deeper and more effectual love.

Having begun her journey as a girl in an all white Catholic women's community, Agnes ends as a male priest in a native community—dramatic shifts in location, religion and gender identity that all contribute to her spiritual development. Her performative acts as Father Damien on the reservation lead her to a deeper spirituality, even as her Catholic faith comes to be complicated by and ultimately merge with Ojibwe rituals and beliefs. Erdrich's novel brings out larger themes seen in postwar women's narratives through this interest in combining the beliefs and practices of separate traditions and examining their political and racial ideologies, as well as their gender roles. Agnes's deep commitment to the people of Little No Horse also reflects the emphasis of postwar women's fiction on community as an important facet of religious practice. In Agnes's case, spiritual growth occurs through engagement with her community and her concerns with its social welfare, suggesting service to a community as a feminist way into religion that is not patriarchal.

For Sharon, however, the performance of prescribed religious acts necessitated by participation in a religious community pushes her away from religion as often as it entices her in. Unlike Agnes's journey, Sharon's leads her in a circle, back to a religious identity that stems from her family and ethnicity. Despite these differences, however, Sharon does come to occupy a role that is similar to Agnes's priesthood in its combination of authority and gentle subversiveness. Sharon's position as a Jewish wedding singer and the manager of

her band offers her a way of participating in the larger Jewish community and gives her the authority to advise couples on wedding protocol and "make up a few new little traditions along the way" (334). This role resembles Agnes's in that both women find themselves in positions of authority by which they may adapt some rituals to accommodate their community. Sharon's participation in the more liberal Havurah and response to Mikhail's *niggun* likewise reveal her need for individual expression in her religious acts to feel spiritual transcendence. Though Sharon's tone as she reports her newly invented wedding rituals is mischievous, and the style of Paradise Park more deliberately comic than that of The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, by the end of their respective journeys Sharon and Agnes have both come to interact with their religious communities in ways that are creative and inventive, departing from the passive role often assigned to women as religious participants. Through this emphasis on accommodation and invention as necessary components of effective participation in a religious community, Goodman's and Erdrich's novels replace concerns about religious authenticity with a valuing of initiative and originality in religious performance.

Chapter Four:

"Religion of the Maternal Body": Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and the Black Virgin [48]

> "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest."
>
> Alice Walker, The Color Purple

> "I traveled to Europe to see some of the Black Madonnas and found them to be images of startling strength and authority. Their stories reveal rebellious, even defiant sides."
>
> "A Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd"

> "The return of the Black Virgin to the forefront of collective consciousness has coincided with the profound psychological need to reconcile sexuality and religion."
>
> Ean Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin

The image of the Black Madonna has existed since the sixth century, and as Sue Monk Kidd's quotation reveals, has long been present in Europe, as well as in Africa and South America. A striking reversal of dominant Christian associations of the Virgin Mary with whiteness, sexual purity, and passivity, the Black Virgin functions instead as a strong and active political force. Ean Begg, a former Dominican friar and Jungian analyst, whose study*The Cult of the Black Virgin* appeared in 1985, speaks of the Virgin's association with "the healing

[48] John N. Duvall coins this phrase in reference to Morrison's novel Beloved in The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness (126).

power of nature" and her advocacy of "the right of peoples, cities and nations to be inviolate and independent from outside interference," as well as her embodiment of uninhibited sexuality (131; 28; 127). The Black Virgin's role in "resuscitat[ing] dead babies long enough to receive baptism and escape limbo" further emphasizes the unusual coupling of maternal and subversive traits in this figure (130).

These qualities—a valuing of nature, political autonomy, open sexual expression, and the resistance to patriarchal laws (here, church laws)—emerge throughout the body of Toni Morrison's work, but especially in Paradise, where the themes of the novel coalesce in the figure of the Black Madonna that appears in the book's final scene. Published in 1998, Paradise centers around a multi-racial group of women living on the fringes of the town of Ruby, in an isolated Southern country house, referred to as "the Convent" because of its former incarnation as a Catholic school for Indian girls. The women, outcasts from their families and oppressed by the sexist and racist social tensions of the early seventies, take refuge there under the protection of a green-eyed, though "certainly not white," older woman. The name of their hostess, Consolata, evokes "the Black Madonna image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Consoler of the afflicted," as J. Brooks Bouson has noted in his study of trauma and race in Morrison's novels (214-15). Consolata, and the women who live at the Convent, garden and cook. People from the neighboring town come to buy her foodstuffs and their women hide out there in times of crisis. The younger women derive comfort by telling her their woes, and eventually she initiates rituals in which she

weaves Catholicism and "magic" together into a type of group therapy that leaves the women newly calm and exorcized of their grief, no longer "haunted" or "hunted" (266).

The Convent and the lifestyle of its women, however, threaten the men of the all black neighboring town of Ruby. The men pride themselves on Ruby's independence from whites and the rest of the world, and its culturally conservative values, which include the subtle subordination of women. Mistrusting all whites and any blacks with lighter skin, the men of Ruby encourage intermarriage within the community, nearly ostracizing those who venture outside of the town's population to marry. Through the power of the churches in Ruby and their emphasis of traditional Christian morality, the men also impose a strict moral code that effectively controls the townswomen's sexuality, not only by compelling early marriage within the community, but also by making subjects such as gay and lesbian sexuality, and abortion, taboo. The pride and protectiveness the men of Ruby profess to feel toward their wives and daughters, becomes their rationale for relegating the women of Ruby to a purely domestic role, affording them no voice in their town's political or economic matters.

Because the Convent women break the codes the men of Ruby have created, by living in a mixed-race community of single women and embracing their sexual autonomy, the men perceive them as a threat to the stability of Ruby and attempt to drive them away. The Convent women, in a final climactic confrontation, must face down violence perpetrated by these men who would

contain and control them. Through a set of religious beliefs and rituals in which they have engaged, the women are able to transcend the violence perpetrated by the men. The novel, though ambiguous about the women's actual fate, concludes with the image of a dark-skinned mother protecting and comforting a daughter whose face combines "all the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl" (318).

Though Paradise shares concerns with the texts discussed in previous chapters, Morrison experiments here with a more radical reinvention in her representation of religion. Whereas Gordon, Silko, Erdrich, and Goodman's write of adapting the rituals of a single religion to meet individual needs, Morrison's protagonists rely on a self-created system of narrative and belief. Rather than simply pointing out the problematic nature of male religious hierarchies (though she does this, as well), Morrison creates in Consolata a self-appointed female facilitator of a religion in which participants play egalitarian roles. The threat of male violence that lurked in the rivalries and war in Ceremony or in the form of abusive relationships in Paradise Park, comes to the fore here: the extent to which the protagonists of Paradise have achieved grace is measured by the increased strength and success of their resistance to the men who would kill them. And though Morrison, like the previous authors, raises questions about the nature of the Judeo-Christian God, these are displaced by her focus on a maternal divine presence. Most strikingly, the correlations between religion and ethnic culture blur as the women of the Convent cross the racial boundaries delineated by mainstream American culture in the 1960's and 1970's. In this novel, however, racial segregation and antagonism do not function as a problem to be solved by

religion, but as a litmus test for religion: the measure of a religion's success is the extent to which its participants overcome racism in their daily lives. These racial and gendered elements of religion converge in the final image of a black spiritual mother, protecting and comforting her multi-racial daughter.

Mothering is a prominent motif in Paradise, occurring throughout the text in various forms, among both the women of the Convent and those of the town. Consolata, the mixed-race green eyed woman, is mothered as a child by a white American nun who took her from the streets of Brazil and brought her to the Convent. "Connie," as she is known, in turn mothers the young women who arrive at the Convent, whose own mothers have failed them. Within the town of Ruby, we witness women yearning for a mother or, childless, yearning to be a mother. Others reject motherhood altogether through attempting abortion or willing a miscarriage. A mother of sick children wanders off in the snow and the mother of a grown daughter assaults her with an iron. These violent acts and unfulfilled longings that surround mother-daughter relationships in the text are addressed, if not always resolved, through a "religion of the maternal body," which evokes a maternal divine presence that nurtures and heals (Duvall 126).

I have adopted the phrase, "religion of the maternal body," from John N. Duvall, a specialist in Morrison and Faulkner, who employs it in The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness (2000). Though Duvall discusses this concept in reference to the character of Baby Suggs from Morrison's earlier novel Beloved (1987), the theme of a set of religious beliefs and practices with a maternal figure at their heart comes to the

fore still more clearly Paradise and is central to my reading of the novel. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs serves as a minister to the community of former slaves she lives among, and her sermons are a far cry from those of Ruby's male clergy, as is what she asks of those who gather round her. Worship in Beloved is radically rethought as a space where children, women and men, laugh, cry and dance in a clearing in the woods, and Baby "did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more…[or that] they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure" but instead instructed them, "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" (88). Baby's religious practice is therapeutic, expressive and intertwined with nature. Duvall reads Baby's statement, "we flesh," as "a verb describing the body's fluid processes enacted as communal ritual" (126). Even after Baby Suggs abruptly ceases her ministry and takes to her bed following the tragedy at the heart of Beloved, the spirit she invokes reappears when the women of the town gather and make a sound that predates the Biblical "Word." This sound provides collective support for Baby's daughter-in-law, Sethe, who is then able to exorcise the ghost of her past. As Duvall explains, "In the symbolic logic of the novel, then, although Baby Suggs is gone, her religion of the maternal body animates the community's movement toward redemption" (130). I would suggest that it is also a religion of the maternal body that we see in Paradise, through the women's community that forms at the Convent around Consolata, and the imaginative and physically expressive religious practice in which they engage.

The psychological and spiritual need for mothering that drives Paradise also echoes earlier work by the poet Audre Lorde, who writes both of the power of the mother-daughter bond and the hunger women feel for spiritual mothering. In Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), Lorde's mother dominates the first part of her narrative, and is tied to her entry into women's communities and her lesbian sexuality. "My mother was a very powerful woman," she explains. "This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the white American common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black" (15). Just as Morrison portrays Consolata at the height of her spiritual powers cooking, or dancing with the Convent women in the rain, Lorde ties the spiritual power she recognized in her mother to evocative descriptions of the domestic realm and the body. Cooking a dish of souse, a spicy West Indian meat stew, with her mother, marks the advent of Lorde's first menstruation, and having her hair oiled and braided, through "the intimacy of our physical touching," becomes both a sensuous and spiritual experience (33).

Lorde's mother, too, directed her daughters in prayer and, as Lorde relates, taught us one to the mother that I never learned in school. Remember, oh, most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was ever left unaided. Inspired with this confidence I fly unto thee now, oh my sweet mother, to thee I come…. (10)

This emphasis on the Virgin Mary as a source of mercy offered by her mother, stands in contrast to the chidings of the white nuns who, though professing to care for "the Colored and Indian children of America," accused young Audre of "lying to the baby Jesus" when her reading comprehension appeared too advanced for what was expected of a black child (29-30). We see a reflection of Lorde's mother's prayer in Paradise in the earthly protection and help offered by Consolata and the image of divine intercession evoked by the figure of the Black Virgin.

Later in life, Lorde turns away from Christian imagery towards the Yoruba gods of West Africa, yet continues to summon the image of a divine mother to aid her. In "From the House of Yemanjá," collected in The Black Unicorn (1978), Lorde writes:

> Mother I need
> mother I need
> mother I need your blackness now
> as the august earth needs rain. (6)

Yemenjá is the mother of all gods and goddesses and of the oceans, again drawing a connection between spiritual mothering and nature (Unicorn 121). This invocation of an ultimate spiritual mother carries throughout Lorde's work.

In Paradise, the final image of the Black Virgin captures a similar spirit of longing for a spiritual mother as the epitome of divine presence and power. Morrison's exploration of the maternal culminates in her invocation of a Madonna, which serves to supplant a traditional paternalistic God and exchange a

white image for a black. Alice Walker's 1982 novel The Color Purple also anticipates Paradise by showing the necessity for a community of black women to reject a white male God who reinscribes Anglo-American and European patriarchal power. Shug, the lover of the book's protagonist, Celie, explains, "Man corrupt everything. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't" (204). The God Celie and Shug reinvent takes the form of an "it" that "is inside you and inside everybody else" (202).

Morrison's novel suggests a similar idea of God, as seen in the divinity that emerges in each of the Convent women—manifest in their domestic activities and homo-erotic interactions, in ways that also echo Walker—and in the ambiguous ending of the novel, which points to their immortality. The question of how this spiritual transformation takes place among the Convent women and the implications of Morrison's allusion to an image of a God who is both black and female, is at the heart of this chapter. To understand the spiritual significance of what transpires at the Convent, however, we must first examine the reasons for the spiritual sterility of the town of Ruby.

The Church and the People: Religion in Ruby

African American theology is central to the structure of Paradise both in terms of plot and thematics. The very nature of Paradise as a dystopian novel reflects, albeit in an inverted fashion, the utopian influence in African-American theology. As Philip Page has explained in Reclaiming Community in Contemporary American Fiction, "[d]enied a past, or at least a respectable past,

and often living in a nearly unbearable present, African American culture often accentuates the future…[and] resembles Euro-American faith in progress and the eventual fruition of the American dream" (17). The town of Ruby—meant to be a utopia for the nine black families who founded it—becomes instead a place of competitiveness, repression, and intergenerational conflict. Race—not just blackness, but the extreme degree of blackness—caused their ancestors to be rejected by other lighter-skinned blacks as well as by whites, when looking for a place to settle. In founding their own town, the descendents of these original families opt to maintain the blackness of their community as a sign of their own racial and moral purity and their rejection of the world that rejected them. In an unspoken pact, they create a mythology around the founding families they revere. They move their town to a more geographically remote area following World War II, changing its name from Haven to Ruby when a young mother from the most prominent family dies en route. They intermarry and shun outsiders. That the founders, first of Haven and then of its offshoot, Ruby, attempt to establish and maintain a perfect society also draws on a tradition of expectancy in establishing a present earthly salvation, or "worldly utopia," such as that upon which Martin Luther King built his sermons. "In both visions—of a just afterlife and of an earthly utopia,"—both of which are preoccupations of Ruby's founding families—"emphasis is placed on a future that will redress the tribulations of the past and the injustices of the present," as Page observes (Reclaiming Community 19). The failure of their utopia indicates that Morrison is taking a different

approach than leaders like King have to the strengths and weaknesses of Christian theology as it affects African-American communities.

Morrison's religious upbringing and her current beliefs provides some insight on her handling of religion in Paradise both in and outside of Ruby. Acknowledging that she is indeed "a religious person" and that "that's not common in the literary world," Morrison's treatment of various aspects of organized religion—the role of the ministry, sermons, the concept of God and Divine Love—reflects a complex and ambiguous response to the American and African roots and current manifestations of Black theology. Morrison's very name alludes to her involvement in religion at an early age. Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford (the latter, her maiden name), she took the baptismal name of Anthony for Saint Anthony after converting to Catholicism, after which friends shortened her name to Toni. She was twelve at the time and her mother a devoted member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Als 68).

Asked if she is now a "churchgoing woman," Morrison replied that she's a "religious person," who "[a]s you might guess," has "arguments with institutionalized religion" though not "with the solace that churches provide" (Marcus). Paradise deals more extensively with organized (and disorganized) religion than any of her six previous novels and reflects this ambivalence produced by her appreciation of the comfort a church may provide and her recognition of the danger that lies in the rigidity, politics and hierarchies that often calcify its structure.

Religion clearly occupies a central role in the town and the text. Ruby's four main streets are named for the Gospels, the ministers of its three churches mediate family feuds as well as preaching sermons that are thinly veiled commentary on social and political debates, and its founding legend rests on Zechariah (a man who displaced his African name, Cofi, with a Biblical name) being led to the site of the town by a spiritual vision.

On the outskirts of the town, the Convent contains everything the founding families of Ruby shun and consider profane. Begun as an embezzler's mansion that predates Ruby itself, nuns converted it following his arrest, into "Christ the King School for Native Girls," which was eventually closed when funds and pupils had run out. Left as the residence of Mary Magna, an elderly nun, and Consolata, the Brazilian adopted spiritual daughter who nurses her til her death, the house draws a small community of women of different races fleeing the wrecks of their lives—outcasts in their own right, like original town founders. As a space, the Convent bears traces of its history in the opulence of its bathrooms and remnants of obscene fixtures the nuns removed and secreted away; the now empty schoolroom for Arapaho girls that was once a dining room; and carvings of nymphs juxtaposed with icons of Christ and Mary. Here, traces of criminality and comic pornography combine with those of a self-sufficient and exclusively female Catholic community engaged in a cultural colonization and domination of Native peoples. Both the sexually repressive and racist elements of the Catholic Church are exposed through this architectural history of the Convent, which are then reversed in the reconciliation of spirituality, sexuality, and interracial mothering

represented by Consolata and the women who live with her. The Convent, as a metaphorical palimpsest due to these traces it bears, also represents the combined forces that brought America into being when Oklahoma was still the frontier. The house brings together everything the founding fathers of Ruby see as threatening in its history of criminality and promiscuity, and its current inhabitants' mystical religious practice, interracial mixing, and exclusively female population without roots or tradition.

Like many prominent African-American novels, Paradise is a "collective *bildungsroman*," a novel that traces the development of multiple protagonists.[49] The citizens of Ruby and occupants of the Convent have lives that intertwine, and in *Paradise* the effects of belief and religious rhetoric can be witnessed on a range of individual protagonists, and on these two communities as a whole. First and foremost, religion both contributes to and reveals a gaping gender divide within Ruby and in relation to the women who live on its outskirts in the Convent. Noting the thematic closeness of Paradise to Morrison's earlier works, such as Sula and The Bluest Eye, Duvall remarks that "Paradise returns us to the troubled relation between men and women, particularly when African-American men's sense of identity parallels that of the patriarchal structures of middle-class white culture" (142). The religious structures of Ruby do in fact replicate Euro-American churches in their emphasis on respectability, the and in the political

[49] Phillip Page observes, "[African-American] novels tend to depict not an individual *bildung* but a collective *bildung*. A set of characters moves toward a clearer understanding of their locations in time and space, specifically the significance of their pasts, their places within the African-American community, and their uncharted futures" (Reclaiming Community 34).

allegiances that differentiate and separate them (as much or more than theological differences), and the male hierarchies on which they are founded.

Richard Misner, a new minister and recent arrival in the town, shows a deeper spiritual sense, more akin to those of the women. His concept of God is less authoritarian and he shows no desire to monitor the female population of Ruby. He is the one man in the novel for whom religion is not conflated with or informed by any sexism or misogyny. Instead, his emphasis on a loving God informs his belief in Black Pride and his desire to educate the young people in Ruby about Africa. Yet, though Misner is far more sympathetic and politically progressive than the other men in Ruby, and treats women with genuine respect, Morrison still positions him to be less effective in helping the town's women than is Consolata or the female community that forms at the Convent.

For the men, even the liberal and sympathetic outsider Reverend Misner, the church sermon is a platform from which to influence a captive audience on their response to socio-political issues causing conflict in the town. When rumors circulate that one of the town's prominent daughters, Arnette Fleetwood, had an abortion performed on her at the Convent, the conservative Reverend Senior Pulliam "preached a sermon taken from Jeremiah 1:5: 'Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,'" condemning Arnette, and Misner "countered with Paul's words to the Corinthians: '…the greatest of these is love" (150). The third clergyman, Reverend Cary, has his message on social evils so fine-tuned and it is "so well received" that he repeats it each Sunday:

"What have you given up to live here?… What sacrifice do you make *every* day to live here in God's beauty, His bounty, His peace?"

"Tell us, Reverend. Say it."

"I'll tell you what." Reverend Cary chuckled.

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead, now."

Reverend Cary had lifted his right hand straight in the air and curled it into a fist. Then, one finger at a time, he began to list what the congregation had deprived itself of.

"Television."

The congregation rippled with laughter.

"Disco."

They laughed merrily, louder, shaking their heads.

"Policemen."

They roared with laughter.

"Picture shows, filthy music. …Wickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner. That's what you have given up. (274)

In an interview after the publication of Paradise, Morrison observed that all of the subjects that are on the menu today--abortion, for example, or divorce, marriage, child abuse, and criminal justice--have their roots in some form of moral structure and religion. All the things that we worry about, and are appalled by, are not merely crimes--they're also sins (Marcus).

Arnette's alleged abortion and the references to police brutality, pornography, murder, theft and addiction are social problems, but the resonance they carry has its roots in religious codes. Morrison suggests in Playing in the Dark that the "yearning for God's law is born of the detestation of human license and corruption" (34). Ruby serves as an allegory for America, and Morrison's representation of Ruby's founding fathers as obsessed with managing sin reflects her observation that "[t]he flight from the Old World to the New … generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility" was "in fact … sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined" (Playing 34). Pulliam and Cary's sermons expose the anxiety that the community's men feel about sin, and further, that the nature of what they deem sin centers on sexuality and change.

The scenes in Ruby's churches reveal Morrison's use of the town as a metaphor for America, even as they represent a particularly African-American side of religion with its heavy emphasis on sermonizing. Theologian Katie Cannon has noted that sermons in black churches in general constitute a discourse that has traditionally marginalized women, and Cannon has called on ministers to show women as "complex, life-affirming, moral agents" within sacred rhetoric (120). Her analysis sheds light on Morrison's representations of the problems inherent in the male dominated ministry of black churches, and casts the speech and action of Morrison's female protagonists in times of moral crisis as a disruption of that male discourse. Morrison thus simultaneously comments critically on the marginalization of women in African-American churches through

her representation of the authority wielded by the male ministry, and draws a broader analogy between Ruby and America through the discourse of moral purity that the town was founded on and the contemporary problems of sexism, racism and materialism it shares with the United States. Representing the foundational mythology and contemporary conflicts of a black community as a metaphor for the larger American society allows Morrison to move African-American history to the center of American history, while still offering a critique of the dominant Euro-American culture and the ways in which African-American culture reflects the dominant culture.

The preservation of tradition and racial and moral purity is crucial to the men who hold the power in Ruby because it allows them to cast Ruby as superior to other communities. The accomplishment of these goals will, they believe, keep their families safe. Ironically, it is the way this set of concerns dominates that instead leads to Ruby's downfall. Religion becomes fused with these dominant ideologies, bolstering the men with self-righteousness and moral conviction. Thus the annual Christmas pageant becomes a bizarre conflation of the story of Ruby's nine original families' rejection by communities of free blacks with the story of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the Inn. Similarly, a communal oven built in Haven, reassembled in Ruby, becomes a religious icon and a source of contention, due to differing interpretations of the partially worn away letters inscribed on it (which read either, "*Beware* the furrow of His brow" or "*Be* the furrow of His brow"). These competing interpretations of the words on the Oven, much like modern day fundamentalist and liberal readings of the Bible, sow

discord and undercurrents of violence in the community. The intertwining of religion with the patriarchal politics of the town culminates in a wedding ceremony meant to restore relations between two feuding families. Instead, the town's ministers use their platform to air barely concealed political and ideological differences about the bride's alleged abortion. The sermons on the nature of God and love are meant in one case to warn and discipline an unruly bride and groom, and in the other, to encourage forgiveness and liberation rather than control.

Between the Reverends Misner and Pulliam's polemics stand the couple about to be married and their friends and family, ranging from confusion to anger at the ministers' behavior. The couple, K.D and Arnette, unhappy and uncomfortable, serve as both a product of and metaphor for the town. The two disclaim the Convent, but can't sustain themselves without going there for what is illegal in Ruby, Arnette for an abortion, and K.D. during his affair with Gigi, one of the Convent women. The aptly named Deacon and Steward Morgan, the groom's uncles whose Grandfather Zechariah founded Haven, generally "behaved as if God were their silent business partner" (143). Steward is the one among the congregation who understands Misner's gesture of silently holding the church's cross aloft in the air as meant to convey a God of love and respect, even as Steward concludes that the gesture is ineffective, recalling all the crosses he has seen planted by bigots and worn by "whores." In another scene, when Steward recalls a story of his brother, Elder, fighting two whites who were hitting a black prostitute, the narrator notes that "it unnerved him to know [the story] was based

on the defense of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own" (95). Thus in addition to revealing Steward's misogyny that breeds his desire to control the town's women and youth, Morrison presents another aspect of Christianity, showing the symbol of the cross replicated in varying contexts until it is emptied of meaning.

The women in Ruby read these tensions differently. Given the rumors of Arnette's abortion at the Convent (in actuality, her covert attempt to abort her child brings on it's premature birth and death), Arnette's friend Billie Delia perceives that the tensions underlying the wedding are really "about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals" (150).

The sermons served up to Ruby's congregations, even Misner's unconventional mute plea with the cross, simply do not engage its women as they do its men. The women of Ruby instead experience moments of spirituality outside the bounds of the triangulated structure of the town's churches. Dovey Morgan, Steward's wife, confides regularly in a young man who appears to her when she is alone, and "[b]y a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again" (92). The namelessness of the man Dovey refers to as her "friend" evokes Biblical angels and her reluctance to ask his name may even allude to the biblical man who wrestles with Jacob and when asked his name, replies, "Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?" before he blesses him and disappears (Gen. 32.29). The effect this man has on

Dovey seems designed to fill a hunger that neither her husband nor her attendance at Mount Calvary church feeds. Her very name, "Dovey," alludes to the dove as it appears to Noah after the flood, as a biblical sign of peace, in distinction to the warring political parties of men in the town.

Like Dovey, Lone DuPres also expresses a spirituality separate from the town's institutionalized religions. A midwife and one of the oldest members of the community, Lone—whose name, a variation of "alone," suggests her solitude within Ruby— can read minds and discern hidden motives, skills, which she sees as gifts from God to be used in his service. Even Anna, Richard Misner's fiancée, is shown having her most intense spiritual revelation in an extra-religious moment standing in the open air outside the Convent where she sees a door, and Richard, a window—"[o]r sensed it rather, for there was nothing to see" (305).

God and heaven can't be pinned down in Paradise and won't remain static. The trope of movement—manifest as flight, migration, and search for place—that Philip Page notes recurs in African-American novels, is evident not only in the migration of Ruby's original founders and the Convent women, but when coupled with Morrison's mysticism, infuses the text with a dynamic and even slippery idea of God (Reclaiming Community 1-3). If stasis leads to death, as born out by Ruby's citizens' inbreeding, infighting, and resistance to change, then the idea of God is more of a dynamic force and less a static patriarchal entity. Dovey's thoughts about the words on the Oven—that "[s]pecifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile" (93)—serve as a directive that counters fundamentalist, literal readings of scripture and leads to a postmodern idea of

God—a God of multiple sources and meanings. This is the God Dovey and Lone accept, and that Anna and Richard glimpse.

Billie Delia, who remarks the men's desire to control the "mares and stallions," is not the first or last to see the extent to which anxiety over female sexuality motivates the men of Ruby. Her mother Patricia discovers the sexism at the root of Ruby's history through analyzing the genealogy of the town and the midwife Lone intuits it through her almost unconscious mind-reading.

Lone and Pat, like Billie Delia and Misner, stand on the margins of Ruby where they can exercise greater powers of perception. It is Pat who spells out most clearly for the reader that racism is what informs the sexism so subtly and pervasively at work in the townsmen's day-to-day lives. The men of Ruby fret about women's sexuality because they want to keep the town racially "pure." Even as it serves as a metaphor for racism in America, in Paradise anxiety over racial purity is inverted from the Anglo-American form it normally takes in the United States: the men of Ruby want to keep their town exclusively black and exclude any lighter skinned (that is, bi- or multi-racial) people as revenge toward all the white and lighter skinned folks who excluded and abused them and their ancestors because of their darker skin. "In that case," Pat reasons, "[…] everything that worries them must come from women" (217). According to the submerged logic of Ruby's men, since women bear the children, women bear the responsibility for maintaining the "purity" of the race, by coupling with and thus bearing dark-skinned children.

Pat assigns herself the task of writing a genealogy of the town's families, but she is blocked at every road and the project unravels into a more personal and speculative venture. Lines crossed through names or ink blots in family bibles signal secret erasures of individuals and relationships, and family ruptures. The families of Ruby have created a tight history of the town that silences and eradicates any conflict or loss that interferes with its myth of holiness. Pat is left with an undertaking that grows increasingly unwieldy, fragmented, and uncertain. In her effort to uncover the mysteries of what has been expunged from the record, she articulates many of the gender dynamics of Ruby: we learn that "a widower might ask a friend or distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects," that some of these couplings were incestuous, and that the community ostracized and expelled anyone caught having sex outside marriage (196). Thus the dynamics of male dominance become still more apparent.

Significantly, part of what gives Pat the distance even to attempt the genealogy is the problem that emerges as a motif through much of the novel: the absence of a mother. Pat's mother, Delia (after whom Billie Delia is named) was an outsider, light-skinned and with no last name, who died in childbirth because none of the neighboring men would drive to the Convent or to any whites for help since they never fully accepted Delia—or so Pat hypothesizes. Widowed after a year, light-skinned and set apart, Pat has no allies in either a mother or sister. "We'd have grown up together," she imagines of her stillborn sister, "Patricia and Faustine. Too light, maybe, but together it would not have mattered to us. We'd be a team" (198).

The Convent women all yearn for a mother as well, but unlike Pat, they fill the void with Connie's ready ear and spiritual guidance. Each of these women has experienced some violence or threat of violence, and a break with her family that has left her motherless. Mavis, the first to arrive, has run away from her abusive husband to her mother's, only to leave her mother's when she overheard her calling Mavis's husband to come get her. Her experience as a mother herself has been still more disturbing: Mavis had accidentally left her twin babies to die, and believes her other children are colluding with her husband to kill her. She stays at the Convent in part because she is able to feel the presence of her dead babies there. Grace, or "Gigi," the next to appear, refers to her granddaddy and her father, the latter of whom is in prison, but never mentions a mother. Seneca was abandoned at the age of five by a girl she thought was her sister, but who it seems likely was her young unwed mother. Pallas, the last to arrive, ran away from her father with her boyfriend to see her mother in Mexico, and ran away again when she discovered her mother and boyfriend having an affair.

All of these women are dealing with past traumas of abandonment and threats of violence, but they find healing by the conclusion of the novel through Consolata's maternal nurturance and ministering. In contrast to the meals Connie prepares and rituals she leads at the Convent, Pat's approach to healing her painful past is analytical, historical, scientific, and solitary—not spiritual or collective. For Pat, there is no transcendence, but only alienation and a destruction of that work with which she had tried to piece together the past and find wholeness.

Pat's acceptance of Ruby's centrality, and even perpetuation of this view through the very act of recording its history, works metaphorically and metonymically to represent her fundamental acceptance of the town and its structure as the legitimate center—even as she struggles against the attitudes and practices of the founders and their descendents. Pat attempts to record the bits of history that don't fit or are unacknowledged, but she does so through traditional phallogocentric means of written history and analysis. Though she attempts to subvert the town's hierarchical structure by including the excluded, in the end she chooses to set fire to the record of what she has uncovered. Pat's erasure of the genealogical history she had created by burning her papers signals the failure of her act to achieve for herself or the town any significant changes or redemption—any escape from the collective founding traumas from which Ruby was spawned. In her article "Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in Corregidora and Paradise," Elizabeth Yukins explores Pat's position as a "bastard daughter" who experiences traumatic memories transmitted by her mother and she notes that the location of the Patricia section before the Consolata section that immediately follows it, draws attention to Pat's underlying assumption that Ruby is the center and the Convent the margins, whereas for Consolata the Convent is an uncontested center. This distinction is significant because it is those who choose the Convent as their center who achieve some kind of transcendence and healing, though Pat does not. Whereas Pat's approach is scholarly, analytical and solitary, that of the Convent women is spiritual, therapeutic and collective, qualities that Morrison values and associates with healing. Pat may be treated with some

coolness by the citizens of Ruby, given her light skin and her questions about their family histories, however, it is in the Convent women the men of Ruby find a true threat and scapegoat because of their absolute autonomy from men.

The Convent

When the men of Ruby set out to destroy the women of the Convent, it is done with a sense of moral imperative, and united by a fear and loathing of women outside the social norm, which characterizes all witch-hunts. Upon entering the Convent—a scene represented from different perspectives in the opening and closing sections of the novel—they note that "each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock" (7) and their hunt is beset by anxiety about "the female malice that hides here" (4). What they see in the house is described in diabolical terms: Catholic icons of Mary and Jesus are viewed as evidence of idolatry, a baby's clothes and playthings as evidence of murder and witchcraft. When the men sight their rifles at the remaining women fleeing in the fields beyond, it is done through the lens of religious righteousness: they are shooting, "God on their side," at "black Eves unredeemed by Mary" (18). The age-old Judeo-Christian virgin-whore dichotomy is at work and the Convent women—outsiders who live without men, outside of patriarchal law—are cast as the whores in unmistakably religious terms.

In contrast to the men of Ruby's sexist biblical terms, however, the Convent women's autonomy links them to the Black Virgin, though her image does not appear until the final page of the novel. The Black Virgin's role is to support and protect marginalized communities struggling for independence and

she stands "in favour of freedom and integrity, the right of peoples, cities and nations to be inviolate and independent from outside interference" (Begg 28). This freedom the Convent women embrace is the first sense in which the Black Virgin is evoked.

A second and closely related association of the Black Virgin lies in her "subversive posture vis-à-vis the rules of male dominated theology," a stance that links the Convent's matriarchal and merciful culture closely to her (Begg 130). The Virgin's anti-establishment position within the church that counters the rigidity of its dogma has been linked in particular with the belief that she exercises the power to "resuscitate dead babies long enough to receive baptism and escape limbo" (130). We have seen the clergymen in Ruby do ideological battle in their sermons over the rumors of Arnette's pregnancy. Later in Paradise, readers learn that Arnette had indeed fled to the Convent for an abortion, but that Consolata and the Convent women attempted to save the baby she tried to abort, which she delivered prematurely and then abandoned. Their attempt to save Arnette's child, and their delivery and nurturing of a baby of Pallas, one of the women who lives at the Convent, evokes the Black Madonna's maternal care. In an act such as this, mercy is predicated over judgment—the "most important function of the Black Virgin"—and another theme that emerges prominently in Paradise (Begg 48).

In contrast to this emphasis on flexibility and mercy, the men of Ruby's project is one of purifying the town, and critic Katrine Dalsgard relates the attitudes that prompt its enactment to "American Exceptionalism": "the claim

that America is … unique, one of a (superior) kind—and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility" (86).[50] American Exceptionalism has been a doctrine subscribed to and used rhetorically by those who wished to criticize social or political circumstances as falling short of the moral ideals upon which America was founded and its elevated purpose as a nation. Whereas other writers— Black-American activists, in particular—have cast social injustices in contrast to the Puritans' and founding fathers' discourse of tolerance and equality, and thereby reinforced American Exceptionalism, Morrison emphasizes the problems inherent in the doctrine of Exceptionalism.

Ruby's inception, coming as the result of several "exclusions" (that is, race-based rejections of its founding families by other communities), highlights the hypocrisy at the heart of America's national myth of God-ordained moral superiority, yet Ruby's descent into its own hypocrisy, chaos and violence, points to the fundamental problem with the ethos of American Exceptionalism as premised on a need to expel those who threaten a society's sense of itself as morally superior. The Salem Witchcraft trials, implicitly referenced in Paradise's opening section, when the Convent women are gunned down, serve as a marker of how the Puritans' sense of divine ordination was predicated on a need to violently expel what was deemed impure and of the failure of the actual to measure up to the ideal (Dalsgard 3). Dalsgard explains, "the nation's ideal desire to build a perfect community necessarily implies a violent repression of what it constitutes

[50] This definition is from Thomas B. Byers's "A City upon a Hill: American Literature and the Ideology of Exceptionalism," in American Studies in Scandinavia 29.2 (1997): 76-84. The concept is one that has emerged as prominent within American Studies and its definitions vary, but as Dalsgard notes, Byers's definition seems representative of that used by literary historians.

as its imperfect other" (11). What serves finally to unite and pacify the various factions in Ruby following K.D. and Arnette's wedding is their united animosity for the Convent women, who arrive at the reception in response to an invitation from Deacon's wife, Soane, wearing revealing clothing and playing loud music. They are literally a "necessary evil"—a scapegoat that helps the town maintain its collective identity as unified and morally upright.

Morrison's portrayal of religion in Paradise reveals her postmodern aversion to master-narratives, which here take the form of religious mythology that, like American Exceptionalism, entails a violent exclusion of that which doesn't "fit." Morrison deliberately endows the town's outsiders—Lone, Misner and Consolata—with the most spiritual insight, and opens up the possible forms spirituality may take. God is dynamic and shifting, in keeping with Morrison's postmodern literary style, in which she refuses to position the narrator or any one character as the bearer of any stable, objective, universal "truth." By the final section of Paradise, readers, through their access to the inner workings of the minds of this community, come to understand that the cause of much trouble in Ruby is insularity, fear of change, and a preoccupation with maintaining purity. In such lies the men of Ruby's departure from spirituality or Morrison's idea of God, which is less about strict moral codes or adherence to a single tradition than it is about vision, integration and openness of thought.

In contrast to the gendered and racialized religious codes the townsmen of Ruby perpetuate, Consolata leads the women who have placed themselves in her care in rituals designed to break them out of a world of divisions and divisiveness.

Thus she decries the separation between body and spirit drawn in Christian doctrine that would elevate spirit at the expense of the body, and instructs them, "Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve," effectively collapsing the virgin/whore dichotomy at work in the minds of the men of Ruby. The mother/daughter relationship is brought to the fore again, as a metaphor for the relationship of the sensual and spiritual, and in Consolata's relationship to the women she instructs. But Consolata herself also takes the role of the daughter, first before the Convent women arrive, in relation to Mary Magna, the white nun who rescued her, and then in the book's final scene where she is portrayed rocked in the arms of a Black Madonna. Morrison's coupling of Eve and Mary, via Consolata, and the according of spiritual value to Eve, also works to communicate that female sexual desire does not oppose spiritual communion, nor is one separate from the other. Spiritual peace and transcendence is not born out of solitary intellectual labor, like Pat Best's, nor does it arrive out of a Protestant work ethic of self-denial and hard work, such as Reverend Pulliam preaches, nor even from the more politically liberal Christianity Misner represents. Instead, spirituality is shown to be intertwined with, and even mediated by, the bodily and emotional. Consolata leads the women to spiritual transcendence through delving into these realms, encouraging them to revisit their traumatic experiences and express their spiritual states through telling and re-telling their stories, drawing them symbolically in outlines of their bodies, and dancing. As Morrison's narrator recounts, "With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother … they altered" (265).

Like the title character of Sula, or Pecola of The Bluest Eye, the Convent women exist in opposition to and on the margins of the main community, and the citizens of Ruby to perceive themselves as morally pure in contrast to these outsiders.[51] Much of the threatening difference of the Convent women is tied to their autonomy and sexuality. The Convent women dress revealingly, one of them openly has an affair with K.D. (Steward and Deacon's nephew and the future husband of Arnette), and by the concluding section, all are engaged in erotic relationships with one another. This expression of sexuality, like the collective rituals of drawing and dancing, is shown to be spiritually sustaining and nurturing for the women, and another source of their transcendence.

The women's alliance with the Black Virgin emerges again in this collision of spirituality and sexuality, for the Black Virgin embodies uninhibited sexuality, perhaps due to those religious figures from whom she is derived, such as Eve, Lilith and other pagan goddesses (Begg 127). The more widespread emergence of and interest in the image of the Black Virgin, then, signals a "profound psychological need to reconcile sexuality and religion" (Begg 28). This psychological need drives Paradise, where one of the most deeply spiritual figures, Consolata, has experienced two great loves, a maternal love for Mary Magna and a sexually passionate one for Deacon Morgan, who she had an affair with years earlier, prior to Mary Magna's death and the arrival of the other women at the Convent. The passion of these two loves, the one for a spiritual mother and the other for an illicit lover, inform Consolata's assertion that Eve and

[51] In "Songs of Solomon: Continuities of Community" Valerie Smith refers to Sula and Pecola as "scape-goat protagonists" and suggests that Sula is an integral part of the community even (and especially) when she's shunned by it (275-277).

Mary, spirit and flesh, are intertwined, and one should not be claimed at the expense of the other.

Paradise also links again with Audre Lorde's Zami by representing lesbianism in a spiritual light and as tied to maternal love. The Convent women break the mores of mainstream society, represented by Ruby, by reversing traditional Christian morality through their open sexuality and homoerotic relationships. Echoing Lorde in her emphasis on the power of women loving women, Morrison thus crafts a story in which women break free of the misogynistic and racist violence they've suffered in the past by finding lovers, as well as mothers, in one another. Through the fulfillment these women experience, Morrison's novel provides a negative critique of the social pressures on women to focus exclusively on men for companionship and stimulation that Adrienne Rich refers to in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976). As Rich observes,

> institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a "normal" woman—that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men. (218)

Morrison, too, reveals the artificiality of this forced transference, through the affection and erotic fulfillment the Convent women find in their relationships with one another. The heroines of Paradise thus achieve spiritual transcendence

through the mix of spiritual and sensual fostered in their communal living, as well as through self-styled religious rituals and racial integration.

Morrison's decision to concern herself with the fate of communities in her novels, as much as with that of a single protagonist, has personal, political and spiritual underpinnings. That Morrison herself found her main emotional and practical support as a young woman through a network of fellow women writers likely contributes to her interest in representing female collectives in a romantic light, endowing them with great potential for freedom and redemption. Also, as Philip Page has observed, black American writers often create a "a collective *bildung*," in which "[a] set of characters moves toward a clearer understanding of their locations in time and space, specifically the significance of their pasts, their places within the African-American community, and their uncharted futures" (34). The exclusively female nature of the Convent, however, is part of a pattern of deeply spiritual matriarchal communities that appear throughout Morrison's work, as in Pilate's home in Song of Solomon and in Baby Suggs' church in nature in *Beloved*. As Susan Willis notes of Song of Solomon, "What Macon [the male protagonist] sees when he looks into Pilate's house is a totally alternative life-style, whose dramatic opposition to the spiritual impoverishment of Macon's world gives rise to a utopian moment…[of] reciprocity and the unmediated response" (Smith 318). Pilate's home contrasts with "Macon's world which is based on accumulation" (qtd. in Smith 318). The greed and materialism that drive Macon, plague the men in Paradise as well, causing Deacon and Steward Morgan

to privilege bank business over personal demands and creating divisions between families.

Interwoven with the importance of community is Morrison's emphasis on nature, as seen again in *Beloved* in the location of Baby Suggs's church in a clearing in the woods. As Page notes, West African beliefs stress "that individual fulfillment only occurs through harmony with the community and the cosmos," and this belief system filters into African-American texts (26). Nature, the elements and universe need be attended to, and they serve as a medium for God and humanity—and do so more often for women. In an analysis of the influence of African spirituality in the novel Sula, in New Dimensions Of Spirituality: A Biracial And Bicultural Reading Of The Novels Of Toni Morrison, Karla Holloway explains:

> This spirit, whether *nommo* (the African 'word,' creative potential, passed on to woman) or nature is the same. It is complementary to an African view of the universe that women should come to hold this power. They give birth to children. In Africa, children are understood to be closest to their ancestors and therefore to ancestral wisdom. Women's power gives life, and retains the life-giving sustenance of the world. Because there is an essential link between the natural, physical world and the spiritual world in African ontogeny, when women carry knowledge, it can be manifested in things from either world. The rocks, trees, grasses all hold magical powers. (Holloway 69)

By contrast, the Morgan brothers are each shown to have a destructive or alienated relationship with nature, Steward through the loss of his taste buds and inability to distinguish the difference between fresh and canned food, and Deek through hunting—tendencies which disturb both their wives.

The Convent itself, whether inhabited by the nuns who founded it or the women who follow in their wake, is strongly associated with nature. On a basic level, both groups of women support themselves through gardening and selling their wares, and even the citizens of Ruby admit that Convent peppers are the spiciest. On a deeper level, this African theology that recognizes and taps into a spiritual power in nature is articulated by Lone, who has gained knowledge of it through her own midwifery and perceives this faculty in Consolata. "Don't separate God from his elements," she instructs, when Connie protests against Lone's instructing her in "magic." "You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world" (244). This focus on the spiritual dimension of nature adds another layer of connectedness between the Convent and the Black Virgin. Consolata's skill with gardening and cooking, and the ease with which she learns to use herbs for healing purposes, with Lone's instruction, in particular aligns her to this figure, for the Black Virgin represents nature's "healing power," in contrast to "the frenzied fashion for denying, defeating and transcending nature" (Begg 131). The scenes of Consolata cultivating a garden or Lone teaching her herbal medicinal cures, for instance, highlight the destructiveness of Deacon Morgan's hunting, which leads his wife Soane to "whisper … to the

darkness outside the window, 'Look out, quail. Deek's gunning for you'" (Morrison 100).

Morrison's own great-grandmother was, like Lone, a midwife "and people from all over the state came to her for advice and for her to deliver babies" (Als 398-9). That Ruby's citizens have stopped turning to Lone for help in delivering their children, and instead drive to a hospital miles away, reflects Morrison's larger concern that society has turned away from female authority and expertise altogether and has rejected female spirituality in favor of technology, coded as white male scientific "knowledge." Along these lines, Morrison recounts in a 1988 interview a story from her family, which further illumines her trust in spiritual intuition over medical science:

> [F]or my mother to decide that myself and my sister, when we were infants, would not go into a tuberculosis hospital as this doctor said we should because we had been exposed to tuberculosis was not based on scientific evidence. She simply saw that no one ever came out of those sanitoriums in the '30s and also she had visitations. It was interesting to me that they were treating tubercular patients at that time in a way that would kill them because they didn't *have* all of the right information.
>
> (Davis 415)

Reluctant to put full faith in science, Morrison explains of midwives, "I feel the authority of those women," and this desire to honor their knowledge and raise questions concerning the reasons for its demise emerges through the figure of Lone.

Morrison's reference to visitations implies a spirit-world that interacts with humanity, also evident in Paradise. Expanding on the role of spirits and the supernatural in her childhood home, Morrison recounts:

> I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what really happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems. Without that, I think I would have been quite bereft because I would have been dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things and also I would have relied on information that even subsequent objectivity has proved to be fraudulent, you see.
>
> (Davis 415)

These spiritual communications are reflected in Paradise, where they both parallel biblical stories of messages communicated through dreams and angels, and West African beliefs in guidance by the spirits of the dead.

Morrison's fictional treatment of spirits, visions and the afterlife in Paradise, however, forms a picture that reflects more than her personal spiritual upbringing. In the final sections of the novel, we watch Consolata undergo a transformation after a strange man appears to her, who is likely a spiritual visitation, like Dovey's "friend." She then demands that the women at the Convent call her by her full name, Consolata Sosa, instead of the diminutive

"Connie," and leads them in a series of rituals, which causes their own strengthening and transformation. This name change is significant in that it signals a shift from a comforting but disrespected and ineffectual "play mother" to a strong matriarchal spiritual leader (262).

Consolata's rituals, however, point to more than an opposition to the traditional church-and-sermon male hierarchical structure around which Ruby centers. As the critic J. Brooks Bouson has argued, Morrison's portrayal of the ceremonies that emerge at the Convent, resembles the "African-Brazilian religion Candomblé—a hybrid mixture of Catholicism and African spirit worship," a religion which Morrison traveled to Brazil to research, though she never mentions it by name in Paradise (209). Bouson's theory is made all the more plausible by Morrison's references to Consolata's birthplace in Brazil and her intense instruction in Catholicism by Mary Magna, which closely align her to the roots of Candomblé.

Much of what occurs to catalyze Consolata's transformation appears rooted in the beliefs of Candomblé, just as the rituals she designs have a precedent in its practice. Prior to Consolata's transformation, Lone's persistent tutoring of her in skills that range from herbal remedies for menopause to actually "stepping in" to revive the dead, and Consolata's own facility, lead her to revive Mary Magna repeatedly from death. Given her strict Catholic upbringing, Consolata initially worries she has traded away a peaceful, blessed death and afterlife for herself, though Lone assures her, "God don't make mistakes. Despising His gift, now, that is a mistake" (246). Consolata, too, receives a stranger who appears to

her alone, much like Dovey's "friend," and who even more strongly evokes the idea of ancestral guidance that is a component of much African theology. Consolata's young man has long tea-colored hair and green eyes, as she did in her youth, and greets her familiarly, "Come on, girl. You know me" (252).

Until this point, the young women at the Convent have thought of Consolata only as "Connie," turning to her for comfort, but not crediting her with strength. They have perceived her only as

> [a] sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was….this granny goose who could be confided in or ignored, lied to or suborned; this play mother who could be hugged or walked out on, depending on the whim of the child. (262)

Though, as with Dovey's friend, we're never told precisely who Consolata's visitor is, he is visible and audible to her alone, and she transforms after his initial visit, displaying a physical and mental strength and clarity remarkable to the young women around her. Following her visitor's appearance, Consolata begins to function effectively as their priestess. A strong maternal religious leader, rather than a soothing but ineffectual mother-substitute, Consolata leads the women to transform themselves and shed their ludicrous daydreams and painful pasts.

The traumas the women have undergone that prompt them to take refuge at the Convent, rather than hindering them spiritually, enable them in Candomblé's terms to embody certain forces of energy. These "'external

forces,'—as ancestors or as the forces of nature—and as 'interior dimensions' of the individual, as part of the human soul and self," called *orixás,*become manifest in the Convent women and, significantly, are associated with specific Catholic religious figures (Murphy 78-9, qtd in Bouson 239-240). Lone's warning to Consolata to respect the balance of God's elements alludes to this manifestation of *orixás*in nature, and her visitation by the man with the tea -colored hair hints at their appearance through ancestors.[52]

The alternative religious universe of the Convent also parallels Candomblé in its matriarchal structure: a female priest presides over the ceremonies in Candomblé and serves as a spiritual mediator, as Connie does for the other women. The spiritual line is a female one whose locus is in the "*mae-di-santo*, or mother-of-saints,"—a suggestion that women are closest to divine power echoed in Connie's position as the spiritual heir of Mary Magna and Lone(with the other women, Mavis especially, as next in line) (Bouson 239). The women have shaved their heads, a rite of initiation into Candomblé. Like the rain dance in which the final traces of trauma are washed away, Candomblé participants dance in a ceremony in which they embody the traits of their *orixá* and thereby bring them into present being. So while "Seneca … finally let go of a dark morning in state housing" and "Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained [by blood]," "rain rinsed away a scary woman on an elevator and all fear of black water" for Pallas, and Consolata becomes "fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden" (283). The rain resonates

[52] Audre Lorde, in another parallel to Morrison, refers explicitly to *orixás* in her collection of poetry, The Black Unicorn (1978), which draws heavily on the beliefs of the Yoruba people of West Nigeria.

with biblical cleansing imagery, from the flood that wiped away a sin-ridden world to the ritual of baptism introduced in the gospels designed to cleanse the sin-ridden soul. The communal and artistic nature of these rituals—drawing symbolic self-portraits, dancing, baking bread—echoes the dancing, crying and laughing Baby Suggs led in the clearing; the intertwining of sensual and spiritual in Pilate's household of women; the lack of artistic outlet that thwarted Sula. The Convent religious ceremonies also resemble performance art: the women move from the language oriented "loud dreaming," akin to poetry or dramatic monologue, to the visual, in which they draw symbols and portraits on the cellar floor, to the final cleansing dance in the rain (Duvall 146). As John S. Mbiti observes in The Prayers of African Religion, "Worship is 'uttered' rather than meditational, in the sense that it is expressed in external forms, the body 'speaking' both for itself and the spirit" (58). That the Convent women "[g]radually … lost the days" suggests a Western and European sense of time shifting into what Philip Page refers to as a "vague, otherworldly time beyond time, a time free of the conditions of the present and free of the difficulties of remembering the African or the slave past," that characterizes African-American theology (18). African-American theology, like Candomblé, is a merging of two theologies whereby "the circular Great Time of West African religion and myth is translated into the timelessness of the Christian belief in life everlasting" (Page 18).

To understand Morrison's project, however, it's important to recall that even before Paradise's publication and her investigation of Candomblé, she

revealed an interest in "the concept of an ancestor not necessarily as a parent but as an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding, presence that is yours and is concerned about you, not quite like saints, but having the same sort of access" (Davis 415). The scenes she paints first of Dovey and her friend, and then of Consolata's flirtatious and familiar stranger, point to a more complex desire not solely to represent a version of Candomblé, but to recognize and validate spiritual beliefs derived from Africa in their modern forms. Familiarizing her readers with them through sympathetic characters works against the usual reading of such spiritual beliefs, one she characterizes as dismissive: "It's just that when it comes from discredited people," Morrison explains, "it somehow has some other exotic attachment: thus the word 'magic'" (Davis 415). "Magic" is what Ruby's citizens and the Catholic nuns who originally lived at the Convent attribute to Lone—the midwife who is one of the most sympathetic and reliable characters in the novel.

Though most of Morrison's audience won't recognize Candomblé, and would indeed perceive it as "exotic," they will likely note the breaking down of more conventional organized religion and the appropriation of certain Christian beliefs and rituals to which new value is assigned, such as the breaking of bread, with its echoes of the Last Supper, and the baptismal rain. The cathartic and therapeutic elements of the ceremony emerge strongly, as do the "echoes of New Age and spiritual regeneration" and the "powerful religious ecstasy," as Morrison herself describes the penultimate scene prior to the shooting (Marcus interview). "It's interesting and important to me that once the women are coherent and strong

and clean in their interior lives, they feel saved," she explains. And given the final scenes that occur *after* the women have been shot down, in which each appears to the person who abandoned or betrayed her in a meeting free of bitterness, it seems they are saved, having transformed into spirits themselves.

Connie, we see rocked in the arms of Piedade—which means "piety, pity, compassion, mercy" in Portuguese—and thus the final image of Paradise is one of mothering and integration (Bouson 215):

> [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 cerulean blue. (318)

The fascination with and romanticization of mother-daughter relationships has appeared before in Morrison's oeuvre, but its intersection with racial integration is new. Consolata, herself racially mixed, has moved from adoration of a white spiritual mother to a black one, and in between has spent her last years mothering a group of racially mixed women. Further, she is blind and thus unable to decipher race in a literal sense, though like Lone (and like the prototypical blind prophets of old, such as Tiresias), she can see into the hearts of women and discern their motives.

Susan Gubar reads such literary depictions of mixed-race mothering as representing the transcendence of racist culture and pointing to the possibility of a society that has conquered racism. Speaking of texts that foreground this

relationship, she concludes, "At their most optimistic, some of these narratives — attempting to envision a post-racist time—celebrate the permeable boundaries between mother and hybrid child as a panracial antidote to racism, an intersubjective solution to the violence of a racist past" (206). In the image of a white mother caring for a black or mixed-race child, as Mary Magna does for Consolata, she sees a reversal of the popular image of black domestics caring for white children:

> [W]e expect to see the pampered white child at the center of a narrative in which she is waited on by the devoted black domestic. Shirley Temple frolicking with Bojangles typifies the coupling of white child/black adult-servant which is rendered so frequently that it has moved to the very center of American cultural history. From youthful Huck accompanied by Nigger Jim to adolescent Scarlett O'Hara costumed by her Mammy, the white youth attended by the black adult spells out a number of disturbing ideological lessons. (204)

Even Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born contains a troubling description of her childhood black nurse as her "Black mother [who] was '*mine*' only for four years" (emph. added, 254). Rich herself later criticized her treatment of this relationship in a new introduction to the ten year anniversary edition of the book, acknowledging that she had "tried to blur that relationship into the mother-daughter relationship … gliding over the concrete system within which Black women have had to nurture the oppressor's children" (xxv). In contrast, then, to this stereotyped image of black women nursing white children, Gubar explains,

"the image of a white woman mothering, nursing, or tending the African-American baby eventually surfaced in imaginative literature as a sign of white efforts to off-set a history of conflictual racial Othering" (206). Though the final image of Paradise is of a black mother in the form of the Black Virgin, Piedade, Morrison has also situated this image within a sequence of mixed-race mothers and daughters throughout the text, thereby scrambling her readers' usual associations of white power and privilege and black servitude. Her line of interracial mothers, especially given the foregrounding of Consolata as a mixed race daughter and mother, points to this utopian impulse to overcome a racist past in America that Gubar identifies.

Further, in Connie's multi-colored face, Morrison may be referencing "the African-Brazilian notion of cultural 'mesticismo,' the gradual fusion of the Amerindian, European, and African races in Brazil to create a new race, which stands in opposition to Euro-American authority" (Bouson 141). Consolata herself resembles 'the famous Black Madonna image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Consoler of the afflicted who is depicted as having greenish eyes, black hair and brown skin" (Bouson 214-15). The final image of Piedade, a Black Madonna, cradling Consolata alludes to these emphases on harmony with nature, mercy displacing condemnation, maternal love, sexual freedom, and racial integration—all in a present, if unstable, Paradise rather than in a utopian one of future imaginings.

Back in Ruby, however, Misner, the outsider who has raised questions about social activism and racial relations in the larger world, appears to be the

town's best chance for redemption. Months after the massacre at the Convent, Deacon Morgan, who participated in the raid, walks barefoot through the center of town to Misner's office to ask for help in rethinking his life and separating from his unrepentant twin, Steward, who killed Consolata, Deacon's former lover. Deacon's naked feet, alluding to Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, signal his newfound humility. Morrison's statement from her Nobel Prize address, delivered five years prior to the publication of Paradise, sheds light on the relation of these final scenes of Deacon's repentance and the Convent women's transcendence to Morrison's position on religion in a postmodern light. Speaking of the Tower of Babel, she explains:

> The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would've expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven … and what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty, if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life, not heaven as post life. (qtd. in Peterson 270)

Morrison demands of religion a shifting of focus from the hereafter to the here—thus the collapse of time and space that allows the Convent women to appear and disappear, and the earthly redemption of Deacon Morgan that demands a present,

rather than an indefinite, future manifestation. The final phrase of the novel, "down *here* in Paradise" reinforces the importance Morrison places on heaven as internal, earthly and "complicated, demanding" (emph added, 318). The postmodern face of religion, however, appears most strongly in Morrison's emphasis on multiple narratives, so that the ultimate spiritualizing virtue shifts from the need to obey a specific and unchanging set of moral laws to the more liberal secular value of "tak[ing] the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives" (270). This concept of being spiritually multi-lingual as the quality that brings one closest to God falls naturally into step with Morrison's imagining of a multi-racial individual and community as the height of spirituality. Here, the greatest test of the depth and authenticity of one's openness and ability to comprehend and appreciate another perspective is racial difference. And those who already embody religious and racial multiplicity—as Consolata does—will be more receptive to a more original and multivalent form of spirituality, such as Morrison suggests in her fictional adaptation of Candomblé, and to the redemption she imagines through the figure of the Black Virgin.

Paradise comes as a culmination of the themes of gender, race, and ecumenical communities that have emerged in the texts examined in the preceding chapters. The feminist desire to overturn patriarchal theology and institutional structures appears in this maternal idea of God suggested by Consolata, herself a "new and revised Reverend Mother," who offers strength and healing, as well as solace. By exploring maternal relationships as the locus of spirituality, Morrison effectively shifts religious discourse from God the Father

and God the Son to an exploration of God as Mother, an image that evokes mercy, nurturance and communion with the natural world. The attendant turn to more innovative religious practices and coalitions in Paradise also reflects the postwar American attraction to ecumenicalism and invention, as Morrison turns to a system that fuses different ethnic and religious traditions. Yet the attempt to make religion work as an active force to heal social injustices, and especially racial divisions, also surfaces through Morrison's exploration of religion within African-American culture, both in her representation of its churches and her threading of West African theology throughout the text. Like the other postwar women writers discussed here, Morrison emphasizes religion's potential to inform resistance to hegemonic structures and provide a means of overcoming marginalization and trauma. The deliberate ambiguity around the final images of the Convent women and the Black Virgin, Piedade, suggests the open possibilities of the shape this new brand of spirituality might take, even as Paradise demands a revised religious practice, which embraces women and crosses racial lines, not be delayed until the future, but appear in the present.

Epilogue

Racial Divides/Religious Communities:

Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees

In 2002, four years after Paradise was published, a novel hit the New York Times best-seller list with a structure peculiarly similar to that of Morrison's novel. The setting was again the rural South in the late sixties, just after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The main characters, like the Convent women, take refuge with a family of women who live in a house on the outskirts of town. As in Paradise, the group is racially mixed: the house is owned by a black woman and her two sisters, and it is a white teenage girl and her black housekeeper who flee there, the girl from her abusive father and the housekeeper from a group of white men threatening to imprison or even murder her. Their hostess, like Consolata, is portrayed as a maternal figure, though she has no children of her own, and is close to nature through her work of keeping bees. Neighboring women come regularly to her home to participate in religious services, which she has patch-worked together from disparate religious traditions that center around supplication to a Black Virgin Mary. The white teenage girl who has taken up residence in the house, is able to overcome the emotional scars left from her past, through her hostess's spiritual mentoring and the beliefs and rituals in which she participates. This girl must then face down her father, a man who uses violence to humiliate and control her, in a climactic confrontation that parallels the men's raid on the Convent in Paradise. In perhaps the most striking similarity to Paradise,

the novel closes with the white teenage girl evoking an image of a black Virgin, protecting and comforting her as a mother.

The book is Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees. Its heroine, Lily Owens, thus achieves spiritual transcendence through communal living with a family of women, self-styled religious rituals, and racial integration. Kidd's novel exemplifies the two trends that have emerged most clearly in American women's fiction over the last quarter of the twentieth-century: the move on the part of women writers to a creative and individualized religious practice rather than a traditional institutionalized one, and the examination of the intersections of religion, gender and race as they shape identity.

Kidd's novel is narrated exclusively by its fourteen-year old heroine, Lily Owens. Lily represents a youth who remains uncorrupted by the adult world, similar to Salinger's Holden Caulfield—and because of Kidd's foregrounding of racial relations, still closer to Harper Lee's Scout and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Most readers will sympathize when Lily's father threatens her and she is excluded from "charm school" at the local Women's Club because she has no mother, and cheer her on when she runs away from her father and thus escapes the social marginalization she feels in their community.

Lily's innocence stands in contrast to racial divisiveness of the world around her. The summer of 1964, the year in which the book is set, witnessed the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the violence that followed in its wake first touches Lily through her black housekeeper, Rosaleen. On her way into town to register to vote, Rosaleen has a confrontation with three white men, and is

arrested, beaten, and then hospitalized by the prison. Lily's scheme to sneak her out of the hospital further necessitates their flight from the town.

As we learn later, Lily's parents married because her mother, Deborah, was pregnant. When Lily was four, Deborah ran away, enraging and embittering her husband (Lily refers to him as "T. Ray," an abbreviation of his first name, Terrence Ray). Like K.D. in Paradise, who comes after the Convent women with the posse from Ruby after his lover, Gigi, has rejected him, T. Ray's response to Deborah's abandonment is violent: he treats Lily like another version of her mother and projects his rage, suspicions and insecurities about his wife's sexuality onto her. Withholding affection and inflicting violence on Lily becomes a means of retribution towards his wife for rejecting him. At fourteen, Lily has had no sexual experience, yet the possibility of her emergent sexuality clearly disturbs T. Ray and he punishes her for it. "It was fashionable to wear cashmere twinsets and plaid kilts midthigh," she explains, "but T. Ray said hell would be an ice rink before I went out like that—did I want to end up pregnant like Bitsy Johnson whose skirt barely covered her ass?" (9). When T. Ray discovers Lily out in their orchard at night, a place to which she retreats to think about her mother, he calls her a slut, assuming she has snuck out to meet a boy, and punishes her by forcing her to kneel on a pile of grits. It is not until Lily has run away, however, that she actually has her first romantic encounter with a black teenage boy as kind and free from racism as Lily is herself.

Lily's escape from and eventual victory over T. Ray is linked to her emerging sexual autonomy and reflects the larger, widespread desire in modern

culture to reconcile sexuality with spirituality, that scholars as diverse as the religious historian Amanda Porterfield and the theologian and former monk Ean Begg identify. These qualities have been associated with the emergence of the Black Virgin in modern culture.[53] Referred to in Kidd's novel as "Our Lady" or the "black Mary," the Black Virgin embodies all the qualities she does in *Paradise*—the spiritually medicinal power of nature, political rights of the oppressed, sexual freedom, and maternal protection and forgiveness. This image plays a still more prominent role throughout The Secret Life of Bees. The qualities of the Black Mary, however, are expressed most clearly through August Boatwright, as the spiritual leader of the women's community Lily enters.

August plays a very similar role to Consolata in Paradise by taking the outcast Lily into her home, and teaching her about the Black Virgin as a way to help her overcome her painful past, just as Consolata introduces the Convent women to Piedade and heals them through the rituals of Candomblé . T. Ray's abusive fathering is thus countered by the nurturing mothering Lily receives from August. That August eventually reveals herself to have been Lily's own mother's housekeeper, and that she had sheltered her mother years before from T. Ray, contributes to her role as an ideal surrogate mother.

August's creative ecumenicalism is entirely inclusive. Her religion is directed toward healing personal and political traumas, and the only requirement for religious rituals or symbols to be incorporated into the Boatwright's worship is

[53] Ean Begg, the author of The Cult of the Black Virgin, states, "The return of the Black Virgin to the forefront of collective consciousness has coincided with the profound psychological need to reconcile sexuality and religion" (28).

that they meet a need, not adhere to a specific tradition. Thus August draws from Judaism by constructing a wall in the yard based on the Wailing Wall, for her emotionally disturbed sister, May, to tuck prayers into when she is troubled. The sisters, however, also kneel with rosaries together to repeat Hail Mary's every night. To their Catholic reverence for the Virgin Mary, around which their religion centers, August and her sisters "mix in our own ingredients," a strategy derived from their father who was, as August ironically puts it, an "Orthodox Eclectic" (90). In addition, then, to Catholic and Jewish symbols and forms of prayer, the Daughters of Mary, as their organization is called, dance in their meetings, form a processional to touch the statue of Mary's heart, and participate in a variation of the call-and-response prayer of African-American protestant churches. The appeal of this mix of self authorized rituals and symbols points to the increasingly ecumenical orientation toward religious practice in America that Kidd's novel both reflects and perpetuates.

Lily's participation makes the image all the more attractive to an audience hungry for an end to racial divisiveness in America. Nearly forty years after the Civil Rights Movement, Americans appear eager to counter the violence of those images with a vision of integration and healing. The political context of the South in the summer of 1964, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the racial violence that both preceded it and followed in its wake, is instrumental to the plot of the novel—and events such as the 1963 bombing that killed four little girls at a church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the 1964 slaying of three civil rights workers in Mississippi are referenced in the fiction. After Johnson signs the Civil

Rights Act, Rosaleen resists three white men who attempt to prevent her from registering to vote, the event that prompts Lily and her to flee their home and find the Boatwrights. Later, Zach, the black teenager who works with August and is romantically involved with Lily, is arrested when one of his friends hits a white man with a Coke bottle he has thrown, on a day when it is rumored that a white movie star plans to bring a black woman to the local movie theater and thereby integrate it. This incident with Zach leads to the death of August's sister, May, when she drowns herself after hearing the news of his arrest. These fictional racial incidents Kidd invents and situates alongside larger historical political events serve a deeper thematic function: they force Lily to face down gendered and national racial violence on a personal level. It is this particular evil of a misogynistic and racist world that becomes a litmus text for the practical value of religion and the idea of God.

Kidd's handling of these issues, however, is disturbing in its convergence with certain racial stereotypes. August effectively mothers the motherless Lily, taking her in and treating her with unconditional love. This makes for a relationship more idealized than the psychologically complex and flawed mother-daughter dynamics of Paradise. August is childless (she valued freedom more than marriage, she tells Lily) and as the previous housekeeper and much beloved mother figure to Lily's mother, August bears a subtle but uncomfortable resemblance to a stereotypical "mammy" who figures throughout Southern fiction, most famously in Gone With the Wind. She is a white-girl wish-fulfillment—an all-wise, unconditionally loving, de-sexualized figure with no

husband or children of her own, no resentment of the racist treatment she's received at the hands of whites, no reservations about devoting all her time and affection to the daughter or granddaughter of the employers who exploited her. Rosaleen, similarly, is a character whose only purpose seems to be to mother Lily, a point illustrated by her jealousy of August, when Lily grows close to her. Unlike August, Rosaleen is physically heavy set, uneducated and coarse in her manners. Rosaleen also has no husband or children, but also appears thoroughly content to mother Lily, bringing her a cake on her birthday and comforting her after T. Ray's abuse. It is this very type of character that Morrison combated with her portrayal of Baby Suggs, and Alice Walker with her character Sofia from The Color Purple. August and Rosaleen, unlike the characters created by Walker and Morrison, appear to bear whites no ill-will and love and support Lily as much or more than they do their own family. Discussing the extent to which her characters were modeled on people she knew, Kidd explains, "the inspiration for August came mostly for a vision I carry inside, of feminine wisdom, compassion, strength." August is largely an embodiment of spiritually desirable characteristics in the form of a mother figure. As such, she is instrumental for Lily to recognize and overcome her own racism, for Lily marvels at August's qualities of mind, admitting that until meeting her, "I thought [black women] could be smart, but not as smart as me, me being white" (78).

August's younger sister, June, who is a teacher and musician, expresses all the race and class-based resentment of Lily that August appears to transcend. The fact that Lily is white and that they are sheltering her puts their household in

danger, June argues. As Lily later learns, June resented her mother because August had to work as a housekeeper for her mother's family when she was unable to find work as a teacher. In this way, June functions as a type of "madwoman in the attic"—a figure who expresses the resentment that it would be normal for the other black characters to feel. Lily, however, wins even June over in the end through a water fight on a hot day, and the affectionate bonds she forges with August, Rosaleen, June and the other black women who make up the "Daughters of Mary" leave her with "[a]ll these mothers…more mothers than any eight girls off the street" (302).

A deep-rooted fantasy is thus played out, both of racism forgiven and race transcended, and of being mothered and nurtured. The two desires bleed into one another: mother-love, as entirely pure and unconditional (as it is popularly imagined to be), becomes the most satisfying manifestation of forgiveness from African-Americans that a white female writer can imagine. As Kidd herself explains,

> [D]espite the African-American women who prominently populated the world of my childhood, there were enormous racial divides. I vividly remember the summer of 1964 with its voter registration drives, boiling racial tensions, and the erupting awareness of the cruelty of racism. I was never the same after that summer. I was left littered with memories I could not digest. I think I knew even back then that one day I would have to find a kind of redemption for them through writing. ("A Conversation" 4)

Kidd finds this redemption through giving voice to a white girl she can identify with, who is in the remarkable and nearly impossible position of not being complicit in the racism of her society, and of being forgiven the sins of the dominant culture through the mother-love of the Daughters of Mary. August, May, and June have names that refer to nature through the fecundity of summer months and are further associated with a harmonious relationship with nature through bee-keeping. The sisters thus come to reinforce the essentialist stereotype of black women as "earth mothers," in tune with nature and superhuman in strength and love. Kidd makes it clear in the story that Lily's name is meant to allude to the pairing of lilies with the Virgin Mary, but regardless of the author's conscious intent, Lily's name also alludes to whiteness and racial purity—witness the phrase, "lily white"—ironically, casting Lily as a representative of white America.

The Secret Life of Bees is a tremendously popular novel, still on displays of recommended reading in bookstores four years after its publication. Its appeal suggests not only that the longing for redemption Kidd's novel expresses taps into a collective desire of white American readers, but also that we are still most comfortable with redemption coming in the form of these black stereotypes that serve as background for a white protagonist's spiritual growth. This element of The Secret Life of Bees takes us back to Adrienne Rich's 1976 description of her childhood nurse in Of Woman Born as her "black mother," which Rich later acknowledged "glid[ed] over the concrete system within which Black women have had to nurture the oppressor's children," and to one of the first texts

examined here, Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," (1964) in which black bodies serve almost solely as a means of redemption for a white protagonist (Rich xxv).

The intersections between Paradise and The Secret Life of Bees demonstrate the intensity of the desire for a maternal divine presence among women, and the figure of the Black Virgin serves to collapse this longing with a valuing of freedom of thought and action in realms that span from the sexual to the political. The differences between these two novels, however, suggest Morrison and Kidd's own different literary communities and traditions. Morrison's investigation and representation of Candomblé stems from her interest in its African hybrid roots, and her affinity to African beliefs about the spirit world and the "living-dead." Further, she constructs a "collective *bildungsroman,*" a form closely associated with African-American literature, as noted earlier, which allows the reader access to the consciousness of multiple characters with competing interests. Lily's singularity as the sole narrator and protagonist of her story, by contrast, means that readers see the black characters who populate Kidd's novel only at a distance, through Lily's eyes, and in terms of how they promote her growth. Yet tellingly, even as the divergences of The Secret Life of Bees and Paradise are informed by race, their authors share a vision of religion that is tested and proved by its transcendence of race—the paradox of a culture saturated by a history of racial tensions and divisions, looking for an answer in a new idea of God.

Morrison and Kidd represent a larger trend among American women writers who set out to examine the role of gender in the construction of religion,

and religion in the construction of gender, but find themselves grappling with the way Americans have historically experienced race as it informs the formation of religious identity and communities. These questions of race and gender have become prominent in American culture at this historical moment, due to social injustices exposed by the Civil Rights and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Race and gender thus emerge in the exploration of religion and elsewhere, as the vehicle for larger questions on which groups have been excluded, because of the way hierarchies function within American culture. The exclusion of certain voices and dominance of others in turn inspires writers in marginalized positions to use literature to articulate alternative visions of the world. This cultural phenomenon reaches beyond the works included here, and needs to be considered in light of the tensions between America's deep valuing of individual identity, and the need of many Americans to rely on group identity as a means of being heard, due to their lack of access to social or economic power.

The scrutiny of religion's impact on societies and nations, however, has only intensified in American culture since the attacks of September 11th, and shows no sign of disappearing. Novels and memoirs by women writers, which foreground the problems and possibilities of religious traditions and communities, continue to proliferate. Annie Dillard's For the Time Being (1999), a personal narrative, reflects on theology by thinkers as diverse as Teilhard de Chardin and the first-century rabbi, Akiva ben Joseph, in an ecumenical meditation on humanity's relationship to the divine. Anne Lamott's memoirs, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (1999) and the more recentPlan B: Further

Thoughts on Faith (2005), are best-sellers that treat her deep exploration of prayer with irreverent humor, and describe the support she finds as one of the few white members of a largely black inner-city church. Finally, Marilynne Robinson's novel Gilead, the winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize, represents a Midwestern minister at the end of his life, shedding light on the religious history of protestant America through his reflections. Through texts like these, we see that the tide of personal and fictional narratives centering on religion shows no sign of ebbing, but continues to build, intertwined with American social ills and cultural mythologies, into the twenty-first century. The direction this body of work is moving in may be unclear, but the questions these authors raise about the relationship between religion and political ideologies has only become more urgent.

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