DIVINE HERESY: WOMEN'S REVISIONS OF SACRED TEXTS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2008

University of Oregon Graduate School

Confirmation of Approval and Acceptance of Dissertation prepared by:

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Title:

"Divine Heresy: Women's Revisions of Sacred Texts"

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December 13, 2008

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An Abstract of the Dissertation of

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in the Department of English to be taken December 2008

Title: DIVINE HERESY: WOMEN'S REVISIONS OF SACRED TEXTS

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This dissertation argues that American women writers have revised sacred texts to challenge patriarchy, racism, and colonialism and rewritten American history to reveal how biblical scripture has been implicated in these processes. I focus on the literary strategies of Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Lucille Clifton to rewrite sacred texts and create myths for a new society. In different ways, these writers redefine Christianity, often by countering the erasures of women in biblical scripture, recovering suppressed texts such as those from the gnostic tradition, and creating new sacred texts. Chapter I traces the history of feminist scriptural revision from the early feminist movement to its resurgence in the late-twentieth century. In this period, a number of authors rewrote religious scripture from a pre-Christian tradition; Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* played a critical role in the attention given to scripture suppressed by Christianity and the potential it holds for writers interested in recovering alternative epistemologies. Chapter II focuses on Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, which are concerned

with the way biblical theology is proliferated through apocalyptic narrative strategies and omniscient narration. This chapter investigates the shift Morrison makes between biblical and gnostic concerns in the first two books of her trilogy. Chapter III analyzes the final book in Morrison's trilogy, *Paradise*, and compares it to Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*. Here, Morrison relies on gnostic sources to scrutinize the effects of biblical notions of utopia on literarature and its implications for social relations. *Gardens* uses the same sources but puts them to different uses, subverting their authority in a rewriting that supports Native survival through a program of cultural syncretism. Chapter IV examines the poetry of Lucille Clifton, who, although initially revising Christianity through her refiguring of the Lucifer character, rejects that tradition following the events of 9/11. Clifton's work in *Mercy* marks a juncture in women's revisions of sacred texts in its departure from Christianity and its introduction of a new sacred text and moral code not predicated upon hierarchy. In conclusion, I consider how these writers extend feminist and anti-racist traditions of scriptural revision explored in the introduction.

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PUBLICATIONS:

Brassaw, Mandolin. "Sacred Spaces: Feminist Revisions in *Paradise*." *International Journal of the Humanities*. 5.12. Melbourne, Australia: Common Ground Publishing, 2008. 15-22.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Shari Huhndorf for her encouragement and support in every stage of this project. This dissertation was funded in part by the Jane Grant Dissertation Fellowship from the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon.

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—Miriam Kessler

CHAPTER I

THE INDICTMENT SERVED ON US IN PARADISE: WOMEN'S REVISIONS OF SACRED TEXTS

Uses of biblical imagery and allusion for political—often colonial, racist, and patriarchal—purposes have a long history in the United States. Although the Judeo-Christian tradition has not always been used as a vehicle of oppression in the Americas—it has also been used as a means to resist oppression—(mis)interpretation and (mis)use of biblical sacred texts has enabled injustice since the early days of the Republic. Representations of the United States as a "New Eden," for example, were connected to European expansion, and the hierarchies introduced in the biblical creation story served as the justification for the subordination of women, the colonization of Native peoples, and the enslavement of Africans. Indians (and later Africans) were conceived as the "beasts" of the Garden in the narratives of early American colonialism. In many instances, the biblical text itself seemed to encourage such oppression through ambiguous language and narrative that could be applied to virtually any social or political scenario. Genesis 1: 28, for example, appeared to encourage the logic of empire with its divine mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it [and rule] over every living creature." Likewise, the "Curse of Ham" was thought to explain and justify racism and the enslavement of Africans since Noah cursed his grandson, Canaan (the son of Ham), by claiming in Genesis 9: 25: "the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers." The Canaanites were believed to have settled in Africa. Many biblical passages in both the Old and New

Testaments sanction slavery, and even Jesus, who had the opportunity to speak against it in Luke 12: 45-48, did not condemn the practice.[1]

These biblical precedents extended to social practice and literary production in the United States: Jefferson Davis, for example, President of the Confederate States of America from 1861 to 1865, claimed that slavery "was established by decree of Almighty God…it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation…it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts" (Rowland 286). Davis' contemporary, U.S. Senator James H. Hammond further argued against abolition by claiming that "the doom of Ham has been branded on the form and features of his African descendents" (37-38).[2] Likewise, in one of the earliest examples of American literature, Increase Mather's "Introduction" to *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, utilizes the "beastly" imagery of the Garden when he refers to Native peoples as "wild, cruel, barbarous, brutish (in a word) diabolical creatures" (136). As late as the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence would persist in referring to the Native American as "the demon of the continent" (qtd. in Bellin 1).

Beyond its racist and colonialist uses, biblical scripture has also been utilized to serve patriarchal interests. After all, in the book of Genesis, God gives Adam the authority to "rule over [Eve]" (3: 16). In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul claims that "the head of the woman is man" (11: 3), and in Ephesians, he admonishes women to obey, saying "wives, submit to your husbands" (5: 22). 1 Peter refers to women as the "weaker partner" in marriage (3: 7). These passages and others throughout the Bible have affirmed patriarchal practice and justified the suppression of the rights of women both

inside and outside the church. Together with their racist and colonialist uses they structure the legacy of oppression that is the history of the United States. To this day, Christian symbols and myths remain intimately linked to political power in both the public and private sectors.

Not surprisingly, then, Christianity comes under scrutiny in the works of many American writers, especially women concerned with challenging colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Because imaginative production serves as a primary site for the dissemination, propagation, and deployment of cultural myths, literary rewritings of religious scripture have been an important aspect of such scrutiny. This project analyzes the ways American women writers rewrite sacred texts to scrutinize historical and contemporary hegemonic practices. Specifically, I argue that women authors in the twentieth century have revised biblical scripture as a way to criticize American history and rewritten non-biblical sources to envision a future in which patriarchy, racism, and colonialism are eradicated, in part, through the revival of suppressed cultural myths and practices. I focus in particular on the strategies of Lucille Clifton, Toni Morrison, and Leslie Marmon Silko to resist or redefine patriarchal Christianity and to establish alternative traditions and power relations, either by filling in the gaps left in biblical scripture (as Clifton does) or by recovering suppressed texts and traditions such as the gnostic gospels (Morrison and Silko). Relying upon and frequently subverting the authority of Christian and non-Christian sacred texts, these writers attempt to create new myths as a foundation for social change.

While the oppressive potential of biblical scripture was a prominent feature of the new Republic, resistance to the social hierarchies supported by the Bible emerged with

the establishment of the Puritan colonies. Although American feminist writers have revised these central biblical narratives since the country's Puritan beginnings, those early revisions were aimed only at obtaining authority for women writers and largely ignored issues of race and colonialism. Amy Benson Brown's *Rewriting the Word* contends that biblical revisionism has been a prominent feature of the literature of women of the United States and links the earliest biblical revisions to the work of Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Anne Hutchinson. In 1638, Anne Hutchinson was banished from the Puritan community in Boston for her unorthodox biblical interpretations and teachings, especially those espousing equality for women. Brown claims that although Anne Bradstreet's relationship to the Bible remained in accordance with the orthodox teachings of her Puritan community, her role as the first prominent American poet set the stage for the biblical revisions of women who followed by defying conventional gendered models of authority:

> Though Anne Bradstreet was celebrated by her community while Anne Hutchinson was banished, both Annes represent a usurpation of biblically based structures of authority. The spirits of the dutiful daughter of Puritanism and the 'American Jezebel' enliven the biblical revisions of the women who follow. (3)

Although Bradstreet didn't literally revise her biblical source, her relationship to it changed due to her poetic aspirations and served as a model for writers she preceded. These early practitioners of biblical revision, noted by Brown, were thus less interested in revising the Bible itself as in incorporating it as a basis for their own authority. "Women writers who engage the Bible," Brown continued, are negotiating "a reconstruction of

their literary inheritance and the authority of their own word" (3). After all, she concluded, "'In the beginning was the Word' is both a challenge and a seduction to someone who feels her own word to be less than powerful" (164). While this same logic also motivates revisionist writers who follow Bradstreet and Hutchinson, it is clear that what Brown refers to as the earliest examples of American biblical revisionism are actually more symbolic than literal—aimed to garner rather than subvert the authority of the sacred text. By contrast, later revisionists turn to specific biblical passages and narratives and revise them in the context of their contemporary historical moment, and the authority these authors seek is largely outside the traditional sphere of the Bible. They understand that the logic of sacred texts shapes cultural production, and cultural production informs social structures, so lasting change relies on a radical revision of the myths that structure society itself.

Beyond the Puritan beginnings illuminated by Brown, feminist biblical revisions also played a central role in the early feminist movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, although, as critics have pointed out, that movement from its inception was hardly monolithic. Many different perspectives emerged from a variety of social and political contexts and experiences, all of which affected the treatment of scriptural revision in feminist theology and in literature. It was during this first wave of the feminist movement, however, that women began to articulate the idea that, contrary to the popular rhetoric of the time, "the experience out of which Christian theology has emerged is not universal experience but the experience of the dominant culture" (Grant 10). At the 1885 Annual Convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association, these

early feminists presented a manifesto that outlined the problem—albeit focused only on women's oppression—as one rooted in faulty hermeneutics:

> 'WHEREAS, The dogmas incorporated in religious creeds derived from Judaism, teaching that woman was an after-thought in the creation, her sex a misfortune, marriage a condition of subordination, and maternity a curse, are contrary to the law of God (as revealed in nature), and to the precepts of Christ, and 'WHEREAS, These dogmas are an insidious poison, sapping the vitality of our civilization, blighting woman, and, through her, paralyzing humanity; therefore be it 'Resolved, That we call on the Christian ministry, as leaders of thought, to teach and enforce the fundamental idea of creation, that man was made in the image of God, male and female, and given equal rights over the earth, but none over each other. And, furthermore, we ask their recognition of the scriptural declaration that, in the Christian religion, there is neither male nor female, bond nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. (qtd. in Grant 16)

Although these early feminists felt the problem lay, not with Christianity or the Bible, but with false interpretations of scripture itself, they nonetheless proposed a direct connection between exclusive male imagery of God, the hierarchies expressed in the creation story, and the structural oppression of women. Despite the fact that they were attuned to the gendered inequalities derived from the logic of the Garden of Eden narrative and its use historically, their argument lacked any discussion of the implications for racist and colonialist misuse of biblical texts, a point taken up by women of color during the second wave of the feminist movement.

At the time, however, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a social activist and leading figure of the early women's movement, took the argument one step further when she claimed that all systems, social and political—including ecclesiastical/religious systems—are structured and maintained to limit the power of women; she famously authored *The Woman's Bible* in 1898 because she believed that "the Bible in its teachings degrades Women from Genesis to Revelation" (inscription on verso). In Stanton's conception, the Bible is not the inspired "Word of God," but, instead, "like any other book, [written by men and] to be judged by its merits" (9). Her contention regarding the overarching effects of religious doctrine on the suppression of the rights of women wasn't small, either:

> The canon and civil law; church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man. Creeds, codes, Scriptures and statutes, are all based on this idea. Creeds, codes, forms, ceremonies and customs of society, church ordinances and discipline all grow out of this idea. (7)

In fact, she continued, "the most bitter outspoken enemies of woman are found among clergymen and bishops of the Protestant religion" (13). Stanton was among the first to recognize the structural nature of oppression—the idea that institutions are organized to maintain the power of the few at the expense of the many. Although Stanton had some connections with the abolitionist movement of her day and was one of the friends of Frederick Douglass, her focus was mainly on the structural oppression of women. Stanton's objective in *The Woman's Bible* was to revise "those texts and chapters directly

referring to women, and those also in which women are made prominent by exclusion" (5). The members of the Revising Committee, as Stanton described the process: "each [. . .] purchased two Bibles, ran through them from Genesis to Revelations [sic], marking all the texts that concerned women. The passages were then cut out, and pasted in a blank book, and the commentaries then written underneath" (6). The work of Stanton and her contemporaries to revise biblical texts was among the first of its kind, especially during the early feminist movement. The authors of this study follow in her revisionary model, since rather than merely incorporating biblical imagery and allusion to comment on or illuminate larger societal ills, or to establish themselves as authorities in a society which denies them power, they turn to the sacred text itself and revise the source as a means to alter the society it structures.

The second wave of the feminist movement in the late-twentieth century likewise introduced significant contributions to the field of feminist theology. As Jacquelyn Grant argues in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, "a significant aspect of contemporary [secular] feminism recaptures the spirit of nineteenth century feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in identifying religion as the root of the oppression of women" (17). Feminist theology developed out of the second wave of the feminist movement in the latter half of the twentieth century had, according to Grant, three identifiable perspectives: "(1) the Biblical Feminist Perspective; (2) the Liberation Feminist Perspective; and (3) the Rejectionist Feminist Perspective" (4). The Biblical Feminist Perspective maintained the Bible "as the primary source of theology. As such, [it] provides a central authority which cannot be evaded. These persons are not biblical literalists and, in fact, do approach the Bible with a critical, exegetical eye" (4).

Liberation Feminists are those who, like the proponents of various liberation theologies, viewed God as the champion of the oppressed and thus committed to the liberation of women in particular; in general, proponents of this view considered the Bible "as central authority and define[d] their position primarily, though not exclusively, in relation to it" or they "view[ed] Scripture as simply one, but not an overriding, source for doing theology" (4). Finally, Rejectionist Feminists, according to Grant, "view[ed] both scripture and tradition as irredeemably oppressive. [. . .] Both are rejected as sources for the reflections of serious religious feminist thinkers" (5). In other words, the divine is found outside the constraints of a corrupt patriarchal Christian system, historically manipulated to preserve the status quo and maintain the power of the dominant. Although the many theological perspectives to arise from the second wave of the feminist movement are certainly more nuanced and varied than can be described briefly here, these three positions remain helpful in articulating a basic framework for understanding the feminist hermeneutics developed during this period.

Brown's study of the use of biblical revisions by American women writers concludes by arguing that "the central subject of feminist biblical revision [. . .] is the problems and possibilities of women's authority in a culture shaped by the masculine hegemony that the Bible has come to represent" (163). Rather than merely claiming a text that has historically provided authority for its (male) constituents, "feminist biblical revision questions the very foundations of biblical and literary orthodoxy" itself (4). One way writers have done this is through a revisionary model similar in structure to the one defined by Grant as Liberation Feminism. The Catholic liberation theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that the Bible cannot be accepted in its entirety:

> A feminist theological hermeneutic of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of women from oppressive sexist texts, structures, institutions, and internalized male values maintains that solely those traditions and texts of the Bible that transcend their patriarchal culture and time have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible should not continue to be a tool for the patriarchal oppression of women. (qtd. in Grant 116-17)

Many American women writers engaged in feminist revisions of sacred texts fall under the Liberation category. In *The Red Tent*, for example, Anita Diamant revises the story of Dinah, who, in the book of Genesis, is named briefly and seemingly as an afterthought at the end of a long list of her father Jacob's sons. She is only mentioned one other time, after the murder of her husband by her brothers; even then she serves as a minor character, and the story is told in the voice of an omniscient narrator who favors the male perspective. *The Red Tent* counters the trivialization of Dinah and rewrites her story to give her the voice scripture has denied her, starting with her childhood as the only daughter among four mothers in the red tent. The novel engages contemporary debates about gender and patriarchy by locating these issues in the familiar Genesis stories that are at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition; it maintains a connection with the tradition at the same time as it calls attention to the silences inherent in it, and as such, is linked most closely with the Liberation Feminist position. The novel is one of many similar examples.

The Rejectionist position, by contrast, argued that the entire spiritual tradition is predicated upon corruption and should therefore be discarded: "Christianity itself should be castrated by cutting away the products of super-male arrogance: the myth of sin and

salvation that are simply two diverse symptoms of the same disease" (qtd. in Grant 161). Rather than the Bible, goddess myths and other traditions for sacred texts could offer more positive theological models for women. Although writing much earlier than second-wave feminism, it is in a similarly rejectionist strain that H. D. writes:

> she carries a book but it is not
> the tome of the ancient wisdom,
>
> the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages
> of the unwritten volume of the new (qtd. in Ostriker 56)

This new book, then, while clearly echoing Pounds' modernist manifesto to "make it new," is also engaged in a process of scriptural revision and means to replace the corrupted text of the old. The fact that the poem's subject is gendered female indicates that she, in particular, is in need of this "new" text. That H.D.'s own contribution to the "new," the poem itself, takes the shape it does is an indicator that form, too, can be implicated in structures of oppression. At the heart of these revisions is the insistence of scriptural revisionists "on the power of writers and critics to shape our conception of the ideal order" (Brown 10). In other words, the goal of scriptural revision is to destabilize the authority of the Bible—that sacred text which provides fodder for the cultural myths shaping society—and thereby alter society itself. Despite the importance and prevalence of this strategy, very little critical attention has been paid to feminist revisions of sacred texts. Ostriker's *Feminist Revision and the Bible* and Amy Benson Brown's *Rewriting the Word* remain the central studies in the field of scriptural revision, and neither one treats feminist rewritings of sacred texts other than the Bible. While other scholars have

analyzed these writers' use of the Bible, no critical work has yet examined feminist rewritings in the primary texts I consider or addressed the intersections of race, class, and gender in revisions of sacred texts, the central concern of this project.

Glaringly absent from the above discussion of the feminist movement is an awareness of racism and colonialism as structures of oppression. As this absence makes apparent, the women's movement itself was wrought with its own forms of racism, which Hazel Carby and Patricia Hill Collins, among others, have pointed out. Grant, for her part, claims that "the reality of racism in the feminist movement is testified to by the conspicuous absence of large numbers of [women of color]" participating and "although feminist theology has made an important critique of the sexist limitations of the dominant theologies of Europe and North America, it is not without serious limitations, especially when evaluated in the light of [the experience of women of color]" (36, 195). Both Carby and Hill Collins have argued for a feminist critical practice that acknowledges the importance of interrogating the interrelationships between race, class, and gender; Carby, in particular, questions the concept of a "sisterhood" of all women and argues against a "feminist historiography and criticism which denies the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and [. . .] takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as a norm" (17). Grant draws parallels between these concerns and feminist theology when she claims that the hermeneutics emerging from the second wave of the women's movement arose "primarily out of Christian White women's experiences with only token nuances given to Black women" (37). More, she claims feminist theology has been racist when "the oppressor assumes the power of definition and control while the oppressed is objectified and perceived as a thing. As such, White

women have defined the movement and presumed to do so not only for themselves but also for non-White women" (199-200). Grant's challenge to the feminist theological movement, then, is for an emerging perspective based on the experiences of women of color. Any new feminist hermeneutic, claims Grant, must ensure it does not merely reinforce the old, patriarchal system by recreating hierarchical social structures. Such a perspective, as we shall see, has powerful repercussions for biblical interpretations and for feminist theology in general. Since early misuses of the Bible served not only patriarchal, but also racist and colonialist, purposes, so a revision of the damaging logic of these sacred texts must have implications beyond the concerns of the largely white and middle-class feminist movement.

Recent scholarship has attempted to fill the gaps in literary criticism and to establish the basis for an early tradition of revisionist mythmaking among writers of color. Joanna Brooks' *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (2004) contends that the African American and Native American literary traditions have exhibited revisionist strains since at least as long as women have revised the Bible to claim authority for their own written word. One clear example is found in the early abolitionist movement from Phillis Wheatley, who contended that American slaveholders were "modern Egyptians" (qtd. in Brooks 4). Linking American slaveholding with Israel's slavery in Egypt, as narrated in the Old Testament, Wheatley aligned African Americans with Israel, God's chosen people, and upset the conventional structure that positioned European colonists as Israelites seeking freedom in a "new land." Another example of early revisionist work is in the anti-colonial texts of Pequot Methodist William Apess, who "used his ministerial office to

defend his tribal community and to challenge white supremacy" (179). In *An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man* (1833)

> Apess argued that Jesus Christ was not a white man, but rather a man of color. His bold and altogether correct statement cancels the assumption of godly assent and Christic solidarity so critical to American white supremacy. It also exemplifies how American communities of color used religious discourse to negate the racist presumptions directed against them and how literature served as a space for the construction of newly resistant identities and communities. (qtd. in Brooks 179)

Both African American and Native American authors, argues Brooks, "claimed for their communities a distinctive place within God's grand design for the redemption of humankind" (7). She further contends that "African- and Native American literatures [. . .] document the processes of social, cultural, and textual regeneration through which communities of color developed positive and resistant identities" (49). To focus only on feminist revisions in American literature, therefore, is to overlook a rich revisionary tradition in both African American and Native American literature.

Early African American and Native authors, according to Brooks, chose to focus on claiming and revising biblical narratives that resonated with their own experiences of oppression in the Americas:

> When they turned to their Bibles, African-American and Native American authors sought out stories that honored their haunted and paradoxical circumstances and offered some key into the mystery of personal and community redemption. Their primary concern was not genesis but

> regeneration: not the static economies of prelapsarian innocence, but the tumultuous and emancipatory traversing of the Red Sea, the forty years' wandering in the wilderness, the deliverance from the tomb. The collective character of their stories resemble not the prototypical American Adam but instead an American Lazarus. (8)

From these early experiences arose a literary tradition with roots in the same sacred text as the one used by colonists as a justification for slavery and colonization, but with entirely different repercussions. Ultimately, pioneering black and Indian writers revised and "redirected the democratizing, charismatic, and separatist energies of American evangelicalism and its powerful doctrine of rebirth into the formation of new religious communities, new theologies, and new literatures for people of color" (3). Lucille Clifton, whose revisions of the Lucifer figure in particular will be the focus of Chapter IV, is a key example of the work contemporary women of color have done to challenge normative (white) biblical interpretations in literature; she revises biblical characters to address racialized and gendered social exclusions in the United States. Clifton transforms biblical characters into ordinary people who often speak in dialect; the result, in Akasha (Gloria) Hull's words, is "perhaps the most heterodox (for some readers) of Clifton's stratagems [because she] 'levels' these biblical figures by making them racially black" (280). By "leveling" biblical characters, Clifton challenges traditional interpretations that racialize these figures as white. Her revisions resonate particularly well with the feminist theories of Hazel Carby and Patricia Hill Collins, who reject the normalcy of whiteness and "the notion of a generic woman who is white and middle

class" (Collins 8). Clifton furthers their critique by exposing the racist assumptions located at the heart of both patriarchal Christianity and the women's movement.

Not only do Morrison, Silko, and Clifton, the subjects of the chapters that follow, utilize the Bible for revisionist purposes, they also draw upon other sacred texts, such as the gnostic texts, some of which valorize the feminine, to scrutinize and find alternatives to patriarchy and other hegemonic practices. Such rewritings of sacred texts have been especially prevalent since the second wave of the feminist movement. Critics have identified feminist scriptural revision in the works of Adrienne Rich, Gloria Naylor, Margaret Atwood, and Toni Morrison which retain as their "central fiction or fantasy" not Freud's speculation about a repressed and "slain Father but the slain (and immortal) Mother" (Brown 6, Ostriker 36). The late 1980s and early 1990s, in particular, saw a rise in texts rewriting religious scripture from non-biblical traditions. Historian Elaine Pagels' seminal text, *The Gnostic Gospels*, has played a critical role in the increased attention given to religious scripture suppressed by orthodox Christianity and the potential such texts hold for women writers interested in recovering alternative epistemologies. Recent scholarship on the gnostic texts discovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has revealed the potential they hold for alternative projects in historiography, especially because the sheer volume of interpretations they inspire emphasize plurality and hybridity over stagnant and inflexible religious hermeneutics. It is primarily for this reason that they offer attractive alternatives for women of color engaged in scriptural revision.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the biggest challenge I faced while writing and researching this project was the issue of how to treat the sacred texts themselves. All of

them are in translation, all of them subject to myriad and disparate interpretations by theologians and historians, and all of them incorporated into fictional and poetic works already having been interpreted in very specific ways by the author utilizing them for their own purposes. More troubling still, very little was and is actually known about the social realities of the Gnostics—what a typical day was like, for example, or even what a Gnostic home or church was like—thus creating a disembodied religious tradition that lent itself to whatever imagination was wielding it. How then, was I supposed to separate what the text originally said from what it had become as a cultural marker? In this regard, the gnostic texts were most problematic because I had to consider the fact that much of the recent scholarship on these gnostic texts was unavailable to Morrison and Silko in the 1980s and 1990s when *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*, and *Gardens in the Dunes* were being written and published. What I did know was that both Morrison and Silko knew Pagels and were aware of her bestselling book, *The Gnostic Gospels*—published in 1979—Morrison because of their interactions as colleagues at Princeton and Silko because they were both in the first group of MacArthur Fellows together. Morrison is said to have met with Pagels regularly, and Silko has explicitly stated in interviews that she wrote *Gardens* in response to Pagels' book on the gnostic texts (Leonard, Arnold). What I have primarily chosen to focus on in this project, then, is the way each author utilizes the sacred text, in her own historical context, rather than to be overly concerned with the accuracy or inaccuracy of her hermeneutics. In fact, the project of looking at revisions of sacred texts assumes that in many cases the author intentionally rewrites the original text for her own purposes. Finally, the gnostic texts can be understood, perhaps, as attractive to authors engaged in revisionary projects precisely *because* the disembodied

religious tradition connected with them offers an appealing way to circumvent the often disturbing parallels drawn when aligning a work with a tradition, like Judeo-Christianity, that has been haunted by centuries of patriarchal, racist, and colonial history.

For my own understanding of the gnostic tradition, however, I looked to the recent scholarship of Karen L. King, among others.[3] Her work encourages the understanding that, far from being a monolithic movement or even a religion in its own right, Gnosticism derived its sources from various traditions and was characterized by hybridity rather than purity. In fact, both Gnosticism and early Christianity should be understood as having been highly diverse religious traditions. R. Van Den Broek corroborates this general point in "The Present State of Gnostic Studies" when he argues that

> Gnosticism is one of the most complex and variegated religious phenomena of Antiquity. In its mythology and doctrines there are distinct Jewish and Platonic elements, which seem to reach back to its first developments. But it cannot be explained exclusively from Judaism or Platonism, and certainly not from Christianity [. . .]. Not any of the exclusive explanations of its origin is satisfactory. But there is no doubt that it was only in its Christian form that Gnosticism became really important and was able to exert a lasting influence, not only on the development of Christian theology, but also on western thought in general. In this respect, the study of Gnosticism is still in its infancy. (71)

A central feature of early Christianity's attempts to define itself, the gnostic texts were often used as juxtaposition against the "orthodoxy" and were consequently labeled as

"heresy." Of course, in reality, the divisions between Christianity and Gnosticism were never so definite. Although some gnostic texts valorize the feminine, as the work of Morrison and Silko suggests, many others did not. Yet despite the fact that the gnostic texts may not have ultimately become the panacea for the evils of patriarchal Christianity that perhaps in those early years it had been hoped they might, the work of this project shows that they still held potential for women writers interested in recovering alternative epistemologies and alternative historiographic projects. At the very least, they make possible a reevaluation of history in general—and of the discourses, processes, and practices that enable and maintain power for the few.

Most of the gnostic sources under consideration by women engaged in projects of scriptural revision were discovered, often for the first time, among the codices unearthed at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. Bound in a monastery in the fourth century (as testified by the papyri found in the covers of the codices), these texts are believed to have been the collection of a group of monks who read them as edifying literature and who buried them when the attack on texts considered heretical by the orthodoxy became severe following Athanasius' famous "Easter Letter" of 367 C.E. (Van Den Broek 47). Problems of classification abound in the Nag Hammadi collection: some of the texts are considered gnostic, others are not, and scholars are often divided in their definitions. "Thunder, Perfect Mind," for example, a poem contained in the codices and which both Morrison and Silko utilize in their revisions, is considered by R. Van Den Broek to be "non-gnostic" but by Pagels as "gnostic" (48-9, 55). Since it is certain that both authors were familiar with Pagels' work, I can only assume that they, too, would have had a general understanding of the poem as "gnostic." It is for this reason that I refer

throughout the project to "Thunder, Perfect Mind" as a gnostic text.

Once again, though, even the term "Gnostic" is problematic. In *What is Gnosticism?* King argues that Gnosticism has "mistakenly come to be thought of as a distinctive Christian heresy or even as a religion in its own right" (2). By contrast, she claims:

> There was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that some kind of ancient religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics. Gnosticism is, rather, a term invented in the early modern period to aid in defining the boundaries of normative Christianity. (1-2)[4]

The problem with this construction, continues King, is that "the early Christian polemicists' discourse of orthodoxy and heresy [became] intertwined with twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism" to such an extent that it "distorted our analysis of the ancient texts" (19). Such discussions create identity binaries (Christian/Gnostic, orthodoxy/heresy) rather than acknowledge the ways such texts may overlap with or help to illuminate the meaning of canonized scripture and vice versa. Furthermore, they blur the fact that "hybridity, not purity, characterizes historical processes" (230). Discussions that focus on qualities of "purity" and "contamination" are, according to King, "therefore not amenable to historical analysis" (229). Finally, King argues that the wide range of texts and "the variety of phenomena classified as 'Gnostic' simply will not support a single, monolithic definition" (226). In a similar vein, Pagels observes that "most scholars now agree that what we call 'gnosticism' was a widespread movement that derived its sources from various traditions" (xxxii). In light of these scholars' discussions, then, it seems prudent to use the term carefully and to avoid generalizations

that may or may not apply to specific texts. For this reason, I follow Pagels's lead and refer to the texts as "gnostic" (in accordance with the meaning of *gnosis*, translated as "knowledge" or "insight") rather than "Gnostic" (referring to an embodied—and nonexistent—religious tradition).

The gnostic texts as such still hold the potential for a reevaluation of the master narrative of history. After all, as King refers to it, the "master story" of history is always the narrative of the winner: "much of early Christian history has been a matter of adding details or making minor corrections to the basic plot provided by those who won for themselves the title of orthodoxy" (157). Gnostic theology challenges the authority of the orthodox. Interestingly, gnostic believers often thought of themselves as an elite group in possession of a knowledge unknown to the majority. In fact, the word "gnostic" itself derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, usually translated as "knowledge" or "insight." As Elaine Pagels points out in *The Gnostic Gospels*, the secret of *gnosis* is the understanding that "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God" (xix). Perhaps more heterodoxically, "whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes 'no longer a Christian, but a Christ'" (134). Although there were other reasons why the early Church considered these texts heretical, this central gnostic claim, that true spirituality must be unmediated by Church authority, had the potential for making them the most uncomfortable. After all, in its most basic formulation, gnostic scripture questioned the authority of the master narrative of its time and asserted its own version of true spirituality.

One of the most significant developments to arise from the debates surrounding the history and nature of the early Christian church, however, is the light they may shed on the issue of women's leadership potential in ecclesiastical—and indeed, social—roles.

The orthodox position holds that no woman should have authority over man. 1 Timothy 2: 11-14, for example, explicitly prohibits women from holding positions of authority: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." By contrast, Pagels contends that "many of [the gnostic] texts speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements" (49). Likewise, the Gospel of Mary, a gnostic text of which only three known fragments remain, features Mary Magdalene as a beloved disciple of Christ and challenges normative constructions regarding gender roles in the church and larger society it structures. In *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, King argues that "the theology of the *Gospel of Mary* may well have been informed by [an early tradition of] women's theology-making. Until its discovery we knew of no gospel ascribed to a woman and calling upon her to guarantee the credibility and authority of the work" (185). This discovery, contends King, is not entirely surprising, considering "we know that in the early centuries and throughout Christian history, women played prominent roles as apostles, teachers, preachers, and prophets" (160). What developed into "orthodoxy," then—evidenced in the misogynist teachings of the author of 1 Timothy—was therefore a construction of later centuries:

> the patriarchal and hierarchical leadership of the church developed only slowly over time and out of a wide variety of possibilities. [. . .] The historical importance of the *Gospel of Mary* lies in letting us see the contours of some crucial debates over the authority of apostolic tradition, prophetic experience, and women's leadership. (187-88, 190)

Although Clifton does not explicitly incorporate gnostic revisions into her work, both Morrison and Silko do, and the issue of women's spiritual authority and leadership potential is a central aspect of all three authors featured in this study.

Of course, even the presence of women in gnostic texts does not indicate that the social context of such texts was necessarily more favorable for women or that all gnostic texts valorize the feminine. While it is tempting to characterize the gnostic tradition as one that unanimously celebrates the feminine (and hence as being in direct opposition to patriarchal Christianity), the texts themselves do not necessarily support this assertion. Pagels herself points out that "gnostics were not unanimous in affirming women—nor were the orthodox unanimous in denigrating them" (66). More, as *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* attests, there are "many problems inherent in a description of gender imagery in Gnosticism," the first of which is the problem of determining "when a gendered image is being used for the sake of its gendered characteristics" ("Editor's Foreword" xii). Rather than serving as markers of historical accuracy, then, or evidence of a widespread celebration of the feminine in the Greco-Roman world, the texts may only use gendered imagery as a formal or stylistic technique:

> In some cases, gendered imagery is centrally significant because of its gendered character; in other cases, gendered imagery may be present only because it is part of the tradition or because it is related to the myth or theology as gendered imagery in a different context. (xii)

In evaluating the incorporation or revision of gnostic scripture in contemporary literature, then, it is important to determine the role the feminine plays in each

specific text, as well as the social, political, or literary purposes they serve for the author using them.

Still, that task can be daunting. In *What is Gnosticism?* King provides two suggestions for disentangling historical methods from this problematic apparatus:

> First, as Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza has argued, historians must scrutinize their goals in order to make historiography's ethical character apparent and subject to critique. Though historiography will always be involved in power relations, such relations need not operate under clandestine cover. Second, historiography can do its work better once it has been disentangled from a focus on origins, purity, and essence. None of these has a legitimate place in historical research, given that historical phenomena never have a pure origin but are always *in media res*; given that there is no purity, only mixtures; no essence, only continuity in difference. (218)

Rather than thinking of the gnostic texts as "heretical" and in opposition to the "orthodoxy," King argues it is more productive to see them as variations, contributions, alternatives, reinterpretations, and additions to a syncretic religious tradition that was never as monolithic as the "master story" would tell it. "Viewed this way," continues King, "the study of ancient cultural hybridity should focus less on identifying which materials are combined in syncretic amalgamation than on the discourses, processes, and practices by which people make sense of their lives [. . .] and the power relations that are at stake" (231). Since literature is often the place where crucial debates about identity, community, and nation are staged, it makes sense that American women writers of the

late-twentieth century are employing these gnostic texts in their work as a way to revise and suggest alternatives to patriarchal Christianity and the society it has structured.

All the writers in this study consider not only the patriarchal but also the racist and colonialist dimensions of Christianity. As such, they are engaged in very different projects than Anne Hutchinson, Anne Bradstreet, or even H. D. or Anita Diamant. Chapter II, "From Biblical To Gnostic: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*," argues that Morrison rewrites both biblical and gnostic sources in order to criticize and suggest alternatives to patriarchal, racist American history in the first two novels of her trilogy encompassing *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Biblical scripture informs the entire trilogy, which spans the violent history of African America from slavery to the Civil Rights era, but critics have neglected the transition Morrison makes from biblical to gnostic concerns in the first two books of the trilogy. Morrison has insisted in *Playing in the Dark* that responsible literary criticism must step back from looking inside the "fishbowl" of narrative production to notice the bowl itself—the invisible form that gives structure to the world it contains. One of the least scrutinized of these "fishbowl" forms is the effect of sacred texts on the production of social and cultural codes and, consequently, on the narrative forms which reflect and reinscribe them. Morrison's trilogy, I argue, is informed by her argument in *Playing in the Dark* and asserts that history repeats itself without the revision of destructive myths and cultural practices; each novel articulates a different formal argument and is concerned with the way biblical language and narrative forms are proliferated through apocalyptic and utopian narrative strategies (*Beloved* and *Paradise*), as well as through the use of omniscient narration (*Jazz*).[5]

Both Morrison's last novel in the trilogy, *Paradise*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* rely heavily on gnostic rather than Christian wisdom texts, and Chapter III, "Transcendent Mythmaking: Gnostic Scripture in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*," analyzes the ways these novels recover and rewrite scripture that valorizes the feminine and that has been suppressed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. *Paradise* condemns American racism and patriarchy even as it scrutinizes the violent strategies central to nation building as undertaken by the militant Black Power movement in the 1960s. Morrison incorporates the gnostic poem "Thunder, Perfect Mind" in the novel's epigraph, spoken by a feminine, divine power, in an attempt to locate a feminist worldview that, unlike the social dynamics that Morrison scrutinizes, is premised on inclusivity. This chapter explores how the gnostic belief regarding paradox, as articulated in "Thunder, Perfect Mind," challenges and provides an alternative to the U.S. histories described in the trilogy. Like *Paradise*, *Gardens* incorporates the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind" as a counterpoint to the Judeo-Christian tradition that justifies U.S. colonialism; criticizing the history and effects of colonialism on Native people and the land they inhabit is a primary goal of the novel. I argue that *Gardens* contrasts a feminist epistemology derived from the gnostic gospels with a colonial worldview (exemplified by Edward, a botanist and collector of rare orchids) to criticize the colonization of Native America. At the same time, through the character of Hattie, a well-intentioned (but white) woman, it complicates this contrast by showing feminist complicity in the colonial project.

The final chapter—"A Star More Distant Than Eden: Beyond Lucille and Lucifer"—concludes the discussion by considering Clifton's revisionary work to reclaim

the infamous biblical Prince of Darkness, Lucifer. In her "tree of life" and "brothers" sequences, found in *Quilting* and *The Book of Light*, respectively, Clifton rewrites the Eden myth that has been a key feature in American literature in general and in the African American tradition in particular; by aligning herself with Lucifer, Clifton claims poetic authority for herself through this surprising figure of God's archenemy and reclaims him as a figure of "light"—rather than "darkness" or evil—through the shared etymological roots of both their names. Casting the figure of Lucifer as black and female, Clifton rewrites him as part of the divine and positions herself to receive the Word from this unlikely source. In "the message," however, a sequence of twenty-three poems found at the end of *Mercy* (2004), Clifton turns away from the Bible—that "tome of the ancient wisdom"—and works to establish an entirely new sacred text.

All three authors considered in this study are deeply concerned with the ways racist, colonialist, and patriarchal language inherited from sacred texts is encoded in literature and passed down through seemingly innocuous narrative strategies and literary practices. The work they do to expose the destructive potential of biblical imagery and allusion in cultural production and to revise sacred texts to create new myths from the salvage is remarkable.[6] Although American literature is a treasure trove, as Morrison claims in *Playing in the Dark*, certain texts are exceptional in their awareness of the modes of oppression that structure society, even at the level of language: "How compelling is the study of those writers who take responsibility for *all* of the values they bring to their art. How stunning is the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words to say it" (xiii). Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Lucille Clifton are three such writers, and their work is testament to

the powerful revisionary currents in American literature by women authors of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

NOTES

[1] Neither did Paul, who in 1 Corinthians 12: 13, Galatians 3: 28, and Colossians 3: 11 argued that both slaves and free men were sons of God but neither condemned the practice of slavery nor acknowledged any evil in it. Paul returned a runaway slave to his owner, despite the fact that Deuteronomy 23: 15-16 requires a Jew to protect a runaway slave. See the Letter to Philemon in the New Testament.

For passages in the Old and New Testaments that sanction and regulate the practice of slavery, see especially: Exodus 20: 17, Deuteronomy 5: 21, Exodus 21: 20-21, Exodus 21: 1-4, Deuteronomy 15: 12-18, Exodus 21: 7, Leviticus 25: 44-46, Leviticus 25: 48-53, Exodus 21: 8, Leviticus 19: 20-22, Leviticus 25: 39, Exodus 21: 16, Deuteronomy 24: 7, Exodus 22: 3, 2 Kings 4: 1, Deuteronomy 21: 10-14, Deuteronomy 20: 14, Deuteronomy 23: 15-16, Genesis 17: 13, Genesis 17: 27, Numbers 31: 28-47, 2 Samuel 9: 10, Genesis 16: 1-2, Genesis 30: 3-4, Genesis 30: 9-10, Exodus 20: 10, Matthew 18: 25, Mark 14: 66, Luke 12: 45-48, Ephesians 6: 5-9, Colossians 4: 1, 1 Timothy 6: 1-3.

[2] See *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of Hon. James H. Hammond* (1866).

[3] Also helpful in my pursuit was R. Van Den Broek's "The Present State of Gnostic Studies" in *Vigiliae Christianae* (1983) and Edwin M. Yamauchi's *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (1973).

[4] Although reviews of *What is Gnosticism?* have been for the most part positive, some critics have resisted King's deconstruction of the term "Gnosticism" and counter

that her argument against essentialist religious hermeneutics (heresy/orthodoxy) breaks down in her own claim that "there was and is no such thing as Gnosticism." M. J. Edwards, in particular, argues that

> although the term 'Gnosticism' is (as King holds) so factitious as to be useless for any object but polemic, that is not to say that Gnostics never existed, and we shall not see that past more clearly—we shall simply see nothing at all—if we refuse to admit that something may already have been discovered during a hundred years of vigorous research. (202)

See also Paul A. Mirecki's review of *What is Gnosticism?* in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (2005), Michael C. McCarthy's review in *Theological Studies* (2004), and Alastair H. B. Logan's review in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2004). Reviews of Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* were also primarily positive. See in particular the reviews of David P. Efroymson, Brian Hayes, Alan F. Segal, and G. Quispel.

[5] "Apocalyptic" is another problematic term for religious studies scholars and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

[6] Particularly informative regarding biblical allusion and imagery has been Richard B. Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (1989), which points out the ways Paul was already engaged in a project of scriptural revisions when he wrote the "letters" which are now a part of the canonized Christian New Testament. Hays contends that Paul was "rewriting" the scripture of the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating from the second or third century B.C.E. and which was in common use in Hellenistic synagogues during Paul's lifetime, for his own theological purposes

(xi). The Bible itself, then, should be understood as the product of an interpretative tradition, and "the revisionary hermeneutical operations that later came to be called midrash were already manifest in the work of the writers of the biblical texts, who collected, interpreted, and transmuted still earlier texts and traditions" (14). Hays' work is a reminder that intertextuality is a feature of most, if not all, literary works and that degree and intensity of literary allusion and echo can be judged by seven basic criteria: 1) availability, 2) volume, 3) recurrence, 4) thematic coherence, 5) historical plausibility, 6) history of interpretation, and 7) satisfaction (the effect of the intertextual relation on the reader) (29-32).

CHAPTER II

FROM BIBLICAL TO GNOSTIC:

TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND *JAZZ*

When Toni Morrison first began to conceptualize the project that would ultimately become *Beloved*, she envisioned a much longer text with a broader historical scope. In fact, in an interview just after the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison indicated she felt a sense of failure when she handed the first manuscript to her editor (Taylor-Guthrie 240). What was originally envisioned as one novel eventually became three distinct texts: Morrison's trilogy encompassing *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* recounts African American history from slavery through the Civil Rights era. During the course of this retelling, which encompasses two centuries of African American experience, Morrison introduces dozens of characters, plots, and subplots; some of them function intertextually to bring together Morrison's larger revision of American and African American history. In this revisionary project, Morrison is primarily concerned with uncovering and highlighting the terrible violence in American history that is formative yet unacknowledged. Part of the reason this history isn't acknowledged is that certain people have been unable to enter dominant discourse. The most prominent figure in all three novels is the image of Beloved herself, broadly representative of the ghost of millions affected by the haunting legacy of slavery and its aftereffects. Beloved returns in *Jazz* as Wild, and in *Paradise* as the Convent women living on the outskirts of the patriarchal community of Ruby. Her presence in all three novels points to the way each book of the trilogy demonstrates analogous concerns and works to recover suppressed

perspectives that resist the erasure of narratives exposing the violence of slavery. In particular, it shows Morrison's work to give voice to the silenced "Beloveds" of African American history by exposing the various methods and forms maintained to silence her. That nearly all of the "Beloveds" of Morrison's historiographic and revisionary project are women of color indicates that the convergence of race and gender remains a central consideration. At the heart of her analysis is a concern with the problematic ways resistance unfolds, often by incorporating and adopting social structures and ideologies of the oppressor such as patriarchy and Christianity. Morrison contends throughout the trilogy that, in the African American tradition especially, these two systems have allowed access to power for some (often African American men) at the expense of others (typically women of color). At the same time, she doesn't merely posit an argument for inclusion; for Morrison, the nature of American society itself is the problem, not just its consequences.

Morrison organizes her revision of American history in part around an examination of what she refers to as the invisible structures created by sacred texts that are embedded in social and cultural practices and which play a significant role in social power. As she contends in *Playing in the Dark*, responsible literary criticism steps back from looking at the narrative alone to noticing the social and cultural codes that help to structure it. Failing to do so, as Morrison figures it, is like an onlooker gazing into a fishbowl without noticing the bowl itself:

> It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flick of the golden scales [. . .]; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, [. . .] , the

> tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface—and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. (17)

Although in this specific passage in *Playing in the Dark* Morrison calls attention to what she refers to as an Africanist presence in American literature by white authors, her argument about the transparent, invisible forms that inform the literary imagination is a central theme in her fictional work as well. The novels are especially concerned with the way biblical language and narrative forms are proliferated in literature through apocalyptic and utopian narrative strategies, as well as through the use of first-person, omniscient narration. In literally hundreds of instances throughout the trilogy, Morrison exposes the ubiquity of biblical language in everyday, colloquial speech. Although she doesn't present all biblical narratives as uniformly oppressive, she does call attention to those with historically destructive uses (in the trilogy she is concerned mainly with the three forms indicated above). In this way, Morrison insists upon a revision of these elements of Christianity without ultimately rejecting a tradition that has at the same time played a critical role in African American liberation strategies.

In *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, in particular, Morrison exposes the ways the language of sacred texts structures apocalyptic and utopian narrative forms, as well as the use of narrative voice, and she has referred specifically to the role of these texts in her "Nobel Lecture in Literature": "sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" (16-7). Sexist, racist, and theistic language is what Morrison refers to as "dead language"; it "has no desire or purpose

other than to maintain the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance; [. . .] it "cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, [or] fill baffling silences" (13-4). Ultimately, such language "must be rejected, altered and exposed" (16). Although each of these forms of language—sexist, racist, theistic—has different expressions and manifestations in everyday usage and in cultural production, they all overlap in one critical way. Each relies on a hierarchical model of ordering in social relationships and supports a dualistic worldview that privileges one binary relationship over the other. However, it is important to note that all biblical language is not necessarily theistic language—the latter refers specifically to biblical language that supports the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent perspective to which all others are subordinate or which has been (mis)interpreted and (mis)used toward these ends. This, of course, is largely the way American history has been told and the work Morrison's revisionary project labors to overcome.

The term "apocalyptic" requires further definition at this juncture. In *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, John J. Collins indicates that "scholars distinguish between 'apocalypse' as a literature genre, 'apocalyptic eschatology' as a particular religious perspective and structure of thought, and 'apocalypticism' as a sociological ideology" (3).[1] Since this project is concerned with literary genres, I will be using the term "apocalypse" in reference to these texts. As Collins further notes, "apocalypse" is

> a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it

> envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (9)

Many, though not all, of literary apocalypses end with a vision of destruction and then reveal an ultimate transformation, or transcendence, of human affairs and the human condition. Morrison, for her part, relies primarily on the biblical Revelation of John in regards to the Christian tradition, but she is clearly aware of the larger tradition of literary apocalypse, of which there are many variations, including Jewish apocalypses, early Christian apocalypses, gnostic apocalypses, Greek and Latin apocalypses, and Rabbinic literature and mysticism with elements of apocalypse and the "apocalyptic" (i). Of the gnostic apocalypses, there are a few distinguishing features; first, "the visual element in the revelation is very slight and often consists only of the apparition of the mediator," and second and "even more strikingly, the content of the Gnostic apocalypses places its greatest emphasis on salvation through knowledge, which is extended into personal afterlife" (13). This version of apocalypse seems to fit most closely with Sethe's own "revelation" at the end of *Beloved* (with Beloved herself serving as the otherworldly mediator) and will be discussed in detail as the chapter proceeds.

Because Morrison is interested in the ways theistic language gets imbedded into literatures in often unconsciously self-destructive ways, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* explore the influence of sacred texts on the process of literary production; each of the texts has a distinct formal argument, tied to a biblical precedent that informs its usage in narrative production. *Beloved* and *Jazz* in particular narrate their formal concerns through a shift from biblical to gnostic revisions, amending theistic language to incorporate suppressed perspectives (largely of slaves and women of color) in African

American and American history from the nineteenth century through the Harlem Renaissance. *Paradise* extends these revisions through an examination of the gender hierarchies inherited from sacred texts and handed down by a largely male African American leadership during the Civil Rights era. All three novels ultimately argue the same central point: history repeats itself without the revision of limiting and destructive myths and cultural practices.

To counter these inherited narrative strategies, Morrison incorporates the gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 (at first subtly in *Beloved* and then more explicitly in *Jazz* and *Paradise*) and especially the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind." While never ultimately replacing the orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition in Morrison's trilogy, these texts destabilize the authority of the "master scripture" to the point that it all but crumbles under the pressure to revise its limiting theologies. Especially because the gnostic text Morrison has chosen to focus on as an alternative foundation for her historiography—"Thunder, Perfect Mind"—is oriented around the feminine and encourages a complex and paradoxical worldview that sees difference as integral to wholeness, it holds the potential to disrupt the dualism inherent in both patriarchy and racism. This is not to suggest, however, that the gnostic tradition itself was not dualistic, and here Morrison appears to be making a distinction between two models of dualism: the Iranian (or Manichaean) and the Syrian-Egyptian. According to Hans Jonas, both models are gnostic in formulation and "dualistic" in the sense that "they were evolved to explain essentially the same facts of a dislocated metaphysical situation [. . .]: the existing rift between God and world, world and man, spirit and flesh" (236-37). The Iranian, or Manichaean, branch explains this rift as a dualism of two opposing

principles (i.e. how "the original Darkness" overtook "the Light" and the resulting "mixing and unmixing, captivity and liberation" that became man's fate (237). The Syrian-Egyptian model, on the other hand, undertook "the more ambitious task of deriving dualism itself," explaining "Darkness" as a product, rather than a cause "forced upon [Light] from outside" as in the Iranian model (237). In other words, difference exists internally, and all things have an "opposite" that appears simultaneously (and often necessarily) alongside its pair. Ultimately, Jonas contends that "the Syrian[-Egyptian] type is profounder, and alone of the two [. . .] can do full justice to the redemptional claim made on behalf of knowledge throughout gnostic religion" (237).

"Thunder, Perfect Mind" can be said to follow the latter model of dualism in its emphasis on paradox and a unity of "opposites." As mentioned in the first chapter, however, the poem itself is difficult to classify: remember that Van Der Broak called it "non-gnostic" while Pagels referred to it as gnostic (Bentley Layton also refers to the poem as gnostic). More, its origin is also unclear; *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible* locates both Christian and Jewish influence in the poem (especially Proverbs 8—spoken by a female character, "Wisdom"), while Layton notes the Greek influence of the "riddle" genre in "The Riddle of the Thunder (NHC VI, 2): The Function of Paradox in a Gnostic Text from Nag Hammadi." He refers to the feminine, divine speaker of the poem as "Dame Wisdom" (38). Regardless of who exactly the speaker is—and Morrison never explicitly names her—the text is a monologue, and the speaker identifies herself as a paradox of balanced antitheses among which "I am godless, and I am the one whose God is great" is but one example of many. The model of dualism that "Thunder, Perfect Mind" appears to support and that Pagels' works seems also to affirm (that is, a paradox

wherein each thing has an "opposite" that exists simultaneously, and necessarily, alongside its pair) would no doubt be attractive to Morrison as model for diversity and inclusion. It is perhaps for this reason that she structures both *Jazz* and *Paradise* around the idea of paradox found in "Thunder, Perfect Mind" and featured in the epigraph of each novel.

Because narrative, according to Morrison, also motivates cultural practices, she is keenly aware that it must be scrutinized for harmful or destructive elements handed down from a dominant culture determined to preserve its status at all costs (7). By locating and exposing the "fishbowl" in conventional forms of American literature—those forms that give literary texts structure and coherence and which often derive from theistic language and practice—Morrison evaluates their effectiveness (or lack thereof) for African American authors and posits alternatives that contribute new knowledge and new choices to the reader. The significance of such a revisionist project is that it seeks to expose harmful, deeply ingrained elements of "the national mind," and, as Morrison has repeatedly illustrated in her own critical work, the influence of literary production on social and cultural practice makes it clear that this is an important project (14). It is also crucial to the success of a variety of liberation movements because it interrogates the intersections of race and gender by focusing almost exclusively on the experiences of women of color.

When a very pregnant Beloved disappears into the woods at the end of the novel named after her, she represents the African American community's ability to come together to overthrow the "ghost" of the past and to loosen the chokehold it has on their lives. When she reappears in *Jazz* as the pregnant Wild, and in *Paradise* in a group of

unruly women (one of whom is also pregnant), Morrison reminds us that this work is never entirely finished. After all, the past always gives birth to the future, and the issues of one generation are inherited by the next. To the extent that it offers an alternative to racist, patriarchal American history, Morrison's use of the gnostic tradition in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* enables a revision of hierarchical elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition in a way that doesn't entirely discredit the role that tradition has played in African American history. Although Morrison's explicit reference to the gnostic tradition doesn't come until *Jazz*—and gains momentum in *Paradise*—her awareness of these gnostic epistemologies is apparent as early as the first novel in the trilogy; as such, an exploration of the first two novels with these concerns in mind offers a reading alive with interpretive possibilities.

* * *

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and named in 2006 by the *New York Times* as the best American novel written in the past twenty-five years, *Beloved* inaugurates Morrison's trilogy and her revision of African American history continued in *Jazz* and *Paradise*. The novel begins shortly before Emancipation and focuses broadly on the psychological ramifications of slavery from the Middle Passage to the years between the signing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment less than two decades later. As in the other two novels in the trilogy, and as anticipated through Morrison's critical work, *Beloved* is deeply invested in exposing the "fishbowl" in formal practices of imaginative production. Like *Jazz* and

Paradise, the novel investigates the relationship between the violence of slavery and the destructive logic of sacred texts embedded in seemingly innocuous narrative techniques (often the result of misinterpretation and misuse rather than inherent deficiencies in the sacred text itself). After all, the myth of regeneration through violence that Richard Slotkin claims was central to early American identity formation is based on the precedent of biblical apocalypse. In particular, *Beloved* scrutinizes the destructive effects of apocalyptic narrative forms derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition and interpreted as a justification for (indeed, expectation of) such violence as a vehicle for social regeneration and narrative closure. Although the novel is replete with biblical imagery and allusions, *Beloved* ultimately foreshadows the gnostic preoccupations of both *Jazz* and *Paradise* through its revision of the biblical book of Revelation and by incorporating an understanding of apocalypse that emphasizes salvation through knowledge. The novel actually presents two apocalyptic moments—one which clearly alludes to the biblical Revelation of John and one which does not—and revises the first to provide an alternative to biblical, violent, end-of-the-world narrative of closure.[2] This second option results in a more positive outcome for the novel's characters and emphasizes the "self-knowledge" that is at the heart of gnostic belief. Likewise, this revised apocalyptic narrative stresses the idea that "revelation" can offer hope for revolutionary social change without its destructive counterpart; *Beloved* warns against historical amnesia and encourages the *gnosis* that comes from revision and "rememory" (226).[3]

The story of *Beloved* begins with a haunting: a baby ghost returns to enact revenge on her mother, Sethe, who pulled a handsaw across the throat of her eighteen-

month-old daughter rather than have her returned to a life of slavery.[4] The reason for the baby's venom isn't disclosed until well over halfway into the novel, allowing Morrison time to develop Sethe's own story in a way that helps to explain her "rough choice" when the facts are finally revealed (212). Carried off in the sheriff's wagon with her nose in the air, Sethe spends a year in a rat-infested prison cell with her youngest daughter, Denver, and elicits the condemnation of the black community of Cincinnati, Ohio, who disdain Sethe's haughty carriage after the event and, like many other Christians, believe "pride goeth before a fall" (202, Proverbs 16: 18). In other words, the women aren't upset about the baby's murder so much as the prideful attitude that accompanies it. Their disapproval lasts for almost two decades, or until roughly nine months after the return of the baby ghost in the flesh of a young woman who calls herself "Beloved."

Although Beloved seems harmless at first, it is soon made clear that her presence threatens Sethe's life. After Denver asks for help in her mother's stead, thirty women from the community reconsider their earlier disapproval of Sethe and decide that enough is enough—they reason, at last, in accordance with the biblical Gospels, that "'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' and nobody needed more" (302, Matthew 6: 34). Her former friend, Ella, contends that while "she didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, [Beloved's presence] was an invasion" (302). Gathering at Sethe's house to exorcise Beloved, the group of women "brought what they could and what they believed would work. [Many] brought Christian faith—as shield and sword" against what they considered a demonic presence (303, Ephesians 6: 11-17). What ultimately works to eradicate Beloved, however, comes from an alternative tradition: "they stopped

praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like" (303). Mimicking the biblical gospel of John, which begins with the well-known verse—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—Morrison indicates, however, that rather than looking to the biblical "Word of God," the singing women in *Beloved* relied on another tradition, one where "in the beginning there were no words" (303, John 1: 1). After all, the women "searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (308). The women's reliance on "sound" instead of "words" revises a key moment in Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*:

> [The slaves] would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the *word*, in the *sound*;--and as frequently in the one as in the other. . .they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. (36)

Morrison's revision of this moment in *Beloved* insists on the efficacy of sound over words, the oral tradition over the written. In the novel, a sound that "breaks the back of words" has power, and one the women discover has immediate results: Sethe "tremble[s] like the baptized in its wash," and Beloved disappears into the woods (308, 315). It is no coincidence that all thirty members of the group are women. Here, and throughout the trilogy, Morrison reassigns important spiritual tasks to women, and especially black women.

Not surprisingly, *Beloved* has remained in the critical spotlight since its publication in 1987. Literally hundreds of books and articles have been published which deal with this enigmatic text, and several critics in particular have focused on locating and assessing biblical revisions in *Beloved.*[5] Their work is instructive in understanding how Morrison's use of the Bible functions within the larger context of African American literary tradition and within the particular period of American history the novel recounts; Susan Bowers, for example, locates *Beloved* in a long trajectory of African American apocalyptic writing, while Carolyn Mitchell argues that "Christ's suffering [and the Bible in general] informs the ways in which many African-Americans view their historical (and present day) suffering" and insists that, in the novel, "Morrison is keenly aware of the power of these views" (186). Without doubt, the work of these critics is helpful in pointing out the sheer volume of biblical allusions and references in *Beloved.* When read side by side, however, much of the criticism available on biblical revisions in the text lacks a sense of agreement or coherence: one critic, for instance, views the escaped slave, Sethe, as Christ-like in *Beloved* (Mitchell 176), while others claim Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is the Christ figure (Morey 252, Taylor-Guthrie 126). Still another asserts that Sethe's daughter, Denver, fills this role (Bowers 222).[6] In my formulation, these diverse interpretations each remain valid and can be understood to work concurrently, but only when the novel's gnostic undercurrents are uncovered and explored. The use of the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind" in *Jazz* and *Paradise*, especially, helps to illustrate how Morrison uses the gnostic texts to replace hierarchical either/or formulations with more inclusive methods to clarify how all three characters—Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver—might *each* display Christ-like characteristics. No other

critical work has yet to explore the gnostic influence in *Beloved*, the recognition of which changes key readings of the text.

Clearly, *Beloved* is heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, yet that relationship is complicated by the women's actions at the end of the novel, by Morrison's revision of the gospel of John there, and by her additional revisions of both the Genesis story and, of course, the book of Revelation. Morrison models biblical revisions throughout *Beloved* but especially in the "creation story," the narrative which describes Beloved's voyage across the across the ocean on a slave ship. In this passage, as throughout the novel, it is clear that Beloved is representative of both Sethe's dead daughter and the "sixty million and more," whose history Morrison is crafting. Morrison models the passage, in part, on the text from John ("In the beginning" is repeated throughout) but also on the Genesis story of creation that uses the same formulation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1: 1). Morrison further aligns *Beloved* with the Genesis story when she alludes to the passage of time: "there is night and there is day again again night day night day" (251, Genesis 1: 5). Morrison's incorporation of Genesis, in particular, sets *Beloved* up as a creation story in its own right—of African American history previously untold—and lays the groundwork for the work the novel does to further revise the book of Revelation and the violent version of apocalypse it has been understood to sanction.

The vexed relationship *Beloved* maintains with the Judeo-Christian tradition—illustrated in its complicated use of biblical allusions and imagery—is first exemplified in the novel's epigraph, taken from the ninth chapter of Romans: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (verse 25).

Paul, the author of Romans, uses this verse to argue that God will show mercy not only to the Jews, his "chosen people," but also the Gentiles: "In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (9: 8).[7] Paul supports his argument with a verse taken from the book of Hosea, which uses an extended metaphor of adultery to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness to God. In Hosea, God tells the prophet Hosea to take as his wife the prostitute Gomer—first to rebuke and punish her for her adulterous ways, then to seduce her and speak tenderly to her, and ultimately to reconcile with her: "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods" (3: 1). The metaphorical language works to illustrate God's relationship with the Israelites; thus, Gomer (a symbol of Israel), in her unfaithfulness to her husband, Hosea (representative of God), has adulterated herself with other men (symbols of the other gods Israel has "adulterated" itself with in its unfaithfulness to God). Yet God will call "her beloved, which is not beloved." In His mercy, God will forgive the Israelites for their wicked ways, and they will in turn prosper and "be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted" (1: 10).

In *Beloved*, the epigraph functions by calling attention to the ways the novel itself serves as a metaphor for African American history in general and to the history of slavery and its aftermath in particular. Beloved, the ghost returned to enact revenge on her mother, is representative of the novel's dedication to "sixty million and more," the number of Africans estimated to have died in the Middle Passage before ever reaching the "New World" (Taylor-Guthrie 120). In the text, Beloved is the embodiment, not only

of the one, "crawling already? girl" with her throat cut, but also of the millions of Africans and African Americans who "died bad" in the institution of American slavery (221). As Denver asserts about Beloved: "at times I think she was—more [than the ghost of her sister]" (314). Beloved's actions, then, can likewise be read metaphorically; thus, her haunting of Sethe is representative of the haunting of African Americans by the dead and by the past they symbolize. The women's exorcism and Beloved's disappearance at the end of the novel represent the African American community's acknowledgment of the past, their attempts to suppress its negative control over their lives, and their ability ultimately to overcome it. Naming "her beloved; which was not beloved" is Morrison's metaphor for this type of recovery and her call for African Americans to come to terms with slavery and its haunting legacy.[8]

While the Hosea passage helps to illustrate Morrison's use of metaphor in *Beloved*, Paul's revision of Hosea calls attention to the formal qualities of scriptural revision and to Morrison's own revision of Romans and other crucial biblical passages.[9] Whereas Morrison could have quoted the text directly from Hosea, she chose the Romans passage instead (195).[10] In doing so, she calls attention to the way history, and especially sacred history and the texts that recount it, is revised and shaped by those who narrate it. After all, Paul's revision of Hosea radically changes the text's original meaning. Ultimately, Morrison contends, the way a story is told shapes history as it is being told; "narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principle ways in which we absorb knowledge" (*Nobel Lecture* 14, 7). Her inclusion of the Romans passage as the novel's epigraph thus highlights the urgency for a revision of

harmful elements of sacred texts embedded in social and cultural practice at the same time as it gives agency to the narrative process itself as a means toward that end.

By focusing in particular on the idea of apocalypse in *Beloved*, Morrison calls attention to the way such imagery functions to normalize historical attempts at violent regeneration and how narrative can formulate models to overcome it. The final book of the Christian New Testament offers an end-of-the-world "revelation" and tells in detail of the battle of Armageddon that will end the age of mankind and restore peace in heaven (that is, it predicts the final battle between God and His forces of righteousness and Satan). In other words, in the biblical formulation (as it has been imaged by countless American narratives) violent bloodshed is a prerequisite for eternal peace. More, the Bible has been used to sanction violence toward slaves specifically: Exodus 21: 20-21 declares that it is permissible to beat a slave to near death (but not to kill him) since the slave is the property of his owner. Many of the early colonists and slaveholders were Christians who knew and followed these biblical regulations—recall in particular Davis' (President of the Confederate States of America) assertion that slavery "was established by decree of Almighty God" (Rowland 286). In *Beloved*, Schoolteacher and his pupils are also Christians, "the kind who know Jesus by His first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face" at the same time as they are capable of rationalizing Sethe and the other slaves at Sweet Home as only part human, and as "creatures [. . .] who needed every care and guidance in the world" (44, 176-7). Morrison challenges this logic of violent regeneration by showing its harmful potential; although it never condemns Sethe for her actions, *Beloved* draws parallels between Sethe's violence and the institution she rebels against. In other words, the violence of slavery continues in her act.

Such violence is avoided at the end of the novel through a revision of scriptural narrative motivating both cultural practice and imaginative production. As such, Morrison provides Sethe's with an alternative course of action at the same time as she connects narrative revision and social change. In doing so, she comments on U. S. society as a whole and posits alternatives to the destructive impulse of historical "apocalypse."

Beloved's treatment of the imagery of apocalypse remains a salient feature of the novel and a central part of the work it does to provide alternatives to the logic of slavery. The most significant way the novel does this is by repeating and revising Sethe's particular moment of apocalypse at the novel's end and giving her the opportunity for self-revelation, or salvation through knowledge, that is central to the gnostic tradition. When Schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher, and the sheriff—"the four horsemen"—ride into the yard at 124 to claim Sethe and her children, the reference to the four riders of the biblical apocalypse is clear (174). When Sethe flees to the woodshed to kill her children, Morrison further aligns the narrative with its biblical counterpart by calling forth images of the bloodshed of Armageddon. The text itself maintains a circular narrative pattern, which mercilessly advances and retreats and doesn't finally reveal Sethe's offense until over halfway through the novel.[11] In "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse," literary critic Susan Bowers emphasizes these formal qualities and insists that the "unveiling" at the etymological root of the word "apocalypse" calls attention to the novel's real revelation about the tragedy of forgetting:

> Morrison fuses Christian notions of apocalypse with West African beliefs to create a revised apocalyptic that principally looks backward, not

> forward in time, and concentrates on the psychological devastation which [occurred] when African Americans [. . .] let the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery disappear into the black hole of Lethe, that vortex of forgetting. (210-11)

Although several critics have made the connection between the novel's protagonist, Sethe, and Lethe, the river of forgetfulness that flows through Hades in Greek mythology, Bowers additionally argues that the traumatic, violent narrative is itself a kind of "new [literary] apocalypse" that "unveils" the forgetfulness of history rather than concludes it. She maintains that, unlike the biblical model, "the novel does not drive toward its apocalyptic moment but recounts the struggle of living through and beyond the reign of the Anti-Christ and of surviving the 'mumbling of the black and angry dead' (210, 211). Apocalypse thus becomes, not a synonym for chaos and cataclysm, but a revelation with the potential to serve as a catalyst for personal and historical growth.

As Lois Parkinson Zamora reminds us in *Writing the Apocalypse*, apocalypses had been well established as a literary form by about the second century B.C.E.; the genre has since become intimately tied to mainstream American cultural mythology and to literary production by both canonical and non-canonical American writers (1). In its original formulation (and according to Zamora, who is speaking from the standpoint of modern literary apocalypse), apocalypse is a mode of writing where "the end of the world is described from the point of view of a narrator who is radically opposed to existing spiritual and political practices"; in addition, the "narrative reflects not only his opposition to [these] practices but also his political powerlessness to change them. His is a subversive vision: He is outside the cultural and political mainstream [. . .] awaiting

God's intervention in human history" (2). In part because of the flexibility of interpretation allowed by the form, it has appealed to a variety of people in many historical moments (11). Zamora further argues: "in the historical development of apocalyptic thought one sees the direct relation of the myth of apocalypse to its sociological and political context" (11). Finally, she contends "the resurgence of apocalyptic modes of thought and expression is a predictable reaction to social disruption and temporal uncertainty, and explains in part its currency in our own popular vocabulary" (11). Not surprisingly, themes and narratives of apocalypse have been highlighted by American writers from diverse eras and backgrounds; in particular, the genre has had a long-standing and prevailing influence on African American literary production, although critics have been quick to point out essential differences between writers of apocalypse from disenfranchised groups and those from the mainstream.

Susan Bowers, for example, contends that "African American apocalypse must be clearly differentiated from White American apocalypse," and she insists that each has its own defining characteristics. White American apocalypse, for example, "has been based on the optimistic expectation of historical, material change. The reverse experience [. . .] is true for African Americans" since "they did not leave an Old World of death and decadence for a New World of hope and rebirth but were torn from the world of their families, to be taken to a world of suffering, death, and alienation" (211). While I agree with Bowers that there are significant differences between the two traditions, I don't agree that African American apocalypse necessarily excludes the hope for revolutionary change: on the contrary, this chapter argues that Morrison's revision of the central narrative of apocalypse in *Beloved* favors the revision of limiting and destructive myths

as a means to bring about both historical and material change. Ultimately, Sethe's narrative has the potential to foster both; the main difference is that the novel considers personal, psychological growth and renewal as a prerequisite to historical revolution. Likewise, it resists the temptation to treat violence and tribulation as the primary catalyst for that change. In general, however, apocalypse in the modern literary tradition often envisions cataclysmic or violent upheaval as a prerequisite to revolutionary change and the ushering in of a "new world order" that restores balance and power to the dispossessed.

The specific narrative of apocalypse derived from the biblical book of Revelation, however, is not without its limitations, and historically, some writers have invoked the form as a way to modify or reject it (3). After all, John Leddy Phelan's *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* establishes that a messianic worldview informed the colonization of the "New World" and motivated Puritan belief in America as the site of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21: 1). Zamora further contends:

> apocalyptic optimism pervaded the Age of Discovery [. . .]. Explorers, statesmen, and clergy alike viewed the events of geographical exploration and colonization of America as the fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation—that is, as necessary prerequisites to the end of the world. (8)

Interactions with Native Americans, in particular, took on an added significance—since they were believed by many to be the lost tribes of Israel described in Revelation and predicted to reappear before the Last Judgment: "so the conquest of the Aztec empire immediately began to accrue levels of apocalyptic significance" (8).[12] Writers from

disenfranchised groups, resisting the historical consequences of apocalypse, have revised and reframed the narrative to turn the form on itself; many rewrite the traditional battle between "good" and "evil," for example, and redefine the key players in the encounter as a way to contest such historical processes. In *Beloved*, Morrison appears to focus on the etymological meaning of the word "apocalypse" at the same time as she resists the traditional form that sees violence as a prerequisite to social change or waits for the final intervention of a supernatural being to counter historical injustice. In *Beloved*, Morrison thus favors Zamora's contention that "apocalypse is *not* merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos. It is, in fact, a synonym for 'revelation'" (10). To understand "apocalypse" as "revelation," then, is to separate it from its violent signification.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the idea of apocalypse as a "revelation," featured so prominently in *Beloved*, has links to gnostic scripture; no fewer than seven books of apocalypse are recorded in the Nag Hammadi discoveries alone and six more texts are defined by the editors of *The Nag Hammadi Library* as "revelation dialogue" or "revelation discourse."[13] (Perhaps most interesting among those listed as revelation discourse is "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," parts of which appear as Morrison's epigraphs in both *Jazz* and *Paradise*.) Again, apocalyptic literature dates back to the first two centuries preceding the birth of Christ: in other words, to exactly the same time as when these gnostic texts were in circulation. They are thus exemplary and original models of the genre. Rather than end-of-the-world narratives of judgment, of which there are surprisingly few, these texts treat "apocalypse" primarily as a moment of revelation and redemption and are widely varied in form and content. The book of Revelation is not the

only Christian apocalyptic text, either: according to Zamora, the thirteenth chapter of Mark, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, and the Second Epistle of Peter are also considered apocalyptic; in the canonic Hebrew Bible, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah spring from this literary genre as well (2). The Revelation of John, however, remains "by many judgments the most complete and the finest of traditional apocalyptic texts," and it is certainly the best known in contemporary popular culture; "it is, in short, a text which has directly or indirectly engendered and enriched [countless] other texts" (1-2). The prevalence of a well-established literary genre of apocalypse in the gnostic tradition (as well as in the Jewish and early Christian traditions, among others) serves as a reminder that the Revelation narrative is only one of many such accounts and that too strict a reading of *Beloved* with St. John's text in mind is to miss crucial elements of the novel. When understood in this broad way—as an "unveiling" or a "revelation"—it is clear there are many such moments of apocalypse in *Beloved* and that they differ greatly from the model offered in the book of Revelation. Nearly all the novel's major characters—Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, especially—encounter small moments of revelation throughout *Beloved* that change their outlook on and approach to life. Denver realizes the destructiveness of Beloved and Sethe's love for one another, and it prompts her to seek help where formerly she was terrified to venture. The rusted tin box that contains Paul D's heart begins to open. And, most importantly, Sethe discovers her "best thing" at the novel's end: "Me? Me?" (322). This final emphasis on self-knowledge is a central feature of the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind," that appears in the epigraphs to both *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

After all, unlike the biblical apocalypse, Sethe's violence is not regenerative, nor does it usher in renewal or closure for the problems of her particular moment in American history. If, as in the biblical model, forces of good and evil are at work in *Beloved*, the lines between them are constantly blurred: like Baby Suggs, the text never ultimately "approve[s] or condemn[s] Sethe's rough choice" (212).[14] The central apocalyptic narrative in *Beloved* is significant, however, especially because it is repeated twice; and, despite its apparent differences from the biblical apocalypse recounted in Revelation, the first account maintains important parallels (described above) while the second version departs considerably. These variations help to destabilize the authority of a singular, biblical narrative at the same time as they open the door to alternative (and in Sethe's case, more effective) epistemological frameworks. Since the outcome of Sethe's filicide—the central apocalyptic narrative in *Beloved*—is the death of Beloved, the defeat of Baby Suggs, the disappearance of Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar, the dissolution of her entire support system, and a sense of guilt that haunts her for nearly two decades, it is clear that the negative repercussions of Sethe's actions greatly outweigh the positive. Figuratively, then, the biblical narrative they coincide with—and which Morrison emphasizes through imagery of bloodshed and the four horsemen, etc.—can also be read as destructive and in need of revision.

By contrast, when the apocalyptic narrative is repeated at the novel's end, it has been revised so fully that all it retains from the biblical account is an emphasis on redemption. In particular, it offers Sethe the possibility to redeem herself from her earlier, destructive actions, even if at first it appears she's merely repeating them: just after the arrival of the thirty townswomen and the commencement of the singing that

"broke the back of words," Edward Bodwin, the white abolitionist who owned 124, drove a cart down Bluestone Road and into the yard to pick Denver up for work. Reminiscing about the childhood he spent there and thinking about the box of tin soldiers he buried somewhere in the yard, he hardly notices Sethe coming at him with an ice pick. Sethe, mistaking Bodwin for Schoolteacher returned once more to take away what she considers her "best thing[s]," her children, "hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies" (308-09). During the novel's central moment of apocalypse, when Schoolteacher and his men first come into the yard at 124 and Sethe heads to the woodshed to kill her children, the text is nearly—though not exactly—identical to this revised apocalyptic moment at the novel's end:

> [Sethe] was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. [. . .] She just flew. (192)

These formal variations help to emphasize the one, major difference between the two accounts: that the object and outcome of Sethe's violence has radically changed. This time, rather than kill her children, Sethe revises her earlier actions and lunges at Bodwin instead. The difference is significant. Even though Bodwin at first appears harmless, he represents Schoolteacher by virtue of his relationship to the central narrative of Sethe's filicide and his parallel role in its revision. More importantly, he represents the insidious nature of white American racism—figured best in the novel by the coin dish in his living

room, which was "a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go [. . .]. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. [. . .] Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words "At Yo Service" (300). Thus, when Sethe lunges at Bodwin rather than kill Beloved, her actions can be read as Sethe "lash[ing] out" at the institutions of white racism rather than destroying those closest to her. Interestingly, here the narrative departs from the biblical account of apocalypse almost entirely; rather than the four riders who appeared in the earlier narrative, this time there is only one.[15] Moreover, Denver stops Sethe before she can kill Bodwin, thus avoiding the bloodshed associated with the biblical apocalypse (313).[16] By revising this apocalyptic narrative and presenting it twice in *Beloved*, Morrison gives Sethe the opportunity to expiate her earlier actions (and thus highlights the possibility for personal and historical change) at the same time as she emphasizes the revelatory qualities of "apocalypse" over the biblical, violent, end-of-the-world narrative of closure.

In both cases, the result is similar—Beloved dies or disappears—but the process itself has altered and the overall outcome improves. Since Beloved represents the "ghost" of slavery and its aftermath, the goal is not her total eradication but a lessoning of the control she maintains over the present, and the novel's emphasis on her disappearance, as opposed to her death, illustrates this difference. This revision brings the African American community together rather than alienating them from each other, and it emphasizes women's special capacity to engender significant social change—as symbolized by the thirty singers gathered in Sethe's yard who are all female. When these women appear at the end of *Beloved* and Morrison revises the Gospel of John to argue

that "In the beginning was the sound," she poses an alternative that predates Christianity but is still informed by it. This helps to explain the fact that when Stamp Paid hears "sounds" surrounding 124, he knows they are "older, but not stronger than He Himself was" (202). Since the sounds are linked to Beloved's presence in the house, and since we know from the epigraph that Beloved represents the "sixty million and more" Africans who died in the Middle Passage, we know that the "sounds" represent the general "haunting" of African Americans by a history, as Susan Bowers has insisted, that has been suppressed and must be "unveiled." Of course, the debate between "word" and "sound" alludes first of all to the tension of representing an older, African American oral tradition in the written, as figured in many of the slave narratives of the era *Beloved* recounts.[17] In the context of Stamp Paid's comment, however, the "sounds" may also represent yet another "history" in need of recovery: that of the suppression of sacred texts by those with political power and, in particular, the suppression of gnostic texts by the early Christian church. Thus, the gnostic texts are "older" than the Church, "but not stronger," since they did not survive censorship in the first few centuries C.E. The women's emphasis on sound again asserts that this tradition is older than Christianity ("In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound"), can have powerful effects (the women generate "a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees"), and yet still retain a connection to the Christian tradition ("it broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash") (308).[18] Although this connection between "sound" and the gnostic tradition is never finally made explicit in *Beloved*, the novel's gnostic revision of apocalypse as "revelation" and the openly gnostic concerns of both *Jazz* and *Paradise* (in fact, the epigraph in *Jazz* takes up

the issue of "sound" in a specifically gnostic context) all indicate that, even in this first book of the trilogy, Morrison is developing alternatives to destructive theistic language and formal practices inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition and embedded in literary practices. This alternative is facilitated, at least in part, through an understanding of gnostic theology.

Most important, Morrison's inclusion of this theology offers Sethe the opportunity for personal growth and self-revelation central to the gnostic tradition featured so prominently in both *Jazz* and *Paradise*. The most significant revision Morrison makes to the apocalyptic narrative in *Beloved* is in Sethe's moment of self-revelation at the novel's end, since it is here she emphasizes the "unveiling" that is at the etymological root of apocalypse. Following the gathering of the women in Sethe's yard, Bodwin's dramatic entry, and Beloved's disappearance, Sethe falls into a state of depression akin to Baby Suggs' social withdrawal in the few years after the death of Beloved. Blaming herself for the violence and bloodshed that occurred in her yard, Sethe's mother-in-law had given up on life, returned to an infantile state where she only noticed colors, and slowly passed away. Here, Morrison revises Baby's earlier surrender through Sethe and by drawing a parallel: both retreat under Baby's colorful, patchwork quilt. Morrison's choice of Baby Suggs here is important, since Baby serves as an "unchurched preacher" throughout the novel, "uncalled" to preach to all denominations the gospel of self-love: "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (102, 103). "Yonder," she tells them, "they do not love your flesh. [. . .] *You* got to love it, *you*!" (104). (This idea arises again in the sermon Paul D gives Sethe at the end of the novel.) But Baby Suggs gives

up and admits defeat after Schoolteacher comes into her yard and Sethe kills her daughter: "the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count. They came in her yard anyway" (212).

The Word, of course, represents the biblical Word of God and the Christian tradition Baby Suggs preaches from; she is linked to that tradition throughout the novel through imagery of Christ feeding the masses and by calling the children in the Clearing: "let the children come" (160-61, 103, Mark 6: 32-42, Matthew 19: 14).[19] Although Baby Suggs revises the tradition somewhat—she is, after all, "unchurched," "uncalled," and "[does] not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more"—she ultimately realizes that that tradition is controlled by others who have the power to take it away on a whim (103, John 8: 11). When Stamp Paid argues with Baby Suggs after she gives up ("you can't quit the Word. It's given you to speak. You can't quit the Word, I don't care what all happen to you"), Baby responds by saying, "that's one other thing they took away from me" (210, 209). What she means, and what the text ultimately argues, is that a sacred text loses its authority when it fails to speak to the experiences of those who rely on it for guidance. And if "they" have the power to come into Baby's yard and "take away" the Word (that is, to make her doubt her own beliefs), then they control even her spirituality. Paul D puts it another way: "Did a whiteman saying it make it so?" (260). Baby Suggs ultimately gives up the Word and admits defeat under her colorful patchwork quilt: "God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to say so" (208). There is a sense of urgency surrounding the details of Baby's death: to revise those sacred texts that can no longer sustain their adherents and to consider other perspectives and texts that offer viable solutions (as well as comfort) in the face of lived history.

The singing women who initiate this revised apocalyptic narrative in *Beloved*, the "sound [they generate] that broke the back of words" and, consequently, the baptism it engenders, put Sethe in the position to carry on Baby Sugg's spiritual legacy—with a few key revisions. In both the Judeo-Christian and gnostic traditions, Seth is the son born to Adam and Eve to replace Abel after he is slain by Cain. The New Testament figures Seth in the genealogy of Jesus Christ; in the gnostic tradition, Seth is the recipient of a saving knowledge, or *gnosis*, transmitted to him by Adam. Sethian Gnostics (a division of Egyptian Gnosticism) understood themselves as inheritors of a true spirituality and as members of "the living and unshakable race" (Robinson 396). In *Beloved*, Sethe serves as a representative of this tradition, so, unlike Baby Suggs (whom she replaces after Baby is "killed" by a failure of the Word to sustain her), Sethe's depression and her retreat under the patchwork quilt does not lead to her death. Instead, Morrison revises Baby's character and presents Sethe with the opportunity for gnostic self-revelation: when Paul D comes to see her, he repeats a version of Baby's sermon of self-love—a variant of *gnosis*, or self-knowledge, and a central concept in gnostic thought. When Sethe tells him that Beloved was her "best thing," and now she's gone, Paul D counters: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (322). Sethe's response—"Me? Me?"—illustrates this moment of gnostic self-revelation at the same time as it opens up the possibility for a continuation of Sethe's story instead of its conclusion. The Judeo-Christian apocalyptic narrative of closure, which offers Sethe no future, is therefore revised and replaced by a gnostic narrative of "revelation" and redemption, which does.

In fact, at no point is Sethe's story actually finished; on the contrary, *Beloved* emphasizes beginnings over a narrative of closure and finality. The novel's

"apocalyptic" ending thus reveals the potential for scriptural revision to engender significant personal change and to alter history itself through the creation of new beginnings and new narratives that carry over into the other novels of the trilogy. Ultimately, "creating" African American history in this way gives agency to the narrative process itself and reclaims a spiritual heritage that has been distorted, suppressed, and denied. By revising the biblical account of apocalypse and other central biblical passages, Morrison tells African American history in a way that both envisions a viable future and proposes the means to its attainment. Paul D tells Sethe, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322). Although on the literal level he's talking only about the two of them, the novel's emphasis on metaphorical meaning makes it clear that Morrison intends Paul's comment for a much broader community as well. What that community will do with the challenge is a theme further explored in *Jazz*.

* * *

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* begins with the sound of a needle being placed on a record: "Sth." This simple sound, and the image that accompanies it, sets in motion the driving metaphor of the entire novel. Throughout *Jazz*, Morrison explores her unnamed narrator's initial concern "that the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle" (220). In *Jazz* Morrison is concerned with a different cultural epoch in African American history from that in *Beloved*; rather than the Reconstruction Era, *Jazz* is set during the Harlem

Renaissance. However, Morrison structures *Jazz*, like *Beloved*, around a metaphor regarding the nature of historical narration and explores the relationship between sacred, political, and literary history. Strengthened through continuous references to music, jazz clubs, and Bluebird records, the metaphor of the needle in the groove illustrates the cyclical nature of history and its potentially endless repetition.[20] Morrison similarly employs gnostic texts to argue that a revision of the myths and cultural practices that motivate history is essential to an avoidance of further violence and repetition. In *Jazz*, however, the narrative revolves around a different formal concern; unlike *Beloved*, which investigated the ways a biblical model of apocalypse often drives the need for violent regeneration and narrative closure in American literature, *Jazz* is concerned with the problem of omniscient narration and its relationship to an omniscient (Judeo-Christian) God.[21] In part through its use of gnostic texts and themes, the novel posits an alternative to the destructive logic embedded in conventional narrative modes at the same time as it makes historical revision a participatory process by leveling hierarchical distinctions between author and audience.

Ultimately, the story of *Jazz* serves to disprove the metaphor of the needle stuck in the groove of history by providing alternative possibilities and outcomes for the novel's characters; the voice narrating the text gives an account of African American history in which she herself plays an important role. In fact, the techniques and limitations of narrative form are of central concern in *Jazz*, and its setting—the Harlem Renaissance—provides an important context for the ideas of narrative voice presented in the novel. After all, the Harlem Renaissance was a period of black literary production when the problem of voice was particularly at the fore of African American cultural

production; in *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that during this period "the search for a voice in black letters became a matter of grave concern among the black literati" (171). Morrison's retelling of this era of African American history thus takes up the concerns pertinent to the period, but she recounts them in a way that responds to what she sees as their limitations; Morrison thus locates herself in the tradition at the same time as she scrutinizes its practices. Through a self-reflexive commentary on the art of narrative technique and authorship, Morrison challenges the roots of accepted narrative modes in African American literary production and calls for a revision of their adverse qualities, often connected to theistic language inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition that is nonetheless a vital part of the African American experience.[22] Patricia Hunt, in "'Free to do something wild': History and the Ancestor in *Jazz*," has noted the "god-like Voice that narrates *Jazz*" and argues that it "is reminiscent of God in the Pentateuch" (49). Her contention that "Morrison's creation of the Voice (the narrator) plays with the notion of the 'omniscient narrator' in fiction, which is often related to the idea of God or a 'God's eye view'" is appropriate (49, parentheses mine).[23] A revision of the omniscient narrator, the novel ultimately contends, is the first step in avoiding the destructive repetition of the needle stuck endlessly in the groove of history.

Other critics have likewise noted Morrison's emphasis on form. In "From the 'Other' Sides of the Realist Tracks: (A)gnostic Narratives in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," Vincent O'Keefe argues that "the effect of Morrison's text on the reader is resistance to, if not rejection of, traditional realist narrative of closure and rational certainty in favor of less oppressive, more revisionary narrative techniques" (331).[24] As the title of his article suggests, however, and despite the fact that O'Keefe is one of few critics even to

acknowledge the novel's gnostic undercurrents, he finally settles on an agnostic reading of the text, arguing that tensions between Western, gnostic, African American, and feminist traditions "escalate in the context of the narrator's growing epistemology of agnosticism" and that Morrison "ultimately rejects the possibility of any type of track-making because of the nonrepresentational nature of history and reality" (331). O'Keefe's observations about the novel's gnostic tendencies are germane, but while the narrator does finally admit her own lack of understanding, *Jazz* doesn't ultimately succumb to an agnostic "unknowing" in the face of the nonrepresentational.[25] On the contrary, while the narrator is ultimately exposed as unreliable, *Jazz* transfers the power (knowledge, *gnosis*) to the readers themselves in much the same way as gnostic scripture often saw Christ (or the Savior) as not the end in itself, but as a means to an end—that of the self obtaining its own knowledge and divinity (Pagels 126-34).[26] In this formulation, the novel serves as only a model, and an openly imperfect one at that.[27] This is a strategic move on Morrison's part, since it deviates from the idea of literary production as a vehicle for personal or historical salvation and the author as the bearer of that deliverance. Instead, the novel becomes, not a definitive account of African American social and literary history, but an account of its possibilities—it serves only as a guide. O'Keefe is correct in assuming that to do otherwise would be an impossibility given "the nonrepresentational nature of [. . .] reality," yet my own work with *Jazz* helps to illuminate how Morrison's inclusion of the gnostic texts articulates an alternative which allows the novel to retain both its authority and a sense of its continuing role in the process of ongoing historical revision.

Jazz takes up the story of Violet and Joe Trace, a childless, middle-aged couple who live in Harlem in the cultural heyday of the 1920s and who drift apart until events transpire that make them unable to ignore each other's presence. After Joe kills his eighteen year-old lover, Dorcas, and Violet turns up at her funeral to slash her dead rival's face, both must accept the reality of their bleak situation and either change, persist in it, or kill one another. What happens next is a surprise even to the narrator, whose own confusion about the novel's central plot marks her as somewhat unreliable: "I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen" (220). What the narrator "misse[s]," and what the characters discover without her help, is that they author their own story and that history, therefore, isn't destined to repeat itself. After Dorcas's death, a visit to the Traces by her best friend Felice sets the narrative wheels in motion for a repeat of the novel's earlier violence and fatality; after all, the novel presents Felice as "another true-as-life Dorcas, four marcelled waves and all" (197).[28] The narrator admits that "[she] saw the three of them, Felice, Joe and Violet, and they looked to [her] like a mirror image of Dorcas, Joe and Violet. [She] believed [she] saw everything important they did, and based on what [she] saw [she] could imagine what [she] didn't" (221). What the narrator predicts as a repeat of the fatal threesome, however, the characters counter with an unusual friendship, one that leads to a renewal of affection between Joe and Violet and supplies them with the child lacking in their own relationship. Thus, rather than falling into the rut (or "groove") of their past mistakes, Joe, Violet, and Felice surprise the narrator with a story she is unable even to imagine.

Although Joe and Violet's actions are independent of the narrator's understanding of them, she nonetheless has the power to tell their story in whatever way she prefers. Therein lies the problem with omniscient narration and its implications for history and cultural production. For if omniscient narration allows a privileged, godlike authority and favors a single perspective, usually that of the majority, then it does so at the expense of all other perspectives. Derivative of the Judeo-Christian tradition in American literature, omniscient narration carries with it a sense of fate: the story is destined to happen in exactly the way the narrator describes, a perspective encouraged by Paul's discussion of the doctrine of predestination in the book of Romans and called attention to in *Beloved*'s epigraph. The "God's eye view" of omniscient narration announces itself as truth—the only possible way of telling a story—and is an example of the theistic language Morrison hopes to eradicate (related to sexist and racist language and practices because of its similarly hierarchical logic). In *Jazz*, Morrison counters an omniscient narrative style by retelling central elements of the Trace's story from different perspectives and with different outcomes and by introducing an increasingly self-conscious narrator as the novel progresses.

Like *Beloved*, then, *Jazz* presents a central narrative moment and repeats it with a difference. The primary narrative presents the triangle of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas, with fatal results; the revision of this narrative (Joe, Violet, and Felice) ends not in death but in reconciliation, affection, and friendship. Such a repetition illustrates how, by manipulating narrative form, the outcome of the story can be radically changed. In doing so, Morrison refutes the narrator's contention that history inevitably functions like the needle stuck in the record groove at the same time as she engages concerns surrounding

the issue of narrative voice pertinent to the period. The tradition she follows stems largely from debates between Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, debates Gates has argued existed during this period surrounding the nature and function of representation, the ideology of mimesis (179). In his formulation:

> Hurston, Wright, and Ellison's divergent theories of narrative structure and voice, the cardinal points in a triangle of influence, with their attendant ramifications upon the ideology of form and its relation to knowledge and power, comprise a matrix of issues to which subsequent black fictions, by definition, must respond. (184)

According to Gates, a "fiction of obliteration" (that is, narrative that writes into being an individual at the expense of the community) created a "great divide in black literature" in this period, a fissure surrounding the ethics of mimesis and taken up by Hurston and Wright especially; Gates argues that "no two authors in the tradition are more dissimilar" in their views regarding narrative voice (182, 183). According to Gates, Wright in particular considered himself "among those few Negroes who could tell not only their own story but also the woeful tale of their pathetic, voiceless black countrymen" (182). This idea stems from his belief, as Gates refers to it, in "an ironic relationship between the individual black talent and an Afro-American cultural tradition ravaged and laid waste to by an omnipresent and irresistible white racism" (181). In other words, the "voiceless" African American community needed Wright, the voice of "black talent," to tell their story. Wright follows the tradition of Du Bois, who argued in "The Talented Tenth" that "the Negro race [. . .] will be saved by its exceptional men" and that "the

problem [of education is] of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst" (33).

Jazz picks up this historical debate; the novel, however, appears to align itself with Ellison and Hurston in its refusal to uphold hierarchical language that positions the author as responsible for (indeed, capable of ensuring) the "salvation" of his fellow "men" at the expense of the rest of the African American community, who are at the very least reduced to stereotypes and caricatures, if not denied agency altogether.[29] The narrator in this formulation serves as a figure for the author—responsible for the representation of her characters—and those characters figure as members of the black community in general. Of course, Morrison here exposes the limitations of this familiar metaphor, one inherited from sacred texts: that of the author as "creator." In doing so, she comes up against questions regarding the nature of creation and its potential ramifications—the power a work of imaginative production exerts and over whom. Conventional (omniscient) narrative forms, inherited from Judeo-Christian beliefs in the American tradition, position the creator/author as omnipresent and infallible, but in *Jazz*, Morrison destabilizes the logic of this position by foregrounding the author's fallibility through the figure of the narrator. In fact, *Jazz* challenges the omniscient narrator especially by employing a narrator who eventually loses all power of representation to the authority of her characters. As the narrator acknowledges near the end of *Jazz*, "[they] were [. . .] busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered" (220). Ultimately, Morrison's contribution to the Hurston-Wright-Ellison "triangle of influence" is to assign

the power of self-representation, for the first time, to the characters who serve as figures of the community.[30]

Ultimately, the narrator's error is in overlooking these characters—she assumes she is "invisible," when in reality she is predictable and does more harm than good to the people whose history she recounts; she denies them agency by assuming their responses predetermined and their lives fated (220). The word "invisible," in particular, begs a comparison between the narrators of Morrison's *Jazz* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, both of which live in or near Harlem in the 1920s. Ellison's narrator claims he is "invisible [. . .] simply because people refuse to see [him]" (3). By contrast, the narrator of *Jazz* believes she is invisible but is actually observed by the entire Harlem community (220). Ellison's Invisible Man insists he is "a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and [. . .] might even be said to possess a mind" (3). The narrator of *Jazz*, however, specifically points out that she is a disembodied narrator who "[hasn't] got any muscles" (8). At another moment, though, the narrator of *Jazz* continues in a voice that might as well come from the pages of *Invisible Man*, the similarities are so great: "I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind. People say I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places" (9). By going to the trouble of highlighting such clear similarities and contrasts between the narrator of *Jazz* and Ellison's Invisible Man, Morrison may be distinguishing between two different projects, both dealing with types of invisibility—the invisibility of an African American man in the United States (and the need to write himself into being), on the one hand, and the invisibility (and potential hazards) of traditional narrative modes in African American literary production, on the other.[31] In fact, it is important to note that, while *Jazz* takes up the history of African

America after slavery in a way not accounted for in dominant discourse, my focus is on the novel's approach to the African American literary tradition in particular.

Meanwhile, the narrator's self-purported "invisibility" also recalls Morrison's work in *Playing in the Dark* and the "fishbowl" forms of literary production that structure conventional narrative modes and, consequently, limit historical and social change. Remember that Morrison has insisted again and again in her critical work that language and narrative influence social practice. After all, much of American history has been told using this narrative technique at the expense of people of color and as a means to justify patriarchy, slavery, and colonialism. In the African American tradition, if perhaps unconsciously, these techniques have likewise been adapted—the consequence of which has been to limit power for women of color specifically. As such, the myopic (though seemingly omniscient) perspective the narrator of *Jazz* initially demonstrates is thus cause for suspicion both because it stagnates narrative and historical potential and because it relies on narrative modes that evidence hegemonic and hierarchical strategies of representation. In her arrogance, she misses her "human" characters' capacity to change, and as the figure responsible primarily for the retelling of African American literary history in *Jazz*, she does a serious disservice to that population by assuming, with godlike power, she knows them best. As a narrator, then, she is essential only insofar as she helps to illustrate the problems inherent in accepted narrative modes which envision the author as possessing an unquestionable right to representation; throughout *Jazz*, Morrison uses the narrator to demonstrate the limitations of a single, omniscient perspective, one that offers one, privileged version of a history which has, in reality, many possible interpretations and outcomes. Of course, the nature of the version of

history being told is also significant, and Morrison responds specifically to the historical debate regarding narrative voice in her refusal to privilege the author's perspective at the expense of all others. In the end, it is clear that the narrator (rather than the novel's characters) is the figure most in need of "salvation," and this salvation is accomplished through the help of certain gnostic texts that offer an alternative to the destructive logic of omniscient narration.

Unlike *Beloved*, which is replete with biblical imagery and allusions, *Jazz* includes relatively little reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the novel's epigraph is instead taken from the gnostic text, "Thunder, Perfect Mind." This transition from biblical to gnostic concerns in the first two books of the trilogy helps to explain some of the latent gnostic allusions in *Beloved* and parallels the openly gnostic preoccupations of *Paradise*. While there is brief mention of Christian response to violence in the North (the "doomsayers" saw it as evidence of God's wrath and of His impending judgment), the novel's interest in the Judeo-Christian tradition functions primarily at the formal level in *Jazz* and revolves around the issue of voice illustrated in Gates' literary history (78).[32] Here, again, Morrison is concerned with the way sacred texts get written into cultural production and their consequent influence on history. Of particular interest is the way theistic language, if allowed to do so, has the potential to limit storytelling and thus its potential for imagining revolutionary social change; in *Jazz* narrative goes hand in hand with historical change by conflating character and reader and envisioning alternative social action for both. Remember that in her "Nobel Lecture in Literature," Morrison refers to theistic language as "dead" and claims it "actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, [and] suppresses human potential" (14).[33] This is the

problem with texts that invisibly (and often unconsciously) reinforce hegemonic forms inherited from sacred texts and which limit personal and historical potential. As in the other two books of the trilogy, however, Morrison doesn't reject Christianity entirely—she accepts it as a vital and integral part of African American history—but she revises it instead by including suppressed texts and perspectives, especially those that subvert the notion of salvation as attainable only through the aid of an established authority (whether priest or novelist).

To the extent that they offer an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the gnostic texts aid in the novel's revision of the function and role of narrative voice. Quoted in the novel's epigraph, the gnostic text "Thunder, Perfect Mind" presents an alternative to conventional narration by contradicting the narrator's initial contention that "no power *on earth* could lift the arm that held the needle" (emphasis mine). Rather than an omnipotent, otherworldly creator/author who offers the only possibility for personal and historical salvation, *Jazz* aligns itself instead with certain gnostic scriptures that suggest salvation is a primarily personal undertaking. Ultimately, active, participatory historical revision is required of the audience instead, an idea that resonates well with the ideas presented to the Swedish Academy on the occasion of Morrison's "Nobel Lecture in Literature." In that lecture, Morrison tells the story of an old woman, blind but wise, who is tested by visitors who ask her whether the bird one of them holds is living or dead.[34] Unable to see to confirm the truth, the old woman answers that she doesn't know. Instead, she says, "what I do know is that [the bird] is in your hands" (11). As Morrison explains, "her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive is

your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility" (12). In a fascinating and revealing narrative move, *Jazz* concludes with an equivalent image of the book being held in its reader's hands; by doing so, it implies a parallel responsibility on the part of the audience. Rather than offer a pithy moral lesson or gnomic pronouncement, *Jazz* illustrates a version of narrative as exchange; as in the gnostic formulation, salvation becomes the responsibility of the seeker, and no savior intercedes. Narrative, then, provides the interaction, but it is ultimately only part of the equation, and must be interrogated at each turn for potentially harmful effects.

The way sacred texts influence the literary imagination (and the consequences of this influence on literary and historical production) is a central concern of both *Beloved* and *Jazz*, and both novels seek to reevaluate those cultural myths and practices that control which version of history gets told, and by whom. After all, failure to do so allows power to remain in the hands of the few—those who tell history in a way that ensures the continuation of their power. The gnostic theology introduced in the novel's epigraph offers the potential for multiple perspectives by breaking down the hierarchical logic of theistic language. Spoken in the first-person, Morrison's epigraph in *Jazz* comes from the gnostic text, "Thunder, Perfect Mind": "I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name." The gnostic text features a divine speaker who is a complex fusion of opposites and who resists simple categorization—she is both "first" and "last," "honored" and "scorned," an "alien" and a "citizen" (Robinson 297, 301).[35] The novel's epigraph illustrates this paradox by presenting a chiasmus ("I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name"). The epigraph thus establishes the framework for the novel's revision of traditional narrative modes, since it encourages a narrative point-of-view that

is complex, paradoxical, and unlike hierarchical formulations that envision an exceptional narrator (the "Best") entitled to represent "the Worst" of his fellow men (Du Bois 33).

The narrator's own similarity to the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" further illustrates Morrison's contrast between orthodox Judeo-Christian belief in an omniscient, infallible savior/narrator and certain gnostic texts, like "Thunder, Perfect Mind," which engage the seeker in the process of their own representation and salvation. In *Jazz*, the divine speaker of the gnostic poem becomes the ideal narrator because her limitations are self-proclaimed: she is both "knowledge" and "ignorance," reliable and unreliable (298). Although Morrison's narrator in *Jazz* at first announces her omniscience and employs a conventional narrative style, the logic of this position is quickly exposed and undermined. The narrator's telling, and subsequent retelling, of the story of Golden Gray—a racially mixed character who plays a significant role in Joe and Violet's past— serves as one significant moment in *Jazz* when Morrison's narrative technique reveals an evolving narrator, one aware of the responsibility she bears to the story she fashions, and one increasingly more gnostic in formulation. In fact, by the end of Golden Gray's narrative, the narrator admits her own error: "I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am"; here the narrator, like the speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" begins to recognize herself as somewhat paradoxical (160). The aim here, of course, and the work the novel's gnostic epigraph helps to articulate, is to present a narrator whose own attempts to write herself into being don't come at the expense of her characters—the same debate prefigured by Wright, Hurston, and Ellison, and to which *Jazz* returns. In fact, the narrator is revised and

modified throughout the novel so that by the end she most resembles the gnostic speaker of the epigraph. Such a self-transformation erases distinctions between author and reader at the same time as it answers Du Bois' critical question regarding "How [. . .] the Negro [Shall] Be Portrayed" (Gates 179).[36]

The novel itself remains authoritative, but with a new relationship to its reader. To illustrate this point, *Jazz* concludes with a twist on the African American trope of the "Talking Book," a metaphor of the double-voiced text, as illustrated by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*.[37] Born of Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," whereby the African American subject "feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body," a double-voiced text is one that similarly articulates its dual position as a text with both white and black literary antecedents (Gates xxiii).[38] As a means of responding to the debate over the role of narrative voice initiated by Wright, Ellison, and Hurston, Morrison takes the essentially figurative model of the Talking Book and makes it literal by having the book itself talk to the reader at the novel's end:

> *I love the way you* (the reader) *hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyebrows when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.* (229)

By introducing the second person for the first time in the novel and creating an intimate and interactive moment with the reader, *Jazz* calls attention to the reader's own relationship to the history the text only helps to recount, and it offers them a voice not usually permitted in conventional narrative forms. Through the trope of the Talking

Book, Morrison grounds the novel in the actual world of the reader; after all, the book must be talking to *someone*. This position refutes the model of narrative voice envisioned by Wright and others and articulates the idea of narrative as exchange rather than as a privileged story told by an omniscient and infallible author/narrator. Just as significantly, though, Morrison's use of the trope of the Talking Book also reminds the reader of its history, with its connection to the ideas of double-consciousness and double-voiced texts, serving as a reminder of the dual role of the African American author influenced by *both* white *and* black literary antecedents (and the potentially harmful effects of these influences).[39] The actual work of historical revision ultimately falls to the responsibility of the audience as much as to the narrator, author, or novel as a whole.

It is on this note that Morrison concludes *Jazz*, thereby rendering the novel not ultimately agnostic but, instead, deeply invested in the reader's own understanding, or *gnosis*. The narrator continues her emphasis on the reader's responsibility to African American history at the novel's end by highlighting the reader's hands, which now hold the speaking text:

> But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

Here, the narrator echoes a biblical lexicon that views Christ as "chosen," or elected, for the role of Savior (Isaiah 42:1), but rather than relying on the image of the Savior's nail-scarred hands as a symbol of a saving power, she asks the readers to look at their own:

"look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229). By rewriting the biblical concept of the Savior and grounding the moment in the physical rather than the fictional, *Jazz* highlights gnostic epistemologies at the same time as it transfers authority to its African American audience. In insisting the reader "make [her], remake [her]," it is clear that *Jazz* speaks not only to the necessity of a revision of traditional narrative techniques that favor an omniscient, "God's eye" point-of-view but also to the need for active, participatory historical revision on the part of the reader; *Jazz* assumes a black audience and gives it the voice often denied them in American literature. This, the novel suggests, is the only possible "salvation" and the only way to remove the needle of history stuck indefinitely in its groove. Ultimately, *Jazz* achieves this feat with the help of the gnostic tradition and without succumbing to a nihilism that would render the text (and historical revision) meaningless in the process.

It takes the entire novel to get to this point, however, and many significant plots and subplots to shape this revision. The narrator in *Jazz* is of utmost importance in this process, and the gnostic tradition helps to facilitate her self-transformation throughout. Despite the fact that, in the beginning of *Jazz*, the narrator feigns omniscience and seems to follow a conventional narrative style, she does share important similarities with the gnostic speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind"; both narrators speak in first-person, and they remain equally anonymous. Nowhere is the narrator more clearly aligned with the divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," however, than in her discussion of Violet and Violet's opposite, whom the Harlem community calls "Violent." The narrator, on the other hand, refers to Violet's alter ego as "*that* Violet": "maybe *that* Violet, the one who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it, had the hips [Violet]

had lost. But if *that* Violet was strong and had hips, why was she proud of trying to kill a dead girl, and she was proud" (94). Both the narrator and the community try to differentiate between the two Violets—the nice woman who fixes their hair, on the one hand, and the crazy one who shows up at a funeral just to "mess up" the face of a dead girl, on the other (211). However, although they make a distinction between the two women, *Jazz* makes it clear that both halves of Violet comprise the whole, so when Violet "buttoned her coat and left the drugstore [she noticed], at the same moment as *that* Violet did, that it was spring" (114). Like the divine speaker of the gnostic poem, Violet is composed of opposites—most obviously violence and nonviolence—but rather than separate her into one or the other, the novel envisions a complex woman who encompasses both and who thus resists the danger of becoming a stagnant and predictable character. It also formulates Violet as a character quite unlike the stereotyped caricatures of narrative strategies that thematize characters in binaries in order to uphold the hierarchical positioning of the narrator or author. By creating a character who simultaneously exhibits both destructive and creative qualities, Morrison additionally aligns Violet with the divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," an alignment that gains more significance as the novel continues.

In fact, in a surprising and critical move, the narrative slips seamlessly into Violet's voice as it describes her alter ego ("*that* Violet") and her actions at the funeral. This is especially significant since it functions to conflate the character/narrator distinction and renders the speaker ambiguous; at this moment, it is *both* Violet *and* the narrator speaking:

> That's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! *that* Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me! The me that hauled hay in Virginia and handled a four-mule team in the brace. (95-96)

As the narrative has already revealed, Joe and Violet met in Virginia and worked the fields before moving to the City; this brief passage indicates that Violet (but even more specifically, "*that* Violet") is actually the narrator herself. Yet just as easily, and with no change in form to indicate a shift in speaker, the narrative slips out of Violet's voice to recount her thoughts in the drugstore: "sitting in the thin sharp light of the drugstore playing with a long spoon in a tall glass made her think of another woman occupying herself at a table pretending to drink from a cup. Her mother" (97).[40] The crack in the narrative framework is hardly perceptible—and just as quickly as it opens it closes—but there can be no denying the crucial connection Morrison makes here between "*that* Violet" and the novel's narrator, a connection that also equates the narrator with the gnostic speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" and lays the groundwork for the work the novel does to unravel the conventions of accepted narrative modes and rework them to revise the invisible power dynamics inherent in imaginative production. At stake here is the authority of such production itself, but again—and through the aid of the gnostic ideas presented in *Jazz*—Morrison insists the novel can retain its authority without resorting to other, more insidious, forms of the same subjugation it seeks to escape.

Although at the beginning of the novel, the narrator claimed omniscience—"I know that woman. Know her husband, too."—by the time *Jazz* gets to the story of Golden Gray, the narrator is ready to admit that her story is, at least partially, a fabrication:

> Joe acts like he knew all about what the old folks did to keep on going, but he couldn't have known much about True Belle, for example, because I doubt Violet ever talked to him about her grandmother—and never about her mother. So he didn't know. Neither do I, although it's not hard to imagine what it must have been like. (137)

Here, instead of claiming knowledge, the narrator admits her ignorance. In both versions of the narrative that follow, the narrator continually inserts her presence and acknowledges the fact that imagination, not reality, is generating the story. Neither does she make claims to the ultimate truth of her narrative. In fact, in this section, she repeatedly begins her account with only tentative claims to its authority: "More important Miss Vera Louise *might* help her buy them all out with paper money [. . .]. Then again, *maybe not*. *Maybe* [True Belle] frowned as she sat in the baggage car [. . .]. *Maybe* she felt bad" (142, emphasis mine). Throughout the section, the narrator repeats the mantra, "maybe," in more than half a dozen instances, admits that she "[doesn't] know" at several other moments, and acknowledges her own involvement in the shaping of Golden Gray's story: "I like to think of him that way" (150). At the same time, she makes known her desire (and sense of responsibility) to tell the story in a way that does justice to the characters: "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly?" (160). It is clear that the narrator's perspective begins to shift in this critical moment in Jazz and

that here, too, traditional narrative modes (with their desire for one, authoritative version of the story at the expense of all others) are at odds with more positive models of storytelling that are able to acknowledge multiple perspectives. After this point, it becomes difficult *not* to see the Golden Gray narrative as a continuation of Morrison's response to the historical debate regarding narrative voice, and the narrative that follows leads to the novel's final position regarding the role of language and power in literary production.

The story of Golden Gray begins with True Belle, Violet's maternal grandmother. Since Morrison has already made the connection between the narrator and *that* Violet, Violet's alter ego, it makes sense that the novel's first-person narrator would be familiar with the story of Golden Gray, the mixed child of Miss Vera Louise, the white woman True Belle leaves her own family to follow to Baltimore. Raised by the two women, Golden Gray grows up ignorant of the facts of his birth because, as the narrator recounts it, "Vera Louise had smiled and said, 'But he's golden. Completely golden!' So they named him that and didn't take him to the Catholic Foundling Hospital, where whitegirls deposited their mortification" (148). Later, when Golden Gray is eighteen, Vera Louise tells him the truth about his African American father, and he discovers that although "he had always thought there was only one kind—True Belle's kind. Black and nothing[,] [. . .] there was another kind—like himself" (149).[41] This news comes as such a shock that he rides off "to find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father" (143). This is the last True Belle ever sees of him, which means it's the last Violet would have known of him, and yet the narrative continues to recount the experience of Golden Gray on his quest to kill his father (143). It is clear that, after this point, the narrator is operating entirely within

the fictional world she's creating, and she even admits that she's "thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved and Violet too. Or the vain and nincty pinchnose worrying about his coat and the ivory buttons on his waistcoat? Come all that way to insult not his father but his race" (143). Whatever happens after Golden Gray leaves Baltimore is not based on any known facts or authoritative "truth" but on the narrator's own attempts to come to terms with a history that *Jazz* makes clear is also her own.[42]

As the child of both white and black parents, Golden Gray serves throughout *Jazz* as a figure for the product of a "double-voiced" and dual literary ancestry, with both black and white antecedents and as outlined above. As the narrative continues, it reveals Golden Gray as another author fashioning a story largely of and for himself and not unlike the kind of narrative Wright celebrated but which omits certain, essential elements of the story in an effort to portray himself in the best possible light. Most significant to the historical context of this story are Golden Gray's interactions with Wild, a "berry-black woman" who, almost uncannily like Beloved at the end of the novel named after her, is living naked, pregnant, and alone in the woods (144).[43] She, like Beloved—and the women living on the outskirts of the Ruby community in *Paradise*—represents in *Jazz* all the silenced voices of African American history and particularly those of black women; thus Golden Gray's interactions with and responses to the woman named Wild are telling of the relationship between the largely male-dominated African American literary tradition of the period recounted in *Jazz* and those silenced in the wake of their successes. On his journey, Golden Gray gets caught in a downpour while riding in his carriage, believes the left wheel has struck a stone, and stops to check whether his trunk

has been dislocated (143). When he disembarks, he sees "a woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible" (144). "As soon as she sees him," the narrative recounts, "[the woman] starts then turns suddenly to run, but in turning before she looks she knocks her head against the tree she has been leaning on. [. . .] The blow knocks her down and out" (144). Most of the narrative following this scene details Golden Gray's fears about this woman, whom he rescues with some apprehension and only in an effort to make himself look good. In fact, he vacillates between versions of the story he will tell his father, of how he saved the woman and brought her to the cabin, and covered her nakedness with the dress he found there. But, when the narrator calls his bluff—"I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody"—it is clear that she, too, is doing the same (154). After all, she is the narrator of *his* story, and the same narrative dangers exist for her as for Golden Gray. As the author of her own version of African American history, then, Morrison takes pains not to repeat the same mistakes she exposes in her own literary antecedents; despite his many character flaws, by the end of the section, Golden Gray is presented as an ultimately redeemable character.

More importantly, the narrator's exposure of Golden Gray's hypocrisy reveals her own increasing self-consciousness and her desire to make visible, rather than render invisible, the armatures of narrative production. So, when Golden Gray takes his baggage into the house before the woman whose head is bleeding, the narrator admits her own concern and involvement:

> That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her

> breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore. (151)

Here, the narrator struggles to decide which version of the narrative she should tell. Prone to the same tendencies as Golden Gray, she gets caught up in her own biases before she catches herself and revises her opinion of him. On the one hand, it is clear that Golden Gray thinks first of himself; the woman is little more than a prop in the story he fashions to tell his father. On the other, however, he is still a human being ensnared in his own personal trauma, and he is a gentleman to the core. Like Violet, and many of the other characters in *Jazz*, Golden Gray is a complex and paradoxical character. Although he is both reprehensible and redeemable in the same moment, the narrator takes pains to present Golden Gray in a way that acknowledges his flaws at the same time as it accepts them as a part of the whole, human equation. As the novel progresses, it is clear that she—perhaps more than Golden Gray—must work hardest to avoid stagnancy and predictability and to resist hierarchical, self-righteous proclamations that establish her authority and cast her in a flattering light. Without this self-transformation, the novel is set to repeat its original, fatal narrative.

The narrator works hard to accomplish this task, however. In fact, later in the second version of Golden Gray's narrative, she adjusts her opinion again regarding Golden Gray:

> Aw, but he is young, young, and he is hurting, so I forgive him for his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures, and when I watch him sipping

> too quickly the cane liquor he has found, worrying about his coat and not tending to the girl, I don't hate him at all. (155)

Rather than her earlier claim that she "[doesn't] hate him much anymore," now the narrator admits she "[doesn't] hate him at all." Seeing Golden Gray's pain stirs the narrator's compassion; yet, pity isn't ultimately the best perspective, either, as *Jazz* makes clear. At last, the narrator settles on a third point of view:

> Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things. I have to be a shadow that wishes him well [. . .]. Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet, and contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it. I want to be the language that wishes him well. (161)

In the narrator's final view, "not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful." What the narrator finally settles on is the idea that she has the power (indeed, the responsibility) to "alter things," and that "language" is the key to making this difference. This emphasis on language serves as a reminder that *Jazz* is deeply invested in these formal questions concerning narrative structure and voice as prefigured in the Hurston-Wright-Ellison debates of the period.

Hating him, loving him, liking him—the novel claims that none of these positions is ultimately very useful—but *Jazz* makes it clear through the narrator's brief moments of self-consciousness that she has a responsibility to use language to enable (rather than disable) Golden Gray and the other characters she encounters. Revising destructive language and narrative modes thus serves as the vehicle through which both the

characters and the narrator can come to terms with a shared history. And, although to this point in *Jazz* the narrator's evolution has been at the forefront, the characters themselves actually control the story, as the novel soon makes clear. In fact, by the end of the novel, a humbled narrator admits the extent of her own delusion:

> They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them—and doing it seemed to me so fine—I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy. [. . .] It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of. (220, 221)

The narrator of *Jazz* assumes she knows her characters, that what she says of them was the truth, and that there is no other way to tell their story. Rather than uphold its authority, *Jazz* insists, again and again, on the faulty nature of this narrative model; the novel here claims that despite her beliefs to the contrary, the narrator "was completely in [her characters'] hands."[44] The real work of storytelling, and by extension of revisionary history, is taken up instead by the characters who are "putting their lives together in ways [the narrator] never dreamed of." Throughout *Jazz*, Morrison utilizes the gnostic texts to illuminate the fact that certain narrative strategies incorporated in the African American tradition—and especially omniscient narration—do nothing more than uphold the same forms of power their authors struggled against. The novel's gnostic epigraph, spoken by a feminine divine power, facilitates Morrison's revision of conventional narrative forms in *Jazz* and presents an alternative mode of literary production that conceives of narrative as an exchange rather than a hierarchy. In addition to the work the novel does to revise

the figure of the narrator, the novel's final image of the reader holding the speaking book is significant in its refusal to privilege literature as the bearer of either personal or historical salvation. In the end, both author and audience collaborate to produce new forms of narrative that give voice to the silenced "Beloveds" of African American history; the old, blind woman of the "Nobel Lecture in Literature," who Morrison tells us after all is a figure for the author, concludes her story by insisting: "Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together" (12, 30). This kind of community accomplishment assures that the power of representation is shared evenly and isn't abused, even in the name of liberation.

* * *

In Morrison's trilogy, these "Beloved" figures of African American history—Beloved herself, Wild in *Jazz*, and the unruly women living in a Convent on the outskirts of the Ruby community in *Paradise*—all serve as a reminder that the relationship among sacred, political, and literary history is often vexed and complicated. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison maintains "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature" (39). In her "Nobel Lecture in Literature," she claims "narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created" (27). Such a powerful connection between literary production and cultural practice means that literature must be carefully scrutinized to expose moments when language serves to justify personal ambition or reify a dominant perspective at the expense of others. In all three novels of the trilogy, it is clear that Morrison is taking seriously the long-standing tradition of the African

American church as a locus of social deliverance, yet at the same time as she engages with that tradition, it is also apparent that she offers her own revisions to it, especially in the name of those who have been silenced along the way. As these "Beloved" figures also demonstrate, the question of power, who wields it and over whom, often divides down gender lines. On this point, the gnostic tradition, and the poem "Thunder, Perfect Mind" especially, seems for Morrison instrumental as a means of rethinking conventional narrative forms and a way of revising the Judeo-Christian tradition from within. As Morrison is keenly aware, an ongoing concern with religious engagement as a vehicle for social and political activism remains an integral part of the African American experience, but such a position doesn't justify the destructive logic historically embedded in its practices. Neither should the work of imaginative production reinforce this logic.

Acknowledging these silenced voices of African American history, and exposing the narrative forms that enable their omission, provides the central work of the trilogy. While the narrator of *Jazz*, for example, mistakenly believes that "all the while [Joe] was running through the streets in bad weather [. . .] he was looking for [Dorcas]," in reality, Joe was looking for Wild, who is potentially and most likely, though never definitively described as, his mother. Never knowing the truth, and never having any contact with Wild, drives Joe into the arms of Dorcas: "he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about, and [Violet was] holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy [she] never saw either. Which means from the very beginning [Violet] was a substitute and so was he" (97). The "golden boy" Violet loves is, of course, Golden Gray, and she internalizes his narrative (inherited from her grandmother True Belle) to the point that she denies her own voice and her own narrative. Clearly, both Joe and

Violet are affected by the destructive history passed down to them—the silences and omissions inevitable when certain voices are privileged over others—so the dissolution of their relationship hardly comes as a surprise. As *Jazz* has shown, however, history need not function like a needle stuck in the record groove, and the couple's crisis is only temporary. When the characters come to terms with the past and recognize the losses inherited from it, they are able to move forward in a spirit of friendship and reconciliation. Even the narrator (perhaps especially so because she serves as a figure for the author) must acknowledge Wild and other Beloveds of African American history before her work is complete; when she does, the text casts the moment in terms of the narrator's own achievement of *gnosis*, or knowledge: [Wild] has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me. Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret. *Now I know*" (221, emphasis mine). This is the process of acknowledgment and self-knowledge that *Jazz* insists is crucial to its revisionary project.

This endeavor is explicitly cast in gendered terms. All the "Beloveds" of the trilogy are women, and these women figure significantly into the narratives of both men and women throughout the three novels. Joe and Violet likewise represent fractured (and gendered) relationships in the African American community caused by the adoption of patriarchy and Christianity, the oppressor's own social structures and ideologies; the fact that Joe and Violet reconcile at the novel's end speaks volumes about Morrison's own prognosis for ongoing gender relationships in that community, provided destructive theistic language and restrictive narrative forms derived from these systems are exposed and revised.[45] Yet the work she does to accomplish this feat is not fully accomplished in

Jazz, and the question of gender, and the role it has played in African American history in particular, is explored more fully as we turn to *Paradise*.

NOTES

[1] Collins' other work with apocalypse as a literary genre has been helpful as well. See especially *The Apocalyptic Imagination* and *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism.* Adela Yarbro Collins' *Early Christian Apocalypticism* extends the works of *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, which helped to define "apocalypse," to study the social settings and functions of particular, early Christian apocalypses.

[2] The second apocalypse is only "gnostic" insofar as it "places greater emphasis on salvation through knowledge, which is extended into [Sethe's] personal afterlife" (*Apocalypse*, 13). Morrison never explicitly aligns this second "revelation" with the gnostic tradition, although it is clear she is challenging the normative idea of apocalypse as end-of-the-world destruction that will balance the scales of history.

[3] "Rememory" is a complicated concept that involves more than merely remembering the past. Instead, rememory is something that is always out there "haunting" the present. When Sethe explains rememory to Denver, she claims: "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened" (36).

[4] Although Sethe also tries to kill her other three children—Denver, Buglar, and Howard—at the same time, the "crawling already? girl" is the only casualty (110).

[5] See in particular Susan Bowers' "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse," Robert L. Broad's "Giving Blood to the Scraps: Haints, History, and Hosea in *Beloved*," Carolyn A. Mitchell's "'I Love to Tell the Story': Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*," Ann-Janine

Morey's "Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison: Reflections on Postmodernism and the Study of Religion and Literature," and Danille Taylor-Guthrie's "Who are the Beloved? Old and New Testaments, Old and New Communities of Faith."

[6] Critics have additionally suggested both West African and Hindu influences in *Beloved* as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition and as illustrated through the novel's cyclical treatment of time and through the ongoing relationships *Beloved*'s characters have with the dead (Bowers, Morey). At the same time, however, the lines between these influences are often blurred, with characters responding to elements of several traditions, and in the end it is not entirely clear that the alternative is meant to replace the original. Ella and Stamp Paid, the man who ferried Sethe across the Ohio River to freedom, know, for example, "that people who die bad don't stay in the ground," although they do try to reconcile this belief with their Christian faith (221). After all, they conclude, "Jesus Christ Himself didn't [stay there]" (221). Yet this perspective diminishes the miracle of Christ's resurrection by suggesting its banality. When Stamp Paid hears voices surrounding Sethe's house (called "124" in the novel), he believes they are "older, but not stronger, than He Himself was" (202). This subverts the notion of the Judeo-Christian God as "before all things" while at the same time upholding the idea of His omnipotence (Colossians 1: 17). Likewise, many of the women who gather to exorcise Beloved are Christians, yet their singing indicates familiarity with another spiritual awareness as well. This alternative tradition, while analogous in some ways to West African and Hindu religious belief, bears even more striking similarities to the gnostic tradition prevalent in *Jazz* and *Paradise*—especially in its emphasis on revelation

and self-knowledge—and initiates the transition from biblical to gnostic preoccupations in the first and second books of Morrison's trilogy. As such, it provides a way of critiquing and revising Christianity without entirely rejecting a tradition that has played a significant role in African American history.

[7] The "children of the promise" refers to those people (Jew and Gentile) who have renounced the wickedness of the world and have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

[8] Of course, Beloved's reappearance in *Jazz* as Wild and in *Paradise* as the figures of the Convent women serves as a reminder that such recovery is never entirely finished.

[9] Robert L. Broad has argued that Morrison's use of Romans in the novel illuminates St. Paul's manipulation of the Old Testament passage to fit his own argument for predestination:

> Paul suppresses the historical context of the quoted passage in order to use it for his own purposes and directly against the descendants of Hosea for whom and to whom Hosea was, after all, writing. Paul's is a classic case of a writer dehistoricizing a text in order to appropriate that text for purposes that violate, and even contradict, its original meaning (194).

Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie, by contrast, has argued for a much more positive reading of the Romans passage, suggesting that "the Biblical gospel as preached by Paul declares a new community of faith and world order as having been established" and implying that Morrison's audience would naturally align

themselves with this new community and, therefore, read Morrison's epigraph as being more optimistic than critical (120).

[10] In both biblical passages, the emphasis is on divine mercy, but with radically different results. In Hosea, as illustrated above, God tells the prophet to forgive his adulterous wife and to show her mercy in the same way God will show mercy to the Israelites (the Jews). In Romans, St. Paul asserts that, once again, God will show mercy (based on faith rather than on adherence to the law); "[Salvation] does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (9: 16). This time, however, St. Paul argues that God will show mercy to some (the Gentiles) at the expense of others (the Jews):

> What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (9: 22-3)

In his argument for predestination and for the adoption of the Gentiles as "children of the promise," St. Paul manipulates the original passage from Hosea to argue for a divine mercy that is based on exclusion. In this formulation, the Gentile is saved because the Jew is not: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. [. . .] Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for ignoble?" (verses 18, 21). This passage actually reverses God's promise to the Israelites in Hosea by changing

the definition of an Israelite from "one born of the clan of Israel" to "one adopted into it" as a child of the promise. By extension: if, in fact, the Jews are not actually "chosen" as recipients in Christ's promise of salvation, then their preservation is inessential. The same goes for any group of people the Church decides are created for "ignoble purposes."

[11] In the biblical apocalypse, by contrast, time "is essentially linear. Time becomes the vehicle of divine purpose: It moves teleologically [. . .] toward a specified end" (Zamora 13). This concept extends to the narrative pattern as well: "like apocalypse, most plots may be described as a teleology of words and episodes, as comprehensible structures of action that are interrelated in a legible whole" (13). Morrison's departure from this model in *Beloved*, as we shall see, is only one of several revisions she makes to the biblical model: while the references to the book of Revelation here are clear, she does disrupt the conventions of biblical apocalypse throughout the novel in favor of an alternate, revised form.

[12] Zamora quotes Phelan when he additionally argues that:

> Linked to this prophecy was another, found throughout the apocalyptic literature of the time, that the Jews would be converted as the end of the world approached. If the Indians were the lost tribes of Israel, and if they were converted, both prophecies would be fulfilled at once and the kingdom of God might be initiated. (8)

[13] The overwhelming majority of texts contained in *The Nag Hammadi Library* are a part of the literary genres defined by the editors as "apocalyptic," "revelation dialogue," or "revelation discourse," with several others exhibiting influences from those

traditions. The apocalyptic texts in *The Nag Hammadi Library* include "The Apocalypse of Peter," "The Apocalypse of Adam," "The (First) Apocalypse of James," "The (Second) Apocalypse of James," "Marsanes," "Melchizedek," and "Zoztrianos." Defined as revelation dialogue or revelation discourse: "The Gospel of Mary," "Allogenes," "The Second Treatise of the Great Seth," "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," "Eugnostos the Blessed," and "The Book of Thomas the Contender." Texts influenced by these three literary traditions but not falling squarely within any one category include "Hypostasis of the Archons" (revelation discourse), "Dialogue of the Savior" (contains fragments of an apocalyptic vision), "The Concept of our Great Power" (end of the world narrative), and "The Three Steles of Seth" (revelation).

[14] As Zamora argues in *Writing the Apocalypse*, "the moral dualism of apocalypse is embodied in the metaphoric contraries of the Christ and Antichrist, whore and bride, Babylon and the New Jerusalem, this world and the next" (12). By refusing to either "approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice," *Beloved* rejects these Manichaean binaries in favor of a (potentially) more inclusive gnostic hermeneutics (212).

[15] In some apocalyptic gnostic texts, there is one, hostile figure who deters ascent into the higher realms on the gnostic's heavenly journey (Robinson 257).

[16] It is important to note that while Sethe's violence is ultimately prevented when Denver tackles her, Morrison doesn't entirely erase the *possibility* for violent action. Rather than go to the opposite extreme and envision a world that excludes violence of any kind, she acknowledges its existence and allows its presence—yet doesn't privilege it as the primary tool for regeneration or renewal as usually seen in apocalyptic texts which

favor the biblical model. This inclusivity becomes especially significant in both *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

[17] This point has been taken up, in one form or another, by nearly every critical account of *Beloved.*

[18] In *Jazz*, Morrison's epigraph comes from the gnostic text "Thunder, Perfect Mind" and repeats *Beloved*'s final emphasis on sound; in it, a feminine, divine speaker tells her audience: "I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name" (Robinson 302). In this second book of the trilogy, Morrison essentially begins where she left off in *Beloved*, stressing the necessity of a revision of Christian sacred texts through the inclusion of suppressed gnostic texts and ideas. Morrison's emphasis on gnostic thought as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition is made explicit in the epigraphs in both *Jazz* and *Beloved.* Additionally, her use of the word "like" (i.e. "Sethe trembled *like* the baptized") indicates that the text is operating outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, while still similar in some ways (emphasis mine).

[19] Of course, the "word" also refers to the Western, written tradition Douglass and other authors of slave narratives of the time aim to establish their authority in and their rejection of an earlier, oral tradition (the "sound") to do so. This is yet another reminder that Morrison is deeply invested in examining the consequences of formal strategies of literary production and their relationship to knowledge and power.

[20] Similarly, the idea of repetition plays itself out in the novel through references to "tracks," both the "tracks" that Joe, the hunter, is bound to follow on his quest for Dorcas and the "tracks" which the City lays for its inhabitants, thus "controlling their

feet" and dictating their actions (32). As critics such as Vincent O'Keefe and Patricia Hunt have pointed out, the City in this formulation is thus linked to the orthodoxy, while the Country (represented by the South and by Wild, Joe's maybe/maybe not mother) represents the alternative and unorthodox and must be taken into consideration before the characters are able to ignite change.

[21] Although the Bible is certainly not the first text to utilize omniscient narration, it can be understood as the primary source of its usage in American literature since the Judeo-Christian tradition has been foundational to American mainstream culture.

[22] In 1899, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois claimed that "without wholly conscious effort the Negro church has become a centre of social intercourse to a degree unknown in white churches" and that "consequently all movements for social betterment are apt to centre in the churches" (203, 207). In 1982, in *Prophesy Deliverance!,* Cornel West argued that "revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis enact the Afro-American humanist tradition in the postmodern period" and that "these are guided by the norms of individuality and democracy as proposed by the prophetic Christian viewpoint, promoted by the progressive Marxist orientation, and promulgated by revolutionary activity" (131). This prophetic Christian viewpoint, West contends, is informed by the progressive Marxist politics of the twentieth century to create a hybrid form of Christian liberation theology that then provides the foundation for social change. With a prevalent and outstanding history of church-based social activism in the African American community, it is only natural that the dialogue would continue in the works of contemporary African African authors; after all, as Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in*

the Dark, "national literatures [. . .] end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind" (14). In fact, Morrison's *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, comprising a trilogy which spans the history of African America to date, enter this debate without exception.

The humanist tradition West refers to is one of four responses, West argues in *Prophecy Deliverance!,* to modern racist discourse—the other three responses being exceptionalism, assimilationism, and marginalism. In West's formulation, the humanist response to modern racist discourse is the only tradition that

> does not romanticize or reject Afro-American culture; instead it accepts this culture for what it is, the expression of an oppressed human community imposing its distinctive form of order on an existential chaos, explaining its political predicament, preserving its self-respect, and projecting its own special hopes for the future. (85)

West further argues that the best example of the African American humanist tradition is in its music and its literature—from Toomer to Ellison (85-91). For a thorough account of African American religious history, see especially C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamija's *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990), *African American Religious Thought*, edited by Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (2003), and Michael Battle's *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (2006).

[23] While her analysis of the novel's biblical allusions is helpful, the article does little to fully explain *Jazz*'s gnostic preoccupations.

[24] For another account of the gnostic influences in *Jazz*, see also Patricia Hunt's "'Free to do something wild': History and the Ancestor in *Jazz*" (1995). John Leonard also mentions the gnostic epigraph in his "Review of *Jazz*" (1992).

[25] "Agnosticism" comes from the Greek "*a*," meaning "without," combined with "*gnosis*," often translated as "knowledge." In its simplest definition, then, agnosticism is a belief system that views the truth regarding the existence of God, gods, or other deities as "unknowable." Gnosticism, by contrast, translates to "knowing," and in fact, often refers to a secret knowledge, or "insight," available only to a select few.

[26] For a basic overview of the gnostic tradition, see especially Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels*, a text that, while admittedly dated, remains helpful as a general introduction for those new to religious scholarship (1979). While it is true that religious scholars often view Pagels' work as a somewhat oversimplified account of the gnostic tradition, it is helpful to know that Morrison herself is familiar with Pagels' work through their academic interactions at Princeton. John Leonard, in his "Review of *Jazz*," has even suggested that Morrison and Pagels regularly meet: "Morrison now spends part of every week at Princeton with Elaine Pagels" (48). As such, Pagels' text remains an important introduction to the work Morrison does with the gnostic epigraph in *Jazz*. For a more detailed, up-to-date example of scholarship on the gnostic tradition, however, Karen King's *What is Gnosticism* (2003) remains an excellent source.

[27] If the novel doesn't have the responsibility of "saving" the reader, then the issue of the narrator's reliability or unreliability isn't particularly relevant.

[28] This "resurrection" of Dorcas in the form of her friend, Felice, may be an allusion to Acts 9: 36-42 and the biblical character of Dorcas.

[29] The use of the masculine in Du Bois' quote, although most likely meant to indicate all people, male and female, nonetheless gives a clue to the often-gendered hierarchies born of these kinds of discriminatory formulations.

[30] Growing out of this historical debate, the postmortem violence Violet directs at Dorcas alludes to Bigger Thomas' postmortem destruction of Mary Dalton's body in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. This is especially important since Wright was a key figure in the debate surrounding the use of narrative voice in the period and because *Native Son* employs a third-person omniscient narrator; as such, it is exemplary of the author's own position regarding representation. Morrison makes the connection here between the third-person omniscient narrator of *Native Son* and the role of the "individual black talent" described above. In *Jazz*, Morrison also explores the psychological effects of racism on the African American community, but rather than assign ultimate omnipotence to the narrator (in *Jazz* the figure of the author), she hands over the power of representation, of storytelling, to her formerly "voiceless black countrymen" instead. If anything, she seems to argue that the narrator is just as susceptible to the effects of racism as anyone else. In *Jazz*, this is evidenced by the narrator's necessary transformation at the hands of the gnostic epigraph.

[31] Morrison seems to suggest that omniscient narration is characteristic of the African American literary tradition during this period.

[32] During the violent and tense atmosphere of Harlem in 1926, for example, the narrator recounts that the only women who weren't armed were Christian—or else "silent or crazy or dead" (78). Rather than carry weapons, those "doomsayers" believed that "in God's eye and theirs, every hateful word and gesture was the Beast's desire for its own filth" (9, 78). This imagery of the Beast echoes *Beloved*'s preoccupation with violent apocalypse, but in *Jazz*, the unarmed doomsayers are the exception rather than the rule.

[33] In the novel, of course, such language doesn't limit storytelling—Joe and Violet's actions are independent of the narrator's understanding of them, but Morrison certainly exposes the possibility for the opposite to occur. After all, the narrator theoretically could have told the story in the way she first envisioned it, but Morrison takes pains to ensure she doesn't in order that no harm is done to the characters/audience.

[34] Significantly, Morrison describes the old woman in part by saying that "among her people she is both the law and its transgression" (10). This echoes the gnostic text "Thunder, Perfect Mind," whose feminine, divine speaker claims: "I am the one whom they call Law, and you have called Lawlessness." The woman, Morrison tells us, is a figure for the practiced author, a connection that gains importance as in *Jazz* we contemplate the fact that the novel serves as a metaphor, with the narrator representing the author (12). The gnostic author/narrator seems central to Morrison's understanding of the revisionary work to be done with "language," the bird the visitors hold in their hands (12).

[35] Although the majority of references to the speaker in this gnostic text cast her as feminine—she is the "wife" and the "virgin," the "mother" and the "daughter"—she is

also a fusion of opposites and therefore composed of both masculine and feminine characteristics (297). This is important because, in *Jazz*, the unnamed narrator is also never explicitly gendered.

[36] In other words, Morrison's answer is "however she prefers."

[37] As Martha J. Cutter has pointed out, "Morrison [herself] comments in an interview that the book 'was talking, writing itself, in a sense'" (qtd from Carabi 42). Critics have commented extensively on Morrison's narrative "Voice" in *Jazz*, sometimes referring to the narrator as the Voice of the City, the Voice of Jazz, the Voice of the Book, or the Voice of the Author. Cutter's "The Story Must Go On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*" gives an overview of the various stances critics have taken on the Voice in *Jazz*. Since the novel's gnostic epigraph encourages these multiple readings and paradoxical perspectives, all these critics' perspectives on the Voice seem relevant and potentially helpful in understanding Morrison's complex narrative strategies and the work the text aims to accomplish.

[38] Of course, the pressure of articulating the tropes of a largely oral tradition within a written one generates some of the same tensions and positions as well. See especially Chapter Four in *The Signifying Monkey* for a thorough account of how the trope of the Talking Book functions in African American literary history.

[39] These same concerns reappear in the Golden Gray narrative.

[40] In other instances in the novel where a shift in speaker occurs, the text is clearly set apart with quotation marks to distinguish the speaker—except for the narrator, who receives no such marks. At this moment in *Jazz*, there has been nothing to indicate

that Violet, instead of the narrator, is speaking, just as there is no change when the novel moves back to describe Violet's thoughts in the drugstore.

As far as I can tell, only one other exception to this rule occurs (that is, the rule of direct quotation to distinguish a shift in speaker), and this when the narrator tells the story of Golden Gray. Here, the text sets apart Golden Gray's thoughts without the use of direct quotation, presumably because he is thinking, rather than speaking the lines: "Only now, he thought, now that I have a father, do I feel his absence" (158). The next paragraph, we assume, continues to follow Golden Gray's thoughts: "Who will take my part? Soap away the shame? Suds it till it falls away muck at my feet to be stepped out of? Will he?" (159). However, the "he" of this last line is ambiguous; it may refer to Golden Gray's father or it may refer to Golden Gray himself, since in the next paragraph, the narrator is clearly the speaker again. Here, she tells us that "it had rocked him when he heard who and what his father was," while referring to Golden Gray in the third person (159). Yet, between these three paragraphs the usual suggestion of a shift in speaker, shown by the use of direct quotation to set apart the character's speech, is absent.

[41] The fact that Golden Gray is a mixed child of *both* a white mother *and* a black father is another reminder that Morrison is taking pains to present a character that embodies the paradoxes of opposites introduced in "Thunder, Perfect Mind."

[42] But, a complication: although Morrison has already established a connection between *that* Violet and the novel's narrator, Joe Trace has some involvement in the story of Golden Gray as well, despite the fact that at the beginning of the section the narrator

claims that "[Joe] didn't know" (137). When Golden Gray sets out to kill his father, he comes across a pregnant, "berry-black woman," whom he rescues somewhat unwillingly. When she gives birth to a baby boy, she refuses to feed or touch him, and he is taken into town and given to another family (170). Although the novel never clarifies this point, (despite critics' claims to the contrary) and Joe himself certainly never knows, there is a significant chance this woman is his mother—"Wild"—whom his adopted parents tell him "disappeared without a trace"; hence, the name he gives himself (124). More, this section also repeats the word "trace" on several occasions, subtle textual hints of a possible connection between Wild and Joe Trace (171, 176, 178). There is also the possibility of an intertextual connection to *Beloved*, since the end of that novel claims "by and by all trace [of Beloved's footprints] is gone," although—again—this connection is never made explicit (275). For a discussion of other intertextual moments in *Beloved* and *Jazz*, see especially Martha J. Cutter's "The Story Must Go On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*" (2000).

What *is* clear here, however, is that Hunters Hunter (Henry Lestory or Henry Les Troy) is Golden Gray's father, who is also Joe's mentor and hunting teacher during his childhood in Virginia, so it is possible that Joe knows at least part of the narrative of Golden Gray as well as Violet, although presumably they never talked about their shared past to each other (137). Thus, in a moment of narrative ambiguity, when it is uncertain whether Golden Gray is talking about his father or the narrator is talking about Golden Gray, the speaker asks "What do I care what the color of his skin is, or his contact with *my mother*?" (159). If this is the narrator speaking, it may also be Joe speaking in

addition to *that* Violet (whose own mother drowned herself in a well very similar to the one beside which Golden Gray recovers his sense of self-worth) (emphasis mine, 159, 161). Either way, the narrator's own connection to the story is made explicit. At the same time, the novel purposefully leaves the narrator's identity ambiguous, here and elsewhere in the novel. The point seems to be not the certainty of any one telling of the story but its many possibilities and outcomes; the gnostic epigraph, after all, encourages this multiplicity. Joe and Violet also comprise another set of "opposites" (man and woman, husband and wife), so to conflate them into one narrator helps to emphasize their mutuality rather than their independence. For ease of comprehension and in the spirit of consistency, however, I will continue to refer to the narrator in the feminine, although she seems to be, more accurately, *both* male *and* female—much like the divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind."

[43] After all, Beloved was also a figure for a larger African American community; she represented the millions of African Americans who had "died bad" in the institution of American slavery. Denver also alludes to this metaphorical meaning: "at times I think she was—more" (314). The fact that Beloved's throat was cut is also a clear analogy to the literal silencing of that population—a silencing continued in *Jazz* and upheld by the figure of Wild.

[44] When the narrator insists that she was "completely in 'her characters'] hands," she foreshadows the novel's final lines and their similar emphasis on hands. In the final ten pages of *Jazz*, in fact, the text refers both to the hands of the characters, shaping their own story, and to the hands of the reader, holding the book "speaking" the story. This

emphasis on hands functions to conflate the characters and readers, rewrite the biblical imagery of Christ's hands as the primary symbol of salvation, and reinforce the gnostic ideas first introduced by the novel's epigraph.

[45] Their relationship with Felice also indicates that, rather than a fruitless (childless) life, Joe and Violet now have the potential of continuing their own narratives into the future through Felice, who benefits from this interaction because her own parents are physically and emotionally absent.

CHAPTER III

TRANSCENDENT MYTHMAKING: GNOSTIC SCRIPTURE IN MORRISON'S *PARADISE* AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *GARDENS IN THE DUNES*

Both Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko undertake a massive revision of the "master narrative" of American history—with its concealment of colonialism and slavery—by retelling that history from suppressed perspectives in *Paradise* and *Gardens in the Dunes*.[1] They do so, in part, through the inclusion of gnostic themes and texts that valorize the feminine and that emphasize diversity and social equality over homogeneity and exclusion. In the first two books of the trilogy encompassing *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, Morrison transitions from biblical to gnostic revisions to examine invisible forms and narrative modes which structure literary production. She continues this earlier project by incorporating gnostic texts again in *Paradise*. Like *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* also challenges the racist and patriarchal dimensions of American history and suggests their roots in normative Christian theology; *Paradise* is particularly concerned with the history of African America in the latter half of the twentieth century. Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* relies on gnostic and pre-Christian texts to develop a feminine epistemology and to scrutinize the effects of colonization on Native communities. Both authors incorporate gnostic scripture as a counterpoint to patriarchal Christianity. In contrast to Morrison's project in *Paradise*, however, which incorporates the gnostic texts not to reject Christianity but to revise it, *Gardens* ultimately rejects the Christian tradition because of its implication in patriarchy and colonialism. Even the

gnostic texts are significant only inasmuch as they aid Native cultural survival. The novel is interested in recovering suppressed histories of many kinds—gnostic and traditional, among others—but, most importantly, in revising American history to foreground Native perspectives and experiences. Although Silko is certainly involved in a recovery of the suppressed women's histories the gnostic texts represent, in the end she is primarily concerned with how such histories can be utilized toward the future vitality of specifically Native communities. Finally, both Morrison and Silko identify the biblical Garden of Eden as the site of their revisionary work. Utilizing this central biblical narrative as a structuring metaphor regarding social interactions in the United States, Morrison and Silko revise the idea of the Garden, or "Paradise," to scrutinize gendered traditions in both Native and African American literature.

In both *Paradise* and *Gardens*, gnostic theology plays itself out through primarily female characters who possess knowledge of themselves and who use this knowledge to facilitate both personal and cultural survival. Rather than a God who is wholly other, some gnostics claimed that "self knowledge is knowledge of God" and that "the self and the divine are identical" (Pagels xx).[2] Morrison and Silko utilize these texts to provide a historiography that allows the U.S. an alternative "self-knowledge" that carries implications for social practice. The gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind," introduced in Morrison's *Jazz* in the previous chapter, appears in both texts for this reason. In it, a feminine, divine speaker warns against ignorance and encourages an understanding of the world as a place where opposites exist in balance; to separate or isolate things from their "opposite" is therefore to exhibit ignorance of the divine. In *Paradise*, in particular, self-knowledge likewise leads to divine knowledge (the knowledge of the *self* as divine), a

notion especially threatening to the orthodox, patriarchal community in the novel. In *Gardens*, this tension between knowledge and ignorance plays itself out in the contrast between Native characters whose self-knowledge allows them to control their own history and colonial characters whose ignorance determines their history for them.

If orthodox scripture has been used to validate patriarchal practice, however, it has similarly been utilized as a justification for colonialism and slavery in the United States and around the world. Through their inclusion of gnostic scripture, Morrison and Silko draw parallels between the oppression of traditional societies in ancient Syria, Palestine, and Egypt by Alexander the Great and the ensuing Roman Empire and a history of slavery and colonization in the United States. In doing so, they utilize what George Lipsitz refers to as "families of resemblance."[3] In other words, they invite comparison between seemingly disparate modes of oppression in order to highlight the way power operates and to acknowledge "similarities in form and content that transcended surface differences" (150). This may account for some of the appeal of these gnostic texts to both Morrison and Silko. After all, what we know of the gnostic texts is that they were written by a colonized group of people primarily as a resistance to oppression. As Karen L. King explains in "Who Are The Gnostics?": "the Gnostic viewpoint is not that of the victor, but of the conquered and colonized" (15). At the same time, many gnostic believers were actively involved in material resistance to oppression. Like Morrison and Silko, these writers often understood the potential for revolutionary social change through the revision of limiting and destructive cultural myths and practices; they were poets and authors who believed they had a secret knowledge known only to a few and that this knowledge had the potential to change history. Not

surprisingly, in the few centuries after they were written, these gnostic texts were deemed heretical and were burned, buried, suppressed, and silenced; their recovery at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere challenges us to reinterpret history at the same time as it offers the potential for cultural change today (Pagels 69). The choice to incorporate gnostic texts in *Paradise* and *Gardens* helps to locate both novels in a tradition of radical mythmaking at the same time as it offers a model for the revisionist project each text undertakes.

If gnostic scripture itself became a way to reject domination, *Paradise* and *Gardens* "uncover" these repressed voices to destabilize the logic of American colonialism and slavery, practices motivated by the same "orthodox" perspective that labeled these ancient texts "heretical."[4] Transcendent mythmaking in both *Paradise* and *Gardens* serves as a necessary step in the return of the world to its proper balance—whether that entails a rearticulation of difference (*Paradise*) or resistance to the colonial presence from the Americas and the possibility of its disappearance (*Gardens*). Like the gnostic writers, they also attempt to create new myths as a means of reordering oppressive social structures. Ultimately, "the people who wrote and read [gnostic] texts [in their original context understood] themselves [. . .] as powerful, heroic persons of superior awareness and infinite self-worth who [were] being degraded, exploited, deceived, and oppressed by illegitimate forces of domination" (16). What they wanted was "spiritual development, moral clarity, knowledge, power, and peace" (16). As such, their story resonates well within the narrative framework of both *Paradise* and *Gardens in the Dunes*.

* * *

Although she doesn't reject Christianity entirely, the alternative Morrison offers in *Paradise* is nothing less than a full-scale revision of normative theology through the inclusion and integration of gnostic scripture suppressed in the formation of the early Christian Church. While *Paradise* has received less critical attention than either of the first two novels in the trilogy, scholars have for the most part agreed that the third novel continues the revision of African American history begun in *Beloved* and *Jazz*. As in the two preceding novels, *Paradise* explores the narrative modes and cultural practices inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition at the same time as it calls the authority of the master narrative of American history into question. Whereas *Beloved* dealt with antebellum America and *Jazz* with the Harlem Renaissance, *Paradise* takes as its backdrop the Civil Rights movement and the period of black nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.[5] In particular, it investigates patriarchy and the self-conscious strategy of isolation central to the concerns of the Black Power movement and invokes the still-current debate surrounding the question of integration. In *Paradise*, Morrison challenges separatist ideologies that romanticize communities based on isolation and exclusion—even when that isolation is a response to racial violence—by linking these ideologies to biblical utopian narratives and calling attention to their inherently patriarchal and hierarchical nature. More significantly, she illustrates the dangers inherent when people internalize the same values they seek to escape. The gnostic scripture Morrison posits as an alternative emphasizes diversity and balance over isolation and exclusion; the novel

argues that violent history perpetuates itself if it fails to revise limiting and destructive myths and cultural practices that motivate them.

Paradise depicts the all-black town, Ruby, whose citizens are proud, confident, and self-sufficient, traits they equate with racial purity. They are a community of African Americans isolated from the white world, but purity and isolation become the justification for the violence they enact on five women living in a nearby house referred to as the "Convent." Although the "Paradise" of the novel's title refers most obviously to a biblical heaven, a haven (and a place of peace) that is the reward for the Christian faithful, the novel undermines the logic of this kind of formulation—based on exclusion—and reveals its destructive and violent potential. The Ruby community is fashioned in accordance with this biblical model as an earthly "paradise" for its African American inhabitants, men and women who seek a haven for themselves in a country premised on violence toward them. Despite the fact that proponents of black nationalism historically rejected Christianity, the novel makes a pointed comparison between their isolationist politics and the utopian logic of exclusion derived from Christian theology, and it suggests that such theology is the root of Ruby's problems. In *Paradise*, Christianity remains the driving force behind the Ruby community; the town's patriarchs, Deacon and Steward Morgan, have names that reflect the nature of their authority and indicate their church-sanctioned position.[6] Family and church authority in Ruby also mirrors biblical authority: the men govern and lead, while the women support and encourage the men (1 Corinthians 11: 3, Ephesians 5: 22).

Not surprisingly, these men are deeply invested in protecting their way of life, and they view any aberration from the norm as a risk to their safety. After all, their

experience in the past has taught them that survival means isolating themselves with people who are the same as they are. The problem arises when Ruby's politics (and the faith they reflect) become stagnant, inflexible to change, and unable to deal with differences amongst them; arguments between the older and younger generations, contention between men and women concerning gender roles, babies born with physical defects from consanguineous marriages, and rivalry between the town's churches are just a few of the very serious problems the Ruby community faces. When a group of nontraditional women from diverse backgrounds takes up residence in a "Convent" on the outskirts of town, the men find their difference an easy scapegoat for the problems they see within their own community. So it happens that, on a clear morning in July, 1976, nine gunmen from Ruby surprise, surround, and kill (the unarmed) Consolata, Pallas, Mavis, Gigi, and Seneca.

The male-centered community of Ruby and the violence it inspires evoke two sets of early American patriarchs, both of whom helped to "author" the master narrative of American history Morrison challenges. The first group of men the Ruby community calls to mind are the nation's "Founding Fathers"—those men who organized in some way the establishment of the American democracy. The date of the Convent women's murders, however—the United States' bicentennial—is a pointed reminder of the failure of the new nation to tolerate difference, especially in its Native and African populations. *Paradise* illustrates how the Ruby community has internalized this national logic and manifested the same intolerance toward outsiders that was first aimed at them. Peter Widdowson has argued that the novel's "black sub-textual invocation of the [Founding Fathers] reinflect[s] the American Dream—seeking a pure polity and freedom from a

corrupt past in the [New World]—and its failure" (319).[7] Like the Founding Fathers, proponents of black nationalism historically sought to separate African American communities from the harmful influence of mainstream, white America. In addition to this separatist impulse, and despite the fact that there were many important benefits to arise from black nationalism, the movement also maintained purist politics that excluded African American women entirely or relegated them to stereotypically feminine roles.[8] Eldridge Cleaver's notorious formulation, which involved "practicing [rape] on black girls in the ghetto" in preparation for an assault on the real enemy, is a clear example of the patriarchal politics of the Black Power movement—politics derived largely from the logic of exclusion inherited from the Founding Fathers and applied to black women (14). Linking the failure of patriarchal Ruby (and the period of African American history it represents) to the failure of the American democratic experiment more broadly, Widdowson's work is representative of the large majority of work being done on *Paradise*.

In the text, however, Morrison also challenges another master history—one corresponding to the story of the "Founding Fathers" and having a similar, violent effect on the men of Ruby. These second American "Fathers" evoked by the Ruby community are the Puritans, and they help to clarify how Morrison uses the biblical imagery and allusion that abounds in the text. At the same time, they introduce another part of the master narrative in need of revision: biblical scripture that justifies violence motivated by a fear of difference. As Katrine Dalsgard has pointed out, there are clear parallels between the establishment of Ruby in *Paradise* and the first Puritan colonies in the New World.[9] After all, Puritan belief in the "Promised Land" of God's chosen people (and

their persecution in and "Exodus" away from the Old World) does resonate with the idea of utopia the citizens of Ruby seek (and their "Disallowing" by other black communities).[10] It also alludes to a common theme in African American discourse of blacks as a chosen people seeking freedom in a foreign land; the analogy of the enslavement of Israel in Egypt is even more fitting when applied to the enslavement of blacks in America. Since the Ruby community parallels the Puritan colonies in this way, the violence the men resort to in the novel can also be read as a repetition of the failure of the Puritan Fathers to tolerate difference, and the Convent shootings become another detestable witch hunt. Ultimately, the narrative of Ruby's men illustrates the novel's position regarding the actions of both sets of American "Fathers" and the historical process they initiated: unless something is done to change the cultural myths that inspire this kind of violence, the failures of American history (and any similar attempts to establish "paradise" on earth) are doomed to repeat themselves.

Yet the story of Ruby, and particularly the story of its male citizens, is not the only narrative in *Paradise*. To amend these historical failures, Morrison posits an alternative to the patriarchal Christian community of Ruby that critiques the destructive theology they embrace. In fact, just sixteen miles outside of Ruby, a group of unruly women undergo a radical transformation in a "Convent."[11] But, before we learn about their transformation or about their lives at all, Consolata, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas are gunned down in the first chapter; the novel then presents their stories in succeeding chapters named after each one. From the beginning, the women at the Convent are seen as outsiders to the Ruby inhabitants and are viewed with suspicion. After all, they grow the hottest peppers in Oklahoma (which, according to the Ruby men, is clearly evidence

of devilry) and take in drunks and runaway mothers. In fact, unlike Ruby's patriarchs, they exclude no one (male or female, from any racial background). While each woman likewise arrives shouldering the burden of a violent and traumatic personal history, she resists Ruby's impulse to isolate from those who are different from them: all the women live in a community (sharing tasks, tending to the garden, cooking), but have their own space and are free to come and go as they choose.[12] Rather than the exclusively male leadership found in Ruby—based on biblical models of authority—another major distinction between the two communities is that the latter is a space where gender roles have been reversed; in the Convent, the women maintain authority, lead, and govern themselves. Most significant in terms of the novel's work to contrast the Convent women with Ruby's patriarchs, however, is the women's transformation just before the men come to hunt them down. After their deaths, the women are introduced again at the end, persisting in a middle world between life and death that can best be described as "paradise," although the novel insists that such a place differs vastly from the utopia sought by the "Founding Fathers," the Puritans, or even the inhabitants of Ruby. In this new formulation of "paradise," the novel claims the women have important "work to do" (318).

While a few critics understand the Convent women as consistent with Morrison's use of biblical imagery and allusion in the rest of the novel, most critics have simply chosen to ignore the novel's enigmatic ending entirely.[13] Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, for example, reads Consolata as a Christ figure who offers salvation to her followers in New Testament fashion and who is in stark contrast with Ruby's version of the Old Testament Father God, but she glosses over the novel's mysterious ending.[14] She argues that, after

the women's purification, and before their deaths, the Convent "turn[s] itself into a paradise for the women living there, demonstrating that improvement relies on the visibility of change and fluidity that the men in Ruby eschew" (23-4). Although Fraile-Marcos' emphasis on change and fluidity is apt, neither her nor other critics' explanations are entirely convincing in light of the transformation the women undergo in *Paradise* or their death and reappearance in the coda, largely because such interpretations overlook the novel's gnostic epigraph. My own work with *Paradise* draws on this earlier scholarship but focuses on the epigraph to situate the Convent women on the outskirts of orthodox Christianity (also represented by their geographical distance from Ruby's patriarchal Christian community). Rather than locate the Convent women within the Christian tradition, I argue, these ten lines expose the work the novel does to challenge notions of utopia based on exclusion.

An understanding of the epigraph itself and its function in the text clarifies Morrison's purpose in rewriting the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind," as an way to rewrite to normative, patriarchal Christian theology and to revision the role of difference in any formulation, fictional or factual, of "paradise." In contrast to the exclusively male leadership of Ruby, all the Convent inhabitants are women; this is significant because it aligns them with the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," a character who possesses an important insight concerning the relationship of the soul to the world around it. One of the women living in the Convent is even named "Divine." This alignment rewrites women as spiritual leaders, a role not traditionally assigned them in patriarchal society, and it revises the concept of the divine to include feminine characteristics. The final ten lines of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" appear as the novel's

epigraph, and they serve as both a warning against "pleasant forms" of ignorance and a hope for a permanent state of understanding, or *gnosis*:

> For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
>
> numerous sins,
>
> and inconsistencies,
>
> and disgraceful passions,
>
> and fleeting pleasures,
>
> which (men) embrace until they become sober
>
> and go up to their resting-place.
>
> And they will find me there,
>
> and they will live,
>
> and they will not die again. (*Paradise* xiii)

Translators have inserted the term "(men)" in "Thunder, Perfect Mind" to refer to all people, male and female, who have not "found" the feminine, divine speaker and who, therefore, do not possess the ability to "live, / and [. . .] not die again." By contrast, this lack of knowledge is something both the speaker and the second-person, "you," have overcome; hence, both the speaker and the audience have a secret knowledge that sets them apart from "men," who lack knowledge. In *Paradise*, Morrison plays on the translator's insertion, "(men)," denying its generic reference and pitting the men of Ruby against the Convent women.

The "sobriety" men can attain only through *gnosis* (and which leads to the discovery of the feminine, divine speaker) reflects a characteristically gnostic use of symbolic language. For some gnostics, the metaphor of intoxication illustrates man's

state of "drunkenness" in the world. In *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas argues that drunkenness

> is induced by the "wine of ignorance" [. . .], which the world everywhere proffers to man. The metaphor makes it clear that ignorance is not a neutral state, the mere absence of knowledge, but is itself a positive counter-condition to that of knowledge, actively induced and maintained to prevent it. The ignorance of drunkenness is the soul's ignorance of itself, its origin, and its situation in the alien world. (71)

For the gnostic, "the soul's ignorance of itself, its origin, and its situation in the alien world" is the single, greatest risk facing the believer, since many gnostics claimed that "to know oneself [. . .] is to know human nature and human destiny" (Pagels xix). In *Paradise*, it is clear that the men of Ruby are "drunk" with ignorance of themselves, their origin, and their relationship to the damaging logic motivating American (and African American) history. The Convent women, on the other hand, are working hard to obtain *gnosis.* In the end, they do obtain it—which explains their uncanny ability to "live, / [. . .] and not die again" when they reappear in the novel's coda. In other words, through self-knowledge they have become divine.

The majority of this nearly 250-line poem is devoted to self-naming and self-knowledge. This is a speaker who is *not* intoxicated by the wine of ignorance offered by the world. In fact, unlike "(men)," the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" knows herself as a complex fusion of opposites:

> For I am the first and the last.

I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am the mother and the daughter.

[. . .}

I am the bride and the bridegroom. (12-16, 24)

The paradoxical speaker encompasses all things, great and small, masculine and feminine, elevated and base. She is both "compassionate" and "cruel," "an alien and a citizen," "war and peace" (68, 156, 55). This unity of opposites at work in the divine is also at work in the poem in "you," the audience (later referred to as angels and spirits), implying that "you" will become divine when "you" come to know "yourself" wholly. The healing that the Convent women undergo under Consolata's tutelage is a clear example of such self-transformation. By painting their outlines on the cement floor of the Convent cellar, Mavis, Seneca, Gigi, and Pallas create their "opposite," a twin image of themselves and one that houses all their past trauma so that they can be free of it. The Convent women come to "know" themselves once they embrace both their negative and positive selves, and this knowledge, in turn, leads to an understanding of their inherent divinity.[15]

The idea of opposites existing in union is not new to Morrison; as early as 1974, she claimed that African American authors were "focusing on a peculiar way [. . .] Black people experience evil and deal with [it]" (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 8). Speaking of a distinctly African American way of "seeing" (i.e. "knowing"), Morrison claimed that

> Black people never annihilate evil. They don't run it out of their neighborhoods, chop it up, or burn it up. They don't have witch hangings. They accept it. It's almost like a fourth dimension in their lives. They try to protect themselves from evil, of course, but they don't have that puritanical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it. (8)

Twenty years later, exceptions to this are the "8-rock" men of Ruby, who seek to purge evil from their community both by excommunicating those whose skin tone is too light and by shooting the Convent women, whose home they view as "the devil's bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen" (17). In flight from white and black racists who persecuted them for being different, these men now seek to destroy difference. They are the "men" of the epigraph who lack knowledge of the divine. Morrison contrasts these two communities in the novel to call attention to the flawed national logic that compels the men of Ruby. The "unity of opposites" proposed by the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" replaces the stagnant, social and spiritual policies of the Ruby community and encourages diversity and inclusion as prerequisites to personal (and historical) salvation.

Toward these revisionist ends, and to emphasize balance as an alternative to exclusion, Paradise also foregrounds pairs of opposites. Several sets of twins appear in the novel. Beyond the "twin" images of the women in the Convent cellar, there are at least three sets of twins in the novel: the babies, Merle and Pearl; the brothers, Steward and Deacon Morgan; and their ancestors, Coffee and Tea.[16] The story surrounding Coffee and Tea, especially, expresses the idea of a necessary unity of opposites as suggested by "Thunder, Perfect Mind." More to the point, the story of Coffee and Tea

shows the negative potential of separating two "opposites" which are meant to exist together:

> One day [. . .] when he and his twin brother were walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren't brothers anymore. Coffee began to plan a new life elsewhere. (302)

Coffee is, of course, Steward and Deacon's grandfather; rejecting his accommodating, lighter-skinned brother and looking for his "new life elsewhere" initiates the search for an all-black "haven."[17] Richard Misner suggests that such separation of opposites is due to a "lack of forgiveness. Lack of love," and he emphasizes the necessity of maintaining a unity of opposites by reminding Deacon that "[losing] a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that's worse than the original shame, wouldn't you say?" (303). By the end of the novel, Deacon understands the necessity of reconciling with his twin, who has become his "opposite," even as he realizes that he has "a long way to go" (303). But he is the only man among the nine gunmen who acknowledges this.

Steward, in particular, resists the difference the Convent women represent and considers their actions unorthodox and heretical. In fact, he goes as far as to "[stop] them dead lest they know another realm," but he is simply too late (301). By the time the men arrive at the Convent, the women have already undergone a transformation that has led to their divinity. The novel presents their transformation in a way that resonates with

Christian conceptions of salvation and rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ, but it rewrites the master scripture to posit other paths to personal salvation. Consolata instigates the women's transformation, and she serves as their leader and teacher throughout the process. Although everyone in the novel calls her Connie, she gives her full name as Consolata, meaning "consolation" in Portuguese. Interestingly, in the Bentley Layton translation of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," the feminine, divine speaker says that she is "consolation: of [her] own travail" (26). The Robinson version translates the word as "solace." Consolata is the character in *Paradise* most like the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," especially at first. She offers solace throughout the novel to the four girls living with her in the Convent; however, before she becomes their teacher, Consolata undergoes her own transformation from a drunk living in the darkness of the Convent's cellar to a "Revised Reverend Mother" practicing what she formally condemned as "magic" but now calls "in sight," a word synonymous with *gnosis* (247).[18] The "darkness" of the cellar indicates another gnostic metaphor for the ignorance of the world, and her ascent from the cellar to the main floor parallels gnostic imagery of the soul's ascent to knowledge of the "world of light" which represents salvation through *gnosis* (Jonas 80).[19] The climax of Consolata's own transformation comes when she meets the stranger whose eyes are the color of green apples, the same color hers were before they faded. Likewise, they both have "tea-colored" hair, and he speaks her first language (223, 252).[20] Like Consolata, he is wearing sunglasses, although his are described as "the mirror type" (252). Morrison's emphasis on mirroring and reflection, along with the similarities between the two characters, indicates that this man is

Consolata's "opposite," or "twin"—the knowledge of which "Thunder, Perfect Mind" asserts leads to salvation.

As soon as she "knows" the stranger, her "opposite," Consolata's transformation is complete; she takes over in her role of spiritual guide and begins preparations for a meal the women share before they descend to the cellar and emerge "reborn." In a significant moment of scriptural revision, *Paradise* simultaneously rewrites two key Christian concepts: "the fall" as the site of original sin and faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ, as the only path to salvation. In the novel's revised version, Eve becomes not the bearer of evil but the messenger of *gnosis*; this revision is significant because it positions women as the messengers of true faith at the same time as it marks the beginning of the Convent women's own *gnosis*—a self-knowledge that will lead to their transformation and "rebirth" and, ultimately, to their divinity.[21] To begin with, the "apples" used to describe the color of the stranger's eyes reappear in the meal Consolata prepares for the five women.[22] These apples, of course, evoke an image of the biblical Garden of Eden, where Eve first ate the apple of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and then offered it to Adam; this is the passage used most often to justify patriarchal Christianity's suppression of the rights of women, since it was Eve who sinned first by eating the forbidden fruit. After all, God gave Adam the authority to "rule over [Eve]" as a result of this original sin (Genesis 3: 16). For many gnostics, however, this biblical scene was of particular interest because of its emphasis on "knowledge," and the conclusions they drew were antithetical to Christian teachings on original sin. Rather than the site of Eve's sin, the Garden for many gnostics marked, instead, a success: "the beginning of all *gnosis* on earth which thus by its very origin is stamped as opposed to the world and its God,

and indeed as a form of rebellion" (Jonas 93). In other words, by serving apples as a part of her meal, Consolata offers the women the "knowledge" this fruit represents. In terms of the novel's historical revision, Morrison amends the destructive logic of "the fall" and rewrites it to include suppressed perspectives that valorize, rather than condemn, the feminine.

Through the figure of Consolata, *Paradise* also revises the Christian concept of the Savior and faith in the teachings of Christ as the only path to salvation. Instead, the novel suggests the gnostic concept of self-knowledge as a means to salvation as a viable alternative. In this formulation, Christ leads and teaches, but the individual attains her own salvation through internal transformation. More significantly, this transformation leads to an understanding of divine reality, and according to certain gnostic formulations, "whoever perceives divine reality 'becomes what he sees'" (Pagels 134). In other words, "whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes 'no longer a Christian, but a Christ'" (134). In *Paradise*, the women's self-knowledge leads to knowledge of the divine, which in turn leads to their own divinity. Following this logic, it makes sense to read Consolata as a kind of Christ figure in *Paradise*, as Fraile-Marcos has argued. The novel, however, radically revises the concept of the teacher, or Savior, in Christian theology at the same time as it ultimately renders church authority unnecessary.[23] While Consolata leads the women's transformation at first, in the end her authority is replaced by the power of the women themselves, who are the authors of their own salvation. Echoing Jesus' words to his disciples at the Sea of Galilee, she insists the women "follow [her]," but she immediately qualifies her statement by adding, enigmatically, "someone could want to meet you" (262). That someone is not Consolata but each girl's "opposite"; revising the

biblical concept of the Savior puts power into the hands of those who have historically felt most powerless.

In Paradise, an exploration of personal and historical experience leads to an understanding of divine reality and rewrites Christian conceptions of salvation and rebirth as only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. As previously noted, self-knowledge is the soul's knowledge "of itself, its origin, and its situation in the alien world." In terms of the Convent women's transformation, then, it is imperative that each woman revisit her own personal history before she can be saved and move forward. By contrast, the gnostic text "The Book of Thomas the Contender" claims: "whoever has not known himself has known nothing"; the incongruity between the Convent women and the men of Ruby on this point is striking (qtd. in Pagels 134). Thus begins the "loud dreaming" in the Convent's cellar, where each girl lies naked in her outline on the cold floor, symbolizing the uniting of each one with her "opposite" so that she can know herself and become whole.[24] This internal transformation makes salvation primarily a personal experience and renders church authority meaningless in the process. Once in the cellar, the four women are led in a ritual re-enactment of their personal histories in a way that alludes to gnostic conceptions of rebirth and transformation through *gnosis* and the soul's ascent back to its true home, and it rewrites those histories with each woman as the author, rather than victim, of her own narrative. History becomes, in these women's experience, something they can control and fashion, rather than being forced upon them without their consent. Seneca, for instance, recognizes the outline as an extension of herself; she "duplicated in robin's egg blue one of her more elegant scars [. . .]. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on

the cellar floor" (265). Jonas explains that, for the gnostic who encounters her "opposite," "the recognition of it as [her] own image, and the reunion with it signify the real moment of [her] salvation" (122). By the time the women ascend the cellar steps and dance in the rain, they are described as "holy women," as "divine" as both Consolata and the feminine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" (283). As Jonas explains, "this is the good end of those who have attained *gnosis*: to become God" (153). However, such a radical transformation is only possible when difference ("opposites") is accepted and celebrated. Morrison's message is that African Americans need to revisit (i.e. "know") their own history before they will be able to amend the destructive logic at the root of its failures.

When she first sees the women after their transformation and "rebirth," Soane comments on "how calmly themselves they seemed," adding that they "were no longer haunted" (266). The "hunting" that follows, then, although it serves to indict the Ruby community, actually has little effect on the five Convent women. The novel indicates that three of the women "went down [. . .] in the grass" after they were shot, and the men assume they've been killed (290). Soane, Dovey, and Lone believe that the two other women have died; they close Consolata's eyes and cover her up with a sheet just after Dovey comes in to report that "the white girl" is "gone" (291). The word "gone" has a double meaning, however, as the novel soon makes clear. Dovey uses it to mean that "the white girl" is dead, but when Roger Best "gunned the motor of the ambulance/hearse and sped to the Convent" to pick up the bodies, he found nothing (292). More surprising still, "even the Cadillac was gone."[25] The women seem to have simply disappeared; Lone deduces that God "had actually swept up and received His servants in broad

daylight," and Richard Misner concludes that they've gone to "another place—neither death nor life—" (298, 307). The novel's epigraph, however, suggests that the place is actually something more along the lines of an earthly "paradise" that encompasses *both* death *and* life and is therefore a combination of the opposites that comprise the paradox of "Thunder, Perfect Mind"; it is also clearly a revision of the biblical formulation of "paradise" based on exclusion. Ultimately, though, the violence of the men of Ruby has no lasting effect on the Convent women because they are "holy," and their divinity makes them invulnerable to the violence of the mortal world.

This divinity explains the women's reappearance in the coda, yet it shouldn't be mistaken as a justification for Ruby's violence. Lone may be correct in thinking that "God had given Ruby a second chance," but the novel makes it clear that the murder of the Convent women leads to the dissolution of the entire Ruby community and the utopian impulse it represents. *Paradise* thus calls into question both the racist and sexist dimensions of the master narrative of American history and the self-destructive theology internalized by the men of Ruby and proponents of the historical Black Power movement—whose purist politics figured black women as a threat to African American virility (Ford 178-79).[26] Morrison therefore rewrites harmful elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition to incorporate an other, expressly gnostic epistemology that sees difference as integral to wholeness. Her reconception of "Paradise" is first and foremost be based on inclusivity, so when the women reappear in the coda, they embody opposites. They are alive though they were dead; they are both human and spirit; two tote weapons, three are weaponless; one embraces an old woman, one a baby. They come from racially

diverse backgrounds. All five move through spaces they inhabited in the past while focused on a future goal.

The novel's final line emphasizes the work yet to be done: "Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work *they were created to do* down here in paradise" (318, emphasis mine). Like the feminine, divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind," the women have come armed with a message of *gnosis* that argues that God and the self are identical and that "paradise" is "down here." In this self-reflexive final line, Morrison refers to her own creation of these mythical characters and acknowledges that she, too, is shouldering her revisionist work down here in paradise. Ultimately, *Paradise* makes it clear that a revision of the master narrative of American history and its cultural myths gives African Americans the power both to author their own history and to shape their future. Without this kind of revision, and despite the best of intentions, violent history merely repeats itself.

* * *

If *Paradise* invokes the gnostic gospels in order to scrutinize the racist and patriarchal dimensions of African American and American history, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* relies on these texts to develop a feminine epistemology that serves as a counterpoint to the Judeo-Christian tradition that justifies U.S. colonialism. Like *Paradise*, *Gardens in the Dunes* incorporates gnostic texts and themes, especially those affirming feminine authority in the early church, and Silko even cites a section of the same gnostic poem used in Morrison's epigraph. But *Gardens* is less

concerned with revising orthodox Christianity through its inclusion of these texts than it is interested in encouraging an alternative worldview entirely. Silko's use of the gnostic texts in *Gardens* facilitates this goal by first destabilizing the authority of a singular, master narrative of American history that promotes colonialism and suppresses all systems of belief not adhering to its fundamental tenets. In the novel, scriptural and historical revision go hand in hand and enable a retelling of American history and colonialism from a Native epistemological framework in a way that affirms alternative narratives. Of course, the ultimate goal is not merely narrative, but also social, revision. In Silko's formulation, such an alternative incorporates elements of several belief systems, including Celtic and Roman mythology, Native American cosmogony, and ancient goddess and fertility myths, as well as the gnostic texts themselves. By drawing parallels between all these systems of belief, the novel exposes the intersections (in addition to the more obvious disconnections) between disparate ideas, people, and places. More significantly, this cultural syncretism ultimately becomes part of a strategy for Native survival in *Gardens*. To date, no critical attention has been given to the incorporation of pre-Christian and gnostic texts in the novel.

Criticizing the history and effects of colonialism on Native people and the land they inhabit is the primary goal of *Gardens*, which traces the story of two Colorado River Indian sisters from the fictional Sand Lizard tribe.[27] Although at the outset of the novel the tribe appears to be in danger of extinction, *Gardens* troubles this myth of the "disappearing" Native by emphasizing the sisters' survival. Set at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel follows Indigo and Sister Salt on a cyclical journey that ends where it begins: in the "gardens in the dunes." The family gardens where Sister Salt and

Indigo begin and end their story are located in a remote spot in the American southwest accessible only by foot. There they learn from Grandma Fleet how to subsist on seeds (which they plant in and harvest from the terraced gardens), dried fruit, and occasional game, and to respect the other inhabitant of the dunes, old Grandfather Snake. When Grandma Fleet dies of old age and the two sisters go into town looking for food, they are seized by Indian police and separated; Sister Salt is sent to a nearby reservation and Indigo to the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. The rest of the novel traces both sisters' attempts to return to their home in the gardens in the dunes. After leaving the reservation, for example, Sister Salt finds work at a nearby dam project and works to save enough money to return. As soon as she can, Indigo escapes the boarding school and seeks refuge in a garden near an orange grove. In this garden, she meets Linnaeus, a monkey who befriends her, and his owners, Hattie and Edward Palmer, who become her temporary guardians. Thus begins a series of encounters with gardens of all sizes and styles. "Rescued" by Hattie and Edward, Indigo is whisked off on a tour of American and European homes and gardens that exposes buried and suppressed histories and belief systems. Each garden on the journey introduces another epistemological framework, which works in conjunction with the gnostic texts to destabilize the authority of the master narrative of Christianity and U.S. colonialism.

Edward and Hattie Palmer are the novel's central colonial figures, and their relationship illustrates different kinds of complicity in the colonial project. Repeating a U.S. history of collecting Native artifacts and even Native people themselves, Edward in particular is fascinated with classifying and collecting "specimens" of everything he encounters. His special interest is botany, and the plants he attains wherever he travels—

the jungles of Brazil, the Gulf of Mexico, or the American southwest—are witness to the effects of colonialism on the global geography. As Silko has observed in an interview: "everywhere the colonials went, the plants came back from there" (Arnold 20). Edward's impulse to collect even extends to his encounter with Indigo. Almost immediately, he sees her as a specimen in need of classification: he begins "to search through his library for ethnological reports on the desert Indians" and is "intrigued with the notion that the child might be the last remnant of a tribe now extinct, perhaps a tribe never before studied by anthropologists" (113). Edward's self-interested acquisitiveness is countered by Hattie, who sees Indigo not as an artifact from a now-extinct tribe, but as a human being (108). However, Hattie's complicity in the colonial project is made clear when she insists Indigo accompany them on their trip east and refuses to let Indigo return to her home in the dunes. The novel also makes it apparent that Hattie wants a child and would like to adopt Indigo. This, of course, is a type of acquisitiveness and control that merely repeats dominant colonial dynamics of paternalism—Natives were frequently likened to children in "need" of governmental "care" and control. Thus, while Hattie is certainly well intentioned, she is nonetheless also implicated in the history of American colonialism *Gardens* recounts, if less obviously than her husband. By the end of the novel, her presence becomes more explicitly disruptive and even harmful to the survival of the Native community.

Many of the specific concerns facing the Native world at the turn of the century are echoed in the sisters' stories and, when told from their perspective, function to rewrite the master narrative of American history by uncovering suppressed Native histories and experiences. The story of Sister Salt and Indigo, then, represents a much broader history

of American colonialism and the military conquest of Native America Silko rewrites in the novel. Each sister's story reenacts part of this history:

> the military campaign against Natives dispossessed them of their lands and confined them to reservations, a history [*Gardens*] repeats in Sister Salt's story. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the federal government then began its attempts to assimilate the survivors, in part through the boarding school policy, and Indigo's story reenacts this part of the conquest. (Huhndorf 190)

Silko rewrites the history of Native America in a way that emphasizes the destructive consequences of federal policies on Native people. In the months Indigo is at the Sherman Institute, for example, she "watched three girls from Alaska stop eating, lie listlessly in their beds, then die, coughing blood" (*Gardens* 70). These histories, purposefully silenced in conventional colonial narratives, are uncovered in the novel to foreground the violence of the conquest (Huhndorf 190). Silko also illustrates the effects of colonialism on the land itself: the dam project Sister Salt works at after she leaves the reservation rewrites the particular history of the American southwest by emphasizing the flooding of Native lands and the diversion of water from sacred places caused by federal dam-building initiatives in the early twentieth century. Even as it highlights the consequences of colonialism on Native people and the geographical landscape, however, *Gardens* also emphasizes Native methods of resistance and survival: "although Indigo is plagued by death, poverty, and tragic loss, she tells the story of a Native person's survival in a changing world" (190). This revision of the history of U.S. colonialism is the primary goal of the novel, and it is aided, in part, by parallel revisions of biblical

scripture, all of which serve in the text as reminders of the intersections between sacred and political history. Through its incorporation of scriptural revision, the novel emphasizes a capacity for native survival at the same time as it counters Edward's colonial perspective that views Indigo as the "last remnant" of a now-extinct tribe.

Silko emphasizes historical and scriptural revision as a mode of resistance against a dominating, colonial perspective through the novel's reenactment of the historical Ghost Dance, an anti-colonial movement in the late-nineteenth century that incorporated into itself elements of Christian theology (like an apocalyptic return of the Messiah) as a subversive act; although they adopted aspects of Christianity, the ghost dancers did so in a way that called attention to the violence of the conquest and redefined the players in the biblical struggle between good and evil in the colonial context. Syncretic in nature, Wovoka the Prophet nonetheless advocated a rejection of all things European. In fact, the Ghost Dance movement ultimately "imagined nothing less than the end of colonial relations" and the disappearance of the colonial presence from the Americas (Ostler 262). Government efforts to suppress the movement culminated in the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. In *Gardens*, Wounded Knee has already happened before the narrative begins: "far to the north there were rumors the soldiers killed dozens of dancers" (24). In the novel, the Ghost Dance appears twice, once at the beginning and once at the novel's culmination. At the beginning of *Gardens*, Grandma Fleet and the sisters' mother are part of a fictional offshoot of the historical movement. By beginning the novel's narrative *after* Wounded Knee, Silko emphasizes Native vitality despite dominant narratives that suggest Native American history officially ended in 1890.

In *Gardens*, Grandma and the other women join the participants of the Ghost Dance outside of the colonial town of Needles, and on the fourth day of dancing and being visited by the ancestors, the Messiah and his eleven children appear. Congruent with accounts of the historical Ghost Dance, the novel claims that "Jesus was very angry with white people" and prophesies their downfall and ultimate disappearance at the event (25). This first Ghost Dance is ultimately unsuccessful, however; the Messiah appears but the colonial presence does not disappear; when soldiers and Indian police break up the dance, Sister Salt and Indigo escape to the gardens in the dunes. It is this colonial presence, and the oppressive ideologies attached to it—especially patriarchy and racism—that the girls will flee until the return of the Ghost Dance at the end of the novel. After this first dance, however, Grandma Fleet returns to the gardens after several days, without Mama, who "follow[ed] the tracks in the sand made by the Messiah and his family" (46). The mystery of her disappearance and her symbolic return to the dunes at the novel's end, once again in conjunction with the Ghost Dance, parallels the sisters' own cyclical journey and their successful attempt to rid their lives of the oppression of colonialism. The novel's emphasis on alternative experiences of the Messiah (for example, witness of his multiple appearances in the Americas and around the world in the nineteenth century) calls into question the authority of the master narrative of orthodox Christianity and the Church's assertion of its as the only, "true" faith. By including the Ghost Dance as a feature of Sister Salt and Indigo's narrative, Silko reiterates the anti-colonial message of the historical Ghost Dance itself, which predicts the disappearance of the colonial presence at the same time as it provides a program for Native survival.

Along with the historical Ghost Dance, which revised elements of colonialist culture as a subversive act and as a means of cultural survival, *Gardens* incorporates gnostic (and, later in the narrative, pre-Christian) texts as a mode of resistance against a dominating, patriarchal perspective. *Gardens* incorporates the gnostic texts in the same way the Ghost Dance adopted elements of Christianity—in the service of Native survival first and foremost—and as part of a syncretic cultural practice that resists static and essentialist notions of identity locked in the historical past. In the case of the Ghost Dance, the incorporation of Christian scripture equated with survival because it meant colonists continued to allow the meetings and dancing to occur. More significantly, by revising the Christian notion of apocalypse and the second coming of Christ, it also supplied a narrative to utilize in support of their own survival. In this way, the Ghost Dance stood in stark contrast with the colonial perspective, represented by Edward, which assumed Native disappearance and considered Indians as "specimens" from a now-defunct past. Like the incorporation of Christian texts into the historical Ghost Dance, the gnostic texts in revised form also provide narratives for the sisters of how to survive in the gardens in the dunes (respecting the Grandfather Snake, among other inclusive approaches). Both cases are subversive because they utilize the tools of the oppressor (Christian *or* gnostic) against that oppressor and because the original meaning of these texts is inverted so the Native population becomes the victor. Thus, *Gardens* models itself after the historical Ghost Dance, and the gnostic texts themselves illustrate this complicated, and subversive, relationship.

Silko uses Hattie's story, in particular, to introduce the gnostic texts and to critique patriarchal Christianity and its suppression of women's voices since the first

several centuries C.E. This, in turn, provides an important foundation for Native women's stories. At the same time, however, her story also critiques another mode of oppression—colonialism—with Hattie this time in the contradictory role of the oppressor. It is important to remember that the imposition of patriarchy on Native cultures was part of the colonial endeavor. Louise Michele Newman's *White Women's Rights* locates the adoption of patriarchal practice by Native communities as late as the beginning of the twentieth century; in the 1880s and 1890s, white "reformers" were still pushing patriarchy as a way to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream. White female reformers, in particular, played a crucial role in this program, and they linked "the future of white women, the United States, and destitute Indian tribes by suggesting the need to save, protect, and elevate Indian women" (118). And "civilization," they believed, would no doubt improve Indian women's lives:

> rather than have to do backbreaking labor while their menfolk loafed, they would experience the joys of domesticity; they would be protected from sexual exploitation within monogamous, nuclear family structures; and they would become citizens of a home-loving republic and receive the blessings of democracy, even without the vote. In short, Indian women were to be given the gift of patriarchy, with all the protection it afforded. (119)

Gardens, of course, is set at virtually the same historical moment as these "reforms" were occurring and, although Hattie is a figure who is herself a victim of patriarchy, she is nonetheless implicated in the project of colonialism through her paternalistic approach to

the sisters and her misguided assumption that "she knows best" what they need to ensure their livelihood and the future survival of their community.

It is thus through the complicated figure of Hattie that the gnostic texts first appear; they serve throughout the novel as a condemnation of the patriarchal Christianity that stifles her academic interests and labels them heretical simply because they fail to comply with the dominant perspective, but they are ultimately subsumed in the larger interests of Native cultural survival. The daughter of Long Island aristocrats, Hattie becomes interested at a young age in the stories of the heretics. In her catechism class, "[She] was fascinated by the early years of the church; heresies sprang up almost as soon as Jesus was crucified. Week after week, the pale Jesuit took them over the great heresies: Gnostic, Arian, Nestorian, Pelagian, Waldensian, Albigensian, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican" (97). In this same class, she discovered "the history of church heresy was far more interesting than the lives of the saints" (97). A gifted student, Hattie completes her coursework at Vassar College with honors in three years and, with her father's encouragement, is allowed to attend lectures at Harvard Divinity School "as a nondegree student until she proved she was capable of [. . .] graduate work" (98). The novel suggests she is one of the first women to do so; she is certainly the only woman to audit classes that semester (100). Hattie thrives when her father's friend, Dr. Rhinehart, allows her full access to the old Coptic scrolls in his library, which she calls "a lovely strange garden" of variously colored leather volumes (98).[28] Likewise, she is fascinated by her seminar on heresy, where she "discovered heresies and heretics never mentioned in catechism class" (99). Inspired by three Coptic texts in Dr. Rhinehart's library in particular, Hattie proposes a graduate research project that examines the "female spiritual

principle" in the early church and asserts that Jesus had women apostles (102). Hattie's thesis proposal causes such a controversy that it is rejected by the committee as groundless and its primary texts deemed inauthentic "forgeries"; she never fully recovers from the blow and, in fact, has an emotional breakdown when one of her male peers accosts her in her own carriage immediately after the rejection of her proposal (103). The doctor diagnoses the breakdown as "female hysteria" and blames the "overstimulation of the lectures in the presence of young gentlemen for Hattie's illness," a rhetoric that argues women's inferiority and helps to justify the suppression of their rights on medical and scientific grounds (98).[29] Hattie ends up giving up the idea of graduate education and buries her manuscript in the garden of her California home in much the same way as the original gnostic texts Silko relies on were buried at Nag Hammadi.

Though Hattie's world is not yet ready for her revelation about the role of women in the early church, Silko's use of the gnostic texts does important work in *Gardens* to establish the groundwork for a feminine perspective developed in the rest of the novel through the various gardens Indigo encounters on her journey. The gnostic texts Silko introduces first resist the Judeo-Christian concept of an omnipotent God who is wholly other, separated from humanity by a chasm. As Elaine Pagels has indicated in *The Gnostic Gospels*, certain gnostics contradicted this orthodox position by asserting "the self and the divine are identical" (xx). Citing directly Pagels's text, Silko quotes the gnostic Monoimus as the first of Hattie's primary sources in *Gardens*:

> Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as a starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything [her] own and says, "My God, my

> mind, my thought, my soul, my body." Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him *in yourself.* (Pagels xix-x, *Gardens* 101-02)

Rather than a distant God who is separate from humanity, Monoimus claims that God and the gnostic are two parts of essentially the same being. It is clear why Hattie's professors (and orthodox Christians) would view his argument as heretical. After all, if self-knowledge leads to knowledge of the divine, then all forms of authority, and especially Church authority and its claim as intercessor between God and man, are irrelevant.[30] A second key authority imperiled in this formulation is patriarchy itself. For if women (in addition to men) can know the divine through self-knowledge, then the entire logic that justifies the suppression of women's rights, both inside and outside the church, is at stake. It's hard to imagine which claim would seem more heretical to Hattie's late-nineteenth century audience.

Perhaps even more shocking to her audience, however, Hattie's thesis explored the "female spiritual principle" in gnostic cosmogony.[31] Hattie's primary source concerning this principle is the gnostic text "The Reality of the Rulers," although Silko takes poetic license with the original and offers a variation of it in *Gardens*, perhaps to account for the fact that Hattie's source came from Dr. Rhinehart's late-nineteenth century Coptic library, which couldn't have contained the text from Nag Hammadi (not discovered until 1945) (102). In both the novel and the original gnostic text, however, Sophia (Wisdom) is directly linked to the supreme Aeon (or Father), and no other Aeons are mentioned (MacRae 88).[32] Although "The Reality of the Rulers" doesn't indicate whether the female spiritual principle actually originates from Sophia, Silko's version

explicitly claims that this principle is Zoe (Life), Sophia's daughter: "Wisdom, Sophia, sent Zoe, Life, her daughter [. . .] as an instructor to raise up Adam" (102).[33] Both versions offer essentially the same narrative, although the original is longer: in it, the female spiritual principle first enters Adam and gives him life, then departs from him in the form of Eve, then leaves the mortal Eve and enters the body of the snake, and finally instructs Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit (Layton 70-71). In both texts, the female spiritual principle speaks through the snake, who is thus linked to the true Aeon (as opposed to the Judeo-Christian God who is, in gnostic tradition, often an imposter).

Silko's revision of "The Reality of the Rulers" accomplishes two important tasks in *Gardens*: first, it subverts the snake imagery, associated with evil and the fall in Christian theology, and reinstates it as a form of good (and, perhaps more significantly, as a form of wisdom through its connection to Sophia).[34] Second, it asserts a feminine presence in the creation story in a way that challenges the authority of patriarchal Christianity and its traditional use of the same story as a justification for misogyny. In other words, Silko rewrites early church history by uncovering buried and excluded women's histories, and she suggests the suppression of women and their authority by the church fathers parallels the suppression of women's rights in Hattie's nineteenth-century world. Silko draws further connections between the colonization of the Americas and the suppression of Native histories and the colonization of the East and the suppression of gnostic thought in the first few centuries C.E. In fact, by revising gnostic scripture in an American colonial context, Silko responds to Pagels' claim that "the Nag Hammadi sources, discovered at a time of contemporary social crisis concerning sexual roles,

challenge us to reinterpret history," and she is intimately involved in the revision of language and cultural myths that serve "to define who is included—and who excluded—from participation in the power of priests and bishops" (69, 47). The argument can be extended to the question of exclusion from education and other civic freedoms based on gender, as seen in Hattie's case. Even more pointedly, however, Silko furthers Pagels's argument by considering exclusions based on race as well as gender; the complicated, often paternalistic relationship between Hattie and Indigo is one example. In *Gardens*, then, Silko rewrites "The Reality of the Rulers" as a way to examine (and subvert) hegemonic practice at all levels, not simply as experienced between men and women, but between colonialist and Native as well.

Gnostic theology is not the only alternative to patriarchal Christianity in *Gardens*. Rather, the novel affirms several belief systems, all of which valorize the feminine, and these are each represented by the various gardens Indigo visits on her journey across the Atlantic Ocean and back. In fact, while the "gardens" of the novel's title first call to mind the biblical Garden of Eden, Silko's treatment of gardens in the text aims to destabilize the authority of the biblical origin story by introducing plural "gardens" throughout the novel that resonate with an alternative, expressly feminine, worldview. Each garden Indigo encounters introduces another epistemological framework; the first gardens she experiences after leaving California, for example, are the elaborately designed and painstakingly constructed gardens on Long Island belonging to Edward's sister, Susan. Not surprisingly, these gardens serve as the model of colonial gardening nearly every other garden in the novel is created to resist.[35] Torn up and replanted each season to model current fashions, Susan's monochromatic landscape gardens represent

what Silko calls "conspicuous consumption to the max" (Arnold 20). The novel draws parallels between these particular gardens and both capitalism and Christianity when Susan's bishop gives a mass of thanksgiving in her private chapel, thanking "God and Susan," in the same breath, for the success of her party, "The Masque of the Blue Garden," which raised more money for the Church that year than in all previous years (199). The fact that Susan's gardens are monochromatic is further evidence that they belong to a dominating perspective: variety and difference are not welcome there.

Not incidentally, Silko counters the bishop's conflation of Christianity, capitalism, and colonialism through the gnostic texts and themes introduced by Hattie and through her description of the remaining gardens Indigo encounters as she continues her journey. Silko argues that there are several possible ways of looking at gardens in the novel, and she insists that

> one of the recurring [themes in the novel is] gardens, innocence, safety. But also gardens can mean betrayal, plotting. The wicked old Popes used to go into the garden to plot the deaths of Bishops and Cardinals they didn't like. Jesus [was] betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. That's intentional, to have that range of possible ways of looking at gardens. (Arnold 20)

The gardens Indigo encounters after her stay on Long Island serve exactly this function: they illustrate the wide "range of possible ways of looking at gardens," and they offer alternatives to Susan's conspicuous consumption and the dominant perspective it represents. Two of the most notable alternatives in the novel are Aunt Bronwyn's garden in England and the area surrounding it (steeped in Celtic and Roman mythology) and

Laura's terraced gardens in Italy (containing remnants of ancient goddess and fertility myths). Both of these gardens, and the belief systems they represent, reinforce the general ideas set forth in the gnostic texts introduced by Hattie—namely, that true belief is unmediated and that spirituality can (and often did) affirm the feminine.

In the novel, Aunt Bronwyn's gardens represent a pre-Christian England, one that emphasizes the interrelatedness of plants and people and believes that plants and trees have souls. Toads that are "worshiped as incarnations of the primordial Mother," sacred white cows that belong to the moon, stones that dance after midnight, and oak groves that house the spirits of the dead are all part of Aunt Bronwyn's worldview, a perspective informed by Celtic and Roman mythology and used as a guide to care both for her own gardens and the land that surrounds them (243). The toads and their relationship to the primordial Mother are reminiscent of Silko's emphasis on the feminine spiritual principle in the gnostic texts introduced by Hattie. Likewise, Silko makes a comparison between Aunt Bronwyn's belief system and both the gnostic and Native epistemologies described in the novel through her inclusion of two artifacts found in the excavations around Bath: the carnelian depicting the Roman goddess Minerva, seated with a snake; and the figure of Fortuna, Roman goddess of good luck and blessing, holding "what appeared to be an ear of corn [. . .], though it must have been another plant, since corn was a New World plant" (260). In addition to the note about corn as a New World plant, the image of the snake recalls the old Grandfather Snake in the dunes, a symbol of the ancestors (38, 478). It also alludes to the snake imbued with the feminine spiritual principle in "The Reality of the Rulers." Snakes in the novel thus function broadly as symbols of suppressed or buried histories in need of recovery. The emphasis on "artifacts" and "excavations" in

Bath, and the two female images found there, evokes the discovery of the gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi and the recovery of texts affirming the role of women in the early church. Finally, the inclusion of the Roman goddesses supports Silko's concept of a spirituality that valorizes the feminine.

Not surprisingly, similar imagery is repeated in Laura's Italian gardens. When Hattie sleepwalks into Aunt Bronwyn's garden, she hears a knocking sound and sees a "luminous glow" that breathes rhythmically as it approaches (250). Whatever the apparition is—and Silko doesn't make this clear until the end of the novel—it certainly has some connection to the feminine spiritual principle in gnostic cosmogony; the novel makes a pointed reference to Hattie's thesis notes as she's trying to make sense of the encounter (251).[36] The language describing Hattie's vision also foreshadows the story Laura tells of the white princess who disappears into a glowing light in a lake full of snakes, as well as the image of the Holy Mother appearing on the schoolhouse wall in Corsica: the words "luminous," "glowing," and "light" are repeated several times in each section (301-02, 321-22). Beyond the description of the snakes that come to greet the white princess, stone images of Minerva abound in Laura's gardens. There are also terracotta images of "goddesses that were half snake or half bird" from the fifth millennium and an egg-shaped sandstone with what looks like a curled snake on it from the fourth millennium (286-87, 292). Walking through the gardens, Hattie and Edward stumble across a "snake-headed figure with human arms and breasts that held a baby snake, but her legs were two snakes" (298). When Hattie walked with Laura, the *professora*

> explained the meanings of the symbols found on Old European artifacts: [t]he wavy lines symbolized rain; Vs and zigzags and chevrons symbolized river meanders as well as snakes and flocks of waterbirds; goddesses of the rivers transformed themselves to snakes and then waterbirds. The concentric circles were the all-seeing eyes of the Great Goddess. (293)[37]

Rather than the familiar, Judeo-Christian image of the snake as a harbinger of evil, all of the snake images in Laura's garden are connected with fertility, life, and the feminine divine. More, Laura's all-black gladiolus garden works to subvert another familiar Judeo-Christian symbol: black as the sign of mourning, death, and evil. When Edward asks about the meaning of the all-black garden, Laura asserts that "to the old Europeans, black was the color of fertility and birth, the color of the Great Mother" (298). By challenging orthodox representations of snakes and the color black, and by affirming the presence of the feminine divine in all the gardens Indigo visits after Long Island, Silko rewrites patriarchal and racist ideologies prescribed by the orthodoxy.

At the same time as she privileges these various traditions, however, Silko makes it clear that the feminist perspective they encourage is still sometimes at odds with anti-colonial practice. This conflict is best illustrated through Hattie, and it recalls the work of Hazel Carby and Patricia Hill Collins to expose the racist and colonialist elements of feminist practice after the second wave of the movement. While Hattie is largely a sympathetic character, she nonetheless maintains characteristics of the oppressor. Thus, although she does eventually return Indigo to the Gardens in the Dunes, she also plays a large part in the child's abduction and removal from her home. Again, Hattie's interest in early church history introduces the gnostic texts in *Gardens* and supplies a feminine

perspective that aids the sisters in their survival, but the novel makes it clear that her presence (as a white woman in need of "protection") at the second Ghost Dance at the novel's culmination is disruptive and harmful to the outcome of the gathering. After all, when Hattie's parents come to take her home, they bring with them white soldiers and the Indian police, who again break up the gathering. This time, however, it's the last day of the dance and the Messiah is about to appear. Her presence is thus the primary reason why the Messiah's visit fails and Indigo and Sister Salt are unable to reunite with their mother, whom they believe will return with him. Hattie's complicity in the colonial project, no matter how well-intentioned she may be, makes it impossible for her to remain in Arizona with Indigo, or in the United States for that matter, and she returns to England to live with Aunt Bronwyn at the novel's end (though not without putting up a good fight and starting a fire that eventually burns half the colonial town of Needles to the ground). Therefore, even though she is a woman, and even though the novel applauds her interest in recovering suppressed women's history, Hattie is still responsible for the role she plays in the colonial project. Ultimately, the novel's main concern is with Native cultural survival, so when her presence conflicts with the livelihood of Indigo and Sister Salt, Hattie disappears from the narrative.

The gnostic texts she introduces, however, never entirely vanish. Instead, they are incorporated into an emerging Native perspective that retains traces of the other sources and preserves its interest in the feminine by focusing on Native women's stories in particular.[38] Unlike conventional histories that narrate the "disappearance" of Native Americans, *Gardens* emphasizes both the survival of Native communities and the disappearance of Europeans at the same time as it represents a community that survives

through its ability to combine and put into practice elements from diverse traditions. In this way, the sister's garden community maintains strong parallels with the Convent community in *Paradise*. The Ghost Dance that returns at the end of *Gardens* again emphasizes historical and scriptural revision as a mode of resistance against a dominating, colonial perspective, and argues for a Native cultural practice that encourages syncretism as a legitimate form of Native survival. Although there has been some scholarly disagreement concerning the nature of the historical Ghost Dance, *Gardens* treats the movement as a syncretic one, as Shari Huhndorf has argued in *Going Native*:

> Historically, the Ghost Dance movement drew upon Christianity (the figure of the Messiah is one example of Christianity's influence) as well as upon Native traditions and the visions of Native prophets. [*Gardens*] thus inaugurates the story with the notion that this syncretism is essential to Native survival.[39] (196)

Focusing on the syncretic quality of the historical Ghost Dance illuminates the work *Gardens* does to utilize a variety of belief systems in the interest of Native cultural survival. Emphasizing moral reformation and the renewal of the world through a return of the Messiah and his family, the dancers in *Gardens*, as in the historical Ghost Dance movement, followed the Paiute prophet Wovoka's teachings that they "must dance, everywhere, and keep on dancing. If they danced the dance, then they would be able to visit their dear ones and beloved ancestors. [. . .] They must not quarrel and must treat one another kindly" (*Gardens* 25). If they followed all of Wovoka's teachings, the results would be apocalyptic: "great storms would purify the Earth of her destroyers"; the

winds would "dry up all the white people and all the Indians who followed the white man's ways" (25). By using the historical Ghost Dance to frame the narrative, and by situating the novel after 1890 and the events of Wounded Knee, *Gardens* prophesies the ultimate survival of Native America, the disappearance of all things European, and the return and renewal of Native lands. For Silko, Native endurance is crucial to the fulfillment of the prophecy—symbolized by the need to keep on dancing—as is a Native cultural practice that resists static and essentialist programs for Native survival.

The gnostic and pre-Christian texts that appear in *Gardens* show how the revisionist politics of feminism and anti-colonialism can be complementary and yet sometimes at odds with each other. While doing important work to destabilize the authority of the master narrative of Christianity and to recover suppressed women's histories, they are significant only inasmuch as they aid in Native cultural survival; the same is true for the other systems of belief the novel proposes as an alternative to orthodox theology. When Indigo returns to the dunes with Sister Salt, she brings along traces of each of the various systems of belief she has encountered in her travels. The circle of stones used to build the spirit house of the Lord during the Ghost Dance recalls the stone circles near Bath, England (456). The gladiolus corms planted in the dunes come from Laura's Italian gardens, and their black blooms evoke the novel's work to subvert Judeo-Christian imagery of the color black and the snake through its inclusion of pre-Christian ancient goddess and fertility myths. On a more practical level, many of the seeds Indigo gathered during her travels are planted and used as food to sustain the sisters.

Gardens' most striking example of cultural syncretism, however, is the novel's final image and its relationship to the gnostic doctrine of the female spiritual principle: when the girls return to the gardens in the dunes, they find the old Grandfather Snake has been slaughtered by strangers. In the novel, the Snake (and its death) exemplifies the suppression of Native cultural practices, but the novel's ending posits hope for the future: Sister Salt believes that her child, the "little grandfather," is the "old grandfather's soul returned" (468). Filling the role of old Grandfather Snake, Sister Salt's racially mixed baby is further evidence of the syncretic nature of Silko's project and an example of alignment and solidarity with other oppressed groups. When they discover the old Grandfather's body, the girls carefully gather up his many-hundred rib bones and "give him a proper burial next to Grandma Fleet" (478). This burial side by side, like husband and wife, emphasizes the union of the two at the same time as it helps to solve the mystery of what happened to the girls' mother. The novel concludes by saying that the following spring, "Old Snake's beautiful daughter moved back home" (479). The return of the girl's mother in the form of a snake again supports the recovery of snake imagery elsewhere in the novel, but more significant is the fact that the snake itself is both female and living. This final gesture combines elements of Native tradition with gnostic (and other) traditions that valorize the feminine at the same time as it provides a symbol of hope for suppressed histories now recovered and, ultimately, Native survival. In *Gardens*, the divine speaker of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" implores her listeners: "Don't be ignorant of me!" (231). By rewriting the history of U.S. colonialism from a Native perspective, Silko presents a way of life that is both a radical reassessment

of U.S. colonial history, a reevaluation of the legitimacy of church authority, and a viable mode of Native cultural survival.

NOTES

[1] In an interview with Carolyn Denard while she was writing *Paradise*, Morrison claimed that, "in doing novels about African-Americans, I was trying to move away from the unstated but overwhelming and dominant context that was white history and to move into another one" (qtd. in Widdowson 316). Karen L. King refers to the master narrative as the "master story" in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* (156).

[2] Remember that both Morrison and Silko are familiar with Pagels' work.

[3] The term is originally Michael M. J. Fisher's. See "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory" (1986).

[4] In the "Apocryphon of John," for example, there is a "clear rejection of [. . .] injustice, sexual exploitation, war, poverty and wealth, and slavery" (King 16).

[5] Peter Widdowson's "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" offers the most comprehensive survey of the novel's fictional and factual "histories." See also Richard L. Schur's "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory."

[6] More, to "morganize," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "to assassinate secretly, in order to prevent or punish disclosures, as the Freemasons were said to have done in the case of William Morgan in 1826." Deacon and Steward Morgan's last name may allude to the murders of the Convent women, which they help to instigate. "Morgan" may also be a reference to Way-out Morgan, the black revolutionary committed to violence (especially against women) in Gwendolyn Brooks' "In the Mecca."

[7] Of course, as Widdowson has also pointed out, "that the identity of the white girl in *Paradise* remains a mystery merely emphasizes that here it is gender rather than race which is the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilizing change" (329). As Pat Best reasons in the novel, "everything that worries [Ruby's purist leaders] must come from women" (217).

[8] Karen J. Ford's *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* argues that

> The aggressively heterosexual masculine [African American] persona emerged in response to a long history of white racist assaults on black manhood, evidenced by the physical, economic, and political castration of African-American men. Understandably, the militarism of the Black Power movement encouraged a reified view of masculinity since conventional "manhood" was a ready and vital source of power to receive. Wearing uniforms, carrying rifles, and imposing a rigid hierarchy on supporters were just some of the more visible ways that the Black Panther party and other militant organizations asserted a notion of masculinity that was potent and threatening to white people but also exclusive of black women. (190)

See also Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman.*

[9] In a similar vein, Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos argues that "the all-black town of Ruby constructs an image of itself as an earthly paradise as a consequence of its engagement with the foundational Puritan myths" and locates the novel within a long-standing jeremiad tradition used by African Americans "to express poignant social

criticism [. . .] as a chosen people within another chosen nation which, as such, had the covenantal obligation to be just to them" (3, 8-9). See "Hybridizing the 'City upon a Hill' in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2003).

[10] "The Disallowing" refers to the rejection of the original families of Ruby by citizens of the all-black town of Fairly, Oklahoma in 1890. Since these citizens were "men like them in all ways but one," the travelers knew their exclusion from Fairly was based solely on the fact that their skin was too dark (189). The name of the town is also a key indicator that its citizens have internalized racist ideals.

[11] Here, Morrison's use of Christian imagery is ironic since the house that acquires that nickname was a school for Native American girls run by a group of nuns, and before that, a den of "pagan" revelry. Moreover, the five women who inhabit it have no affiliation with the Catholic Church and, in fact, are considered heretical by the men of Ruby. The pre-Christian, "pagan" symbols in the Convent destroyed by the Catholic nuns who later inhabited it can be read as a parallel to the suppression of gnostic belief by the Church Fathers in the Greco-Roman world.

[12] One of the most striking contrasts between Ruby and the Convent is through the image of the Oven, a place for gathering and a symbol in the novel of a well-functioning community. Largely unused in Ruby, at the Convent the women gather regularly in the kitchen, where the oven is in full service.

[13] Adriane Ivey sees the five Convent women as "harlots in the Promised Land" in her dissertation chapter by that name, and she claims that Morrison "does not suggest a rejection of Christian mythology, but instead urges the rewriting and reinterpretation of

limiting and destructive myths," especially those which reduce women to binaries of either virgin or whore (152). She reads the women's disappearance in agreement with Lone's prognosis in *Paradise* that "God had given Ruby a second chance," but offers no explanation for their reappearance in the coda (297).

[14] Before their salvation, Fraile-Marcos contends, the Convent women live in "a Purgatory, the space that for Catholics allows a soul tainted by sin to purify itself before joining God in Heaven" (23).

[15] Several critics have emphasized Morrison's rejection of Manichaean binaries in *Paradise* and "either/or" formulations that lead to colonization, racism, and the establishment of communities like Ruby and the Puritan colonies, based primarily on isolation and exclusion. It is important to note, however, that Mani himself was also a gnostic, and while Morrison is certainly responding to his more limiting concept of dualism, she is noting a general difference between the two major branches of gnostic thought, Iranian and Syrian-Egyptian, rather than condemning the concept of dualism entirely. Refer to discussion of dualism in Chapter III.

[16] Although it isn't clear whether or not they are twins, Soane and Dovey are the sisters married to Deacon and Steward, but the first initials of each couple, "S" and "D," are the same, creating another "twin" of sorts. The names "Merle" and "Pearl" are also significant, as "Pearl" is an allusion to the gnostic text, "The Hymn of the Pearl." "Merle" is important for two reasons: 1) it refers to a mottled or speckled color, usually comprised of black spots on a white background (i.e. a combination of "opposites"), and 2) it's the name of a common European thrush. Mavis, Merle's mother, is also named

after a song thrush, and the combination of mother/child parallels here may allude to the divine speaker in "Thunder, Perfect Mind" who proclaims: "I am the mother and the daughter." (Pallas illustrates another mother/child conflation in the novel; everyone calls her "Divine," which is actually her mother's name.)

[17] The name of the first community established after "The Disallowing," "Haven" is a word synonymous with "Utopia" or "Paradise," but it represents exactly the kinds of formulations of "paradise" based on exclusion which Morrison resists and which are also repeated in Ruby (Marcus 1).

[18] The text actually says that Consolata emerges "*like* a Revised Reverend Mother," suggesting that instead of becoming a revised version of Mary Magna, she becomes something *similar* to her in function and purpose, although still only peripherally (emphasis mine). This distinction indicates once again that the novel is no longer operating within a normative Christian epistemology.

[19] Keep in mind that the novel is still utilizing the Syrian-Egyptian model of dualism, not the Manichaean, and that the epigraph itself encourages a "unity of opposites" as the necessary prerequisite for personal salvation.

[20] When Consolata asks the stranger if he's from town, he answers: "Uh uh. I'm far country" (252). Like Consolata, whom Mary Magna "rescued" from the streets of Brazil as a young girl, this man is also an "alien." A primary symbol of gnostic thought, '"alien" is a constant attribute of the 'Life' that by its nature is alien to this world" (Jonas 49). For the gnostic, the metaphor of an "alien Life" is a constant reminder of

> his own alienness, [and] the recognition of his place of exile [. . .] is the first step back; the awakened homesickness is the beginning of the return. All this belongs to the "suffering" side of alienness. Yet with relation to its origin it is at the same time a mark of excellence, a source of power and a secret life unknown to the environment and in the last resort impregnable to it. (Jonas 50)

See also Karen L. King's "Who Are The Gnostics?" (1991).

[21] As Consolata prepares the meal, the repetition of images related to the womb (an "Oven") and childbearing ("eggs," "fluid," "swollen," etc.) indicate that this transformation is a kind of "rebirth" that will lead to the divinity she now embodies (260).

[22] The novel also revisits the biblical "Last Supper." The fact that the five women share a meal together, however, is one of the only similarities to the biblical account of the meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his death and resurrection. In Paradise, the supper the Convent women share is actually their first meal together as a group, and the women are anything but Consolata's "disciples." Instead, they think of her as a "granny goose," a "play mother," and an "ideal landlord," and they initially resist her transformation into a leader and teacher (262). Most importantly, and quite unlike the biblical "Last Supper," this meal does not lead to their death first and then, consequently, to eternal life, but the other way around. In the novel, the women are killed only after they become "divine."

[23] Gnostic sources often "acknowledge the need for guidance, but only as a provisional measure. The purpose of accepting authority is to learn to outgrown it" (Pagels 131).

[24] The "'naked' true self," for example, occurs in gnostic language to describe a shedding of the "garment" of the world just before the soul's ascension (Jonas 166). Likewise, a "heavenly garment" also refers to an image of the self that leads to *gnosis* when recognized. In the novel, the outlines drawn on the cellar floor serve this function, and through them the women begin to "know" themselves.

[25] The baby Pallas (a.k.a. "Divine") gave birth to sometime between January and July has also disappeared. According to Soane, Consolata's last words were "something like 'He's divine he's sleeping divine,'" which allude to the fact that Consolata left the baby sleeping in the cellar when she came up to investigate the disturbance (291, 289). Since there is no mention of the men finding or killing him—they find "the devil's [. . .] playpen" but don't mention a child near it—he seems to have disappeared even before the men come to investigate the cellar (17). In some gnostic texts, and especially in "The Poimandres of Hermes Trismegistus," the soul actually has the power to become "impregnable and possibly even invisible" to the cosmic powers that would deter its ascent (Jonas 167). Something like this may be happening with Pallas' child.

[26] Although the Black nationalist movement reified patriarchy, it did help to call attention to racist inequality in the United States. My aim is not to vilify the movement but to call attention, as I believe Morrison does, to the different levels of oppression operating in American history at large.

[27] In an interview, Silko explained that she intentionally choose these sisters as a way to rewrite the history of tribes along the Colorado River that were completely destroyed by ranchers: "just the good upstanding Arizona territory, the good old boys, slaughtered all these tribes that are just gone forever. So I decided that my characters would be from one of these remnant, destroyed, extinct groups. They'd be some of the last of them" (Arnold 3). Rather than disappearing by the novel's end, however, *Gardens* makes it clear that the sisters will survive. See Ellen Arnold's "Listening to the Spirits: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko" (1998).

[28] This is the first of the "gardens" visited in the text, and Dr. Rhinehart's name is itself significant, since a German scholar named Dr. Carl Reinhardt originally purchased a papyrus book on the antiquities market in Cairo in 1896. Unbeknownst to him, the codex contained several fifth-century gnostic texts and is now generally referred to as the Berlin Codex, after the city that houses it. Among other gnostic texts, the Berlin Codex included *The Gospel of Mary*, which "presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and [. . .] it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority" (King 3-4). More significantly, it presents Mary of Magdalene as not only an apostle, but the single most spiritually mature and beloved of all the apostles. See Karen L. King's *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (2003).

[29] Hattie's physician would not have been alone in his diagnosis, since "female hysteria" was still considered a medical condition in the late-nineteenth century and was

thought to be especially prevalent among middle-class white women. A popular diagnosis for a variety of ailments—including weakness, decreased libido, insomnia, depression, irritability, and nervousness—"treatments were drastic: bleeding, extended bed rest and [. . .] surgery to remove the ovaries" (Briggs 247). "Unfeminine behavior" was often blamed for its onset, as was women's education; "Harvard President Edward Clark [famously argued] against women's education in 1873 by claiming that the blood demanded by the brain would prevent the reproductive system from developing properly" (247-48). (The novel highlights the fact that Hattie's experience occurs while she is attending Harvard—rather than another university.) Not surprisingly, feminist historical scholarship of the 1970s has argued that "the hysterical woman [. . .] is both sign and symptom of conflict over the cultural meaning of gender" and that hysteria "was also the way nineteenth-century U.S. and European cultures made sense of women's changing roles" (246-47).

More recently, Laura Briggs has insisted that issues of race must also be considered in scholarship on hysteria:

> The discourse of [female hysteria] was made to make sense in part through a racial theory of the existence of two kinds of radically discontinuous bodies and constitutions: one white, nervous, and plagued by weakness; the other racialized, colonized, and hardy. [. . .] It also reconceptualized [. . .] white women's struggle for social and political autonomy from white men as a racial threat. That is, by insisting that white women were becoming sterile and weak while non-white women remained fertile and

> strong, it encoded white women's transgressive behavior as a danger to the future of "the race." (249-50)

See Briggs' "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology" (2000).

[30] When Silko claims *Gardens* "is a gnostic novel" in her 1998 interview with Ellen Arnold, she is referring to this primary gnostic claim: that faith in and knowledge of God can be unmediated by the orthodoxy. The novel, she argues, thus engages in a "fight against the corporate church that tries to tell people what is holy" (25). Hattie puts it another way: "[gnostic] teachings rendered the orthodox church useless; no need for punishment if there are no laws, only God's love. No need for church hierarchs, or tithes either" (101).

[31] This term is taken from the Bentley Layton translation of the Nag Hammadi texts, *The Gnostic Scriptures*. The text Silko quotes from is "The Reality of the Rulers" (also known as "The Hypostasis of the Archons") (71). In addition to the Layton translation, Silko also uses the Robinson edition, *The Nag Hammadi Library*; her version of "Thunder, Perfect Mind" comes from the latter.

[32] Variations on the Sophia myth abound in gnostic scripture. In Valentinian myth, for example, Sophia is the last (and lowest) of fourteen male-female pairs of Aeons, and it is through her misguided passion to know the Father that she brings about "the beginning of all evil" (King, "What is Gnosticism?" 3). For two articles on gnostic representations of Sophia, see G. C. Stead's "The Valentinian Myth of Sophia" (1969), and George W. MacRae's "The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth" (1970).

[33] Silko probably makes this connection between Sophia and the female spiritual principle because Layton's cast of characters in "The Reality of the Rulers" indicates that the female spiritual principle is "the SPIRIT OF LIFE" (66). In certain gnostic traditions, Zoe means "Life"; Sophia is her mother.

[34] This helps to explain Silko's use of snake imagery throughout *Gardens* (and *Almanac of the Dead*). It also evokes an intersecting between gnostic theology, Native American epistemologies, and the pagan, goddess mythology of Laura's Italian gardens—since they are all subverting Christian ideology of the snake as an evil messenger. Interestingly, Gloria Anzaldua does similar work in her recuperation of Aztec cosmology.

[35] The one exception to this rule is the orange grove and garden in California where Indigo first meets Edward and Hattie; it serves as a smaller version of Susan's East Coast garden because it's composed largely of plants obtained during Edward's travels in South America. The orange groves at their California home also serve as an implicit connection to colonialism and to Edward's interest in the lemon grafts in Corsica.

[36] At the end of the novel, Hattie sees the "luminous glow" again on the second to last morning of the Ghost Dance, this time outside the sister's lean-to. Sister Salt explains the light is "the morning star, who came to comfort" Hattie, and she suggests that both the morning star and the glow Hattie saw in England represent the light of the Messiah and his family traveling the earth—"they might be anywhere" (471). The parallel between Jesus and the morning star has biblical origins: most notably, Jesus refers to himself as the "Morning Star" in Revelation 22: 16. Sister Salt's use of the

allusion, however, picks up on Native incorporation of Christian symbols as a form of resistance to U.S. colonialism in the historical Ghost Dance. See Jeffrey Ostler's *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* for a detailed account of the Ghost Dance and its culmination in the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890.

[37] A version of the Great Goddess' eyes also appears in England when Aunt Bronwyn and the others visit stone circles near the cloister (probably Stonehenge or the Avebury stone circles, both relatively close to Bath). Aunt Bronwyn refers to "the circles and spirals incised in the limestone [as] the eyes of the original Mother, the Mother of God, the Mother of Jesus" (267).

[38] This is a departure from the dominant preoccupation with Indian men in and an important contribution to Native American literature.

[39] In *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism*, Jeffrey Ostler argues that the Ghost Dance wasn't "an instance of syncretism. Talk of a messiah and the renewal of the world did not so much add something from Christianity to create a new blend as it used Christianity's central story to reject the entire world of which Christianity was a part" (255). While it is true that the Ghost Dance incorporated elements of Christian theology to resist the colonialism such theology justified, *Gardens* maintains that the Ghost Dance's syncretic quality—the ability to incorporate elements of Christianity into an already-existing Native cultural framework, rather than the other way around—made it more effective (rather than less) as an anti-colonial movement.

CHAPTER IV

A STAR MORE DISTANT THAN EDEN: BEYOND LUCILLE AND LUCIFER

The poems of Lucille Clifton are unapologetic in their refusal to ignore the long history of oppression in the United States. "[I] am accused of tending to the past," the speaker declares in a poem by the same title, "as if i made it, / as if i sculpted it, / out of my own hands. i did not" (*Quilting* 7).[1] Instead, she counters, "the past was waiting for me / when i came / a monstrous unnamed baby, / and i with my mother's itch / took it to breast / and named it / History" (7). A "monstrous unnamed baby"—akin, perhaps, to Morrison's "Beloved" who was the focus of the first chapter—the past is a force that must be reckoned with before a viable future is a possibility. Like Morrison and Silko, Clifton is acutely aware of the way racist, sexist, and colonialist language and imagery inherited from sacred texts have been used to justify historical oppression and, consequently, must be revised to make possible social change. Thus a central focus of Clifton's revisionary work is the Bible and the narratives it contains; over 150 of her nearly 500 poems feature biblical characters or incorporate biblical imagery.[2] Clifton's ten-poem "tree of life" sequence in *Quilting* (1991) and the eight-poem "brothers" sequence in *The Book of Light* (1993), in particular, take up the Garden of Eden trope as a way to reclaim the biblical figure of Lucifer and to challenge the social hierarchies it condones. Doing so necessitates a radical revision of the divine; grants spiritual authority to women, especially women of color; calls attention to the silenced histories of the

United States; and will inform Clifton's visionary and prophetic poems that later appear in "the message" in *Mercy* (2004).

Clifton is not, of course, alone in her use of the Eden trope. A long history of its incorporation in American literature, especially, indicates that her revisions of the Eden myth are engaging in an ongoing dialogue regarding social relationships in the United States. As J. Lee Greene sets forth in *Blacks in Eden*, "the image of America as the new Eden preceded the discovery, exploration, and settlement of the New World" and was frequently employed to explain and often justify unequal power structures in the United States; as such, the Eden trope from the very beginning "occupied [an anchored position] in America's social, political, historical, and discursive landscapes" (12, 274). American writers from every cultural background have utilized the trope, though often for different purposes. The early Anglo-American colonists, for example, finding it difficult to reconcile the ideal of the New World with the paradox of slavery,

> attempted to explain [and justify] this contradiction within the context of biblical doctrine. To do so, of course, they were required to distort the Scriptures [. . .]. The assertion that blacks were not descendants of the original parents and that their presence in the biblical Garden of Eden stemmed from the intruding evil (the snake) had popular support during and well past the colonial period. Southern whites concluded that because blacks were excluded from the original Eden, they did not merit a place in the South's Eden that compared to that of whites (supposedly the true descendants of Adam and Eve). (14-15)

That African Americans were figured as the snake or "beast" in the Garden of Eden of

the New World would become a commonplace in much of early Anglo-American discourse, especially when imagined as a threat to the "purity" of a white Eve, who represented white America broadly. It is clear from this formulation how Anglo-America's initial fear of miscegenation was also easily, and conveniently, recast in terms of the "original sin" and viewed both as an abomination to God and a threat to the nation.

Since the earliest examples of African American literature, the Eden trope has been incorporated primarily as a way to counter and dispel the myth of the New Eden in the United States. So central was this project to the concerns of early African American writers (as well as those who came after) that Greene insists the Eden trope "can be considered one of [the tradition's] salient characteristics" (6). Although authors have utilized the trope in a variety of ways, there are nonetheless notable features within the African American literary tradition and which depart in striking ways from Anglo-American usage of the same narrative. One central strategy simply inverts the racial identity of the story's central characters to expose the "true evil" of slavery and US domestic policy; in these accounts, Lucifer is often the white oppressor. Others recast Adam as black and "expelled" from (white) American civil society. And, as Greene relates, "as early as the 1880s African American writers explicitly invoked the relationship between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as an analogy for a sexual union between a black man and a white woman to suggest what such a union symbolized in the American social structure" (168). In this formulation, "the conflict decidedly is between two males for power and control. Though Eve is most directly responsible for violating the taboo restriction that precipitates Adam's Fall, she is a secondary party in this male competition" (170). Until the mid-twentieth century, and often much later, the

concerns of the nation were most often cast as issues between different races of men vying for power. These explicitly patriarchal features, typical of the early African American revisionist tradition, would come under special scrutiny by later authors, especially black women writers concerned with revising the sexist as well as racist dimensions of the tradition.

Congruent with the use of the Eden trope in African American literature, Clifton's own project is in dialogue with the history of African Americans in the United States, and biblical revisions and historical critique often go hand in hand for the poet. The Bible remains a significant text for Clifton precisely because it has been so often distorted to justify oppression; indeed, no critical study of her poetry can be complete without an understanding of the work Clifton does to revise and reclaim biblical scripture and to transpose biblical characters into a contemporary, specifically African American, setting.[3] Hilary Holladay has argued that Clifton "repeatedly juxtaposes poems about African American life with portraits of biblical characters in order to expand our understanding of both" (128). Several of Clifton's poems expose the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity through an examination of that tradition's central myths: one poem in particular points out the irony of slave ships with names like "Angel," "Jesus," and "Grace of God" (*The Terrible Stories* 35). Another presents the image of a white woman, at the lynching of a black man, who is seen "smiling toward the camera, / her fingers loose around / a christian cross drooping / against her breast" (*Blessing the Boats* 19). Yet another rewrites the story of Jonah in the context of slavery and the Middle Passage; Jonah, the poem's speaker, remembers from the belly of the slave ship "the smell of mango / and yams" from Africa. "If i had a drum," he tells the reader, "i would send [this

message] to the brothers / —Be care full of the ocean—" (*Good Woman* 97).[4] Biblically derivative and yet also evocative of a history of slavery in the Americas, "jonah" is representative of the many poems which incorporate biblical characters and imagery into a contemporary or historically informed setting.

As critics have pointed out, revising biblical characters serves other purposes as well; first, and as Akasha (Gloria) Hull has argued, it helps to "transform [. . .] biblical figures into plain black folks [in] a move that simultaneously levels and elevates. It brings the Bible's inhabitants down to earth, while it imparts to black people some of the status of universal heroes and heroines" (281). Still further, it "(1) Africanizes, (2) feminizes, (3) sexualizes, and (4) mysticizes the original text. Thus [Clifton] rewrites in her own image as a black and cosmically spiritual woman" (273). To Holladay, Clifton has confided:

> the Bible people—it's too easy to think of them all as mythological, saintly folk. It is much more interesting to me that these were humans—caught up in a divine plan, but human. That seems to me the miracle. (188)

The "miracle," as Clifton puts it, of human beings engaged in the divinely ordained plan recorded in the Old and New Testaments, remains the central concern of these poems, which encompass a wide variety of biblical characters—King David, his wife Michal, Bathsheba, Jonah, Moses, Mary and her mother Anna, among others.

Clifton's most significant revision, however, works to reclaim the character of Lucifer, the biblical fallen angel and Prince of Darkness. It is especially through the character of Lucifer that Clifton's revisionary work takes form—from the "tree of life"

sequence in *Quilting* to the "brothers" sequence in *The Book of Light*. The history of Lucifer in Christian doctrine is here helpful in understanding the work Clifton engages to reclaim him. Hull offers an account in "In Her Own Images: Lucille Clifton and the Bible":

> The actual biblical basis for the mass of material about [Lucifer] is slight. The most extended reference occurs when the Old Testament prophet Isaiah decries the ruler of Babylon as "Lucifer": "How are thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou has said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: . . . I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit" (Isaiah 14: 12-15). In the New Testament book of Luke, Jesus says to his faithful, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10: 18). These references—together with two others in Revelation and Ezekiel—lay the foundation for the "doctrine that the Devil was a great archangel who rebelled against God from pride" (Cavendish 1983:1662). (289)

So little actual biblical scripture regarding Lucifer, and yet so much use of his figure in the history of Christianity in general and in the historical use of the Garden of Eden trope especially, makes him a character worthy of Clifton's attention. More, the etymological root of Lucifer is "light," yet Lucifer has been figured historically as a "dark" or evil character: this point in particular would be of interest to a poet concerned with exposing and undermining historical (and biblical) sources of racism.

In *Wild Blessings*, Holladay has acknowledged that Clifton's revisions of Lucifer differ from her earlier biblical revisions, especially in the "brothers" sequence: "the sequence has elements in common with her other biblical poems, but it is more detailed in its theological intent and more probing in its questionings. Though it is not her last poem making use of the Eden myth, 'brothers' feels like a culmination, a summing up of many years of spiritual searching" (131). Clifton's treatment of Lucifer, in particular, helps to clarify her own position as a poet engaged in communication with a divine, or spiritual, source. After all, "Lucille," like "Lucifer," has at its etymological root the word "light"; here, as in numerous poems throughout Clifton's oeuvre, Clifton likens herself to Lucifer (and him to herself). By repeatedly comparing herself of the figure of Lucifer, Clifton aligns herself with God's primary critic, the Devil, and interrogates God to expose His culpability in the events of history. The first in a series of revisions to reclaim the Lucifer figure, the idea of the devil as God's "critic," rather than His ultimate archenemy, is itself an unconventional role for Lucifer and one Clifton will develop throughout the two sequences. While Holladay notes Clifton's work in "brothers" to draw parallels between the human and the divine and to revise the figure of Lucifer to "[speak] for human suffering rather than evil," this chapter takes up the ramifications of this revision, especially for the character of God and the proliferation of the Word in the Lucifer poems and throughout Clifton's work (138). After all, to revise the figure of Lucifer as akin to the divine is to revise the divine to contain elements of Lucifer, which shatters the concept of God as flawless. To do so not only breaks down inherited binaries of God as all "good" and Lucifer as unquestionably "evil," but it also means that the divine can no longer be counted on for salvation from oppressive

historical circumstances. This has important implications for the poet who, lacking a saving Word from the divine, must create her own words; this new sacred text proposes a new moral code and will be the subject of Clifton's "the message" in *Mercy*.

Although her project is mainly concerned with the history of African Americans in the United States, Clifton nonetheless departs in striking ways from the characteristic use of the Eden trope as documented in Greene's *Blacks in Eden*.[5] Whatever the specific shape the trope took, in Greene's account, female sexuality was still seen as the primary cause of the conflict in the Garden of Eden and the root of the original sin. Clifton's refusal to denigrate Eve makes her revision of the Eden myth an anomaly within the tradition, and her work reflects new currents in African American literature since the mid-twentieth century, specifically literature written by black women authors. In Clifton's revisions, for example, Adam is decentered to the position of a minor character, a move that shifts from the traditionally masculinist narrative that figured the conflict as one between two males (one human, one omnipotent) warring for power. Rather than simply inverting the power structure, however, Clifton also positions Eve as a minor character, though she is cast as quicker and more intelligent than the slow-moving Adam. She is no longer responsible for the fall of mankind or, therefore, is no longer the source of evil. Significantly, she is still sexualized, but not as a taboo; nowhere in Clifton's revisions is Eve's sexuality cast in a negative light. Clifton thus erases the Puritanical fear and loathing of sexuality ingrained in traditional interpretations of the Eden myth.[6] Finally, the characters aren't racialized in specific ways; unlike many of Clifton's other biblical poems, the characters don't speak in dialect. This is significant because it implicates all people in the project of the American civil utopia (or New Eden) and, as

becomes evident in the poems, in the (transnational) problem of oppression in general. The conflict, and most of the communication, is largely between Lucifer and God, or observed by the other angels in Heaven. A snake in form, but not a beast in the traditional sense, Lucifer is cast in the text as neither white nor black, as he is also neither explicitly male nor female. In Clifton's version, it is Lucifer, rather than Adam or Eve, who is centered and reclaimed from the tradition that figured him as a (black) beast and a threat to the purity of white America.[7] In a surprising move, Clifton casts Lucifer in a humanizing light as an "illuminator" of "what has not been clear."[8] Even more surprising, she uses Lucifer as a means of redefining the nature of the divine itself; after all, Clifton's decision to recoup the Lucifer figure in "tree of life" and "brothers" is a significant departure from the traditional use of the Eden trope in the African American tradition, as documented by Greene, since rather than merely inverting the characters in the mythical battle between "good" and "evil," she redefines the nature of those terms entirely.

At the beginning of the "tree of life" sequence, which illuminates Lucifer's own perspective on the Garden of Eden narrative, Clifton makes one minor adjustment to the biblical epigraph which begins the piece: instead of an exclamation point, Clifton replaces the punctuation instead with a question mark. The change is major. The scripture—and by extension the entire poem—becomes a text that questions, rather than affirms, Lucifer's fallen state: "*How art thou fallen from Heaven, / O Lucifer, son of the morning?... / –Isaiah 14:12*" (*Q* 71). Presumably asked of Lucifer by the other angels in heaven, who narrate off and on throughout the sequence, the epigraph presents a confused host of angels mystified by the excommunication of Satan from heaven.

Clifton's choice of biblical scripture here is significant as well since in this passage, and in the first poem of the sequence, Lucifer, as in the King James Version of the Bible, is referred to as the "son of the morning"—in other translations as the "morning star" (NIV, NASB, NIRV)—a term used in the New Testament to describe Christ—the beloved son of God (2 Peter 1: 19, Revelation 22: 16). Although the comparison of Lucifer to the "morning star" is sometimes referred to as a translator's error, Clifton capitalizes on the ambiguity of the passage to question conventional biblical hermeneutics regarding Lucifer's involvement in the fall of mankind and his position in the line-up of God's affections. By questioning Lucifer's fallen state, and by presenting him as beloved of the other angels and of God, the poem opens up the possibility that his excommunication from heaven was one big mistake. If Lucifer was not entirely evil—if in fact he was "the son of the morning"—then surely his fall from grace was an instance of divine injustice. Throughout the sequence, Lucifer also appears confused about his rejection from heaven—at the same time as he offers insights about both its state and the state of earth and is presented as a sympathetic character altogether.

Considered together, these features function to center Lucifer in the Garden of Eden narrative and to claim him in the tradition of African American mythmaking. Holladay has pointed out that

> [Clifton's] portrayal of Lucifer has important antecedents in African and African American religion and folklore. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African Americans' concept of the devil was not strictly grounded in Christian notions of sin and evil, perhaps because the idea of original sin was unknown to their African ancestors. [. . .]

> According to Melville Herskovits's account in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, the devil's good qualities can be traced to 'that character in Dahomean-Yoruba mythology, the divine trickster and the god of accident known as "Legba"' [. . .]. Since they had a vested interest in the abolition of slavery, it follows that the slaves would project their fondest desires on a trickster god capable of outsmarting his adversaries. [. . .] The widespread belief that the devil was black no doubt heightened African American interest in this compelling figure. (129)

The poet's own family traces its lineage to Dahomey women, which would, perhaps, make Legba an even more appealing character for Clifton's revisionary project. Either way, though, the Legba figure reveals Clifton's work to incorporate a variety of other spiritual traditions into her poetry. Although her primary text in "tree of life" and "brothers" is the Bible, throughout her poetry Clifton is interested in drawing parallels between seemingly disparate ideas and traditions, and her poems in general explore diverse mystical traditions. In addition to her emphasis on the Bible, there are poems treating the Hindu goddess Kali and ones with links to gnostic theology. Likewise, there are poems featuring the "tree of life" of esoteric Kabbalah and ones composed to represent Clifton's own experience with channeling. In fact, she is careful not to privilege any one spiritual tradition over another. The resulting polytheism destabilizes the authority of the master scripture, the biblical narrative, and to posit alternative ways of understanding the relationship between good and evil. Rather than merely inverting the narrative of the Eden myth to claim authority for African Americans, and for women of color in particular, Clifton refuses to engage the damaging logic imbedded in it; she

insists that "good" and "evil" are not mutually exclusive and are, instead, two parts of the whole.

As the character closest to God in Clifton's prelapsarian Eden, Lucifer serves as God's primary companion, confidante, and critic. This is, in itself, a major revision of the Lucifer figure. As the "brothers" sequence will do in *The Book of Light*, "tree of life" questions the presence of evil (often formulated as "darkness" in the Judeo-Christian tradition) in a world created by a benevolent God (representative of "light"). After all, 1 John 1:5 decrees that "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." The sequence thus begs the timeworn question: why, if God is "good" and loves His creation, did He allow the "fall" that led to human suffering? More, why does He continue to allow suffering and the violence of history? As the "Prince of Darkness," Lucifer is the poem's main subject—although Adam and Eve appear in minor parts throughout. In the last poem of the sequence, Lucifer is again referred to as the "son / [. . .] of the morning"; at the same time, he is also called the "light-bringer" (*Q* 80). In other poems in the sequence, he is described as a "bringer of light" and, similarly, as a "bearer of lightning" (71, 75). These references to light and lightning, and the last one in particular, are presumably based on Jesus' words to his followers—"I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10: 18)—yet contrast with conventional biblical understanding that "God [alone] is light" (1 John 1: 5). Because "God is light" and because the world (including, presumably, the angels) is created in His image, then all created things, including Lucifer, are derived from the "light." In addition, Clifton likens "light-bearing" to artistic creation; all creation, in the image of God, has the potential to create and thereby imitate God. By calling Lucifer the "light-bringer," Clifton reminds us of his source at the same time as

she equates him with Christ through her description of him as the "son of the morning." Doing so recasts Lucifer in the role of a savior and affirms in him the divine. In other words, since Lucifer is equated with Christ, "the morning star," and since Christ is one-third of the Godhead, then Lucifer is also a part of God. According to the poem, this is what it means to have "knowledge of good and evil" (that is, knowledge of God's character), and this is the understanding Lucifer encouraged in Adam and Eve. Here, Clifton offers another version of the story of Creation and the Fall, one that recasts Lucifer in a creative, rather than destructive, role.

In this first poem of the sequence, in fact, Clifton asserts that Lucifer's fall from heaven and the creation of the world actually went hand in hand. Clifton rewrites Lucifer as co-creator of the world: "light breaks / where no light was before / where no eye is prepared / to see / and animals rise up to walk / oh lucifer / what have you done" (*Q* 71).[9] Lucifer's excommunication from heaven is described in terms of a creation since it causes "light [to] break" and "animals [to] rise up to walk." Linking Lucifer's fall from heaven to God's famous command—"Let there be light" (Genesis 1: 3)—the poem implies that Lucifer's fall from grace was both divine will and prerequisite to creation. It links the two "falls"—the first of Lucifer and the second of Adam and Eve—and suggests their similarities; in doing so, it affirms Lucifer's basic humanity rather than upholds his unquestioned devilry. Time and again, Clifton asserts that Lucifer's actions were a creative act, and she capitalizes on the ambiguity first created by reference to Lucifer as the "son of the morning" in the poem's epigraph, and then by his additional role as a "light-bringer" throughout, to complicate notions of God as essentially and unquestionably "good" and the devil as all "bad." Instead, she argues, they all hail from

the same source, or light, whose primary goal is to illuminate what has not been seen.[10] The significance of this revision of God's character in particular will be taken up more fully in the "brothers" sequence.

In fact, in a surprising move, Lucifer is actually rewritten as a savior of humanity—instead of its destroyer—in the final poem of the "tree of life" sequence; in "i who was called son," the Prince of Darkness justifies his infamous actions in the Garden of Eden by describing them as humanitarian:

> i who was called son
> if only of the morning
> saw that some must
> walk or all will crawl
> so slithered into earth
> and seized the serpent in
> the animals i became
> the lord of snake for
> adam and for eve (*Q* 80)

Lucifer's actions are here motivated by what appears to be a genuine concern for God's creation—he does what he does "*for* Adam and *for* Eve"—and are the direct result of his particular insight. The word "saw" in the poem is synonymous with understanding, and Lucifer acts immediately after he "sees." It is thus his understanding that serves as the catalyst for Lucifer's response, and his actions are remarkably similar to God's; Lucifer gave Adam and Eve the understanding he himself had—like God, he created them in his own image. To do so, Lucifer "became" the lord of snake. Clifton's use of the be verb

here echoes God's response to Moses when asked His name: "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14). Like God, then, Lucifer creates himself and is "lord"—albeit only "of snake." The ambiguity created by the enjambed line, however, is anticipated by the medial caesura between "the animals" and "i became" of line sixteen: "i became / the lord of snake." It emphasizes Lucifer's self-creation at the same time that it calls attention to his status as "lord"—two attributes conventionally attributed only to God. By likening the two characters to each other, Clifton positions Lucifer as God's equal in both creative force and divine insight.

Lucifer's divine insight is further explored through his role as "illuminator" in the final poem in the sequence. Rather than relegate all creation to "crawl[ing]"—symbolic of a state devoid of understanding or insight—Lucifer enables Adam and Eve to "walk." Their understanding, the "knowledge of good and evil" they gain from eating the forbidden fruit, that is, is thus recast in positive terms. More, the "knowledge of good and evil" is actually the knowledge of the character of God Himself: containing elements of *both* good *and* evil. In this same poem—"lucifer speaks in his own voice"—Lucifer further explains his actions by claiming, simply, that "illuminate i could," so "illuminate i did" (80). In other words, the capacity for illumination, or creation, compelled the action and thus justifies the deed. The word "illuminate" is linked to the understanding Lucifer granted Adam and Eve, and the ability to cast light—to illuminate matter and bring knowledge to others—appears to be ample explanation, at least in Lucifer's mind, for the events that ensued. Likewise, in her use of the word "illuminate," Clifton links Lucifer's creative action to poetry; here she calls attention to the relationship between herself and the Prince of Darkness, and in particular to their mutual role of poetic "illumination," a

point which Alicia Ostriker has taken note of in "Kin and Kin" (320).[11] In doing so, she rewrites his actions in the Garden of Eden as a creative and redemptive act at the same time that she puts herself in the position to critique God's action (and inaction) through her own creation: poems revising biblical myths.

To assert that Lucifer is part of the divine, and to propose that Lucille is part of Lucifer, is to maintain that women of color are also part of the divine. In doing so, Clifton claims an element of the divine for those, who, like Lucifer, have historically been silenced. To reclaim him is therefore to reclaim women of color from being demonized because of difference. This is Clifton's contribution to the African American tradition's long fascination with the Eden trope: she illuminates the problem of difference inherent in it—that mythic battle between good and evil that has fueled the violence and oppression of history—by undermining its divisive logic. Instead of upholding the idea that "good" and "evil" are opposing, and therefore mutually exclusive, forces, Clifton calls attention to their interrelated nature and in doing so redefines the terms themselves. One way she does so is through the image of the six-fingered hand, an image she has used throughout her poetry but in "tree of life" in particular to draw further parallels between herself and Lucifer and as an image of creative and spiritual potential. In "whispered to lucifer," Lucifer is referred to as "six-finger[ed]" by the other angels in heaven; Clifton was likewise born with six fingers on each hand, two of which were removed when she was an infant (*Q* 73, Holladay 199-200).[12] More surprising still, even God may have had a sixth finger, since "remembering the birth of lucifer" claims the Prince of Darkness "broke / from the littlest finger / of God" (72). Clifton uses this unusual image of six fingers to claim creative and poetic authority, both for herself and

for Lucifer. In an interview with Holladay in 1998, Clifton claimed: "I've said that I know there's Lucifer in Lucille, because I know me [. . .]. And there is the possibility of Lucille in Lucifer. It's too easy to see Lucifer as all bad. Suppose he were merely being human" (188). Despite the fact that Lucifer is traditionally understood as a fallen angel, Clifton takes poetic license throughout her poetry and rewrites him with both human and divine attributes. In *Wild Blessings*, Holladay has argued that "Lucifer's role in the grand upheaval explains his appeal to Clifton, long fascinated by biblical characters' flaws and foibles. Her humanizing of Lucifer is in keeping with her belief that the human and the divine are intertwined, our understanding of one contingent upon an awareness of the other" (127). Throughout the "tree of life" sequence, and elsewhere in her poetry, Clifton emphasizes this interrelated nature of the human and the divine; she blurs the historical divide between good and evil; and she sets herself up as a Lucifer figure herself through her emphasis on six fingers and through a connection to "light," "illumination," and the creative act embodied in their names. She does by first revising conventional scripture that envisions Lucifer as unquestionably and entirely evil; in accomplishing this significant feat, Clifton is then able to write herself into a conversation with the divine through the Lucifer persona.

Clifton's work to revise and reclaim the Lucifer figure continues in *The Book of Light*—in addition to the title's reference to "light," one of the sections of the book is called "lightning bolt." Lucifer is especially at the fore in "brothers," located at the end of the collection, but it is here more than anywhere that Clifton's revisionary impulse turns to the figure of God Himself. "Brothers" begins by briefly explaining the sequence of poems to come as "*a conversation in eight poems between an aged Lucifer and God,*

though only Lucifer is heard. The time is long after" (*The Book of Light* 69).[13] The silence of God in these poems again casts Lucifer in a humanizing light, since, like many people, including Lucille Clifton, we presume, he strains to hear the voice of God, which never comes to him. In the first poem of the sequence, Lucifer affectionately invites God to "come coil with [him]," a move which casts God, at least visually, as a second snake (69).[14] The fact that the poem is called "brothers" and the ease with which Lucifer addresses God indicate a high level of familiarity; Lucifer and God are family. As in the "tree of life" sequence, Lucifer again offers his own explanation of the Garden of Eden narrative. In the third poem, entitled "as for myself," Lucifer wonders about the significance of his own role in the events in the Garden: "Less snake than angel / less angel than man / how come i to this / serpent's understanding?" (71). More "man" than either angel or snake, Lucifer's "serpent's understanding" is merely the ability to see that God is both more and less than what He has been imagined, by His followers and even by Himself. He is *both* good *and* evil, as Clifton's treatment of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in "tree of life" suggests. In the second poem of the sequence, Lucifer tells God that He is "beyond / even [His] own understanding" (70). According to Lucifer in this sequence, God is therefore a bit of a paradox: both knowing and unknowing—a "perfect / imperfection" (70). Having already revised the character of Lucifer in the "tree of life" sequence to draw parallels between herself and Lucifer, Clifton now uses this "conversation" to challenge and revise the myth of the omniscient Patriarch of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Although Greene's *Blacks in Eden* provides a helpful vantage from which to view the historical trajectory of the Eden trope in African American literature, his study only

considers literature written before the 1960s. Major historical changes, coupled with hermeneutical shifts in African American religious thought by the 1970s, meant that authors incorporating the Eden trope after these years were engaging new concerns and ones specific to their cultural moment. One seminal event during the latter years of the twentieth century was the inception of black liberation theology, which, as Jacquelyn Grant explains, "represent[s] a departure from traditional Christian theology. As a collective critique, liberation theologies raise serious questions about the normative use of Scripture, tradition and experience in Christian theology" (831). A theology for the oppressed, black liberation theology was introduced in 1966 by a group of African American ministers who used the Bible as the basis of their call for a more aggressive fight against racism in the United States and who drew upon earlier liberation theologies, particularly those of the Jesuits, who in the 1960s engaged in political activism as a means to fight global poverty. At the heart of black liberation theology are certain assumptions about the nature of God. One of the leading intellectuals and founders of the movement, James Cone, was adamant in his insistence that the Judeo-Christian God is the God of the oppressed and that He is actively working toward their liberation. He argued "either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes his, or he is a god of racism. Black theology refuses to accept a God who is not identified totally with the goals of the black community" (*African American Religious Thought* 850). Later criticism of the theology, however, and especially William R. Jones' "Divine Racism: The Unacknowledged Threshold Issue for Black Theology," contends that God can only be proven a liberator of the oppressed if, in fact, there is actually evidence that He has worked toward their liberation in the past: "in the absence of this

demonstration, the remainder of the system totters for want of a convincing structural validity" (871). Jones concludes: "that the situation of blacks still requires radical correction indicates [Cone's] classification [of God] is premature if not gratuitous" (869). Major criticisms of the theology, including womanist theologies developed by Grant and others, similarly fault the movement for its limited notion of the divine, claiming that it is untenable to envision a God who is against some forms of oppression (racism, for example) but not others (like sexism). Like Jones, Grant has also criticized certain tenets of the movement, especially its adherence to patriarchal structures of oppression:

> [Ironically], some liberation theologians have acquiesced in one or more oppressive aspects of the liberation struggle itself. Where racism is rejected, sexism is embraced. [. . .] In order for liberation theology to be faithful to itself it must hear the critique coming to it from the perspective of the Black woman—perhaps the most oppressed of all the oppressed (831-32).

Clifton's Lucifer is a fitting contribution to this historical debate since through him she reclaims for Grant those voices missing from the theological dialogue. What happens when Lucifer is centered, however, and as Clifton makes apparent in her "brothers" sequence, is a major departure from the tenets of black liberation theology, an awareness of the concerns voiced in womanist theology, and, ultimately, a revision of the nature of the divine Himself.

"Brothers" begins as a poetic theodicy but succeeds, finally, in debunking the myth of the benevolent patriarch altogether. In the sixth poem of the sequence, Clifton quotes Carolyn Forche—"The silence of God is God" (*BOL* 74).[15] In the eighth, the

same line is repeated, omitting the first four words: " . . . . . is God" (76). The significance of this omission bears on the meaning of the poem as a whole, and the poem itself enacts the quotation since only Lucifer is heard speaking in a conversation between the two characters. Indeed, the extended ellipsis suggests that this "visual silence" best defines God. More, the fact of God's silence and indefinable nature allows the divine to be anything we make of Him, as is obvious by the historical manipulation of the Bible to condone slavery and colonialism. That the space is left blank also opens up the possibility for a redefinition of who or what, exactly, "God" is. The conversation Lucifer attempts with God in the sequence aims to understand His role in creation, the fall, and the violent and flawed physical world that followed, and it echoes themes introduced in the "tree of life" sequence regarding "knowledge of good and evil" as knowledge of the character of God. To drive this point home, God is presented in this sequence as aged, unsure, and imperfect. As in "tree of life," Lucifer and God are cast as two parts of one divine force since they did what they did together: they were "like two old brothers / who watched it happen and wondered / what it meant" (69).[16] The outcome of creation does not appear to be what God expected, however. In the second poem, for example, Lucifer tells God that creation "in all its pride, / its unsteady dominion, / is not what You believed / You were, / but it is what You are; / in Your own image as some / lexicographer supposed" (70). Here, rather than uphold the conventional story regarding his involvement and culpability in the fall, Lucifer refers to Adam and Eve's "odd ambition, the desire / to reach beyond the stars" instead as a by-product of God's own character; it was "You, all You / [. . .] the perfect / imperfection" (70). What happened afterwards can only be God's fault: "only You could have called / their ineffable names, /

only in their fever / could they have failed to hear" (72). As they desert the Garden forever, Adam and Eve are "fever[ish]" with shock, and their "fail[ure] to hear" is the result of hearing the divine verdict. As for the two of them, Lucifer claims, their "only sin / was being their father's children" (72). Once again, Lucifer reminds God that the world he created was made in His image, so its defects are also His.

If creation is imperfect, so is God; and if mankind awaits the answers of Judgment Day, so does God, who in this poem doesn't seem to comprehend what's happening any more than Lucifer does. This doesn't make Him blameless, though; after all, many historical atrocities have been committed in His name. In the sixth poem of the sequence, Lucifer interrogates God: "tell me, tell us why / You neither raised Your hand / nor turned away, tell us why / You watched the excommunication of / that world and You said nothing" (74). God may not have been responsible for the crimes of history, but neither did He stop them. Clifton's incorporation of images of assault in this sequence—"babies stacked like cordwood," "limbs walking away from each other," and "tongues bitten through"—are a pointed reminder that she is referring to nonbiblical history (74).[17] By asking God to "tell us why," Lucifer indicates that his audience includes many others besides himself who are curious to hear a justification of God's inaction. "That world" that Lucifer refers to is, most literally, the world of prelapsarian Eden, but it also alludes to the project of a New Eden, begun by the European colonists and justified despite the damning presence of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans. What's striking about Clifton's version is that, unlike the absolute patriarch of orthodox theology—and atypical of historical usages of the Eden trope in African American literature—God appears in these poems as a pitiful character, neither omnipotent nor all-knowing, and

certainly not to be counted on in a crisis. Although her revision of the Eden trope has a specific place in African American literature and references its particular history, the terms are general enough to refer to the crimes of history on a global scale. The problem of God (and the narratives He inspires) is a universal one, and His silence on the issue makes it impossible, finally, to support the theodicy of His divine benevolence.

The final poems in the sequence, though they acquiesce to God's mysterious nature—"to ask You to explain / is to deny You"—nonetheless do so with a knowledge of His essential unreliability (76). God has not historically shown Himself to be the God of the oppressed. Clifton's response to the issue of divine benevolence in black liberation theology thus offers a radical departure from the hermeneutics embraced by leading intellectuals of the movement: human beings, engaging in struggles for liberation against oppression, can no longer rely on God to save them (if they ever could). The penultimate lines of the poem, in fact, serve as both a blessing and a warning: "You kiss my brother mouth. / The rest is silence" (76). The kiss, though it can convey affection and acceptance, can also signal betrayal. After all, Judas betrayed Christ with a kiss in another biblical garden, Gethsemane. The poem suggests that God similarly betrayed Lucifer by inculpating him in the narrative of Eden and insuring for Himself a scapegoat for His own crimes; in the end, it is the patriarch of Judeo-Christianity, not Lucifer, who is revealed as untrustworthy, prideful, and fickle. In later poems, Clifton will disregard the traditional God of patriarchal Christianity altogether, referring to Him as "antic"—in other words, as an utter joke (*Mercy* 15).[18] Instead of relying on God for salvation from oppression, Clifton instead posits self-salvation. In "the meeting after the savior gone," which is dated "4/4/68" and commemorates the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the

speaker tells the crowd hungry for salvation from racial and other forms of oppression: "what we decided is / you save your own self. / everybody so quiet. / not so much sorry as / resigned" (*GW* 31). The odd locution of the poem's title and the date that accompanies it indicates that the "savior" refers both to King and to Jesus Christ. At the same time as it announces the death of King, the race leader and "savior" of African America, it also asserts that Jesus Christ, the "savior" of the oppressed, is also "gone" (and with Him faith in a benevolent God). The advice the poem offers to "save your own self," is particularly devastating, therefore, because it gives up not only on race leaders but also on God since He allows them to be murdered. In the absence of a saving power—or a government working in their interest, for example—Clifton understands that the responsibility for revolution rests on the oppressed since those in power are only interested in securing it for themselves. With the Judeo-Christian God redefined as a loose cannon who betrays in the same instant He blesses, then, and with a reminder of God's historical silence, who will become the bearer of the Word? What moral code will guide the oppressed when the old codes have been abused or are found inadequate?

* * *

In 1974, while playing on the family Ouija board with her two oldest daughters, Clifton received a brief message from someone who identified herself as "THELMA." Immediately recognizing the name of her deceased mother, Clifton skeptically put the board away. A few days later, she took it down again to ask what was happening. It answered: "It's me, baby. Don't worry about it. Get some sleep" (Hull 330). So began a

series of encounters in the 1970s and the beginning of Clifton's work with automatic writing, a process she refers to as "listening-hearing" (340). In "Channeling the Ancestral Muse," Hull recounts Clifton's gradual acceptance of this unusual practice:

> Clifton came to believe that this was, in fact, her mother, whose presence was also being felt by the rest of the family. All six of her children saw and had experiences of some sort with her. [. . .] Over a period of years, the family, in Clifton's words, "incorporated the nonvisible into our scheme for what is real. It worked for us." (340)

After several years, and through the medium of automatic writing, Clifton began to receive messages from beings other than her mother (340). In a series of poems not published until 2004, Clifton documented an exchange between herself and a group of beings referred to as "The Ones." Unlike Clifton's earlier communication with her mother, these twenty-three poems were received by Clifton from a source that insisted they were not ancestors, had never been alive, and were not now dead. Published in *Mercy* and entitled "the message," the missive they relayed to Clifton contained, in part, a new moral code to replace the old code of Christianity. Published thirty years after their transmission, the poems in "the message" depart from the Lucifer poems to document a radically different world. Instead of a Garden of Delight, or even a space where Lucifer and God can come together as "brothers," The Ones describe a world of unprecedented evil in dire need of a new spiritual guidance.

With "the message" in *Mercy*, Clifton shifts from being a poet who poeticizes sacred texts to one who transcribes the voices of The Ones. In receiving these messages from a spiritual source, Clifton follows a long line of poets, perhaps most notably

William Blake and W. B. Yeats. Blake, especially, referring to his own compositional practice, insisted on one version of the automatic writing process: "I have written the Poem from immediate Dictation . . . without Premeditation & even against my Will" (qtd. in Johnston 15). Yeats, while composing *A Vision* worked "from the automatic script of his wife, Georgie, who had begun receiving messages from the spirit world shortly after their marriage" (11). In *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice*, Devin Johnston suggests that one of the appeals of the occult for poets is "the ways in which it constitutes a direct response to contemporary culture. In several cases [. . .] poets invoke it as an analog to contemporary strains of thought in science and philosophy" (2). He further argues that "occultism has offered a pragmatic or situational model for consciousness" (16). This is especially the case in the American tradition, where H. D., Robert Duncan, James Merrill, Nathaniel Mackey, Susan Howe, and Dolores Kendrick have all practiced forms of automatic writing; Merrill, like Clifton, used a Ouija board. Clifton's own transmissions in "the message," while certainly offering a model for consciousness, extends Johnston's model and employs automatic writing to produce a new sacred text to replace the old code discarded in her revisions of the Lucifer figure.

Immediately following Clifton's seven-poem sequence "september song," which documents the events of September 11, 2001, the poems of "the message" describe a world infiltrated with destructive social hierarchies and religious ideologies and on the brink of environmental devastation. Transmitted to Clifton in the 1970s, right at the moment of Civil Rights and the start of ecological disaster, it is significant that Clifton withheld these poems from publication for over three decades. In the meantime, she

published both "tree of life" and "brothers," both of which remained hopeful that the human would triumph over its own worst tendencies toward violence and ruin. After 9/11, however, that hope seems to disappear. In fact, the contrast between the three sequences of poems on this account is striking. "Tree of life" relates a world outside of the Garden that nonetheless "seemed very eden," and, in "brothers," Lucifer recounts a world that led from the Garden "into delight. into the sharp / edge of seasons, into the sweet / puff of bread baking, the warm / vale of sheet and sweat after love, the tinny newborn cry of calf / and cormorant and humankind. / and pain, of course" (*Q* 79, *BOL* 73). The "pain" of this world, however, appears at the end of the list and almost as an afterthought to the world's many joys: "delight," "sweet[ness]," "warm[th]," "love," new life, and "humankind." *Mercy*, by contrast, foregrounds the violence and pain of the contemporary moment. In "tuesday 9/11/01," the speaker tells of a world forever changed by the events of that day: "thunder and lightning and our world / [will never] be the same" (*M* 43). Though Lucille had revised the figure of God, through Lucifer, to contain elements of both good and evil, the moral code she supplies in "tree of life" and "brothers" cannot address the imbalance of a world in which evil predominates. Without a moral code, however, there is anarchy and chaos—there is 9/11 and its causes. Unlike the "antic" God of Christianity, The Ones care about her and the world she lives in. And, most significantly, they are not silent.

Giving up the making of poems and Christianity in the same gesture, Clifton transcribes rather than fashions the new moral code presented in "the message." In using her as a linguistic conduit for their message, The Ones insist Clifton is not special or unusually gifted:

you have a teapot

others have teapots

if you abuse them

they will break

you have a gift

others have gifts

if you abuse them

you understand (53)

Transmitted in the domestic space of the kitchen, at the table over a morning cup of tea, "the message" relayed to Clifton indicates that she is not exactly a random channel, but neither is she distinctive. She has a "gift"—The Ones acknowledge this—but so do "others." If she abuses this gift, like the teapot, it "will break." The Ones further demote Clifton by claiming she is one of many possible vehicles; even a "stone" could proclaim their message:

you

are not chosen

any stone

can sing

we come

to languages

not lives

your tongue

is useful

not unique (55)

Rather than "unique," her tongue is "useful." And, lest there be any doubt, The Ones inform Clifton: "you / are not chosen." Echoing the biblical narrative of Israel as God's "chosen people," The Ones, however, reject the idea that one person or one group of people is any more special to the divine than another. Throughout "the message," in fact, they refuse to privilege Clifton over any other potential conduit. What she does have, and what they need, is a "tongue." Clifton the poet is useful to The Ones insofar as she can give human voice to their "message."

From the outset, The Ones make it clear that they are not ancestors and have never been human. In the first poem of the sequence, The Ones indicate that they are not like Clifton's mother: "we are not she" (53). The Ones further relate to Clifton that "we are ones / who have not rolled / selves into bone and flesh" (56). It would be a mistake to assume, however, that, lacking "bone and flesh," The Ones are simply the spirits of the dead. In fact, they refute this notion: "why should we wander bone yards / draped in linen / [. . .] / what need to linger among stones / and monuments / we have risen away from all that / wrapped in understanding" (59). The Ones reject the imagery of graveyards and burial linens to insist they are not ghosts. Instead, they reproach Clifton: "you have assigned us countries / of the dead / but we are neither dead / nor emigrant /

we are just here / where you are" (58). The fact that they are "just here / where you are" indicates that these beings are not, unlike traditional representations of the divine, apart in a heavenly realm.[19] That The Ones are "here / where you are" is another reason why the poems insist on the familiar and highlight domestic spaces throughout the sequence. Indeed, The Ones interact with and are a part of everyday life; the concerns of the world are their concerns. Finally, it is interesting to note that in the first six poems of the sequence, The Ones use the be-verb construction "we are" six times. In the fifth poem, they condense this affirmative to insist, simply, "we are we" (57).[20] In the world of The Ones, it appears there is no particularity; and they are neither human, nor dead, nor ancestors. They just "are."

Towards the middle of the sequence, The Ones finally illuminate their purpose in utilizing Clifton as a conduit for their message. Describing Clifton as a Cassandra figure who is both blessed and cursed for her visionary gift, The Ones indicate that they have a lesson to relay through her:

> some of you have been blessed
> or cursed
> to see beyond yourselves
>
> [. . .]
>
> none of you have seen
> everything
> none of you have said

everything

what you have not noticed

we have noticed

what you have ignored

we have not (60)

On her own, Clifton has neither "seen" nor "said / everything." Her gift, that is, her ability to "see beyond" herself, is limited. By contrast, The Ones see and understand everything. The problem, however, is that they, having no body, are "tongueless" and so rely on the poet to speak "the message." This faulty process of transmission is described using the imagery of the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion:

you who lie awake

holding your mouth open

receive us as best you can

and we enter you

as we must

tongueless

as best we can (66)

Although the imagery of the Eucharist—"holding your mouth open" to "receive" the bread and wine that is a symbol of the body and blood of Christ—suggests a similarity between the Christian sacred text and "the message" of The Ones, these seven lines actually indicate a significant disparity between the two. Instead of offering communion

with the divine and with a community of believers, The Ones suggest a more radical exchange. They "enter" the poet to give her their message. In the process, the poet becomes the voice of the divine and the poem the sacred text. Of course, the success of this transmission is not guaranteed since the poet, a human being and therefore flawed, must receive the message "as best you can." In this exchange, a new, reciprocal relationship between the human and the divine is acknowledged: The Ones admit their need. They enter her "as we must" and "as best we can."

The message The Ones relate through Clifton critiques the Christian belief system and offers an alterative code of ethics. Repeating a lexicon of knowledge and learning, they claim at first to offer no new lesson: "in the geometry / of knowing / we have no new thing / to tell / only the same old / almanac" (60). The "almanac" refers to the Bible, as we shall see, but also to the *Farmer's Almanac*, an annual North American periodical. A staple of many American kitchens (and farms) since its first publication in 1818, the *Almanac* offers long-range weather predictions and astronomical data as well as commonsense advice about a variety of subjects. "The message" employs the *Almanac* formula:

> january
>
> love one another
>
> february
>
> whatever you sow
>
> you will reap (62)

Both "love one another" and "whatever you sow / you will reap" are maxims derived from the Bible, but their juxtaposition in the poem with the first two months of the year,

January and February, suggests that they might also be found in the *Farmer's Almanac*, which divides its weather and astrological predictions according to the months and seasons of the year. In other words, these two maxims, though originally biblically based, are now simply common sense. The moral code these maxims encourage is one that most people, regardless of creed, would support. The use of the commonsense wisdom of the Bible in this poem illustrates the extent to which the biblical is still in Clifton's tongue, although "the message" attempts to shift over to the logic of the *Almanac*.

Later in the sequence, in fact, "the message" reintroduces the phrase "God is light" first referenced in "tree of life" but makes a surprising critique of the biblical text. While at first The Ones claims "god / is / light," they negate this truism by responding, startlingly, "no" (64). Likewise, they counter the claim that "god / is / love / is / light / is god" (64). Constantly corrective, The Ones finally settle on an affirmation that does not depend on God—"yes":

> place here
>
> the name
>
> you give
>
> to god
>
> is love
>
> is light
>
> is
>
> here the name
>
> you give

to

yes (64)

As in the elliptical epigraph to poem eight in "brothers"—" . . . . . is God"—the poem implies that the idea of the divine has been appropriated for a variety of causes, many of them evil. The white space between lines nineteen and twenty may refer to the problem of God's silence in the face of history, or it may refer to the essentially esoteric and impervious nature of the divine. Either way, both biblically derived definitions of God—"God is love" and "God is light"—are revised to suggest the divine is much bigger than Christianity has allowed (1 John 4: 8, 1 John 1: 5). What "the message" suggests, instead, is a divine presence the poem can only affirm as "yes." More, The Ones repeat the be-verb seven times in this poem alone and forty-eight times throughout the sequence. This "is," coupled with its near-homonym, "yes," repeated throughout, indicates that the divine of "the message" can best be understood as "being" pure affirmation.

The moral force of this "is/yes" equation is nowhere more chilling than in the sequence's revision of the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. Here, the poem introduces a new code of ethics, one that, distinct from the Bible's, views the self as interrelated with and, indeed, one with others:

you are not

your brothers keeper

you are

your brother

[. . .]

the king is you

the kike is you

the honky is you

the nigger is you

the bitch is you

the beauty is you

the friend is you

the enemy oh

others have come

to say this

it is not

metaphor

you are not

your sisters keeper

you are

your sister yes (68)

Again, The Ones end these lines with the affirmative "yes" after having corrected the biblical text and rewritten it as their message. In the biblical narrative, asked by God about his murdered brother's whereabouts, Cain answers: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

(Genesis 4: 9). Although the Bible maintains Cain is in error to deny his responsibility to his brother, The Ones extend the moral imperative. They claim that instead of being "your brothers keeper," you are actually "your brother." And they emphasize that this message should be understood literally: this "is not metaphor." Quite literally, the poem insists, "you *are* your sister." Incorporating a litany of derogatory names for a variety of people from different cultural backgrounds (names incorporated to create and maintain social hierarchies), The Ones contend "you are" all of them. If, as "the message" posits, we are not merely morally charged to "love our neighbor" but in fact *are* our neighbors (and our enemies) then the biblical dictum to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" collapses into the more immediate command: love thyself. Of course, self-protection has historically led to hatred of others, but if we *are* those others—The Ones insist—we have a natural instinct to protect them, too.

The Ones further broaden the range of their concern when they argue that even the human and the natural worlds are intertwined and should be understand as interchangeable. The seventeenth poem of the sequence situates the universe as a space where every living thing has a place and is "required to be":

> the universe requires the worlds
> to be
> each leaf is veined from the mother/ father
> each heart is veined from the mother/ father
> each leaf each heart has a place
> irreplaceable
> each is required to be (69)

Although having "a place" in the universe might at first suggest an inherent ordering of life (that is, human first and natural world second), The Ones reject this hierarchical logic. In their formulation, The Ones list the natural world before the human, and the feminine before the masculine when referring to the source of life "each heart is veined from." Rather than simply invert these familiar hierarchies, however, The Ones reject them. Everything "has a place," is "irreplaceable," and is "required to be." Without any of the parts, the whole would disintegrate. In fact, this is exactly what appears to be happening in Clifton's world. Published after the events of September 11 and at the brink of ecological disaster, The Ones confirm the urgency of the moment: "your world is in grave danger" (70). The final poems of the sequence call attention to the ecological consequences of the hierarchical systems of belief that have justified the misuse of the natural world for the benefit of the human. At the same time, they reiterate the non-hierarchical model of ethics introduced in the preceding poems—"balance / is the law / balance / or be balanced"—and they enact this "balance" formally (71):

the air
you have polluted
you will breathe

the waters
you have poisoned
you will drink

when you come again

and you will come again

the air

you have polluted

you will breathe

the waters

you have poisoned

you will drink (72)

Balancing four stanzas of three lines each around one couplet that repeats the phrase "come again," the poem formally enacts its own message that time is cyclical and that what is done to the natural world will have far-reaching ramifications. The twenty-first poem continues to voice the ecological concerns of The Ones to emphasize the fact that the situation is dire: "the patience / of the universe / is not without / an end / so might it / slowly / turn its back / [. . .] / leaving you alone" (73). The implication here is that "the patience / of the universe" is, in fact, nearing its "end," and this is the last possible moment left to do anything about it. That Clifton waited thirty years to publish "the message" is a strong indicator that perhaps it is already too late.

Clearly, something must be done to remedy the situation, and The Ones do offer hope in the penultimate poem of the sequence: "what has been made / can be unmade" (74). What is imperative, however, is a reevaluation and rejection of systems of belief that encourage hierarchical logic and that delay action to an apocalyptic "end of the

world" moment that will balance the scales of history. The Ones provide hope for recovery, but in a revised form:

it is perhaps

a final chance

not the end of the world

of a world (74)

The "final chance" they offer is "not the end of the world" according to the Christian Book of Revelation, but it may very well be the end of "a world." The Ones find hope in the idea that there may be multiple worlds and alternative forms of reality, of which ours is only one. The ambiguity created by the enjambed line in the last two lines of the poem—they can read "not the end of the world / [and not the end] of a world" or "not the end of *the* world / [but] of *a* world"—indicates that the verdict is still out. There is still hope for recovery in Clifton's world, but that clock is ticking. The final poem of the sequence posits a similarly ambiguous optimism regarding what is to come:

there is a star

more distant

than eden

something there

is even now

preparing (75)

The last three lines of the poem can read two ways—as "something there is even now" or as "something there is even now preparing." A new world is either now being prepared

to replace the old one being destroyed, or it already exists. "The message" indicates that the "star" where this preparation is occurring is a world "more distant / than eden." In other words, it is not the earth, not Clifton's "star." The hope The Ones bring, then, is the knowledge that life is bigger than it has been imagined, and both it and the divine, who just "are," will continue. Human beings are not the center of the universe; there is no hierarchical ordering to life as we have imagined it. Life will go on, in some shape or form, but it will not perhaps be ours.

Received in the late 70s from a source called The Ones and withheld from publication until after the events of September 11, 2001, "the message" contends that we are now in a period of history so dire that we cannot afford to continue in the same patterns of belief that precipitated the climax of the contemporary moment. In publishing these poems when she does, Clifton argues that we can no longer rely on ourselves and on our faulty understanding of the world: we need a moral code to tell us how to live. With the inspired writing of "the message," Clifton delivers a new sacred text, allowing The Ones to supply a new code of ethics to deal with the current crisis. Of course, it may already be too late. In a public reading in April 2008, Clifton admitted that her next book of poems, scheduled for publication in September 2008 and entitled *Voices,* is on hold because she has "writer's block." If the voices of The Ones are no longer using the poet's tongue, it may be because they have already turned away.

NOTES

[1] Further parenthetical reference to *Quilting* will use the abbreviation *Q*. Page numbers are used to cite poems throughout.

[2] This number accounts for all Clifton's poems up through the publication of *Mercy* in 2004.

[3] Several critics have done just that. See especially Akasha (Gloria) Hull's "In Her Own Images: Lucille Clifton and the Bible," Alicia Ostriker's "Kin and Kin: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton," and two chapters, "The Biblical Poems" and "Diabolic Dialogism in 'brothers,'" from Hilary Holladay's *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*. Although she is careful not to privilege any one spiritual tradition over another, Clifton nonetheless does rely heavily on biblical texts. She is familiar with the tradition from her childhood, and some of her earliest (and unpublished) poems dealt with biblical subjects (Holladay 183).

[4] Further parenthetical reference to *Good Woman* will use the abbreviation *GW*.

[5] Greene concludes his study with a discussion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the mid-twentieth century's incorporation of the Eden trope, so Clifton's project is outside the historical scope of his book.

[6] The poem recasts the Garden of Eden largely as a Garden of Delight, as Akasha (Gloria) Hull and Hilary Holladay have both pointed out.

[7] Even the African American theological tradition has consistently denigrated Lucifer—Satan—who is usually cast as the white oppressor. See especially Dwight N.

Hopkins' "Slave Theology in the 'Invisible Institution' from *African American Religious Thought*, ed. Cornel West (2003).

[8] Clifton has referred to the "Light" as

> Light, big L. [. . .] I believe that there is a Light, whatever that means—and it is like [. . .] the making clear [of] what has not been clear, being able to see what has not been seen. I just feel an instinctive trust in that. (qtd. in Hull 288).

[9] The lack of punctuation in the poem's final question regarding Lucifer's actions—"what have you done"—though typical of Clifton's poetry, is in contrast with the poem's epigraph, which added the punctuation to upset conventional understanding of Lucifer's role in the divine plan. Here, the lack of punctuation indicates a withholding of judgment by the angels who observes the events; after all, it is stated as fact, not as a question.

[10] Hull, however, speculates:

> The real conundrum [. . .] is how—after being told [by her supernatural source] that "God is Light"—Clifton maintains her designation of Light as "personification" for "Transcendent Being," but still attaches it to Lucifer, who is God's opposite, or, at the least, is certainly not God. She responds to this puzzlement by asking, "If God is God—is there a 'not God'?"—which means that if God is everything, "He" is also Lucifer, who can then be seen as (part of) God, and hence as Light. (288)

[11] Ostriker claims that the final lines of ""lucifer speaks in his own voice," in which Lucifer claims that "illuminate i could / and so / illuminate i did," is "the simplest possible description of Clifton's work" (320).

[12] Clifton has already incorporated the image of a six-fingered hand into her poetry; as noted above, the poet was born with six fingers on each hand, and both Lucifer and God are also referred to as six-fingered in the "tree of life" sequence. The image of the six-fingered hand is first used in *Two-Headed Woman*, where it is related to Clifton's prophetic (and poetic) talent; Clifton ascribes magical powers to the missing fingers. When asked whether her mother was a "mystical sort of person," Clifton explained:

> I don't think so, but she may have been. [. . .] She was born with twelve fingers also. And I always just decide this is it, this is why we're strange, because we have all these fingers. My oldest daughter was [born with twelve fingers], though I doubt if she would think of herself as mystical." (199)

It is clear from Clifton's comments here that she is using the image of the six-fingered hand as a poetic device. In "i was born with six fingers," the speaker believes the extra fingers have the special capacity to make "connect[ions]" between the living and the dead, between the visible and invisible worlds (*GW* 166). In short, they function as a sort of metonymical "sixth sense":

> i was born with twelve fingers
> like my mother and my daughter.
> each of us

born wearing strange black gloves
extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and
dipping into the milk.
somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells
and our wonders were cut off
but they didn't understand
the powerful memory of ghosts. now
we take what we want
with invisible fingers
and we connect
my dead mother my live daughter and me
through our terrible shadowy hands. (166)

Clifton, like her mother and her daughter, also has the speaker's "special power"—in the poem derived explicitly from her "invisible fingers" and her "shadowy hands." Described as "wonders" and "ghosts," these hands have the ability to "connect"—to reunite things separated even by death—and, particularly, to reunite the poet and her dead mother. Poetry, by extension, the work the poet does with her "hands," serves as a medium through which she can transcribe messages from the other side. Or, as the speaker puts it in "hands": "the snips of finger / fell from the sterile bowl / into my mind and after that / whatever i was taught they would / point toward a different learning / which i followed" (*M* 36).

[13] Further parenthetical reference to *The Book of Light* will use the abbreviation *BOL.*

[14] In many cultures throughout the world, the snake is a creative, rather than destructive, image.

[15] The line is originally from Elie Weisel regarding the Holocaust. Forché's use of the line in *The Angel of History* also refers to the Holocaust. Clifton quotes it specifically from Forché.

[16] The time is "long after" creation, but apparently pre-apocalyptic, since Lucifer reports in the third poem of the sequence, "i have foreseen the evening / of the world," an event which, ostensibly, hasn't yet occurred (71).

[17] Here again her lack of dialect and the fact that the characters aren't racialized indicates that Clifton's concern is for the oppressed in general; the quotation concerning the Holocaust corroborates this point.

[18] Further parenthetical reference to *Mercy* will use the abbreviation *M.*

[19] The pun on "here" and "hear" in this poem is repeated one other time and twice in an earlier poem of the sequence to call attention to the process by which these poems are constructed. Clifton, coming to a specific location to receive these poems—"here"—must also be able to "hear" what The Ones say in order to transcribe it. In this particular poem, for example, The Ones claim: "we are here / between the lines" (58). To "read between the lines" is to understand a hidden meaning or "message" in what appears to be transparent. The "lines," of course, also refer to the lines of the poem. The "gift"

The Ones acknowledge as Clifton's, then, appears to be the ability to "hear" and understand what others cannot—and to transform it into poetry.

[20] That The Ones claim "we are we" also echoes the Old Testament when God claims "I am that I am" (Exodus 3: 14). Although allusion to biblical narratives and imagery remain throughout "the message," it is clear this is not a Christian text. Instead, The Ones engage with and revise biblical texts until they are satisfied with the result.

CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

Extending a long trajectory of American women authors engaged in literary revisions of sacred texts, the works analyzed in this study deploy various strategies to rewrite, resist, reject, reclaim, or redefine elements of biblical narratives linked to community and nation-building (paradise), social engagement (apocalypse), narrative practice (divine omniscience/omnipotence), and church authority (the relationship between the human and the divine), as well as intersecting, hierarchical social structures (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc). However, unlike early examples of women's revisions of sacred texts in the American literary tradition—as seen, for example, in the work of Anne Bradstreet and Anne Hutchinson discussed in Chapter I—which aimed to secure poetic or spiritual authority for women by incorporating biblical imagery and allusion, the work of the authors under scrutiny in this dissertation destabilizes that biblical authority by calling attention to its hierarchical logic. In this way, their work also differs from twentieth century revisionists like Anita Diamant, also discussed in the Chapter I (or Miriam Kessler, whose work appears in the epigraph) who rewrite patriarchal biblical texts to incorporate suppressed or silenced female voices but who do so from within the tradition they criticize. Even historical models of revisionist mythmaking in both the African American and Native American traditions—recall Phillis Wheatley's contention that slaveholders were "modern Egyptians," for example—often relied upon inversions of hierarchical scriptural formulations without interrogating the destructive ideologies behind them. By the time Clifton published *Mercy* in 2004,

however, the dangers of utilizing the biblical text as a social or literary model had been well-established by all three authors, and the Bible had lost, at least for them, its authority to reflect effectively social, political, or personal reality.

In particular, the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi (1945) and elsewhere have offered models for contemporary authors engaged in resistance against a dominating Christian perspective as well as ways of reevaluating the legitimacy of the "orthodoxy" itself, although—as the work of Morrison and Silko illustrates—utilizing the gnostic texts for such purposes comes with its own limitations. Throughout their work, Morrison and Silko both seem to reject hierarchical formulations that favor one "opposite" over another, yet to introduce the gnostic tradition as an alternative to the evils of patriarchal Christianity is to do just that. As I maintain in the first chapter, scholarly evidence simply does not support the idea that early Christianity was "pure" in its orthodoxy, while the gnostic tradition was corrupt and "heretical"; neither, however, can it prove the opposite. Even canonical texts are themselves often "rewritings" of earlier texts, as works like Richard Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* attest. There is, therefore, no sacred text or tradition that can be said to be free of historical "corruption," and the gnostic tradition is no exception. To replace the Judeo-Christian tradition with the gnostic as a model of social formation, then, is an overly simplistic and romantic idealization of a disembodied religious tradition that, in actuality, we know very little about.

Yet both Morrison and Silko incorporate the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind" as a counterpoint to patriarchal Christianity and as a means of introducing a paradoxical worldview that sees difference as integral to wholeness.[1] Are there, then,

ways to understand these authors' incorporation of the gnostic tradition as being analogous with the idea of a "unity of opposites" described in "Thunder, Perfect Mind" (that is, ways of understanding Christianity and the gnostic tradition as two forces—often characterized as "opposites"—necessarily existing together in any historical understanding of the period) instead of a jejune replacement? Morrison, for instance, understanding that Christianity is and has been an important feature of the African American tradition in general and its liberation theologies in particular, revises it in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* through the incorporation of gnostic texts that valorize rather than diminish the feminine and that offer sustainable alternatives for community organizing, social engagement, and cultural production. Rather than rejecting Christianity and positing the gnostic tradition as an alternative, as I have argued, Morrison calls attention to gnostic traditions that were present in early Christianity and helped to shape what the tradition later became. Thus, she emphasizes a different understanding of Christianity and its sacred texts—not as monolithic but as syncretic and varied. In this way, she seems to support the idea of a unity of opposites in her inclusion of the gnostic texts and retains the Judeo-Christian tradition despite its long history of historical abuse. More, with its links to ancient Egypt, Morrison may also be drawing parallels between the history of Christianity in the African American tradition and black liberation theology—long used in different ways than in mainstream, white Christianity—and potential links to the gnostic tradition in Africa. Still, no significant attempt is made in Morrison's work to qualify her use of the gnostic tradition or to indicate its own complicated and varied history, one of the trilogy's weaknesses.

Silko, by contrast, rejects Christianity as inherently corrupt, a tool of the oppressor, and in need of overhaul completely. Though she introduces the gnostic and pre-Christian texts in *Gardens in the Dunes* as a means to challenge the authority of the master narrative of Christianity, those texts are ultimately subsumed into the larger interests of Native cultural survival—the goal of which is to dispel the colonial presence from the Americas once and for all. Yet, although she rejects Christianity and the gnostic tradition—symbolized by both Edward and Hattie's disappearance from the narrative—Silko's emphasis on syncretism and on Native cultural survival may, perhaps, be understood as a kind of "unity of opposites" wherein the sisters incorporate and utilize elements of diverse belief systems in an attempt to create a new social order (neither Christian nor gnostic but Native). Only the echo of the gnostic poem remains in the novel's final emphasis on cultural syncretism, and this is a good move on Silko's part since it frees *Gardens* from the often facile juxtaposition of Christian and gnostic traditions that haunt the early pages of the book.

Finally, Clifton, though initially challenging the misuse of biblical texts through her reclaiming of the Lucifer figure, rejects that tradition entirely following the calamitous events of 9/11. Her work in *Mercy* marks a critical juncture in women's revisions of sacred texts in its complete departure from Christianity to introduce a new sacred text and a new moral code not predicated upon hierarchy. "The message" raises the question of why we need a sacred text at all. Clearly, Morrison, Silko, and Clifton are concerned with the problematic ways sacred texts have been historically utilized for racist, colonialist, and patriarchal purposes. Yet to abandon them completely, these authors seem to be arguing, means risking anarchy. Each has therefore proposed a new

code of ethics: occasionally revising that old sacred text, the Bible; occasionally incorporating other sacred texts and belief systems, such as those of the gnostic and pre-Christian traditions; and, in the example of Clifton, occasionally even creating new sacred texts. What all three authors have in common is the desire to establish a moral code that is nonhierarchical and therefore amenable to a cultural praxis that values social justice and rejects oppression in its various forms. How well each has succeeded in this ambitious task has yet to be seen.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I considered the connections between biblical scripture, American racist, colonialist, and patriarchal history, and imaginative production. How, exactly, literature proposes to take upon itself this program of social change still remains unclear, but it is apparent that each of these authors believes it can. Their engagement with these sacred texts is born of the conviction that narrative matters and that myth in its various forms is the foundation for the way we engage with the world and what we perceive as our role in it. If those myths have been manipulated as a means to justify oppression, then an examination and revision of the elements that make such misuse possible is the essential first step in orchestrating social change. At the heart of the work of each of these three authors is the belief that, by changing the ideology of a society, we have the potential to change the society itself. History has shown that reliance on outmoded models of social ideology and hierarchy will only result in the same violent and destructive outcomes. Yet, as Morrison has argued, the needle of history need not remain stuck perpetually in its groove. Clifton's work in *Mercy*, however, has shown that the situation is dire. Perhaps now more than ever, literature

holds the potential for articulating new narratives, new stories, and new cultural myths that could model social change at a time when it is desperately needed.

NOTE

[1] Discovered at Nag Hammadi, "Thunder, Perfect Mind" has been referred to as a gnostic text. Even so, it can hardly be said to be exemplary of the tradition.

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