

ABSTRACT

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**SUM OF THE PARTS: THE TRILOGY IN
MCCARTHY, ROTH, AND MORRISON**

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This dissertation examines the function of the trilogy form in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*, and Toni Morrison's *Love Trilogy*. The *Border Trilogy* is comprised of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*; the *American Trilogy* is comprised of *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*; and the *Love Trilogy* is comprised of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Written in the waning years of the twentieth century, McCarthy's, Roth's, and Morrison's use of the trilogy ran counter to the formal practices of postmodern fiction and to the ideological predilections of contemporary criticism. They used the trilogy form to apprehend an extensive history out of the rubble of postmodernism, which often militated against such large-scale attempts at representation. What the three authors end up producing are contemporary versions of grand narratives, appropriate for the end of the twentieth century: individual novels that are discrete, localized, and contained within themselves, but also epic cultural geographies whose breadth exceeds the limits of the single novels.

Taken as a whole, the three books in each trilogy demonstrate that history must be diversely narrated and the storytelling structures that constitute that history should be shuffled, alternated, and changed up as necessary. No one single novel is sufficient to the task of encapsulating that multiplicity of narrative approaches—not even literary monoliths like *Beloved* or *American Pastoral*. The three novels in each trilogy must be read together in order to comprehend the narrative largess of late twentieth century American history.

To paraphrase Hayden White, the authors in this study use the trilogy form in order to investigate how histories get invented, not found. McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison deploy the trilogy to configure—to *invent*—this history as a problem of scale, identifying coordinates and providing a way to cognitively map the past so that we gain a sense of its totality, to use Frederic Jameson's word. Once we can apprehend the totality of the past, we can begin to make sense of it.

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ROTH

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Dedication

For my parents, Brendan and Dorothy Egan,
with much gratitude and love.

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It took a village to write this baby, and it's time acknowledge the village.

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Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s three major American novelists – Cormac McCarthy, Philip Roth and Toni Morrison – committed themselves to the creation of trilogies. They chose this form in response to the crisis of American culture and society and, more broadly, of historiography that marked the last twenty years of the 20th century. Their trilogies are all distinct products of the post-1960’s United States, particularly the “inter-war” years between the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the beginning of “The War on Terror” in 2001. The first book published in this study was *Beloved* in 1987; the last book published was *The Human Stain* in 2000. All three authors were looking down the barrel at the end of not only a century but also an entire millennium. Moreover, the century about to pass had been dubbed the “The American Century,” and these authors, who had lived through much of this American century—Morrison was born in 1931; Roth and McCarthy were both born in 1933—had constantly and consistently engaged with the consequences of that experience. The end of the century and the millennium provided a profound “sense of an ending” that provoked in these authors, I believe, a large-scale literary examination of the American century’s effects and impacts.

Their choice of form ran counter to the formal practices of post-modern fiction and to the ideological predilections of contemporary criticism. In the early part of the century, the trilogy had been one of the preferred vehicles for literary nationalism, through which writers ranging from Frank Norris to the white supremacist Thomas Dixon helped create and historicize the vision of America’s twentieth century hegemony. By the end of the 1990’s, the trilogy as a literary form

appeared to be the antithesis of literary post-modernism due to its characteristically linear plot and its formal evocation of the “grand narratives” that had seemingly died in the early 1980’s. By writing trilogies, McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison made a paradoxical choice. They reverted to an earlier twentieth-century version of the form, associated with nationalism, thereby linking fiction to history. However, they altered this “retro” version of the form in order to engage in the questioning of that history and nationalism, and the foundational mythology that still undergirds them both. Morrison, McCarthy, and Roth use the trilogy form to apprehend an extensive history out of the rubble of postmodernism, which often militated against such large-scale attempts at representation. What they end up producing are contemporary versions of grand narratives, appropriate for the end of the twentieth century: individual novels that are discrete, localized, and contained within themselves, but also epic cultural geographies whose breadth exceeds the limits of the single novels. Taken as a whole, the three books in each trilogy demonstrate that history must be diversely narrated and the storytelling structures that constitute that history should be shuffled, alternated, and changed up as necessary. No one single novel is sufficient to the task of encapsulating that multiplicity of narrative approaches—not even literary monoliths like *Beloved* or *American Pastoral*; the three novels in each trilogy must be read together in order to comprehend the narrative largess of late twentieth century American history.

Historical Roots of the Trilogy Form

Between 1890 and 1940, trilogies were a major feature American literary production. In *The Rise of the Novel Trilogy in the U.S., 1890 – 1940*, Jonathan

Richardson Smith describes them as a “distinctly 20th century epic form,” (ii) whose ambitious renderings of national history represented “a deep drive for [. . .] national, racial, or economic unity” (2). Smith traces the twentieth century popularity of the form to the American reception of an English translation of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s Polish trilogy.¹ Despite the publishing world’s concern about “the unmarketability of ‘sequels,’” Sienkiewicz’s “historical romance” had landed on American shores in the 1890’s, precisely at the moment when “many U.S. writers and critics were looking for a kind of epic fiction that might reunify the nation—meaning whites—after Reconstruction” (12).² Many of the trilogies written in the immediate wake of the English publication of Sienkiewicz’s work were on a conservative ideological spectrum (8), reflecting the nationalism of an America engaged by an emergent imperialism and the establishment of Jim Crow laws. At its extreme end, this spectrum included racialism. *Birth of a Nation* author Thomas Dixon was directly inspired by Sienkiewicz to write his *Trilogy of Reconstruction* (1905 to 1907), a trio of books that glorified the racist society of the Antebellum South (12). Importantly, in early twentieth century trilogies, “plot is rarely, and never definitively, what unifies” the form (2); rather, the novels are united through paratextual structures such as the binding, box, and prefatory messages to the reader, all of which enacted a unification

¹Smith points out that there had been novel series published before Sienkiewicz’s trilogy appeared, “historical romances ranging from two to five or six in number, generally modeled after Scott or Cooper” (27 – 28). He discounts James Fenimore Cooper as a trilogist because, while Cooper had written three linked novels called the Littlepage Manuscripts, neither he nor his publishers or reviewers had called the series a trilogy (28). I agree with Smith’s aversion to calling three linked books a “trilogy” when an author has not labeled the series as such; formal appellations are birthed from distinct cultural and historical contexts, and we probably gain a more accurate sense of what Cooper was trying to achieve with his three-novel series if we understand it to be part of an early nineteenth century discussion on literary seriality, rather than literary trilogies.

² Indeed, according to Smith, *Birth of a Nation* author Thomas Dixon was directly inspired by Sienkiewicz to write his *Trilogy of Reconstruction* (1905 to 1907) a trio of books that glorified the racist society of the Antebellum South (12).

process that resulted in “epic completeness and ideological coherence” (47). Thus plot, the prime signifier of a trilogy in twenty-first American culture, is not an innate characteristic of the form, and early twentieth century practitioners rarely deploy it as a strategy of coherence.

The transformation of American society after World War I, and the arrival of literary modernism, altered the literary character of the trilogy while preserving its role as a fiction of national identity. The prestige of the form culminated in the 1920s and 1930s, when “three of seven Pulitzer Prizes for fiction went to volumes of trilogies” (1). This “trilogy boom” hit all levels of fiction writers, from middle-brow to “high-brow,” i.e., canonical, authors, which included Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and William Carlos Williams,³ to name only a few.⁴ The most highly regarded of these trilogies—those by Norris, Dos Passos, and Faulkner—are critical of U.S. culture and history and use fragment, collage, radical subjectivity, and other devices of literary modernism in order to re-imagine and re-configure dominant narratives. Thus, they arguably exist on the same spectrum as the trilogies of McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison. Yet, as Smith asserts, the trilogy tradition “as a whole” during this time period was “a sustained and often ambivalent response to recurring cultural calls for epics of middle-class, professedly ‘Anglo-Saxon’ male hegemony” (iii). The three authors in this study are responding to a very different set of cultural and historical calls, and even an author as focused on masculine development as McCarthy

³Also on this list are Booth Tarkington, James Branch Cabell, Josephine Herbst, Henry Miller, and Pearl Buck (1).

⁴In her book *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity*, Wanda Corn argues that these novels were literature’s contribution to a broader cultural project, which took in visual arts and music as well – the search for what Corn has called “The Great American Thing.”

questions the sustainability of hegemonic structures that privilege white male narratives. So, while the trilogies in this study are formal descendents of the early twentieth century trilogies, they are more preoccupied with the cultural consequences of dismantling hegemonic narratives than they are with reifying those narratives.

The form fell into disuse in the late 40's when the New Critics became the predominating literary tastemakers and cultivated a carefully curated "disdain" for "the big, the inclusive, the epic" (ii). The form did, however, begin a wildly successful second act in the genres of science fiction and fantasy (ii) with the publication of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy between 1951 and 1953 and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy between 1954 and 1955. Tolkien's work essentially (and, as it turns out, unintentionally⁵) re-defined the form and still provides the basis for our contemporary understanding of what a trilogy is and should be. This is how we commonly define the literary trilogy—and its sibling, the Hollywood movie trilogy—today: The first novel represents the beginning of the plot, the second novel is the middle, and the third novel is the end. Key elements recur in all three novels: characters, settings, and themes. In short, a trilogy is supposed to be one continuous novel-like narrative extended over three books (or movies). The popular use and definition of the term "trilogy" has fostered a view of the form as a transparent and almost banal concept in our contemporary cultural

⁵ According to Pat Roberts in his article "The Lord of the Rings: The Tale of a Text," Tolkien certainly did not intend to re-invent the trilogy form. Tolkien originally conceived *Lord of the Rings* as a single novel; however, his publishers thought that *The Lord of the Rings* was so long that it would have been prohibitively expensive to publish, print, and buy. Thus, publishing it as three single books would make it more economically accessible to buyers; so, in effect, Tolkien's publishers forced him to redefine the form.

consciousness—a view that teeters on the edge of precluding critical inquiry into the form and its function.

A Sense of an Ending: The Form in the 1990's

And this is the state of the form in the 1980's, when McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison start writing their respective trilogies. While the trilogy was originally deployed to create epic narratives of national unification, it is now primarily used in popular culture to reify conventional narrative structures with linear chronology and clear beginning, middles, and ends. In the hands of some practitioners, the content may be metaphorically rich and the writing sophisticated, but the form itself has a tendency to be relegated to the job of “plot container,” or deployed merely to meet the audience expectations of a particular genre (i.e., fantasy, science fiction, and their generic progeny). Often, the form does not present itself as participating in the thematic conversation. Rather, it acts as a structural support system for the plot, presumably static and unchanging in its purpose and function. In the 1980's and 90's, McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison use the form differently. They appropriate it precisely to access its configurative properties, the way in which it enables the juxtaposition of narratives that would not otherwise be contiguous with each other. They are specifically interested in how the trilogy form can be used to re-map U.S. national narratives, and they deploy its tripartite structure in order to examine how these histories are assembled, told, and re-told at the end of the twentieth century.

Roth, Morrison, and McCarthy closely echo the early twentieth century trilogists in that they grasp how the trilogy exists at the intersection of history and narrative form. They share a mutual understanding that the “story” innate to “history”

may be emplotted through a variety of configurations, not just along a conventional plot line. Generally speaking, they all use the trilogy form to investigate how history and the past are authored and narrated, and the history that most concerns them is that of the post-World War II United States. Even Morrison, who writes about the 19th and early 20th centuries, approaches history and its narrative production from a distinctly post-1960's position, when the transparency of hegemonic narratives (e.g., those that told and serviced a distinctly white male history) began to be questioned and dismantled. As Morrison's work most keenly demonstrates, how history was produced and created was, in the latter half of the twentieth century, no longer a straightforward process.

McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison all write their trilogies in a fallen world where the truth-claims of traditional historiography have been punctured by the revelation that history is discursively constructed. As sophisticated fiction writers, they all freely take advantage of this, delving into the myriad ways that history gets *told*—narrated, authored, passed along, and generally fictionalized through storytelling modes. In doing this, they are taking part in a wider discussion about changes in historical epistemology in the 1980's and 90's. Hayden White's seminal work on the historical text as literary artifact best articulates the conundrum that traditional methods of historiography were confronting at this point. He exhorts us to “consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*” (192). According to White, the historical narrative “mediates” between actual events and occurrences and the “pregeneric plot structures” that “endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings” (198).

These plot structures are what he calls “strategies of sense-making” in that they help us make sense of the past by configuring alien and unfamiliar events into familiar, and therefore comprehensible, narrative forms (202). Historical narratives are “invented” in as much as past events are put into relation to each other according to the dictates and parameters of literary (i.e. fictional) forms. The “story” within any history is the narrative structure that the historian unconsciously borrows from literature, and this narrative structure forces the historian to make choices about what conforms—and, as importantly, what doesn’t conform—to the literary story arc.

As the critic Ursula Heise argues, during the 1980’s and 90’s there was a perceived “crisis of historicity” that was in large part engendered by the putative death of the “grand narrative,” as reported by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1984. The key points of this crisis, as summarized by Heise, were that large-scale, overarching theories and narratives of “progress, enlightenment, emancipation, liberation, or revolution” lost their legitimizing authority. There was a realization that no single historical narrative could properly speak for or apply to all groups of people. As the authority and justification for those grand narratives receded, heretofore repressed and marginalized narratives appeared in their wake, and more “local and concrete” narratives arose around those experiences (16). This caused a transition from the idea of one master “history” to the concept of many localized “histories” predicated on the experiences of particular peoples—women, minorities, the lower classes (17).

Exhaustion with older modes of historical epistemologies registered in other ways as well, particularly within political philosophy, which, after 1989, worked full-time to theorize the fall of communism and the (apparent) global dominance of democracy.

The best-known example of this—and the one, two decades later, most frequently used as a straw man for quixotic American optimism in the 1990’s—is Francis Fukayama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*. Published in 1992, the book suggests that “the end of the Cold War implies the closure of the historical process itself” (20). McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison’s trilogies landed in the midst of these conversations about the death of grand narratives, the definition of history, and the rise of multiple histories.

These conversations also saturated the (comparatively) narrow realms of literary criticism. With the publication of her essay, “‘The Pastime of Past Time’: Fiction, History, and Historiographical Metafiction,” Linda Hutcheon became the reigning critical spokesperson for the way in which postmodern novels revealed the discursive (read: fictional) underpinnings of historically epistemology. In this essay, Hutcheon examines how certain metafictional texts—those novels that take the precepts of fictionality as their main subject—“problematiz[e] the nature of historical knowledge” (281) by emphasizing the fictional basis of historical narratives. She calls these texts examples of “historiographical metafiction.” This genre, which she avowedly labels “postmodern,”⁶ “shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured” (289). Historiographical metafiction reveals the epistemological problem at the heart of traditional historiography: though “[h]istory’s referents are presumed to be real [...] we only know the past (which really did exist) through its textualized remains” (288). Drawing on Hayden White’s philosophies,

⁶According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is postmodern in that it confronts “the paradoxes of fictive versus historical representation, the particular vs. the general, and the present versus the past. And its confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is willing to exploit both” (277).

she emphasizes how we epistemologically “constitute” the past by arranging its textualized remains into a recognizable narrative forms (281).

While the trilogies of McCarthy, Roth and Morrison are not primarily representatives of “historiographic metafiction,” all three (to varying extents) take part in the epistemological phenomenon that White, Heise, and Hutcheon describe. The trilogy, as a form, was a way to reconcile a desire for a large-scale literary examination of historical knowledge-making while also acknowledging that traditional “grand narratives” were no longer a valid way to narrativize the past. All three trilogies are expressly interested in how history gets constituted from the remnants of the past. All register a need to investigate whether traditional historiography is sufficient to the task of accurately representing the experience of the past. All skillfully manipulate narrative structures in order to examine how history gets constructed through storytelling frameworks.

The trilogy form also appeals as a response to the anxieties arising from the coincidence of the collapse of the twentieth century’s dominant political and ideological configurations with the endings of the century and the millennium. In the 1980s and 1990s, the looming “ends”—of the century, of the millennium, of (supposedly) history—were driving this vast re-appraisal of historical and literary knowledge systems. The trilogy form, with its firm end at the third novel, unlike most other types of serial narratives, is an appropriate form through which to explore and take advantage of cultural and historical “endings.” As Frank Kermode has argued, human beings need “the sense of an ending” to give shape to their lives. People ordinarily live in what he terms

“the midst” (8): a seeming “intermediary” (7) state potentially untethered from either a beginning or end point and therefore without a legible shape or form. Endings, Kermode argues, birth the form of human existence by defining its middle and endowing the beginning with weight and significance. According to Kermode, “Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by provision of an end, make possible satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” (17). To borrow Hayden White’s phrase, endings are a sense-making strategy; applying them to human existence engenders that existence as an “arc,” a familiar developmental pattern. The ending of the trilogy retrospectively endows its narrative world with a classic and familiar tri-partite shape, thus rendering the storyworld familiar and more easily “made sense of.” In the 80’s and 90’s, traditional methods of historical epistemology were seemingly disintegrating just at the moment when there was great urgency to evaluate the wreckage and ruins of the twentieth century—to make sense of it. In their fictional investigations into the construction of history, Morrison, McCarthy, and Roth leverage the shaping power of the trilogy, with its powerful sense of an ending, to give their representations of history a “coherent pattern.”

McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison’s use of the word “Trilogy”

All three authors have called their novels trilogies, though they vary greatly in the extent to which they have actively authored the novels as formally recognizable trilogies. Both McCarthy and Roth have published their trilogies in a single volume. While McCarthy did this immediately after his third novel was published, Roth waited another eleven years after *The Human Stain* was published. Morrison, as of

this writing, has not yet done published her novels as single volume. The single volume gives paratextual authority to the trilogy form, and the point at which each author decided to publish their novels as one (or not) is indicative of their investment in having their works widely perceived and acknowledged as a unified whole. Yet, as this study will show, such paratextual apparatus is of secondary importance to other components that unite the novels in a trilogy. A trilogy, then, does not only (or primarily) reside in publication practices. Rather, it grows out of an author's recurring engagement with a specific set of narrative concerns that call for or require a large-scale literary examination.

Of the three authors, McCarthy was the most aggressive in treating his three novels as a trilogy in the conventional sense of the word. When *All the Pretty Horses* was published in 1992, he was already calling the novel "the first volume of a trilogy," and the raw material for the third part of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, had, by that point, existed for over 10 years.⁷ When the second and third novels were published in 1994 and 1998, respectively, their proper titles were *The Crossing, Volume 2, The Border Trilogy*, and *Cities of the Plain, Volume 3, The Border Trilogy*.⁸ In 1999, merely one year after the final book was published, he published all three novels in a single volume, *The Border Trilogy*. This suggests that McCarthy had had long-standing vision of these novels as working together as a single, coherent unit and wished for his audience to read them as such. Additionally, his three novels are united through recurring characters: John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. John Grady

⁷ See Richard B. Woodward's *New York Times* article, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," for information about the genesis of *Cities of the Plain*.

⁸ See Michiko Kakutani's reviews of *The Crossing*, "Border Crossings: Real and Symbolic" and *Cities of the Plain*, "Moving Along the Border Between Past and Future."

appears in the first and third books, and Billy Parham in the second and third books. Of the three authors in this study, McCarthy is most invested in explicitly linking the three books to each other through thematic structures and paratextual apparatuses.

Roth occupies a middle ground in his relationship to the conventional form of the trilogy. By 2000, when the last book of his trilogy, *The Human Stain*, was published, he was actively calling the three novels a “thematic trilogy” (McGrath, “Zuckerman’s Alter Brain”) and book reviews referred to the novel as part of a trilogy.⁹ However, before *The Human Stain*, there was no reference to a trilogy in *New York Times* reviews of either *American Pastoral* (1997) or *I Married A Communist* (1998).¹⁰ This lack of critical discussion about a trilogy during the publication of the first two novels would suggest that Roth may have decided to turn them into a trilogy at some point between the second and third books. Compared to McCarthy, this “trilogizing” of the three novels most likely occurred much later in Roth’s writing and publication process. However, all three books are united through the first-person narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, whom Roth has called his “alter brain” (McGrath, “Zuckerman’s Alter Brain”). Zuckerman is one of Roth’s most famous creations, and his vocal, vociferous presence had provided the structural link to Roth’s previous trilogy, *Zuckerman Bound*.¹¹ Therefore Roth had some previous experience thinking about how three novels might come together as a trilogy, particularly novels structured through Zuckerman’s inimitable narration. Roth did

⁹ See Michiko Kakutani’s review of *The Human Stain* in the *New York Times*, “Confronting the Failure of a Professor Who Passes.”

¹⁰ See Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* reviews of *American Pastoral*, “A Postwar Paradise Shattered from Within,” and *I Married a Communist*. “Manly Giant vs. Zealots and Scheming Women.”

¹¹ *Zuckerman Bound* is technically a tetralogy, though Roth has called the first three novels a trilogy. These are *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). The tetralogy includes *The Prague Orgy* (1985).

eventually publish all three novels as single volume, *The American Trilogy 1997 – 2000*, in 2011, a move that gave the novels material reality as a trilogy.

Of the three authors, Morrison is the least concerned with endowing her trilogy with paratextual authority. She has not yet published it as single volume, nor do the titles of her novels—*Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*—indicate that they are parts of a trilogy. Reviews of all three books published in *The New York Times* do not describe them as parts of a trilogy.¹² Unlike the novels in McCarthy’s and Roth’s trilogies, Morrison’s novels are not united by recurring characters or settings. Morrison did originally plan the three novels as a single three-volume work, as the critic Gail Caldwell points out, but *Beloved* eventually (and unsurprisingly, in retrospect) emerged as its own novel. When *Beloved* was published, she viewed it as the first of three works (241) examining, as she said, “[T]he way women love” (Powers 31 – 32). Thus, her trilogy is often called the Love Trilogy. Yet, for all its lack of paratextual ligaments and recurring characters and settings—markers of conventional trilogies—Morrison’s trilogy is the only chronologically sequential trilogy in this study; each novel takes place 50 years after the one before it. Further, each novel is based on an actual historical incident,¹³ which provides a structural and thematic endoskeleton for the three-part form. Thus, of the three trilogies in this study, Morrison’s is actually the most deeply invested in adhering to well-known formal conventions: the three novels are chronologically sequential and examine

¹² See Margaret Atwood’s review of *Beloved*, “Jaunted by Their Nightmares”; Christopher Lehmann-Haupt’s review of *Jazz*, “2 Voices”; and Michiko Kakutani’s review of *Paradise*, “Worthy Women, Unredeemable Men.”

¹³ See Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia*, 60, 70, and 90. *Beloved* is based on the story of Margaret Garner, who killed her child rather than allowing the child to return to slavery; *Jazz* is based on a photograph of a young girl Morrison came across while editing *The Harlem Book of the Dead*; *Paradise* is based on newspaper article that Morrison found exhorting blacks to “Come Prepared or Not at All” to territories in the south and Midwest.

actual historical events. The trilogy with the least amount of paratextual reality is, in some ways, most familiar in its use of the form.

The Architectonics of Form: How the Trilogy Produces History

For McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison the tri-partite form, with its reference to the Aristotelian mandate that narratives have a clear beginning, middle, and end, provides a sense of coherence and completeness of representation that these authors want to achieve in their surveys of the twentieth-century American experience. Yet they also break with the conventional definition of the form (a chronological sequence of novels connected by plot) in ways that reflect their ambivalence about the possibility of coherently and completely representing a historical experience. The loose or non-existent ligaments of plot, characters, setting, and chronological sequence are appropriate for authors writing at a point when one master history has morphed into many local histories; when grand narratives have lost their credibility as the “controlling story,” to borrow Morrison’s term (*Paradise* 13); and when the precepts of historical knowledge itself have been revealed as fictive in nature. In the hands of McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison, the trilogy becomes an agile form capable of mediating between a desire for a sense of complete representation and the knowledge that such representation may only be partially available at the end of the twentieth century.

The core of their creative project is an attempt to resolve the paradox of desire for a new and adequate “master narrative,” and the belief that such a narrative has become inconceivable. To appreciate the ways in which they develop this underlying tension, it is useful to see their aim as the achievement of what Frederic Jameson calls

a “totality” of historical representation. The critics Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks gloss Jameson’s concept in the following way:

Totality is meant to function as a prescription to strive constantly to relate and connect, to situate and interpret each object or phenomenon in the context of those social and historical forces that shape and enable it. (22)

Indeed, that is precisely what the trilogies in this study ask us to do: relate and connect, situate and interpret the individual novels to each other in order to gain a sense of the larger historical force fields at work. Jameson’s concept of totality, however, is not *totalizing*; that is, he is not advocating to hermetically seal the borders of historical perspective and understand that knowledge to be complete, unified, and final in its representational capacities.¹⁴ Rather, he advocates for an “open totality,” which allows for

the creative and unpredictable efficacy of the new. New forces push in different direction such that an open totality is always moving and growing in an amorphous way, never toward any fixed or pre-given end. (21 -22)

“Totality” is thus a set of dynamic relations, rather than the fixed conception of historical reality demanded by both positivism and traditional Marxism.

This is precisely the sense of history that McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison’s trilogies give us: the sense of an open totality that allows for the introduction of new forces and welcomes the unpredictable growth that results from those forces. The

¹⁴ Hardt and Weeks gloss totalizing epistemologies as those that attempt to recuperate differences within an *a priori* unity (21).

“loose variation” on themes¹⁵ that these trilogies offer provoke a whole set of interpretive questions about the very definition and function of the trilogy itself, thereby expanding the parameters of possible critique about how to use literary form to represent history. The very issues that make these trilogies problematic as conventional examples of the form actually make them very appropriate vehicles for serious, ambitious investigations into the complexities of historical representation at the end of the twentieth century.

According to Jameson, historical totality can never be completely represented or captured within any aesthetic, social, or political model; the best we can do is attempt to situate ourselves in relation to that totality so that we can begin to partially grasp its complexity and shape (22). One of the primary methods for doing this is what Jameson terms “cognitive mapping”:

a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentatable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structure as a whole. (Jameson *Postmodernism* 51)

As Hardt and Weeks emphasize, cognitive mapping “is a form of praxis”—a *practice* that we can use to apply to the totality of history in order to begin to understand it (*Jameson Reader* 22). It is a

necessarily partial and incomplete rendering of the multidimensional and constantly changing totality that serves as a kind of navigational aid. (22)

¹⁵In Michiko Kakutani’s review of McCarthy’s middle novel, *The Crossing*, Kakutani remarked that the *Border Trilogy* seemed “a loose variation on [the] themes of loss, exile, violence and fate.

A cognitive map enables us to begin to pinpoint the location of the historical forces that dictate our subjective experiences. If the three novels of the trilogy act together to refer to a Jamesonesque totality, then the individual novels act as coordinates that help us, the readers, to mentally map that historical landscape. These coordinates are access points to the total historical representation that the trilogy aspires to reference. The tripartite structure of the trilogy provides the necessary navigational aid to negotiate that totality.

The three trilogies in this study restructure the timeline of events of the late twentieth century as a horizontal plane, and each of the three novels represent a coordinate on this plane. The individual novels in the trilogy delineate an imagined space of history that can be accessed at different points and through which readers can wonder in any direction without losing track of “what happens when,” so to speak. Yet this imagined universe is still bounded by the limits of the three novels that constitute its landscape—the universe formed by a trilogy, unlike other serial forms, is finite. There is a point at which this imagined terrain begins and a point at which it ends. The finite nature of this space enables readers to better grasp the form and shape of this period, and to see this particular part of it whole.

The form of the trilogy thereby provides a cognitive map for this period by delimiting the site of all the major conflicts, problems, and achievements associated with this era in American history. All three trilogies discussed here offer a spacialized representation or cognitive map of history.¹⁶ Chronological sequence takes a back seat to the primacy of space. Neither McCarthy’s nor Roth’s trilogies are

¹⁶ Again, this mode of unification harks back to the early twentieth century trilogies. As Jonathan Richardson Smith argues, “[T]he trilogy’s primary modes of suggesting unity are not temporal or narrative, but spatial, taxonomical, allegorical, even mystical and numerological” (2).

chronologically sequential, and McCarthy's entire trilogy is about a contested space: the U.S/Mexico border. While Morrison's trilogy is arranged in chronological sequence, the primary settings of her novels rely on distinct spaces: the house at 124 Bluestone in *Beloved*, the City in *Jazz*, the rural town of Ruby in *Paradise*. In this sense, she is almost as spatially oriented as McCarthy. Further, all three trilogies are interested in investigating, to varying degrees, what Roth labeled the "American pastoral," one of the most powerful and enduring national myths ever to coalesce within the American cultural imagination—so enduring, in fact, that it continues to evince a vice-like grip on the national imagination at the end of the twentieth century.

The pastoral is a potent imaginary space, exerting great force on the formal elements of the trilogies in this study and the geographies they create. Generally speaking, the U.S. is "pastoral" in its assumption of its own essential innocence and naturalness, linked to a notion of American national exceptionalism. For believers of this myth, the promise of American life is that of free, innocent, and harmless self-(re)creation enabled by a vast amplitude of space.¹⁷ As Leo Marx persuasively argued almost 50 years ago, American pastoralism is deeply ideological, "achiev[ing] political results outside literature" and "spill[ing] over into thinking about real life" (130). This, in Marx's eyes, distinguishes the American pastoral from its poetic European antecedents.¹⁸ Annette Kolodny sums up this point forcefully: "American pastoral, unlike European, holds at its very core the promise of fantasy as daily

¹⁷ This definition of the pastoral is indebted to Richard Slotkin's concept of the role of myth in the American cultural imagination and its impact on ideas of national exceptionalism.

¹⁸ Marx dates the birth of the American Pastoral to the end of the 18th century (73). By the 18th century, according to him, the European pastoral form devolves into "a fixed body of poetic conventions," slowly dying at the hands of Alexander Pope and his cohort (94). A few things intervene in this situation to make the American pastoral possible: the rise of an aesthetic philosophy surrounding landscape in the 18th century (83) and the geography of the New World itself, which lent itself to such adjectives as "Paradise" (76).

reality” (7). All three authors use the trilogy form to grapple with the myth and consequences of imagining a fantasy as a daily reality. McCarthy’s and Roth’s trilogies are practically predicated on a large-scale examination of this myth, and even Morrison—hardly one to indulge in what have been largely white-only visions of national exceptionalism—gets into the game with *Paradise*. For the trilogies in this study, the pastoral is a metaphorical space projected onto real geographies: Mexico (McCarthy), Oklahoma (Morrison), and even New Jersey (Roth, of course).

The geographies in each trilogy—largely pastoral but also domestic and urban in Morrison’s case—are units of what Mikhael Bakhtin called “time space.” (84). He uses the word “chronotope” to describe “the interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84):

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal Indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (84)

For the purposes of this study, I want to focus on the chronotope as the fusion between a sense of time—i.e., the past, present, future—and a well-delimited unit of space. In each trilogy, the past, present, and future take on a different chronological identity, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, and the units of space vary in size from intimate domestic structures to vast swaths of geography. The trilogies temporalize space and spatialize time, and this spatialization

of the past and, more specifically, of history is one of the primary unifiers of the trilogies in this study.

McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison do not present a straightforward chronology of late-twentieth century American history. Rather, they present an imagined map of this history, of what it would look like if all the events they portray were spatially contiguous with each other and could be accessed from a variety of points. Their trilogies present an architectonics of history; that is, the trilogy form provides a unifying structural design for this history, situating different pieces of it in relation to each other within its structure so that they make sense as a whole. Viewing the trilogy as architectonic in its effects, as a fictional “house” for the representation of history, enables a proximity between different events that might otherwise be separated by chronology, sequence, and order. When these events are put into proximity with each other, similarities arise and resonate between them that might otherwise be muffled in service of more conventional ordering techniques. The trilogy structure thus endows these events with a narrative unity, triggering our sense-making practices and facilitating our ability to gain purchase on this history. In the hands of McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison, the trilogy proves to be a very appropriate form for grasping the problems and complexities of the late twentieth century American experience.

The first chapter on Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy* focuses on the way in which the three novels, *All The Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of Plain*, attempt to reconfigure narrative beginnings, middles, and endings in the border territory between the U.S. and Mexico. As one storyteller says in *The Crossing*, “All is telling. Do not doubt it” (C 155), and *The Border Trilogy* argues that the border

territory is as much a creation of its diverse narrative genres—*corridos*, *historias*, and the Western—as it is a geographical phenomenon. Additionally, in McCarthy’s eyes, the U.S./Mexico border is an appropriate place to close out the century due to the tensions between the deep history of the area and an unyielding, foreboding future asserting itself on the landscape. McCarthy is concerned with the way in which narrative structures existence, giving it shape and form, and his use of the trilogy is a way to give form to a particular late-twentieth century experience while also according the border territory the literary space it deserves.

The second chapter about Philip Roth’s *American Trilogy* examines how the trilogy form attempts to cohere the incoherent experience of late-twentieth century America. Each of the three novels argue that there is an essential diremption at the crux of American culture that manifests itself within the constructs of our national identity. On one side, we have the “pastoral,” which promises liberating, peaceful, and non-harmful self-(re)invention within the national space; on the other side of that, we have what Roth memorably terms the “counterpastoral,” which he defines as “the indigenous American berserk” (*AP* 86), the suppressed chaos, disorder, and violence that constantly erupts from our abjected national spaces. *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* endeavor to represent these two sides of the American identity and the way in which the protagonists in all three novels attempt to construct a life story that would somehow reconcile their dichotomous existences. Roth, too, desires such coherence, but understands that it’s a fiction and therefore best represented through fictional structures, such as the trilogy. In his

hands, then, the trilogy gives American national identity the formal coherence it inherently lacks.

The third chapter argues that Toni Morrison's Love trilogy excavates African-American history through diverse narrative structures that both demonstrate how this history has been written over, erased, or otherwise silenced in the national discourse and how to salvage this history from such erasures. The three-part trilogy form asserts a conventional timeline, with each novel occurring roughly 50 years after the one before it, and each novel is based on an actual historical incident. Thus the exoskeleton of Morrison's trilogy is the most conventional out of the three trilogies in this study in the chronological linearity and regularity of the novels as well as in the novels' roots in true historical events. Morrison, then, uses the trilogy form to inject to the African-American presence in traditional narratives of U.S. history—linear, chronologically ordered—while also creating a space for the African-American experience of those national narratives, which are decidedly disordered and non-linear, the result of continuous erasures within the African-American story.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*: What Happens to Country

Introduction

“This is how it was with the old waddies, ain’t it?” Lacy Rawlins poses this question to his friend, riding companion, and all-round partner in adventure, John Grady Cole, at the beginning of Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*. The two boys, seventeen- and sixteen-years old, respectively, have ridden down to Mexico from San Juan, Texas, leaving behind the rapidly modernizing landscape of the 1949 United States for a dream of the “Old West.” They believe they can realize this dream in Mexico, with its beckoning haciendas, agricultural economy, and streets where horses and donkeys remain the primary modes of transportation. To Rawlins and John Grady, Mexico is an American pastoral paradise, just located in a different country: it offers ample space to reinvent themselves and to inscribe themselves on its pre-industrial landscape; it is their cowboy playground. In McCarthy’s world, they turn out to be both very wrong about this assumption – and still a little bit right about it. All three novels of McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy* examine the tension between U.S. myth and Mexican otherness against the backdrop of their shared border, which runs from California in the west to the Gulf of Mexico in the east. *All the Pretty Horses*, the first novel of the trilogy, was published in 1992; the second novel, *The Crossing*, was published in 1994, and the third, *Cities of the Plain*, in 1998. All three texts were gathered into a single volume titled *The Border Trilogy* in 1999. The *Border Trilogy* is primarily set between the years 1939 to 1951, though the last book, *Cities of the Plain*, takes a science fictional leap into the twenty-first century, ending in 2001. *The*

Border Trilogy is most recognizable as a trilogy: it has the paratextual apparatus commonly associated with trilogies, such as the single volume edition, and the titles of the individual novels actual reference their place within the trilogy, e.g., *The Crossing: Volume 2 of The Border Trilogy*. Because McCarthy openly embraces the trilogy form, *The Border Trilogy* is an appropriate place to begin this study.

Broadly speaking, *The Border Trilogy* interrogates how fictional beginnings, middles, and endings shape and form the U.S. national narrative in the geographic region that straddles the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. In McCarthy's work, the border is both spatial and temporal, real and imaginary. The U.S./Mexico border is a geographical space, but from the perspective of McCarthy's boy heroes, this border is also a temporal and historical border that separates the past (Mexico) from the modern present (the U.S.). In their minds, Mexico functions as a substitute for the old west. It is a place where they can re-contact the lost past; it fuels their dreams of an adventurer's underworld and a field for romance. What they actually find, however, is intractable Mexican difference, hostile to their desires and dreams. The border, then, is also cultural and racial. Further, the difference between the two sides of the border is also a difference in story-telling modes. The U.S. strives for national myth, from originary to apocalyptic – a myth perhaps best embodied in the “generic Western,” a story type at once archetypal and historically specific. Mexican *historias* work differently; they make and prefer “middles.” “Historia” can be variously translated into English as “history,” “story,” or “tale,” and McCarthy takes full advantage of the multiple valences of this word, freely conflating its different meanings in order to stress the

fluid boundaries between these narrative categories. In McCarthy's hands, historians construct the "history" of the border region as an admixture of stories, historical occurrences, and meta-commentary about the meaning and practice of storytelling.

The Border Trilogy attempts to reconcile these two story-telling modes—the pre-determined linear plot of the western with the cyclical and existential concerns of the historia—in order to articulate a syncretic version of the history narrative. This version would account for the way that the border region resists the simplified U.S. national myths that are applied to it while simultaneously embracing that myth-making activity as a fundamental component of American border epistemology. Wherever there is a border or frontier, there will be cowboys, and those cowboys will try to play out some version of the U.S. national myth on the backs of people from another nation, another culture, and another world.

The Border Trilogy is the most assertively chronotopic of the three trilogies in this study. From the moment the train comes whistling out of the east in San Angelo, Texas at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* (4), the U.S. embodies a nation rapidly moving into a dubious future. And, from the moment John Grady Cole and Lacy Rawlins eye the prelapsarian paradise of the hacienda called, appropriately enough, La Purisima (97), Mexico represents the past. This spatialization of time—of the past and the future—pervades the entire trilogy, even as Mexico rejects the simplified and highly romanticized version of the past McCarthy's boy heroes often project onto it. However, while the dichotomy of the U.S.-as-future and Mexico-as-past is complicated over the course of the trilogy, it is never quite dismantled. *The Border Trilogy* leverages this contrast between the U.S. and Mexico in order to

examine ideas about the future, the past, and history at the end of the twentieth century.

The chronotopicity of McCarthy's trilogy organizes the sense of time across the three novels; chronological sequence is secondary to the primary pull of the past of Mexico and the future of the U.S. Indeed, the three novels are chronologically out-of-order: *The Crossing* takes place first, set between 1939 and 1945; then comes *All the Pretty Horses*, set in 1949; and, finally, *Cities of the Plain*, set between 1950 and 2001. This disordered sequence asks questions about the validity of applying traditional beginnings, middles, and endings to certain narratives and articulates the ways that conventional chronological sequences cannot always explicate where—and when—a narrative begins or ends, or what constitutes its middle. The trilogy is therefore an appropriate form to narrate the complexities of an ambiguously defined location like the border region between the United States and Mexico. Indeed, this border area itself exists in a perpetual middle state, located between the two more culturally and nationally well-defined locations of the United States and Mexico. The trilogy makes tangible the historian Oscar Martinez's observation that this region calls for a historiography different than "a traditional chronological treatment" (xi)¹⁹ because of its various ethnic populations that have historically straddled both nations; unlike the United States and Mexico, these populations do not neatly begin and end at the international boundary. As a form, the trilogy interrogates where the stories—and histories—of this politically and culturally amorphous area begin and end, and the places that must be crossed in the journey between those two points. With the U.S.

¹⁹Martinez gives the "various perspectives" of the region as one important reason that he does a "topical history" of this area.

representing the future at one geographical pole and Mexico representing the past at another geographical pole, space dictates the sense of time and chronology in *The Border Trilogy*.

The first novel in the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), flirts with the generic precepts of the Western and asks subtle questions about how and to what end that genre functions as an originary narrative within our national imagination.²⁰ It introduces us to the sixteen-year-old John Grady Cole, a self-styled cowboy who does not quite fit in with the modernizing landscape of Texas in 1949. His grandfather has just died, his father is dying, and his mother is selling the family ranch. In order to assuage his own sense of loss and cultural displacement, he heads down to Mexico with his best friend, Lacy Rawlins. There he has many adventures with horses and girls. He finds work at a wealthy hacienda, falls in the love with the daughter of the place, gets arrested on a specious charge, lands in prison, gets out, exacts revenge on those who put him there, and then finally returns to Texas. When he returns to the U.S., he is even more dislocated than he was before, having finally given up the dreams and the fantasies that had insulated him from the harsher realities of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

The second book, *The Crossing* (1994), signals a marked shift in tone. From the beginning, it is a more digressive and deliberative text, and it is much more concerned with the metaphysics of storytelling and narrative than either *All the Pretty Horses* or *Cities of the Plain*. Indeed, the entire novel constitutes a lengthy

²⁰In his introduction to *Narrative Beginnings*, Brian Richardson presents the concept of a national “official narrative with a decisive point of origin” (8-9) that several contributors to this volume take up. My idea of the generic Western as an originary national narrative is indebted to Richardson’s postulation of this idea.

investigation into the epistemology of narrative, explicitly examining how the category of “narrative” structures our knowledge of the world. While it takes place in the same general region as those two books, concentrating its focus on the area surrounding the border between New Mexico and Mexico, it is not as preoccupied with the specific generic conventions of the Western as the first and third novels are. Though the novel opens in 1929 and closes in 1945, the bulk of the action takes place between 1939 and 1941, which means that it is situated at the earliest chronological point in the larger storyworld of the trilogy.

The Crossing is a trilogy in microcosm. It is about Billy Parham’s three trips to Mexico and the adventures he has there, which include listening to three different storytellers. He first takes off for Mexico alone when he, like John Grady, is sixteen. He leaves his family with no explanation, in order to return a she-wolf that had been attacking their cattle to her rightful home in the Mexican mountains. This quixotic quest fails, and he ends up killing the wolf to save her from dogfights. When he returns to New Mexico, he discovers his parents have been brutally murdered by horse thieves and his younger brother, Boyd, is the only survivor, along with the family dog. Billy and Boyd head back down to Mexico, which is where Billy thinks the thieves have taken the horses. They successfully locate the horses, though Boyd gets shot when they try forcibly to take them from the *latifundio*, the large landed estate, where they ended up. Billy stays with Boyd while Boyd recovers. However, once he is better, Boyd, along with a young girl the brothers had rescued from would-be rapists, disappears into the Mexican countryside and Billy never sees him again. When he returns to the United States a second time, he discovers the country has

entered World War II. He attempts to enlist numerous times but is turned away each time due to a heart ailment and ends up wandering through the Southwest during the war years before he finally returns to Mexico a third time to retrieve Boyd's body. He returns to New Mexico a final time with Boyd's bones, and after he buries his younger brother, he ends the novel again wandering through the Southwest.

With *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy forefronts questions about the capacity of the generic Western to appropriately narrate the post-war United States, playing up its generic conventions even more so than he does in *All the Pretty Horses*. *Cities of the Plain* is both the last text in the trilogy and the last text chronologically speaking. It opens in 1951 with a rollicking bar scene that immediately joins the narratives of Billy Parham and John Grady Cole. This scene, like the opening scene in *The Crossing*, marks another significant shift in tone. From the first page, this last novel openly delights in its self-reflexive relationship to the Western, and moves quickly along its familiar tropes. Both John Grady and Billy Parham have jobs as ranch hands at a spread in New Mexico, right near the border cities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. They work and socialize together, taking full advantage of the easy passage between the two cities and the two nations. John Grady quickly falls in love with a young Mexican prostitute, Magdalena, and plans to marry her and bring her back to the ranch; however, Eduardo, her Mexican pimp, kills her first. John Grady confronts Eduardo in a knife fight, and they both end up killing each other. This violent act closes the main part of the novel, and the epilogue quickly takes Billy fifty years into the future. This future, however, bears a striking resemblance in both tone and content to the past, or at least Billy Parham's past as it was portrayed in *The*

Crossing. Thus the trilogy ends in a narrative place that McCarthy has marked as the middle.

McCarthy's sense of a powerful middle that structures the journey or narrative of existence resonates with Frank Kermode's description of "the midst" in his critical work, *The Sense of an Ending*. In the first chapter, Kermode examines "Fictions of the End," which looks at the way in which different visions of "Apocalypse" can provide insight as to why our fictions, with their consonant ends and beginnings, answer a need we all have to "belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end" (5, 3). As Kermode claims, "Men [...] rush 'into the midst,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7). The need for "an imaginatively recorded past" and an "imaginatively predicted future," to use Kermode's terms (8), arises from a desire to give the middle of things a formal meaning it would otherwise lack. What gives meaning to a life that is inherently lived "in the midst of things" is a fictive connection with some sort of origin and end point. Indeed, as McCarthy senses and articulates through *The Crossing* and by extension the entire *Border Trilogy*, these beginnings and endings are necessary productions of the inherent middle-ness of any journey. In *The Border Trilogy*, the middle novel consistently and constantly organizes the entire structure of the trilogy around its central narrative force. Yet McCarthy, of all the authors in this study, is most preoccupied with apocalyptic ends. Indeed, the last scene in *The Crossing*, with noon-time "alien dusk" and "alien dark" (425), is arguably portraying the Trinity Nuclear Test that occurred at Alamogordo,

New Mexico in July 1945 (Busby 243)²¹ This end-orientation provokes McCarthy to give meaning and importance to the middle, which marks out the space in which most people spend their lives.

Each of the three texts has at least one story-within-a-story. Both as a form and within its narrative structure, the trilogy emphasizes the stories located in the middle of larger narratives—the second text in the middle of the trilogy itself and the numerous stories-within-a-story inserted into the main narratives—as a way of re-routing the U.S. national narrative away from the a destructive future, which McCarthy represents in apocalyptic terms, towards a version of that story firmly rooted at a narrative mid-point. In *The Border Trilogy*, these narrative locations in the middle of the larger story re-calibrate the importance of beginnings and endings through their extensive interludes, ultimately emphasizing the importance of a continuous journey-like story whose beginnings exist only in our reference to them and whose endings circle back to the middle. These stories interjected into the middle of larger narratives are generic hybrids that coalesce through the concept of *historia*, a Spanish word that can be translated into English as “history,” “story,” or “tale.” Thus, these multiple stories embedded in the larger structure of the trilogy render “history” as a narrative construct that offers multiple ways of engaging with stories of the past. These *historias* are about Mexico, and they ultimately become a way of requiring the U.S. national narrative to account for the past of other nations in the way that it constructs its future. In this way, the future- or end-oriented narrative associated with

²¹Mark Busby, in his article, references the critic Alex Hunt’s claim about this possibility. Hunt’s hypothesis could be accurate, given McCarthy’s antipathy towards the post-war militarization of the Southwest, which comes across strongly throughout the trilogy.

the United States becomes sublimated to a more transnational view where stories of other nations intersect with its own.

Different storytellers relate long narratives to either John Grady Cole or Billy Parham, and all of these storytellers are somehow connected to Mexico; they are either from that country or have lived there for many years. *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* each have one substantial story-within-a-story, while *The Crossing*, the middle text, has three, an arrangement that mirrors the overall structure of the trilogy. It is the last of these stories, which occurs in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, that helps explain the particular vision of the U.S and Mexico border region McCarthy attempts to realize through the formal apparatus of the trilogy. In the epilogue, a Mexican wanderer tells a now-elderly Billy Parham about a dream he had of a traveler, who, while journeying through the mountains, decides to spend the night on a rock table that was once used for sacrifices (270). This traveler himself then has a dream where he witnesses a sacrifice about to take place, and it is this dream-within-a-dream that largely provides the subject of the Mexican's story. The traveler dreamed that the participants in this sacrificial ceremony offered him a draught that bestowed upon him great clarity and insight into the world, and one of his revelations was this: "He saw that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come" (282). At the end of *The Border Trilogy*, the dreaming traveler articulates the importance of the "middle" of any sort of "journey." "Journey" is a loaded word in McCarthy's lexicon. Here and in other places in the trilogy, journeys are synonymous with life, and, just as

importantly, with stories or tales. Indeed, towards the end of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham's "journeying began to take upon itself the shape of a tale" (331). In McCarthy's eyes, then, a journey, like narratives and like existence, is an experience that requires traversing large distances and amounts of time. Regardless of the time and distance people cover in their lives or stories or journeys, however, they are still only, and always, in the middle of a more infinite time. The traveler's drug-induced revelation acknowledges the middle-ness of existence, the way that people exist forever in an in-between moment in their lives, no matter how long that moment apparently endures or whether it also seems to have a clear beginning and end.

While the dreaming traveler's observation about the perpetual middle state of all journeys is just one of many vatic truths the Mexican conveys to Billy throughout his story, it does, however, provide insight into McCarthy's use of the trilogy form and the role *The Crossing*, the second text, plays in the trilogy. Indeed, like the dreamer in the Mexican's story, *The Border Trilogy* emphasizes the middle of its own narrative journey, *The Crossing*.

Viewed from the formal perspective of the trilogy, *The Border Trilogy* begins in the middle with *The Crossing*, which is the novel that is situated at the earliest chronological point in the storyworld. It is the most dense and substantial text out of the three with a tri-partite narrative structure that echoes the overall structure of the trilogy: Billy Parham takes three trips to Mexico, and each time he goes down there, he hears three long stories. Furthermore, in a final act that emphasizes tri-partite structures, the third story he hears actually has three different parts. The language of this middle text is also much more ruminative and discursive than either that of *All*

the Pretty Horses or *Cities of the Plain*. The time and attention required to read its many peritactic passages with their concatenating clauses is compounded by its extended length, as it is about a hundred and twenty pages longer than either of the other two texts.²² Therefore, in terms of the time it takes to read it and the amount of textual space it takes up within the overall storyworld of the trilogy, the middle of *The Border Trilogy* is arguably its most substantitive part. Viewed from this perspective, *The Crossing* perfectly exemplifies its name, for it becomes a narrative border region that readers must carefully traverse at length in order to bridge the starting and ending points of the trilogy. This middle novel argues, finally, that every narrative journey becomes an extended crossing through a middle area that asks us how we perceive our beginnings, middles, and ends. As the dreamer emphasizes, this journey through the middle is the journey itself, and beginnings and endings recede in light of this inherent intermediate state of existence.

The Crossing, however, is not the only element within the trilogy that argues for the primacy of the time “in the midst” of a fictional structure. The long interpolated stories that occur in the three texts also articulate a narrative “middleness.” In her critical work *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism*, Ursula Heise specifically examines the temporal elements of stories-within-a-story, a narrative structure she calls “recursion” (59). Heise observes that “the embedded narrative is intercalated between two moments of the main story and serves to dilate that instant ‘in between’” (61). In terms of the temporal relationship between the frame story and the framed story, an act of recursion figures the “temporal interval” in which it takes place “as what it is not, replacing it with the

²² This is according to the Everyman’s Library edition of the trilogy (1999).

story of another moment” (61). Therefore, a framed story is itself a narrative middle time, an extended moment of transition between two points of the frame story that displaces the primacy of that story with its own sense of time and duration.

McCarthy repeatedly asserts the dominance of the recursive moment throughout *The Border Trilogy* in his conspicuous use of paratactic language in the interpolated narratives, which lengthens the time it takes to read each story. While such language appears at other points in the texts, McCarthy deploys it most heavily in the embedded narratives, and it becomes an authorial request to carefully attend to these stories—McCarthy obviously *wants* his readers to pay attention at these points. The storytellers who relate these stories utter sentences like the following, which occurs in the first embedded story in *The Crossing*: “And somewhere in that tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking was a thread that was he and he woke weeping” (149). The concatenating clauses of this sentence, unseparated by commas, create a syntactical maze that compels us to read it repeatedly and slowly in order to discern its meaning. As readers, this language causes us to linger at these recursive moments, extending the time they take up within the trilogy for both us and their listeners within the text. Indeed, in comparison to other narrative occurrences in the text, the duration of the framed stories far exceed the fictional time slots they are given with the primary narrative discourse. Usually storytellers relate their tales over small meals—a midnight snack, an early-morning breakfast—and Billy Parham and John Grady Cole prove very patient, and often silent, listeners as twenty pages of text take up what is probably an hour or so within the chronology of the novels. It is through such linguistic and narrative devices that McCarthy extends the duration of

these embedded narratives, asking his readers and the characters in the texts themselves to spend much time in the “moments in-between” that they create.

Heise and Kermode thus give us two different ways of understanding the “time in the middle” of a fictional structure. Heise explains how the interpolated stories that punctuate the textual landscape of the entire trilogy figure an extensive time “in between” other points in the primary narrative, and how this time between becomes the dominant temporal mode for the entire narrative while the storytellers are relating their stories. In *The Border Trilogy*, the dominance of the recursive moment is abetted by McCarthy’s language, which extends the duration of these stories even further through its syntactical complexity. Kermode, on the other hand, provides a way to understand how McCarthy might be using narrative form as a metaphor for the shape of existence, where, as the dreaming traveler reminds us, we are “always and eternally in the middle.” Kermode examines on an existential level how fictive beginnings and endings “make tolerable one’s moment” between them (4) and explicitly addresses large epistemological questions through his “sense of an ending”; beginnings, middles, and ends, he believes, give meaning to both existence and fictional forms. What Heise’s and Kermode’s respective theories do is illuminate how *The Border Trilogy* consistently prioritizes a “middle time,” which is represented as and through narrative and narrative form. Both critics are concerned about how narratives construct units of time in the middle of things, that “moment” (Kermode’s word) or “instant” (Heise’s word) between two other defining points. In the trilogy, middle time emphasizes the way narratives give meaning to our existence as well as

the act of storytelling itself, as the interpolated narratives show, and these two elements are, in McCarthy's mind, very much related to each other.

Thus, the long interpolated narratives that occur in all three texts are, like *The Crossing* itself, examples of these moments and instants in the middle of things that re-shape the entire narrative (or journey or existence) according to their own temporal dictates. There is another element of meaning to these narratives of the middle in *The Border Trilogy*. This becomes evident in the first long embedded narrative of *The Crossing*, the middle text that articulates much of what McCarthy is attempting to achieve in his use of the trilogy form to conceptualize the U.S.-Mexico border region. The storyteller, an ex-priest, advises Billy Parham, "All is telling. Do not doubt it" (155). This statement, occurring from a narrative location in the middle of things points towards a more multi-faceted sense of what the middle constitutes in *The Border Trilogy*.

The syntax of the sentence "all is telling" is itself unusual. The word "telling" is that grammatical hybrid, a gerund, which is a verb that operates as a noun. As such, it serves multiple linguistic purposes, for it denotes both a concrete thing *and* an activity. As a grammatical unit, a word like "telling" thereby achieves two ends at the same time. It simultaneously gives us the dynamic implication associated the present progressive tense—that this activity is always happening right now—and the materiality associated with simple nouns—that this activity is also a tangible object. The word "telling," then, has at once a temporal dimension, based on its verb-like aspects, and a more material dimension, based on its operational function as a noun. When the ex-priest tells Billy that "all is telling" in the middle of his own extended

period of telling, he is accessing both valences of the word. Every *thing* is telling and everything exists in the *activity* of telling—his own story, and, by extension, those of *The Crossing* and the entire *Border Trilogy*. Narrative and storytelling then become a way of generating the time of the border region—as a moment and instant in the middle of things—and its location, as a place between the United States and Mexico. In this way, “telling” constructs the geography of the border region as a linguistic site, creating the U.S. border region through a narrative act.

These middle sites within *The Border Trilogy* all constitute some version of the “past.” *The Crossing*, for instance, is situated at the earliest point within the chronology of the trilogy, taking place between the years 1929 and 1945. The framed stories refer to actual historical events or that occurred in the border region or, in the case of the Mexican’s story in *Cities of the Plain*, an ancient civilization that he implies was once indigenous to the region. While the “past” of *The Crossing* and the “past” of the embedded narratives actually function in very different ways within the structure of the trilogy—the interpolated stories refer to historical occurrences, and *The Crossing* is “the past” by virtue of being the text that occurs first within the chronology of the trilogy—both point to the emphasis that *The Border Trilogy* places on the past and history, and how these elements form the bedrock of an existence rooted in the middle of things.

The method by which the embedded stories narrate “history” provides insight into how the middle sites linguistically construct the past through a variety of narrative genres. The generic term that would best define the framed narratives would be the Spanish word *historia*; the gypsy storyteller who relates the last framed

narrative in *The Crossing* uses this word to describe his three-part tale, telling Billy Parham that there are “tres historias” regarding an old airplane he and compatriots are dragging through northern Mexico (403). The idea that there are “tres historias” immanent to all stories is one that has repercussions for the form of the trilogy at large. Thus, the word is a particularly appropriate one to describe how McCarthy tries to create a sense of narrative border region through the embedded narratives in *All the Pretty Horses*, *Cities of the Plain*, and, especially, *The Crossing*. “Historia” can be variously translated into English as “history,” “story,” or “tale.” These tales become hybrid entities, for they are both stories and histories at once. The word “historia” mitigates a strict American (i.e. English language) sense of what “history” is by way of the more imaginative aspects of stories and tales implied in the Mexican storytellers’ narratives, especially the gypsy’s narrative at the end of *The Crossing*. In McCarthy’s hands, historias construct the “history” of the border region as an admixture of stories, historical occurrences, and meta-commentary about the meaning and practice of storytelling. It is this narrative multiplicity that the middle locations generate for the entire structure of the trilogy.

These powerful narrative sites in the middle of *The Border Trilogy*, with all their stories and storytellers and multiple tellings, become a way to negotiate McCarthy’s own particular narrative of American progress in the latter half of the twentieth century. Throughout *The Border Trilogy*, he represents the United States as discarding and disavowing narratives of history and the past in an effort to more quickly achieve a questionable national future. Anxiety about this future permeates all three texts, and various characters register it at different points: at the beginning of *All*

the Pretty Horses, John Grady Cole's father observes, "People don't feel safe no more [...] We don't know what's goin' to show up here come daylight" (26). Towards the end of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham realizes that "there was no certainty in any of it. Not just the coming of war. Anything at all" (346); finally, in *Cities of the Plain*, Billy informs John Grady, "[...] this country ain't the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet" (78). In McCarthy's imagination, then, World War II is a pivotal event that set the nation on an uncertain course in the second half the twentieth century.

The "country" that Billy refers to in the last quote, however, is also the specific southwestern region, which felt the military ramifications of World War II in a very distinct way. In the last years of the war and the era immediately following it, the southwest became an increasingly attractive location for military activities. Indeed, New Mexico was the site of the well-known Trinity Nuclear Test in July 1945, which exploded atomic bombs at the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range in preparation for the U.S. attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of the same year (Burroughs "Trinity Test"). Appropriating large swaths of in the Southwest for military purposes continued well into the rest of the twentieth century. According to Oscar Martinez, as the Cold War gained momentum following the end of World War II, the U.S. government felt the need to "disperse defense installations to make their destruction more difficult in the event of attack by the Soviet Union or other unfriendly Communist nations." The Southwest provided such a location in addition to offering good weather and large tracts of land that made it particularly amenable to airplane and missile launching. *The Border Trilogy* registers this encroaching

militarization and the accumulation of massive weaponry in the region with a sense of great foreboding. At the end of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham witnesses an very odd sunset in the middle of the day, marked by “an alien dusk” and “an alien dark” (425), which the critic Alex Hunt postulates is probably the Trinity test (qtd. in Busby 243). In *Cities of the Plain*, when John Grady warns Billy that “[w]e’ll all be goin somewheres when the army takes this spread over” (50), he is referring to the huge tracts of land the U.S. military took by eminent domain as part of its massive build-up of military installations in the Southwest.²³ *The Border Trilogy* thus represents the border region in the midst of this dubious post-war transformation, where missiles and fighter planes, rather than ranches and cattle, begin to define its landscape. In McCarthy’s hands, the Southwest becomes a location that is particularly representative of national—and international—momentum in general, swiftly advancing into an ominous future, armed with increasingly sophisticated technologies capable of world-wide destruction.

McCarthy thus associates the national future with the possibility of utter annihilation—and this “End” has been devised in the deserts of the Southwest. Kermode perceives the threat of nuclear destruction as our modern version of Apocalypse, or the “End” as he would term it.²⁴ The “End,” then, is the future of our

²³ McCarthy’s ending in *The Crossing* echoes the last section of Silko’s *Ceremony*, when Tayo finds himself in an abandoned uranium mine that the U.S. Government had built in order to prize the mineral from the land in preparation for the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (243 – 244). Like Billy, Tayo’s grandmother had witnessed the Trinity Nuclear Test, something Tayo only realizes when he spends the night in the mine, which, he comes to understand, is the final part of his healing ceremony (246).

²⁴ Kermode does not actually believe that nuclear annihilation represents a “uniquely terrible” version of Apocalypse. He argues that, historically speaking, the evidence for Apocalypse looked as “good” to our “predecessors” as it does to us, and ultimately believes that “it would be childish to argue [...] that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky” (95).

existential narrative, and McCarthy very much aligns the national future of the U.S. with visions of an apocalyptic end. In doing so, he takes part in a national exercise that, as Perry Miller points out, has been occurring since the Puritans first conceptualized their “errand into the wilderness”: envisioning the Apocalypse as the inevitable End to the American national narrative (or, to use Miller’s terms, the “errand” first started by the Puritans). Unlike Miller, though, who questions whether the human-made “catastrophe” of the atomic age is enough to trigger the requisite divine “Judgment” of true Apocalypse (239), McCarthy certainly thinks it does—indeed, for a much fuller expression of this vision, see his 2006 novel, *The Road*.²⁵

The narratives of the middle that saturate the entire *Border Trilogy* therefore become a way of attenuating this national end (or End). They attempt to sap this potential end of its power to determine the overarching narrative of the transnational border region in the latter half of the twentieth century. The middle narratives, then, are an antidote to McCarthy’s own apocalyptic predilections, an attempt to mitigate this headlong rush into an ominous national future. The end loses its significance in light of the extensive middle zone they form in *The Crossing* specifically and *The Border Trilogy* in general, for they re-circulate the narrative energy away from these apocalyptic visions back towards the middle time of their own making (or telling). Indeed, the last embedded narrative in *Cities of the Plain* occurs in the epilogue, after the story has leaped fifty years into the future. This last story re-routes the end of the trilogy away from apocalyptic destruction, or the “End,” and back towards the middle—a story-within-a-story—the productive site of telling and narrating in the

²⁵ 9/11, with its airplanes flying into sky scrapers against a clear blue September sky, pushed McCarthy into full apocalyptic mode, and *The Road* registers this.

trilogy. Thus, *The Border Trilogy* comes to a close in McCarthy's version of the "the middest" rather than his version of "the End."

In *The Border Trilogy*, the middle sites assemble a version of "Mexico" through their stories and storytellers. All the embedded narratives are told in that country, with the exception of that last one. All the storytellers have strong ties to that country, regardless of whatever larger ethnic or cultural affiliations they may have. All of the stories are set there even if they concern issues that effect the broader border region. The telling that occurs in these middle locations generate Mexico as a narrative construct, a place and a time that exists through the linguistic act of narrative. Thus, these narrative sites in the middle of things imagine "Mexico" as the middle that mitigates the questionable future—or End—that McCarthy attaches to the U.S. national narrative.

In order to diffuse the end, or the future, of its power to shape the story of the border region, McCarthy interjects his own version of Mexico's past into these middle locations. The interpolated stories are "historias"; they generally form and shape actual events from Mexico's past into tales with larger narrative goals than the mere recitation of historical "facts." As such, their purpose expands from narrowly representing the past to providing a meta-discursive exploration about the possibilities history offers in shaping the reality of the present—the narrative, or journey which gives meaning to existence. Two out of the five are about the Mexican Revolution, which took place between 1910 and 1920; another is about an earthquake in the state of Sonora in 1887; and a third is about a plane crash which occurred in 1915 in the "high desert mountains of Sonora" (*Crossing* 404). Even the Mexican's tale about the

ritual sacrifice in *Cities of the Plain*, which, unlike the previous stories, is framed as a dream rather than the personal experience of the teller, references to vague “tiempos antiguos” [ancient times] (270). In McCarthy’s imagination, then, Mexico is more able to fully represent and engage with the possibilities of the past in a way that the United States, which he perceives as oriented towards a dubious future, is unable to.

While the trilogy may appear to displace the problem of the past onto another country, another nation, thus reinforcing Mexico as “other” and “different” through temporal distance (Fabian xi)²⁶, in McCarthy’s narrative universe, the past actually serves a very different, and far more productive, purpose. As the Mexican storyteller informs Billy Parham at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, “A form without history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future” (281). While the Mexican is referring to a “form” that existentially shapes all existence in this quote, questions about the shape of existence in *The Border Trilogy* are interchangeable with questions about the shapes of narratives and journeys. For McCarthy, then, the forms of existence—lives, narratives, journeys—need a “past” and a “history” to continue themselves, for these elements provide the building blocks for the “future.” Thus, the past of Mexico that saturates these middle moments throughout *The Border Trilogy* provides historical ballast for a more accurate vision of the future; if we do not have a secure knowledge of the past, these stories imply, we cannot have a secure knowledge of the future. The middle, then, via the history (or *historia*) of Mexico, has the

²⁶ In his examination of western bias within anthropological research methods, Johannes Fabian argues that such research methods discursively construct its subjects as “others” through distantiation: “But then we pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal.”

capacity to construct a future grounded within the perpetual middleness of existence rather than focused on an imagined narrative end point—and a desire for apocalypse.

As a site in the middle of things, “Mexico,” for McCarthy, provides access not only to the past but also to a more transnational view of this border region. By constructing this middle site as “Mexico,” McCarthy is able to tap into what he perceives as the multiplicity of stories, histories, and perspectives immanent in the northern part of that country, which bears the traces of years of transnational traffic, the journeys that constitute so much of existence in that region. Northern Mexico in particular is able to more fully articulate the cultural hybridity of a region that straddles an international boundary, a hybridity whose origins McCarthy traces to a recent and distant past. *The Border Trilogy* as a whole is set in the American states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and the Mexican states of Sonora, Chihuahua, and Coahuila, all of which line the international boundary between the two nations. These six states largely form the “border region” for the trilogy, though McCarthy represents northern Mexico as the location that best manifests the unique mixture of people that resulted from the once-easy migration between the two nations. Indeed, the narrators of these long interpolated narratives—Mexican, American, and otherwise—reflect the various populations that both are indigenous to this region and have migrated to and through it at various points in history. They all articulate what the historian Oscar Martinez calls the “various perspectives” of this region (Martinez xi); they are gypsies, itinerant wanderers, Mormons exiled from Utah, descendents of the Spanish colonizers, men and women who were caught up in the violence of the Mexican Revolution. Though four out of the five storytellers recount their tales in

Mexico, they all register an American presence to varying degrees as well as the presence of other nations and ethnic groups. These narratives therefore become the “historias” of a transnational past that serve as building blocks for any narrative about the future of the border area.

The Border Trilogy, then, constructs these middle sites, the locations in between other well-defined points in the narrative, as “Mexico.” The time and the place they articulate is the time and the place of that nation’s history with its multiple national and cultural influences; through the extensive space allotted to the stories in the middle of things within the trilogy, Mexico and its historias then become a dominant narrative site in *The Border Trilogy*. In this way, the stories of Mexico end up sublimating an end-oriented American narrative to a place and time in the midst of things. Therefore *The Border Trilogy* ultimately privileges a narrative associated with a transnational part of Mexico whose position situated in the middle does not rely on an apocalyptic end to give shape to its story.

Mexico ends up articulating the governing story of the border region, and what at first appears to be a very “American” story about two cowboys who take Huck Finn-esque adventures into Mexico in a futile attempt, like Gatsby, to repeat the American past, is actually a more transnational story with a different vision of what the past is and its function within the narrative of this region. It is not a way to escape the future, but rather a building block for the future.

All the Pretty Horses: “I don’t know what happens to country”

The first installment of *The Border Trilogy*, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), opens with numerous endings: the death of John Grady Cole’s maternal grandfather

and the passing of a certain “old west” lifestyle that his grandfather embodied. His grandfather was “the last of the wild Grady boys” (301), and his brothers “were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed” (7). His grandfather, in contrast, had died in his house (6) and perhaps even in his bed, indicating the absolute end of a way of life that even he, a direct witness to it, had outlived. The introductory paragraph describes John Grady’s reaction to his grandfather’s body during the funeral; as he looks at the body, John Grady repeats to himself in a chant-like fashion, “That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping” (3). John Grady’s repeated effort to reconcile himself to the reality of his grandfather’s death is also an effort to reconcile himself to a much larger loss, an attempt to understand that his last link to an entire lifestyle based on guns, horses, and wild adventures no longer exists.

The beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* takes place in San Angelo, Texas in 1949, and the location itself is saturated with a sense of loss over the final passing of an “old west” culture that beget men like John Grady Cole’s grandfather. The sixteen-year-old boy embodies an intersection between narratives of personal and national loss; the loss of his grandfather, the impending loss of his father, and his mother’s perceived abandonment are all representative of larger, more profound loss, that of a country—both a nation and a region—engendered through adventurous men who left their mark on its land through strenuous acts of masculine inscription. McCarthy’s version of mid-century Texas is undergoing a questionable transition between an agrarian existence that allowed for such lives and a more corporate lifestyle, where oil, not cattle, will be the primary industry (11). Indeed, modernity is descending

upon on San Angelo like the train that comes “boring out of the east like some ribald satellite” in the first few paragraphs of the novel (3). This scene, according to Leo Marx, is paradigmatic within American literature. The “ominous” sound of the “machine” disrupts the pastoralism of the Southwest, which is already on the wane in the post-World War II years, forcing John Grady, in Marx’s postulation, “to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream” (Marx 15 – 16). John Grady, however, initially rejects this knowledge.

McCarthy refracts the fate of this region through the prism of John Grady’s family, who are also disappearing—and dissipating—in the face of modernity. In addition to his maternal grandfather’s death, John Grady’s estranged parents are newly divorced (17), and his ailing father, a veteran of World War II, has “quit goin to the doctor,” a sign that he has given up on life. As his father observes, they live in an era in which even Shirley Temple, that buoyant symbol of depression-era innocence, gets divorced (17). All this loss culminates with John Grady’s mother’s decision to sell her family’s ranch, which she informs John Grady “has barely paid expenses for twenty years” (15). She wants to move to urban San Antonio and pursue a career as an actress (23), a profession whose focus on the artifice of representation is arguably anathema to John Grady’s sense of an authentic existence based in agrarian values. Losing the ranch definitively cuts the boy off from the region; he is finally, and irrevocably, without a patrimony—his mother is selling the last vestige of his cultural inheritance (17), his last tie to a lifestyle based on a land, livestock and the work of cowboys.

Yet John Grady, like his mother, is a performer. In this opening section, McCarthy self-consciously portrays John Grady as immersing himself in his performance as a “cowboy” in order to compensate for the loss of this national and personal narrative that had structured his existence up to this point. However, McCarthy’s portrayal of John Grady’s performance reveals the novel’s acknowledgement that the foundational stories of family and country that John Grady has embraced exist only in the way he references them; what John Grady perpetuates by figuring himself as a cowboy is a certain method of referring to the past rather than the actual past itself. This acknowledgment produces a sly and playful approach to the tenets of the Western, a genre that *The Border Trilogy* references with both enthusiasm in *Cities of the Plain* and gravitas in *The Crossing*. In McCarthy’s eyes, the Western may be an inherently self-referential tool with which to tell the story of the latter half of the twentieth century, a narrative that only exists within its own system of familiar and highly coded references, but it simultaneously provides a very attractive narrative for masculine development, particularly the development of a certain self-sufficient national masculinity that John Grady attempts to emulate. His embrace of a cowboy persona is an attempt to suture over the profound loss he has experienced; by encasing himself within an identity from the mythic national past, he believes he can safely adhere to a developmental arc with which he is intimately familiar.

John Grady attempts to replicate that masculinity by being a “cowboy,” a performance that, in the first part of the novel, is clearly underwritten by self-conscious references to genre and reveals McCarthy’s knowing manipulation of—and

simultaneous delight in—in the codes of the Western. In San Angelo, John Grady is a remnant of the more pastoral past, a sixteen-year-old boy without a driver's license (167) who insists on riding his horse across a country no longer made for horseback riding (36). In the Hemingway tradition, he is a stoic. When his ex-girlfriend, Mary Catherine, tries to engage him in conversation about their relationship, he laconically informs her, "It's just talk, Mary Catherine. I got to get on" (28). When, unbeknownst to his mother, he travels to San Antonio to see her perform in a play, he spends intermission in the "gilded" lobby, wearing his hat,

smoking with one boot jacked back against the wall behind him. He was not unaware of the glances that drifted his way from the theatergoers. He'd turned up one leg of his jeans into a small cuff and from time to time he leaned and tipped into this receptacle the soft white ash of his cigarette. He saw a few men in boots and hats and he nodded gravely to them, they to him (21).

This is McCarthy using the codes of the Western, particularly the figure of the cowboy, in his most self-conscious and self-reflexive way, intentionally framing John Grady's cowboy identity as a conscious performance meant to attract the glances of theater-goers. This scene emphasizes how John Grady wants his performance to clearly mark him in 1949 Texas and separate him from the general population. It attracts various audiences, such as his fellow theatergoers, as well as the lawyer who is handling the sale of his family's ranch. As the lawyer gently but clearly puts it to John Grady after meeting with him, "Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven" (17).

This section of the text thereby frames John Grady as a cultural artifact, an iteration of the well-known cultural figures like the “Marlboro Man,” smoking a cigarette with his cowboy hat pulled down over his eyes in millions of ads throughout the post-war years, a figure who is himself an iteration of many familiar cultural texts about masculinity and the West. As his performance in the theater and on the streets of San Angelo demonstrates, he engenders an idealized version of the past through his perpetual reference to it. John Grady’s self-conscious performance of the cowboy represents both a compensatory gesture in the face of the loss of the foundational paradigms with which he figured his life *and* the novel’s sly acknowledgement that this intertwined narrative of family and nation may not really exist outside his—and the reader’s—own imaginative construction of it. It is an enactment of an identity that reveals and therefore destabilizes the very narratives John Grady Cole has used to constitute himself.

What this beginning section does is set the stage for John Grady Cole’s flight to Mexico with his best friend, Lacy Rawlins, in a Gatsby-like attempt to repeat his version of the American past. He has willfully constructed this past as a romantic location where he can live out his pastoral dreams, and he imagines Mexico as the last available territory where this might be possible; for him, Mexico may be “the next best thing to dyin and goin to heaven.” Yet, like the cowboy identity he has embraced, his journey to Mexico is an attempt to suture over the loss of his family, home, and cultural patrimony; as he discovers, he is not able to fill a void in the present with the fantasy of a national past that primarily exists through his particular enactment of it. Ultimately, Mexico disallows his attempt to inscribe American

fantasies upon its landscape, and it is the Duena Aflonsa's embedded narrative that attempts to re-negotiate his relationship to the loss of family and country. She proffers her narrative of Mexico as a substitution for these losses that John Grady has experienced, which have driven him to immerse himself in illusions about Mexico. Through her telling, "Mexico" comes to function as an in-between place that helps John Grady negotiate the choice he faces between, in her words, the "dream" and "reality" of the world (238). In the end, then, it is only the story, the *historia*, and the act of storytelling that can supplant the void created when these national and familial ideals pass away.

All the Pretty Horses is formally divided into four parts, though when viewed as a negotiation between John Grady's nationalistic dreams of a pastoral existence and the reality of life in the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico, the novel is thematically divided into three major sections. This discrepancy exists because McCarthy assigns the prison section its own part within the novel, though I would argue that John Grady's experiences in Saltillo Prison reify his illusions rather than disrupt them. The first thematic movement encompasses John Grady's attempt, with Rawlins, to perpetuate his fantasy of an old-fashioned, agrarian life in Mexico, which the boys are temporarily able to achieve at a hacienda appropriately nick-named "La Purisima." The second major movement details the boys' incarceration in and eventual release from Saltillo Prison under trumped-up charges of horse-thieving, after which Rawlins returns to the United States. When John Grady gets out of prison he is as determined as ever to attain what he sees as rightfully his—"[t]he girl and the horses," as he informs Rawlins (211); thus, the prison section does not really

represent a break with the motifs of country and family that the first section of the novel introduces but rather a continuation of them. In this second part, he meets Duena Alfonsa again and she tells him her story, the lessons of which he does not immediately heed. The third section is about the inevitable dissolution of John Grady's national and familial fantasies, which is supposedly provoked by Alejandra's decision not to betray her family and run away with him. When John Grady returns to Texas, he is finally able to acknowledge the losses that he had tried to avoid by escaping to Mexico and admit to Rawlins that he does "not know what happens to country" when the narratives that once constituted that nation and that region have passed away (211).

At the beginning of the novel, John Grady Cole is a displaced person, a self-styled anachronism in mid-twentieth century Texas. To him, Mexico represents the past, a location that will allow him to reconcile the temporal schism in which he has situated himself as a self-styled remnant of a mythic past in a nation that is barreling into the future. Indeed, to John Grady, this journey is almost redundant; as he tells Rawlins before they even leave town, "I'm already gone" (27), a phrase that conveys his sense of essential dislocation—and built-in obsolescence—in the United States. There, John Grady will be able to properly locate himself in a country where some towns, Rawlins speculates, have never even seen a car (51).

On their way down to Mexico, the novel further emphasizes its self-reflexive relationship to the generic Western. John Grady and Rawlins jokingly reference generic Western motifs, telling people they meet that they're "runnin from the law" or

they've "robbed a bank," and John Grady informs Rawlins at one point that he "look[s] like some kind of desperado" (36). This banter as they head down to Mexico is a way of both affirming and deflecting their own desires for precisely those sorts of adventures; it acknowledges that even though they might *know* such exploits are improbable in 1949, they secretly want them anyway, and understand Mexico as the only place where they can experience them. Indeed, by superficially acknowledging their performative relationship to this genre, John Grady and Rawlins's pithy exchanges mask the way in which their journey slyly instantiates this narrative even as it calls attention to its constructed nature.

At first, the boys experience Mexico as the pastoral "paradise" they sought when they left the United States (59). They find work as ranch hands at the hacienda of a wealthy landowner, a place that allows them to conflate Mexico in 1949 with the American past; as Rawlins observes happily, "This is how it was with the old waddies," and John Grady, in response, admits he could stay there for "[a]bout a hundred years" (97). Even the name of the hacienda denotes mythic and pure beginnings: it is called the "Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purisima Concepcion" ["The Estate of Our Lady of the Pure Conception"] and "La Purisima" for short (97). La Purisima seems to offer John Grady and Rawlins a chance to re-conceive a new beginning for themselves, enabling them to assume an identity and lifestyle that closely resembles those available through narratives of the "old west"—those stories they jokingly referenced as they were heading into Mexico. Here, their dreams have seemingly become commensurate with their reality. This is especially true for John Grady: he gets to show off his skills with horses, breaking in sixteen horses in four

days (100); he finds a sort of surrogate father in Don Hector, the owner of the hacienda, and they have several late-night conversations where they both agreed about important things like “God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man” (127). Finally, John Grady finds romance with Don Hector’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Alejandra, whom he pursues despite warnings from both Rawlins and the girl’s godmother and grand-aunt, the Duena Alfonsa. The Duena is an imposing figure who ominously informs John Grady about her authority over Alejandra, “It’s not a matter of right [...] It is a matter of who must say. In this matter I get to say. I am the one who gets to say” (137).

Thus John Grady and Rawlins initially find their transition from the rapidly progressing United States to the prelapsarian Eden of hacienda life as smooth and seamless, as if they had successfully located the “rewind” button for U.S. national mythology and found themselves back in a “New World” pastoral paradise combined with liberal doses of the mythic American west.²⁷ Yet, as *All the Pretty Horses* demonstrates, it is not possible to go down to Mexico and repeat an American past, especially a past that is conjured specifically—and only—to fill a void in the present, which is precisely how John Grady is attempting to use Mexico. He imagines it as a place where he can live out his romantic fantasies about horses, women, and ranch life—all of which are constructs of U.S. national narratives and which, as the opening section implies, achieve reality only in his perpetual reference to them. As the novel argues, the boys’ mistake is to believe that these narratives reference a “true” past, a time before the twentieth century, and that these stories can be repeated in another

²⁷ Annette Kolodny talks about how European settlers experienced the “New World Landscape” as a “paradise” that “really existed, ‘Whole’ and ‘True’” (5). This “fantasy as daily reality” is how John Grady and Lacey Rawlins first experience La Purisima.

country that conveniently seems to exist at an earlier point in history, where some towns have not seen automobile traffic and where ranch owners understand that the only “true” capital is based in land and livestock.

John Grady and Rawlins end up learning this lesson in a particularly brutal way; after John Grady refuses to end his affair with Alejandra, her family has him and Rawlins arrested on trumped-up charges of horse thieving due to their brief association with another American boy, Jimmy Blevins. Blevins, whom they met as they were crossing the border into Mexico, was riding a suspiciously nice horse and carrying suspiciously nice pistols for a fourteen-year-old kid. Before they arrived at the hacienda, John Grady and Rawlins helped Blevins forcefully retrieve his horse from some angry townspeople after it had wandered off during a lightening storm, which necessitated some angry confrontations between the two parties (82-83).

If La Purisima represents some sort of pre-lapsarian Eden to the young cowboys, then Saltillo Prison, where they ultimately end up after their arrest, represents a version of hell—it is full of dark depths, both literal and metaphorical. There, the two buddies disappear into a vortex full of “brooding and malignant life” that literally erases their existences (181); when their names aren’t called during roll call the next day, Rawlins observes, “I guess we aint here” (182). As foreigners, John Grady and Rawlins endure particularly violent initiations into the prison culture: Rawlins gets stabbed and carted off to the infirmary, and John Grady successfully defends himself against a *cuchillero*, a knife-fighter hired to kill him. Instead, John Grady kills the *cuchillero* but is seriously wounded in the process, and ends up convalescing under the protection of Perez, the head prisoner (202). If La Purisima

seemingly promised John Grady and Rawlins a new beginning, another chance to live out their fantasies, then Saltillo threatens to be the end—an abyss that swallows them whole.

Alejandra's family eventually buys John Grady and Rawlins out of prison in return for a promise that Alejandra would not see John Grady again. After the abyss of Saltillo, both boys must re-orient themselves to everyday life, which is full of such familiar and civilized commodities as toothbrushes and public transportation (213, 209). The exhausted Rawlins has learned his lesson; he returns to Texas on a bus, a cowboy without his horse, which is a sure sign that he has surrendered to the inevitability of contemporary life (216). John Grady, in contrast, is a cowboy to the core, and he perseveres in his quest to convince Alejandra to run away with him and to retrieve the horses they left behind when they went to prison: his, Rawlins's, and Blevins's, whom they were briefly reunited with before the arresting officer killed him. Before he does any of this, however, he heads north to La Purisima to confront the Duena Alfonsa about her role in their arrest and release.

It is during this second meeting with Duena Alfonsa that she relates her story to John Grady. It is the first framed *historia* of the trilogy, a rich intertextual narrative of personal and national history that attempts to educate John Grady about the "tru[th]" of the world (240). Her story is formulated as a response to John Grady's injured sense of justice and righteousness and his ideas about the way the world "should" be. When he sees her, his indignation over her role in his arrest and release is evident: he informs her that he "should of been let to tell [his] side of" the story and then stubbornly insists that she "didnt have the right" to buy them out of prison even

though he would have died (227, 228). Alfonsa implicitly rejects this code as naïve and idealistic. At the end of her narrative, she informs him, “[...] by true I do not mean what is righteous but merely what is so” (240). Alfonsa’s own story recounts how she herself reached this conclusion about “what is true” in the world.

Within the context of the five embedded narratives in the trilogy, Alfonsa’s is unique in that, unlike the four framed stories that come after it, McCarthy represents it as a straightforward historical narrative; it is meant as a recitation of actual history rather than an allegorized account of a historical event that leverages a philosophical exploration into the construction of *all* narratives—historical, ontological, and otherwise, which is the function of the subsequent framed stories. Indeed, Alfonsa explicitly frames her interpolated tale as a national history, informing John Grady when she begins her story, “I will tell you how Mexico was. How it was and how it will be again” (231). Alfonsa’s narrative is an account of the Mexican Revolution intertwined with her autobiography about growing up as a young woman in wealthy *gachupine* family, a family descended from the original Spanish colonizers, at the turn of the twentieth century. McCarthy makes the story even more concrete by interweaving historical figures like the revolutionaries Francisco Madero and his brother, Gustavo, into her narrative, whom he portrays as close family friends (232).

Overall, Alfonsa’s narrative is more seamlessly integrated into the body of the main narrative and sticks out less within the arc of the novel than the four embedded stories that follow it. Her language is more succinct and clearly marked as oral and conversational. There is not a shift in discursive mode, as there is in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, that would signal a transition to a more didactic, allegorical, or

meta-fictional narrative. Though she briefly touches upon these subjects, her goal is not to ruminate on the function of storytelling or methods of historiography, as subsequent storytellers do, but rather to relate the details of the Mexican Revolution through the prism of her personal experience. Her more concrete purpose is evident in her concise language, as the following description of Mexico demonstrates: “When I was a girl the poverty in this country was very terrible. What you see today cannot even suggest it. And I was very affected by this” (231). In addition, her story is more firmly contextualized within the plot of the novel than the embedded stories that follow it. She frames its beginning and ending by alluding to the reasons she decides to tell John Grady about herself, which is an unusual move for such embedded stories within the trilogy. She introduces her narrative by telling him, “You think you know something of my life. An old woman whose past perhaps has left her bitter. Jealous of the happiness of others. It is an ordinary story. But it is not mine” (229), and ends it with the statement, “I’ve been at some pains to tell you about myself because among other reasons I think we should know who our enemies are” (240-241). Her stated purpose is to convey historical and autobiographical content that both provides an indirect explanation for her actions and also complicates John Grady’s view of the world.

In many ways, Alfonsa’s story offers a feminine counterpoint to John Grady’s masculine pastoral fantasy. She recognizes in him something that was once true of herself, and, as she describes her experiences as a young woman at the turn of the twentieth century, this parallel becomes more obvious. Like John Grady Cole, she occupies a strongly gendered position in her society, and the strong and prolonged

female perspective she offers is rare in *The Border Trilogy* (and, indeed, McCarthy's work overall), which further distinguishes her story from the other stories. She makes her position very apparent at the beginning of her narrative, telling him that "[t]he societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women" (230), a stance that immediately marks her as rebelling against the upper-class society in which she grew up, which echoes John Grady's own resistance to the more middle class milieu of San Angelo, Texas. The majority of her story centers on the year when she was seventeen, a year older than John Grady, when, like him, she was "very idealistic. Very outspoken" (232). Through her family's connection to the Madera brothers with their ideas about governance borrowed from the U.S. and Europe, she "began to see how the world must become if I were to live in it" (233). The world must be shaped to her specifications of it, and she exhibits a willfulness that matches John Grady's own, as he learns.

Alfonsa's story is a national and personal counter-narrative to John Grady's own national and personal narrative, and the content of her story—the way that it parallels John Grady's own—directly responds to his predicament. She essentially tells him that she, too, knows what it is like to be idealistic, on the cusp of adulthood and to perceive immense possibility in one's country and in one's own life—and what it is like to see that possibility violently snatched away. She says, "I'm not sure if you can understand what I am telling you. I was seventeen and this country to me was like a rare vase being carried about by a child. There was an electricity in the air. Everything seemed possible" (233). As her statement "I'm not sure if you can understand what I'm telling you" implies, Alfonsa questions whether John Grady is

capable of making the mental comparison between his current circumstances and hers sixty years earlier, or of understanding the immense precipice that she, and her country, were inhabiting at that point, which is very similar to the position John Grady now occupies.

Like John Grady's story, Alfonsa's is one of love, loss, and national exile. McCarthy portrays her narrative as heavily intertwined with the politics of the Mexican Revolution, which he accomplishes by portraying her family as close family friends with the real-life Madero family, whose eldest child, Francisco, started the revolution in 1910. McCarthy fictionalizes Francisco's brother, Gustavo, as a figure who represents the intersection between the private and the public for Alfonsa and allows her narrative to move seamlessly back and forth between her autobiography and Mexican national history. As a fictionalized figure, "Gustavo Madero" allows Alfonsa to intertwine her narratives of personal and national grief and expound on the nature of both. The majority of her story takes place when she is seventeen years old and falls in love with him after a hunting accident takes off the smallest finger on her left hand. Gustavo, who has a glass eye and is himself "disfigured" (234), provides her guidance and emotional support, telling her that "those who have endured some misfortune will always be set apart but that it is just that misfortune which is their gift and which is their strength" (235). The revolution causes Alfonsa to lose both Gustavo to executioners and her country to the violent caprices of General Huerta, "[a]n assassin. An animal" (237). Her father sends her to Europe for the duration of the revolution and would not bring her home until she promised to disassociate herself from the Maderos, which she refuses to do as she, like John Grady, was "very

proud. Very stubborn” (236, 237). In the end, she did not return from Europe until her father died (239). McCarthy’s portrayal of Gustavo Madero as the young Alfonsa’s counsel and romantic interest provides her narrative with further historical ballast, weighing it down through the specificity of his references to this real-life figure.

Alfonsa’s narrativization of Mexico thereby transforms it into a location where the personal and the national are intensely interrelated. In her version of Mexico, narratives of personal development are commensurate with narratives of national development, and she uses the Mexican Revolution and her experience with its promise and disappointment as a way to indirectly explain her herself and, by extension, her philosophy of accepting “what is so” in the world. She implies that learning to accept the world as it exists, without embellishing with impossible fantasies, is a lesson John Grady might be in the process of learning. Alfonsa thus proffers “Mexico” as a location that might help John Grady negotiate his own profoundly inter-related narratives of nation and family, and her story becomes a narrative model for him to emulate in the face of the loss she has helped inflict upon him. While she will not help him consummate his dream—indeed, she believes that such an activity is impossible—she can give him a way to narrativize the loss of his dreams about country and romantic love. Ultimately, her story of Mexico substitutes for these losses and generates a narrative space in between his dreams and a harsher reality, creating a place that helps him confront this choice:

In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting

between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. (238)

John Grady, she implies, is faced with a decision: he must either accept the reality of the world or continue to indulge in his dream of it; if he does not, the world, which is waiting for him to decide, will decide for him. Alfonsa's narrative thereby creates a space of possibility wherein she offers John Grady the potential to re-write his own narrative of national and personal loss in light of what she tells him, instead of learning this lesson in a more brutal, perhaps mortal, way. She knows, however, that John Grady will ultimately reject that possibility, which he does; at the end of her recounting, he tells her, "I intend to see [Alejandra]," to which she responds, "Am I supposed to be surprised? I'll even give you my permission" (240). He is still invested in his romantic illusions about life.

Alfonsa's story constructs Mexico as a place in the middle of things that provides him an opportunity to make a decision between the "dream" and the "reality." As a response to his righteous sense of injury, her story demonstrates that he could narrate his own loss as a choice between a willful adherence to a fantastical ideal and an acceptance of the way the world truly is—not what is righteous but what is so. Narrative, then, is interjected into the space of loss and comes to occupy that void instead of the emptiness associated with what passes away. When Alfonsa is finished, John Grady's immediate response demonstrates that he does not comprehend what she is offering him. He bluntly tells her: "You wont let me make my case" (240), not realizing that, after all she has told him, making his case is beside the point; her story has proved that she understands him and his "side of things."

Alfonsa knows, in the end, that she has not deterred John Grady from his course of action, and that what she has done will resonate throughout his young life. She says to him, “I’ve been at some pains to tell you about myself because among other reasons I think we should know who our enemies are” (240-241). She knows the pain she is causing him because it’s pain she herself has experienced, and she knows this makes her an enemy.

The next part of the *All the Pretty Horses* is arguably the apotheosis of John Grady’s self-constructed fantasies about the “wild west.” Indeed, the set-piece of the last third of the novel is an old-fashioned show down (and shoot-out) between a good guy, John Grady, and bad guys, the Mexican captain and his minions who arrested him and Rawlins. Yet this generic episode is paradoxical; it simultaneously signifies the culmination of John Grady’s national fantasies about “the old west” as well as the irrevocable loss of those fantasies. On one hand, McCarthy would have us believe that John Grady is driven only by deep personal grief to seek revenge on this captain; he plans one last illicit rendezvous with Alejandra, during which she finally rejects him, refusing his offer to run away together (254). McCarthy portrays this as a turning point in John Grady’s life, for “[h]e saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all” (254). On the other hand, this confrontation with the Mexican captain allows John Grady to realize some aspects of the lifestyle he had romanticized in Texas, that of his grandfather and his grandfather’s brothers, the “wild Grady boys” who “seemed to fear only dying in bed” (7). Looked at this way, Alejandra’s rejection is merely a convenient excuse for John Grady—and McCarthy—to engage in some exciting action. There is much tension between these

two motifs: the loss of John Grady's personal and national dreams which supposedly drive him to a violent confrontation with the Mexican captain, and the celebratory attainment of an experience that allows him to participate in this narrative of "the old west" where he can deploy some old-fashioned gun-slinging skills.

From the very beginning, his confrontation with the captain is styled as a Western. John Grady had stayed behind in Mexico after he and Rawlins were released from prison to get "[t]he girl and the horses" (211), and if he can't have Alejandra, then he can still retrieve the horses, which is precisely what he decides to do after she rejects him. He breaks into the captain's office in the early morning, sits at the captain's desk, puts the handcuffs on top of it, puts his feet up, and holds a pistol "with the butt resting on the desktop." As the captain walks in with his coffee and mail, he greets him in this confident posture; he is, after all, the man holding the gun (258). He and the captain then go to the corral to get the horses where a shoot-out ensues (258, 264), which allows John Grady to show-off his skills with both horses and guns. As the captain's numerous henchmen attempt to stop him, he quickly dispatches with each of them. When one attempts to use a truck as a shield, "[h]e cocked and leveled the pistol and shot a hole in the windshield and cocked the pistol again and spun and pointed it at the man kneeling behind him" (265). As he emerges from the barn with the horses, he smoothly "stepped out through the door and put the barrel of the revolver between the eyes of the man crouched there," having intuited the presence of this crouching menace through the walls of the barn as he was rounding up the horses (264).

The scene unfolds in a deeply familiar way, and it arguably constitutes the most naturalized generic moment in the entire trilogy. It signifies the point at which *All the Pretty Horses* fully embodies the national narratives that it concurrently questions and holds up for examination. McCarthy finally deploys the codes of this genre in a way that is not self-conscious or self-reflexive; John Grady is no longer the anachronistic spectacle he was in Texas, hanging out in the lobby of a theater, “smoking with one boot jacked back against the wall behind him [...] not unaware of the glances that drifted his way” (21). He is a cowboy, demonstrating his gunslinging abilities as he takes on a bunch of bad guys in order to retrieve what is rightfully his. Yet, even though this particular scene lacks some of the self-reflexivity and the self-consciousness of earlier scenes that specifically reference the Western, it still proves that what is left after the loss of these romantic ideas about nations are the stories we tell about them, especially in the 1990s, when this novel was published. The confrontation between the Mexican captain and John Grady becomes a way of marking the space of this loss in the late twentieth century United States as much as the stories John Grady heard about his Grady ancestors marked the space of his loss in mid-twentieth century Texas.

When John Grady finally returns to the United States, he is again an anachronism. He rides into town on his horse, trailing two others behind him, appearing “like some apparition out of the vanished past” to two men trying to fix a pickup truck. He asks them what day it is, and, after giving each other funny looks, they reply, “Thanksgiving” (287). He is thus immediately injected back into American history and progress, confronting both a world of questionable

technology—a broken-down pick-up truck—and mythologized narratives about U.S. national origins. Mexico has dislocated him from these national schemas, and he cannot comfortably re-locate himself within them, as evidenced by his wanderings across the Southwest in the last few pages of the novel as he returns, and attempts to return, the horses to their rightful owners.

He first attempts to find the true owner of Jimmy Blevins's horse, which takes him through Christmas and into the New Year, 1950, a year that officially marks the end of the first half of the century and the beginning of the second. Failing to find the owner, in February he finally returns to San Angelo, its "country so familiar to him" (298), and returns Lacy Rawlins's horse to him. When John Grady indicates that he's going to continue his wandering ways, the following conversation between him and Rawlins ensues, which begins with Rawlins's reminder that "[t]his is still good country." John Grady responds,

Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country...

Where is your country? [asked Rawlins]

I dont know, said John Grady. I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country. (298)

At the end of the text, John Grady's sense of "country" no longer correlates to San Angelo, Texas or to the United States. He has lost both San Angelo and the stories of "old west" he associated with that place, and his country has disappeared with the loss of those national narratives. His time in Mexico has dislocated the "where" and the "what" of his national coordinates, and John Grady can no longer position himself within west Texas, the southwest border region, and the United States in general. He

has lost both the location of his country, his sense of where it exists for him, and his ability to engage with its story, to relate “what happens” to it. As the Duena Alfonsa lost her idea of Mexico, so John Grady has lost his ideas of nation and region—the country as it is known in the border area between the United States and Mexico. At the end of the book, he “[p]ass[es] and pale[s] into the darkening land, the world to come,” a future in the second half of the twentieth century marked by the shadows of the setting sun (300).

The Crossing: “Hay Tres Historias”

Billy Parham, the teenaged protagonist of *The Crossing*, the second book in *The Border Trilogy*, wanders through the countryside of northern Mexico on his way back to New Mexico after a failed quest to return a she-wolf to her rightful home in the hills of Mexico. In the hours of the early morning, he comes across an ex-priest living an isolated existence in the ruins of an old adobe church who invites him in for breakfast. The ex-priest then proceeds to tell Billy the story of the old man who ultimately led to the ex-priest’s self-proclaimed “hereticism.” Before he does so, however, he posits a general theory about the “place” of the story in the world:

Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer even have a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found

here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell. (C 142 – 143)

The ex-priest's theory touches upon several characteristics of "the border" within *The Crossing*, the text that itself exists in the border location of the trilogy, providing a middle ground "to cross" between those two more dominant narrative sites, the beginning and the end. The terrain of this crossing is much more ruminative and discursive than that of either *All the Pretty Horses* or *Cities of the Plain*, and its concatenating clauses spread out in numerous directions, creating a highly dense linguistic landscape that requires careful navigation. *The Border Trilogy* figures this text as a narrative representation of the border region itself, which is densely layered with stories, *historias*, *corridos*, and folklore; indeed, to echo the ex-priest, *The Crossing* provides the material geography of the U.S./Mexico border region—the "thing"—a story that gives it meaning. Furthermore, *The Crossing*, the story, not only lends this region meaning, but it is also the place itself, and without it, the border of *The Border Trilogy* would lose its name, for it would not exist as a border—as a narrative space densely layered with the stories of various nations and peoples. The narrative, the ex-priest argues, actually creates the conceptual location that it represents by rendering it meaningful through its story-telling apparatus.

The story, however, not only constitutes the place of the border, it also constitutes the time of the border. Indeed, the trilogy argues that *The Crossing* defines border time for the entire trilogy, which it accomplishes by providing a meta-commentary on the form and function of three-part narrative structures. In the novel,

border time is produced through narrative time, which is based on Billy's circular transit through the narrative locations engendered by the three trips he takes to Mexico and the three framed stories he hears during those trips: the ex-priest's tale, the ex-revolutionary's tale, and the gypsy's tri-partite tale. Border temporality in *The Crossing* is comprised of the repeated alteration and movement between the well-defined temporal locations of the United States and Mexico and the dilated in-between²⁸ intervals of these embedded stories, where multiple layers of time infiltrate each other and create a hybrid temporality. The straightforward progression of John Grady's journey in *All the Pretty Horses*—he starts in Texas, he goes down to Mexico, he turns around at Saltillo Prison and heads back up to the United States—is re-configured as a circuit in *The Crossing*, which requires that Billy repeatedly cycle through these narrative spaces of hybrid temporality. Instead of positing border temporality as a teleological achievement, something gained at the end of a journey, as *All the Pretty Horses* does, *The Crossing* articulates it in the constant flux of Billy's transitions between these different narrative locations where he repeatedly journeys through layers of temporality. In this way, *The Crossing* posits border temporality for the entire trilogy as a circular transit through multiple narrative spaces that contain sedimented strata of time and history.

As it is in *All the Pretty Horses*, temporal geography is still predicated on national boundaries in *The Crossing*; however, while the United States still represents a surging futurity, "Mexico" becomes a location that unravels the teleological arc of a dominant American temporality. A U.S.-based narrative trajectory attempts to

²⁸ Ursula Heise observes that "[f]or the reader, the embedded narrative is intercalated between two moments of the main story and serves to dilate that instant 'in between'" (61).

configure Mexico as representative of its own national past, thereby inscribing its own mythologized history across the hemisphere. Yet both Billy Parham and John Grady Cole ultimately discover that they cannot go to Mexico to recapture (or re-live) the American past, though this realization takes place at different times within each text. While John Grady does not understand this historical disjunction until he finally returns to the United States at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy Parham grasps it in the middle of *The Crossing* as he cycles between narrative locations. Mexico enacts a hemispheric reconfiguration of time zones by way of the multiple storytelling genres embedded throughout the text: *historias*, *corridos*, biographies, anecdotes, tales. Though the three long interpolated stories are the most significant allegories within the text—and, indeed, the three stories encompass numerous genres at once—all of these modes of narration are arguably “allegorical” in that they accomplish the same temporal ends.²⁹

As Alfonsa informs John Grady in *All the Pretty Horses*, “Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting” (*APH* 238), and, indeed, the “world” that occupies this gap between reality and desire is the concept of “Mexico” as figured through the temporal distance inherent to the allegorical structure. This structure articulates Mexico as a narrative time zone that transforms this “void” into a generative location, creating an in-between territory with its own temporal structure. The three interpolated stories are intervals within the primary narrative structure that disrupt illusions of an American “progress,” which attempts to redeem a dubious future by neatly aligning it with fantasies of a mythic past, and reconfigures the

²⁹ See George Guillemin, “‘As of Some Site Where Life Had Not Succeeded’”

dominant temporality of the hemisphere as the time that exists between the realities of the present and the fantasies of the past. These stories repeatedly represent Mexico as a narrative middle time that expands and reshapes the temporality of the entire hemisphere, pulling it southward and dislocating it from the centripetal force of the United States.

While *The Crossing* narrativizes Mexico as a time of multiple stories, the U.S., in contrast, articulates a time that closes off narrative in order to consummate its own questionable futurity. The narrative time of the United States provides a contradistinction to that of Mexico, emphasizing the temporal shifts Billy must repeatedly undertake as he transitions from one location to another. The United States is a place where stories vanish into the folds of swift temporal progression, disappearing into the narrative ellipses that, like those at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, collapse large chunks of chronology into small sections of text, rapidly advancing Billy towards the questionable future of the late twentieth century; indeed, most of the sections that take place in the U.S. are actually shorter than those that take place in Mexico. In *The Crossing*, these chronological collapses signify the way that American temporality disallows narrative time, which, in McCarthy's world, is tantamount to abjuring "historias"—stories and histories. Billy's ultimate quest in Mexico, then, is not to return a she-wolf to her home or retrieve his families' horses but rather to acquire narrative meaning, to experience a time that enables stories to be recounted and valued; he is, finally, in search of a language that re-imagines his own historical predicament as he stands on the cusp of the second half of the twentieth century.

The three interpolated narratives for which Billy is a one-man (or –boy audience) attempt to revise the temporality of his narrative arc by interjecting the time and times of Mexico into the middle of his U.S.-based tale. The narrative duration of these stories always exceeds the chronological time slot accorded to them within the primary narrative—for instance, an early morning breakfast takes up about twenty pages of text—and thus extends the action and time of Mexico in relation to those of United States. The expansive duration of each story is aided by the explicitly paratactic language of the speakers, which syntactically demarcates the times of these narratives by further stretching them out through multiple connected clauses. Finally, this interjection of Mexican temporality is also accomplished through the narrators’ representation of Mexican history, which they use to leverage global theories about the purpose, function, and form of all narratives. The way in which these narratives easily shift from the local to the global asserts the representational agility of this history and the importance of telling stories about, for instance, late-nineteenth century earthquakes in northern Mexico in order to achieve a larger understanding of how histories function as places within our imagination—a practice for which the United States generally does not have the time. What these stories end up doing is immersing Billy in the narrative time of another place, one through which he must repeatedly transit if he is to complete his travels. The purpose of his journeys—to experience a different sense of time and history—therefore comes in the middle, in a moment between two other narrative places, and is a crossing itself, a transition through another time.

The first story, that of the ex-priest, sets up the rhetorical model for the two stories that follow it, one that explicitly emphasizes the figurative elements of these stories, even more so than other, smaller embedded narratives that occur in *The Crossing* and the other two texts of the trilogy. All three narrators make only one appearance within the text, and their sole purpose is to impart these narrative lessons and then vanish from the textual landscape, letting the heavy symbolic elements of their narratives speak for themselves. In addition, the stories themselves are not obviously interwoven into the primary plot of the novel, and this contextual separation delimits their narrative boundaries and accentuates their function as meta-commentaries on the purpose of narrative itself rather than as tools that further progress the action of the main plot. Finally, Billy, the avatar of the primary narrative, merely provides an auditory catalyst for these stories; they do not explicitly comment upon his particular situation within the frame narrative, and he quickly disappears from the rhetorical triangles of these stories, barely responding to them and providing no insight as to how they might relate to his own story. By abjuring Billy's presence, the three interpolated stories act as discursive ruminations about the larger purpose of bearing witness to stories and narratives rather than as specific glosses on his fictional motivations and conflicts.

Billy comes upon the ex-priest after he attempts, and fails, to return the she-wolf to her rightful home in the mountains of northern Mexico. It is early dawn, Billy comes upon the ruins of a large adobe church and its sole resident, a man who "was paler of skin than even he and had sandy hair and pale blue eye" (C 137). The man introduces himself, adumbrating his biography in the process, "In Utah. I was a

Mormon. Then I converted to the church. Then I became I dont know what. Then I became me” (140). Significantly, the ex-priest immediately recognizes Billy as a fellow wanderer and labels Billy as “lost,” an accusation Billy immediately refutes (141). The ex-priest understands that Billy is without direction in his travels and, moreover, that Billy has not yet realized this about himself, as the following conversation demonstrates:

What did you come here for? the boy said...

What did you come here for? [Asked the ex-priest.]

I didn't come here. I'm just passin through.

The man drew on the cigarette. Myself also, he said. I am the same.

You been passin through for six years? (141).

The purpose of the journey is indeed to “pass through” a place, a continuous activity that encompasses different amounts of time, from one morning to six years or more. In his narrow sense as to how “passing through” is temporally constituted, Billy still believes that it is a transitory process, whereas the ex-priest realizes that such on-going flux actually comprises years, or a lifetime.

The ex-priest's story figures his journeys as transits through narrative spaces, an act of “passin through” the stories and histories of particular sites or locations. Like Billy does throughout *The Crossing*, he circles back to a particular narrative locations, such as the earthquake-devastated town of Huisiachepic. In this desolate place, he has discovered that what can be extracted from the rubble of history is not a material artifact from the past—“not a thing”—but rather *the* story, the “only one” there is to tell (142-143). The ex-priest originally came to Huisiapechic in order to

“retrace” the steps (142) of the old man who led him into “hereticism” and revisit the site of the old man’s primal trauma, the earthquake of 1887, in which the old man’s son had died (145). As the ex-priest relates to Billy, he met the old man in the town of Caborca when he was still a priest; the old man, who had lost his parents to “American invaders” when he was young and his son to the earthquake when he was an adult, had taken up residence in a ruined church after years of wandering through the Americas. He held daily arguments with God, attempting “to strike some colindancia with his Maker. Assess boundaries and metes. See that lines were drawn and respected” (151), and the townspeople called the priest in to minister to the old man’s relentless attempts to “contract” with God. The priest attempts, but fails, to advance arguments about God’s generosity and goodness in the face of the old man’s beliefs about God’s rigid and exclusionary practices. The old man eventually dies, but over the years, his “queries” into the nature of God become those of the priest (157), and these questions lead him to leave the church and continue the old man’s physical and psychological journey, revisiting sites of the old man’s story, such as this desolate, earth-quake ravaged town in Northern Mexico.

Narrative, in the ex-priest’s eyes, is an activity, not a product; it is a dynamic endeavor based on the process of assembly and construction. As the ex-priest informs Billy at one point, “[...] the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it” (155). It is the act narrating—the *telling* of something—that forms our reality of things, and what we know about the world is predicated upon how we construct a story about it. The “spaces” created by narrative, such as the

Huisiachepic of the old man's memory or the Mexico of *The Crossing*, are repositories for these dynamic processes, locations that produce and are produced by the activity of storytelling. The journey or the "passing" through these places is truly a process of assembling their stories and histories, and the arc of the journey then shapes the arc of the narrative; indeed, at a later point in *The Crossing* after Billy has traveled numerous places, his "journeying began to take upon itself the shape of a tale" (331).

When Billy returns to New Mexico shortly after his encounter with the ex-priest, he is, like John Grady at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, immediately re-inserted into the slipstream of American temporality. His temporal difference is registered as "pastness" in his hometown, for he appears to people as "[s]omething in off the wild mesas, something out of the past. Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for" (170). Nobody—or no story—is able to narrate his existence, and people fumble for a vocabulary that would correctly code him within their temporal schemas; he appears to them as "out of the past" because they have no other categories to describe the distance he represents between their world, full of cars and parking meters, and some other mythic national past, signified by his horse and emaciated state. What his "outlandish" demeanor actually figures (170), and for which the townspeople do not have a proper language, is the impossibility of aligning the present reality of United States with the nostalgic past that Mexico represents. Billy embodies the void that can never be completely sutured over between the harsh present and a fantastical antecedent; indeed, people subconsciously understand that his anachronistic state signifies some sort of threatening abyss that reveals this

temporal incoherence: in him “they beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him” (170). He arguably reveals the paradox inherent to their relationship with the mythic past, and this incites the contradictory impulses they feel when they see him; they do not have the appropriate language to reconcile themselves to the temporal loss he designates, so they want to both kill and protect him. The townspeople’s reaction to Billy pulls the temporal disjunction between the U.S. and Mexico into sharp focus, which emphasizes how the movement from one location to another—from Mexico into the U.S.—itself constitutes border temporality, for these shifts reveal Billy as an inhabitant of the border “world” that exists “between the wish and the thing.”

Billy journeys down to Mexico for a second time with his brother Boyd after thieves brutally murder their parents. He and Boyd want to retrieve the family’s horses, and Billy believes the men who murdered his parents sold them in Mexico. There, Billy, along with Boyd, is as temporally dislocated in Mexico as he was in the United States. Various people whom the brothers meet in the course of their journey attempt to correct the boys’ illusions about what they will find in Mexico. As a Mexican livestock trader informs Billy about Boyd, “Your brother is young enough to believe that the past still exists [...] That the injustices within it await his remedy. Do you believe this also?” And Billy eventually replies, “I quit this country once before [...] It wasn’t the future that brought me back here” (202). The trader tries to disabuse the boys of their fantasy about Mexico as a place where they can rectify a past that happened in another time, another country, and he counsels them to return home. As

Billy informs him, however, they have no home to return to (201); while Billy and Boyd may not be able to address the past in Mexico, the future, for them, no longer resides in the United States, and thus they are without a national time. The state of dislocation that John Grady experiences at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*—"I dont know what happens to country"—becomes something Billy experiences in the middle of *The Crossing*.

Billy hears the second interpolated narrative after Boyd gets shot when they attempt to forcibly take back their horses from men who work on La Babicora, William Randolph Hearst's large neo-colonial estate in Northern Mexico (Wegner 251). Billy rides into the night, looking for medical help, and comes upon the "remote station" where the ex-revolutionary lives with his wife (275). When he arrives, the wife informs her blind husband that "it was an American who had lost his way and the man nodded" (275). Like the ex-priest, the ex-revolutionary and his wife inherently understand that Billy is adrift and without a fixed direction to his journey. The ex-revolutionary and his wife then tell Billy the ex-revolutionary's story, which, like the ex-priest's story, is shaped as a journey. And, like the duration of the ex-priest's tale, the ex-revolutionary's tale far exceeds its time slot within the main plot of the novel, and it too takes about twenty pages of text for Billy to eat a late night snack of a few eggs.

Billy slows the time of his own travels in order to pass through the time of another's. The journey of the ex-revolutionary's story, however, not only recounts his experiences on the road from the town of Durango to that of Parral when he is newly blind (278), but also transfigures the local times of the Mexican Revolution into

global ones of universal “truths.” As the blind man informs Billy about himself and his wife: “[T]hey had no desire to entertain him nor yet even to instruct him. He said that it was their whole bent only to tell what was true and otherwise they had no purpose at all” (284). His story thus becomes a journey through the times of different narrative modes, from a specific history to a broader allegory. The blind man loses his sight when a German captain named Wirtz, fighting on behalf of General Huerta’s military dictatorship, captures the man in Durango with the rest of the rebel army and sucks out the man’s eyeballs in retaliation for the man’s spitting in his face. Indeed, in the blind man’s retelling, the German captain transmogrifies from a malignant person specific to the armies from “many nations” that fought in the Mexican Revolution (276) into a generalized figure of evil, a monster who induces metaphysical blindness: “Entienda que ya existe est ogro. Este chupador de ojos. El ye otros como el. Ellos no han desaparecido del mundo. Y nunca lo haran” [Understand that the ogre still exists. The sucker of eyes. He and others like him. They have not disappeared from the world. And they never will] (290). Such violent acts, both literal and existential, both local to Mexico and global in their metaphorical implications, ultimately have led the ex-revolutionary to theorize “that the light of the world was in men’s eyes only for the world itself moved in eternal darkness and darkness was its true nature and true condition” and that the “disorder of evil was in fact the thing itself” (283, 293).

Indeed, the blind man informs Billy, “[E]very tale was a tale of dark and light” (292), and like the ex-priest, he eventually uses his own tale to philosophize about all stories in general, implicating these interpolated stories in the larger story of

The Crossing and the overall framing structure of *The Border Trilogy* itself. He and his wife indicate that the function of his journey is to provide signposts that map out the coordinates of a universal narrative structure; as the wife informs Billy, “[C]omo en todos los cuentos hay tres viajeros con quines nos encontramos en el camino” [like all stories we must meet three travelers in the road] (284). She provides meta-commentary on Billy’s own encounters with three different storytellers in *The Crossing*, which elevates it—and by extension the entire *Border Trilogy*—as a figurative expression for some sort of larger narrative truth. .

Like the ex-priest’s story, the narrative time of the ex-revolutionary’s tale slows down Billy’s transit through this narrative space, injecting the temporality of the Mexican past into Billy’s urgent mission to find a doctor for his injured brother and extending it through the paratactic structure of the story. The times of Mexico, the revolution and its larger, figurative implications, become represented through long, rhythmic sentences whose connected clauses expand the time of the tale’s telling and signal its universal aspirations rather than its function as mere “entertainment.” Indeed, the loaded sentences, the syntactic complexity of which contradicts the supposedly oral nature of the tale, convey the representational weight of the ex-revolutionary’s purpose by revealing their own importance as symbols. As the ex-revolutionary relates about the early days of his blindness when the revolution was still raging throughout the country:

...he dreamt of young girls barefoot by the roadside in the mountain towns whose own eyes were pools of promise deep and dark as the world itself and over all the taut blue sky of Mexico where the future

of man stood at dress rehearsal daily and the figure of death in his paper skull and suit of painted bones strode up and back before the footlights in high declamation. (277)

Here, the time of Mexico becomes drawn out through myriad conjunctions that verbally connect the ex-revolutionary's private dreams to the national issues of Mexico, which in turn are connected to a larger history, that of "the future of man." The times of the ex-revolutionary's storytelling "place," even more so than that of the ex-priest, are explicitly formed through the intersection between the local times of Mexico—its revolution—and the global time of the allegory—the future of man.

Billy eventually finds a doctor for Boyd, who, as soon as he is healthy, disappears into the Mexican countryside with a girl the boys had rescued from a gang of highwaymen, and Billy never sees him again. After wandering the Mexican countryside for weeks looking for Boyd, he finally returns to New Mexico. Again, the act of transitioning from one location to another engenders Billy as a rupture within the temporal schema of the United States, dislocating him within its modern terrain. As he rides through town, "[...] the people looked back at him through the rolling dust as if he were a thing wholly alien in the landscape. Something from an older time of which they'd only heard. Something of which they'd read" (334). Billy thus becomes analogous to a legendary past, for he appears *as if* he were from an "older time" because the only temporal reference people have for him are provided by cultural narratives that assign such figures to a mythic national history. They thereby make his alien nature familiar by reinserting him into a chronology that neatly categorizes this foreignness as being from a distant past, which serves to cover over

the temporal void that such alien figures actually designate within national chronology. These figures reveal ruptures within that smoothly molded temporal apparatus because they exist nowhere but in the repository of our cultural imagination.

Billy also experiences this rupture as extreme chronological disorientation, for he no longer measures temporality according to American standards and he finds that time has moved forward without his realizing it. Indeed, when he crosses the border, he does not know what month it is, and an amazed border guard has to inform him, “Hell fire, boy. The country’s at war” (333). In the time zone of the United States, narrating temporality means representing a swift advancement into the future, not a slow, ruminative transit through different storytelling genres, and numerous chronological ellipses signify this questionable progress. After Billy repeatedly attempts to enlist in the army but is rejected due to a heart ailment, he ends up wandering the southwestern landscape. During this period, large swaths of time are covered in very small amounts of text: years and months pass in short phrases (“[i]n three months” [346], “another nine months” [349], “By the spring of the third year” [350]). The U.S. condenses its narrative time in service of a dubious progress, barreling over stories and histories in order to attain a future that always exists just beyond its grasp, a la the last sentence in *The Great Gatsby*: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189). American temporality imagines experience as a straightforward line into a time to come; Mexico, in contrast, generates a temporal trajectory that continually circles back over its own stories and histories, inscribing and extending their presence in its landscape.

In the third year of World War II, Billy returns to Mexico for a final time to retrieve Boyd's body, and there he listens to one last story, or, rather, three stories about one event. After collecting his brother's remains from a cemetery, Billy is assaulted by thieves who stab his horse and critically injure it. Shortly after, he encounters a group of gypsies who set about treating the horse. They drag the skeletal structure of an airplane after them, and Billy—fatefully—asks them where they are taking it, to which the leader responds, “Con respecto al aeroplano [...] hay tres historias” [With respect to the plane, there are three stories] (403). The gypsy's story is a multi-layered journey narrative; the essential plot concerns the gypsies' efforts to remove the plane from the high mountains where a young American pilot, whose father has hired the gypsies to retrieve it, crashed it during the Mexican Revolution. The other journey the gypsy describes is the journey we take when we assemble *historias*, a term that he uses very specifically to mean both “history” and “story about the past.” According to him, “The past [...] is always this argument between counterclaimants” (411), and he presents the journey through these “counterclaims” as a movement from a singular narrative argument to one that finally acknowledges the multiple claims inherent to all narratives.

It is this latter journey with which the gypsy is most concerned as he relates the three stories to Billy. They are essentially stories about how we constitute the histories and narratives that taken together comprise a historical “record” of something. Like the ex-revolutionary's story, the gypsy's story mediates his narrative theories through the Mexican Revolution, using certain historical moments in that conflict to leverage larger philosophical reflections. Ultimately, the gypsy posits a

“third story”, which he states “existe en la historia de las historias” [it exists in the history of the histories] (411), and this is the narrative that hovers at the edge of all narrative claims and counterclaims, compelling us to reflect on how we construct those histories. This third story resembles the critic David Herman’s theory about “polychrony,” which he describes as a narrative system of temporality that moves from a bivalent model of time—“earlier” and “later”—to a multivalent one: “earlier,” “later” and “indeterminate” (Herman 212 – 213). Here, his idea of a multivalent model of temporality is useful because it designates the third option—in this case, the third story—as the gateway to narrative multiplicity³⁰ that restructures a dichotomous model of history, one based on the idea of assertion and counter-assertion, as a narrative mode that actually provides for a plurality of configurations and hence historical possibilities. This “third story,” then, is inherent to all narratives about the past, for it is the story of how we assemble that past as history.

The head gypsy proceeds to tell Billy the three tales about the airplane, and the first story the he relates to Billy represents the unified theory of the plane’s history (404). There was not just one plane but two identical planes, both piloted by young American men, that met the same fate during the summer of 1915; their stories, and therefore their histories were “a single history” as long as they both remained in the mountains (404). The first story thus ends, and the duality of the second history opposes the singularity of the first. It describes what happens when people feel impelled to identify the “correct” plane, bifurcating this unified history is

³⁰ Herman’s argument about temporal indeterminacy specifically applies to narrative sequences where the “temporally ordering of events [...] can either be *inexactly coded* [...] or else coded as *inherently inexact*.” Thus “polychrony” appears in a story when it is impossible to ascertain when, exactly, specific events took place in the storyworld. (213).

split into two parts, the “true” history and the “false” history, which is precisely what the father of the young pilot wished to do: extricate his son’s plane from the mountains so he could “bleed of its power to commandeer his dreams” (406). This act of naming and categorization reveals the existential “burden” of all historical evidence, the “false authority” people impute to particular “artifacts of the past” by interpreting those artifacts as the story, or history, itself (410-411). The father’s desire to dislodge the plane from its resting place and thus divide its history “brought into question which in the mountains was no question at all. It was forcing a decision” (406). So they ended up bringing both planes down from the mountain, an act which precipitates the other journey inherent to the gypsy’s tale, their adventures trying to bring one of these planes down from the mountains. They encountered heavy winter rains for “[n]ueve dias. Nueve noches” that flooded the Rio Papigochic while they were “[s]in comida. Sin fuego. Sin nada” [without food. Without water. Without anything] (408), and this flood ultimately swallowed the wreckage of that plane. The question of whether the plane they now carried was the “true” or “false” plane is finally about the power men ascribe to remnants of the past, which is itself, according to the gypsy, “little more than a dream and its force in the world greatly exaggerated” (411).

The idea of a fantastical past introduces the gypsy’s “tercera historia,” the history of our histories, which promulgates a construction of the past based on an aleatory combination of its fragments: “This is the third history. It is the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him. Bits of wreckage. Some bones. The words of the dead” (411). Each version of the past that presents itself as a firm

“claim” is actually a result of individual configurations that reveal its inherently indeterminate nature, for its meaning is only determined through the way in which men put together its pieces into a narrative or story. Because of this individualized assembly process, the past is not an *a priori* site men can ever locate with any certainty regardless of their assured statements about it. Furthermore, the gypsy, like the ex-priest, believes the “truth” of this history only comes together in its telling, for “ultimadamente la verdad no puede quedar en ningun otro lugar sino en el habla” [ultimately the truth cannot remain in any other place but in the speaking] (411). The past does not exist encapsulated in a certain place on a time line to which we can return by merely pressing “rewind”; it is a location that only exists in the activity of its construction, in the speaking and telling of it. It is, then, a linguistic artifact, a narrative combination of all these different parts, and the agility of this activity allows for many possible of historical “truths” that do not overdetermine the present with the colossal weight of one singular history.

After Billy takes leave of the gypsies with his convalescing horse, he comes upon the owner of the plane, a loquacious Texan, and discovers that the story of the gypsy’s journey was false (418). This disclosure, however, does not negate the veracity of the gypsy’s narrative but instead emphasizes its abstract nature; it is not merely about the journey the gypsy and his comrades took to retrieve the airplane but about the journey all people take when they attempt to construct their own narratives about the past according to what they have at hand. Indeed, Billy informs the Texan about Mexico, “This is my third trip. It’s the only time I was ever down here that I got what I come for after. But it sure as hell wasn’t what I wanted” (418). This statement

could apply to both his brother's bones, his original reason for returning to Mexico, and also the gypsy's advice about the past as something that Billy must make himself, not attempt to locate in another country.

When he returns to the United States for a third and final time, time is elided once again, swiftly passing in such phrases as “[d]ays to come” and “in July of that year” (422). Billy is once again subjected to the questionable advancement into the future that the United States enacts with such certainty. In the last few pages of the text, he continues his wanderings throughout the southwest, drifting through Arizona and New Mexico, and he ends up witnessing a strange sunset at noon, marked by “an alien dusk” and “an alien dark” (425), which, in the last sentence of the novel, eventually gives way to a mid-day sunrise: “[T]he right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (426). As the critic Alex Hunt postulates, this anachronistic dusk and dawn is probably the Trinity Nuclear Test that occurred at Alamogordo, New Mexico in July 1945 (Busby 243); thus, at the end of *The Crossing*, Billy fully confronts the destructive effects of American progress that will overshadow—literally—the landscape of the second half of the twentieth century.

This ending is, seemingly, a consummation of an apocalyptic futurity against which the rest of the novel has militated with its vision of a cyclical temporality that attempts to re-route a linear sense of time. The circuitous route of border time, however, has already saturated the entire novel by this point, redefining the finality of this moment. Border time is realized through the linguistic intervention of the embedded narratives and the time zones they generate, which articulate a temporality that disrupts the inscription of an American historical paradigm onto an international

map. These allegories reveal the incommensurable gap between the U.S. present and the past it seeks to recuperate through Mexico, and into this in-between moment it inserts the language of Mexican time and history, figuring border temporality as these narrative-saturated intervals.

Cities of the Plain: "What has no past can have no future"

The opening of the third novel in the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, immediately situates it in contradistinction to the discursive and ruminative terrain of *The Crossing*. It is set in New Mexico in 1951 and brings together the narratives of Billy Parham and John Grady Cole, and the first few lines of dialogue define both their relationship and the relationship they have with Mexico for the entire novel. Billy, John Grady, and some other ranch hands are in Juarez, Mexico for the evening, and Billy has joined every one else outside the brothel where they plan to drink and survey the women:

Damned if I aint half drowned, Billy said.

He swung his dripping hat. Where's the all-american cowboy at?

He's done inside.

Let's go. He'll have all them good fat ones picked out for hisself.

The whores in their shabby dishabille looked up from the shabby sofas where they sat. (3)

On the first page, the novel at once immerses us in the generic codes of the Western: we have an "all-american" cowboy, John Grady, and his sidekick, Billy; we have prostitutes lounging around in their faded finery in a broken-down brothel; and we have the jocular, masculine banter of men who spend a lot of time with other men,

drinking whiskey (5) and telling war stories (7) before “[t]hey crossed the bridge and pushed through the turnstile each in turn, their hats cocked slightly, slightly drunk, and walked up south El Paso Street” (7). As they walk up the empty streets of El Paso after a night of drinking in Mexico, these cowboys form a culturally familiar image with their hats pushed back and their loose, easy gait.

This third novel puts the cities of El Paso and Juarez and, by extension, the United States and Mexico on the same “plain” by tethering them to each other through the tropes of the Western genre, a connection that is imaginatively facilitated by the ease of the border crossing between the twinned cities. Unlike the previous novels, *Cities of the Plain* starts in Mexico and immediately enacts a reverse migration, with the international boundary that separates them marked only by a penny turnstile and a gate shack (7); gone are the highly fraught and symbolic crossings involving mountains, she-wolves, and re-births out of the Rio Grande. The two locations are also sutured together through their mutual investment in the spectacle of genre, from the cocky American cowboys with their Third Infantry Zippo lighters (6) to the Mexican prostitutes who “looked like refugees from a costume ball” (127). Indeed, when either John Grady or Billy cross into Mexico—as they do many times—they do not encounter an “alien” land, as they did respectively in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, but a familiar land, painted with the same broad generic strokes as the United States is and participating in the same drama of “good” versus “evil” enacted in numerous Westerns. Both the United States and Mexico play their requisite roles in this binary relationship with gusto: the “good” U.S. versus the “malign” Mexico, lightness versus darkness, American wives versus Mexican

prostitutes, and all of this culminates with a showdown in a dark alley between a virtuous American cowboy and an evil Mexican pimp.

In *Cities of the Plain*, then, El Paso and Juarez are locked into a mutually dependent dance predicated on the simple binary oppositions inherent to many Westerns. This interdependence endows both the United States and Mexico with a similar temporality: that of the nostalgic U.S. national past. This temporality, steeped in mythic cultural antecedents about the western frontier, asks Mexico, again, to act in service of an illusory national time line. This chronology attempts to cohere a U.S. present to past that exists only as a linguistic fantasy—it is something of which we have only heard, have only read, or, in the case of the Western, have only seen in a movie theater. Indeed, *Cities of the Plain* started off as a screenplay, and elements of that type of narrative mode, which is intended to appeal to a broad spectrum of potential movie-goers, are still evident: a heavy amount of quick-witted dialogue, lots of action scenes, and less storytelling. Yet what *Cities of the Plain* does that the previous two texts do not is to explicitly use a generic American past in service of this temporal paradigm; the text has great fun, as the critic Sarah Gleeson-White puts it “playing up the constitutive codes” (25) of the Western, and by doing so, this fantasy is no longer sublimated beneath portrayals of earnest young men and their search for their horses.

Cities of the Plain, however, actually holds up this system of national representation, with its stark dichotomies, as a narrative artifact and an object of inquiry in and of itself, asking us to scrutinize the very mode of representation that, on the surface, it seemingly perpetuates. Indeed, the novel’s self-conscious use of the

tropes of the Western clearly codes this world and the simple national dualities that constitute it as discrete cultural objects available to our investigation. This concept of *Cities of the Plain* as a discrete cultural artifact can help us understand the epilogue, the year 2001, which “time” has now relocated from the future to the past. The epilogue now asks us to assess itself as “the past,” or, more specifically, it asks us to assess how we once viewed the future of a past that the text had imagined happening fifty years earlier. Here, a “history of the stories” aids us in assembling the different meanings of this epilogue into a narrative that asks us to reflect on what we once demanded of the future and what now, looking back, we ask of the past.

Sarah Gleeson-White’s argument about myth, genre and nostalgia in *All the Pretty Horses* is perhaps even more applicable to *Cities of the Plain*. She observes that the “self-conscious” and “self-reflexive” nature of the novel “lays bare the processes of this highly coded myth-making” inherent to the Western, which is a genre that allows texts to easily “play up its constitutive codes” (24, 25). In the opening line of dialogue, when Billy asks about John Grady, “Where’s the all-american cowboy at?”, we immediately understand—and Billy understands—that the “all-american cowboy” doesn’t *truly* exist, but if he *did*, we all know that he’d probably look like John Grady Cole. And, as the culminating show-down between “good” and “evil” demonstrates, these “constitutive codes” are based on opposing terms that the text predicates upon the national locations of the US and Mexico, respectively, and it is to this contradistinction that I now turn. While critics such as Phillip Snyder have specifically examined the text’s use of complex binaries in

constructing the cowboy code,³¹ the dichotomy between the US and Mexico actually controls this code, and, ultimately, *Cities of the Plain* undermines this national opposition in which, at first glance, it appears heavily invested.

Throughout most of the trilogy, Mexico buttresses US narratives of progress, which, for good or for bad, control and dominate this hemispheric representation of time and history, crunching forward into an ominous future that, McCarthy seems to be saying, we are powerless to stop. *Cities of the Plain* is different from the previous two texts of the trilogy, however, because it encapsulates this system of representation in a small, well-defined space, a space delimited by the twin border cities of El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, that emphasizes the mutual interdependence of these two locations. They are then further bound together in this tight area through layers of intertextuality: the codes and tropes of the Western as well as the biblical allusion of the title. This allusion suggests that, like the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, El Paso and Juarez are tethered to an identical fate through their mutual “depravity” and “corruption”; however, McCarthy’s use of this analogy is comparable to his use of genre codes and tropes, which makes it more teasing and provocative than earnest. As such, this biblical comparison is yet another narrative artifact that, like the Western, reveals the highly constructed nature of this narrowly delimited region. This well-defined narrative architecture illuminates its own structure, thus enabling us to scrutinize and take apart the binaries that constitute it, which diffuses their storytelling powers. By doing this, we can start to ask questions about the need for our national narratives to displace “the past” onto

³¹ See Philip A. Snyder, “Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy”

“Other” locations and our desire, in general, to create “evil” in foreign and “alien” locales.

The dichotomous world of *Cities of the Plain* is an artifact of narration, a particular way of constructing and representing a story that, in the end, queries our desire to assemble our national narratives according to simplistic binaries. This concept thereby posits *Cities of the Plain*, with all the codes, tropes, and dualities of its genre, as a narrative object that eventually explores what happens in the future, 2001, when we have narrated the past, 1951, as so neatly divided into good and evil worlds. What happens when we neatly divide our past this way is that “good” and “evil” mutually annihilate each other, and, when that occurs, the entire system of representation based on such binaries implodes in on itself. John Grady Cole confronts his enemy, the Mexican pimp Eduardo, in a dark alley in Juarez after Eduardo kills John Grady’s love, Magdalena, and both men end up killing each other. Adhering to the demands of the genre, John Grady dies in Billy Parham’s arms, and his death precipitates Billy’s sudden launch fifty years into the future. This rupture is indicative of the powerful repercussions of this implosion: the immediate future cannot be narrated, and it is only the future-to-be that carries the promise of a world recovered from the collapse of this representational system. Indeed, half a century is quickly compressed into five lines of text, which finds Billy, to his own surprise, still alive in “the second year of the new millennium” (264), a time that could only be conjectured in 1998, the year this book was published.

The epilogue attempts to secure a stable future in the twenty-first century for this elderly cowboy, supposedly a relic of an older mode of representation. Even

though Billy has almost become a complete simulacra of himself—we find him in El Paso, working as an extra in a movie, with his saddle “long since sold” (265)—he finally does manage to attain contingent security. After he finishes the movie, he crosses paths, literally, with one more philosophical storyteller, a Mexican who is heading south as Billy heads north. After the Mexican imparts one last didactic story full of vatic pronouncements about the importance dreams, narratives, and journeys, Billy finds himself taken in by a kind ranching family in the fall of that year, and he ends where he started out as a young boy: sleeping “in a shed room off the kitchen” (290). A brief nighttime exchange between him and the wife of the family, which tentatively affirms the future, closes the book. The woman gently assures Billy, “I know who you are. And I do know why [I put up with you]. You go to sleep now. I’ll see you in the morning.” Billy’s response to this, a simple “Yes mam” (292), avers that the old cowboy will wake up to see at least one more morning, facing it in much the same way he did as a boy, from a small room off the kitchen on a ranch in New Mexico.

Conclusion: What Happens to Country

“Country,” that imaginary place that anchors McCarthy’s heroes to a mythical sense of identity and possibility (the all-American cowboy on the range), has disappeared by the end of the trilogy—if it ever existed in the first place. Mexico, the last repository of the romantic past, forcefully and repeatedly repudiates that idea, though it remains other and alien even as it refuses to yield to Americanized notions of it. McCarthy’s heroes will never know the past they seek to know, because that past does not exist, and they will never know Mexico either, as long as they expect it

to serve up a twentieth-century version of the pastoral-as-daily-reality, to quote Annette Kolodny. Their *a priori* American mythos will forever preclude engaging Mexico on its own terms.

Yet what *The Border Trilogy* does to this mythical idea of country is to revise its story. The ambiguous middle space of the U.S/Mexico border—an ill-defined territory with a multi-national sense of history—disrupts facile American myths. This middle space counter-balances the apocalyptic and the atavistic; it ultimately engages a sense of deep time, oriented toward more existential and less specifically nationalistic concerns. The trilogy form emphasizes this middleness by bookending it with distinct beginnings and ends. The beginning of the story may actually reside in some hazy American originary myths, and the end may result in nuclear warfare, but in the middle, McCarthy's heroes try to hew out some space for themselves as best they know how.

The chronotopicity of the three novels emphasizes the primacy of space as primary organizational principle of the border. History, mythic and otherwise, gets mapped onto the national and extra-national spaces of the border, which makes it difficult to apply American narratives based on teleological progress to it; the space of the border does not easily recommend itself to the linear sequence of those narratives. McCarthy uses the trilogy form to figure the narrative of the border as primarily reliant on space, disregarding chronological sequence and plot as primary unifiers. Instead, he uses geographical areas—and the sense of time he aligns with them—as the unifying principle. *The Border Trilogy* is a map of history, not a timeline of history. In the next chapter, Philip Roth will present a more metaphorical

map of late twentieth-century American history, one configured through a novelist's fiction-making skills but nonetheless reliant upon notions of the American pastoral.

Pastoral Dreams: Dreaming a Realistic Chronicle in Roth's American Trilogy

Introduction

Philip Roth, like Cormac McCarthy and Toni Morrison, uses the enlarged landscape of the trilogy to offer an extended meditation on how storytellers form and shape the stories of late twentieth-century America. Roth's trilogy consists of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000). He has stated that the three books form a "thematic trilogy" that examines "the historical moments in post [World War II] American life that have had the greatest impact" on Roth's generation (McGrath "Zuckerman's Alter Brain"). However, Roth's trilogy is different from McCarthy's and Morrison's because it explicitly addresses events and movements from the second half of the twentieth century rather than refracting those events through the prism of genre, as McCarthy does, or through chronologically earlier times in American history, as does Morrison.

Roth frames each text as an investigation into a historical moment in post-World War II America: *American Pastoral* examines the political radicalism of the 1960s; *I Married a Communist* examines the Communist scare of the 1950s; and *The Human Stain* uses the 1998 Clinton/Lewinsky scandal as a launch pad for an examination into racial and sexual politics. Roth employs one his most well-known creations, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman, whom Roth has called his "alter mind" (McGrath), to narrativize these historical moments using the imaginative tools associated with novel-writing and storytelling. *American Pastoral*, the first and perhaps most highly regarded novel of the trilogy, is essentially Zuckerman's novel-length answer to the question of how someone like Seymour "The Swede" Levov, a

man who did not want to “run counter” to “anything” (*AP* 23), could become “history’s plaything” (87)—in other words, how a man who was inherently inclined to conform with and thoroughly embrace the dominant cultural narrative of post-War World II America became, instead, its hapless victim. The novel, like Morrison’s *Beloved* and, to a certain extent, McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, ends up interrogating the cultural assumptions that constitute narratives of American exceptionalism in the second half of the twentieth century. Just as importantly, the novel also interrogates the methods by which those narratives are constituted. Zuckerman assumes the place of historian in relationship to the three men whose lives he examines, contextualizing their experiences within the milieu of post-World War II America and the tumultuous and, in Roth’s eyes, the frustrating years that followed it. Ultimately, the three novels articulate a vision of history as excavated through the auspices of fictional instruments, and they culminate in an argument that one of the only ways to wrestle some control over history—to avoid becoming its “plaything”—is to imaginatively shape it by inserting it into the molds of adaptive and self-interrogating fictional structures.

All of the protagonists in the novels of Roth’s trilogy begin as believers in an American myth, which is “pastoral” in its assumption of essential innocence and naturalness, linked to a notion of American national exceptionalism. For believers of this myth, the promise of American life is that of free, innocent, and harmless self-(re)creation.³² This belief in the pastoral promises of the American landscape thematically echoes McCarthy’s trilogy, particularly *All the Pretty Horses* and *The*

³² This definition of the pastoral is indebted to Richard Slotkin’s concept of the role of myth in the American cultural imagination and its impact on ideas of national exceptionalism.

Crossing, and Morrison's *Paradise*, which revises this myth in order to address questions of racial liberation and freedom. Thus, at the closing of the twentieth century, the pastoral promise of the New World continues to retain its profound hold on the American national imagination. In her critical work *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny offers a powerful rationale for why this is: "American pastoral, unlike European, holds at its very core the promise of fantasy as daily reality" (7). Roth, McCarthy, and Morrison all address the consequences of interpreting the pastoral fantasy as a daily reality. They provide a powerful argument that this conflation between fiction and reality must be confronted, examined, and wrestled with in order to properly assess the ravages of late twentieth-century America.

Yet, out of all three authors, Roth most explicitly leverages the power of the pastoral myth in order to create a metaphorical site or location where his protagonists can invent or reinvent themselves. Unlike McCarthy and Morrison, his concept of the pastoral is related to, but not dependent on, specific geographies.³³ Roth first articulates his philosophical vision of the pastoral in the 1986 novel *The Counterlife* (1986), where he specifically treats pastoralism as a "genre" (317) and a lifestyle—both of which happen to be completely unsuitable for Zuckerman, the complex, irascible first-person narrator of the novel. At the end of the novel, Zuckerman dismisses the enticements of a safe and simple existence, devoid of contradiction and complexity: "[...] we all create imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be 'ourselves.' Yet another of our mythological pursuits" (322). Roth,

³³ McCarthy explicitly maps the pastoral fantasy onto the Southwestern landscape and uses the geography of the US/Mexico borderlands to flesh out his concepts of national identity and self-invention. Morrison uses the rural location of Ruby, Oklahoma to emphasize the social and geographic isolation of the town's residents as well as the isolation of the black experience within the pastoral paradigm.

then, has a history of conceptualizing the pastoral as an “imagined world” that offers the possibility of complete, accepting self-realization—an ideal, of course, that can never be attained. Yet that does not stop Roth’s protagonists in the American Trilogy from attempting to attain this ideal by removing themselves from urban spaces to more rural locales. This desire even afflicts Zuckerman, the man who so thoroughly—and verbosely—rejects the pastoral in *The Counterlife*. Leo Marx calls this the “ ‘flight from the city’ ” attitude, when “[a]n inchoate longing for a more ‘natural’ environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life.” This is, according to Marx, a “sentimental kind” of pastoralism and therefore overly simplistic in its understanding of the role the pastoral space plays in the American national imagination (*Machine in the Garden* 5). The flight from the city or the remove to the country remains, however, quite a powerful representation of the pastoral impulse, and all three novels register it in a substantial way. Zuckerman himself embodies this remove by isolating himself in a small cabin in the Berkshires, away from the energies, demands, and vitality of urban America. All three protagonists practice removing themselves in one way or another, two by going to rural New Jersey (The Swede Levov in *American Pastoral* and Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist*) and one by going to the Berkshires (Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*). Finally, Roth’s idea of the pastoral, particularly in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, adheres more strictly to William Empson’s well-known formulation of the genre: “The essential trick of the pastoral [...] was to make simple people express strong feeling” (11). The “simple people” to which Empson is referring are traditionally shepherds, the classical subjects of pastoral poetry, dating

back to Virgil's *Eclogues*.³⁴ Yet Roth updates this representation in his portrayals of Seymour Levov, with his seemingly "simple" "relationship to himself" (*AP* 36), and, to certain extent, Ira Ringold, who is simple in that he is "unschooled and ill-educated," which largely contributes to his almost classically tragic downfall (*IMAC* 59 – 60). (Coleman Silk, however, breaks this pattern in a spectacular way.) Roth, therefore, appropriates the two basic tenets of pastoralism—the "green and breastlike" landscape, primarily, but also the simple shepherd—in order to narrativize the landscape of late-twentieth century American experience. This concept of the pastoral informs all three books of the trilogy.

While *The Counterlife* distinctly genders the pastoral as feminine,³⁵ the novels of the trilogy do not. Rather, they use the pastoral myth as a vehicle for investigating the possibilities and limitations of self-invention and self-creation. However, the pastoral myth in the American Trilogy, which endows the protagonists of Roth's three novels with an innate sense of possibility, have what Roth describes as an "other side," where the "unexpected thing" exists, always "ripening, ready to explode" (*AP* 176). Roth labels the other side of the pastoral as the "counterpastoral," which he

³⁴ Paul Alpers argues for a return to this basic understanding of the pastoral genre in Early Modern criticism: "[W]e will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives, rather than landscape or idealized nature" (22). Alpers's book focuses largely on Early Modern texts with a foray, at the end, into late 19th century American literature by way of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, which he argues is pastoral in the (neo) classical sense (407). In terms of this project, his formulation of the pastoral—quite influential in Early Modern studies—is mostly interesting as an antecedent to the American pastoral, which is, as Leo Marx argues, heavily influenced by the birth of an aesthetic philosophy of landscape in the 18th century (88). Certainly by the time Roth, Morrison, and McCarthy were writing, the "pastoral" in the American sense was heavily defined by land, geography and landscape and had, I would argue, collapsed into ideas of the frontier.

³⁵ In feminizing the mythic pastoral landscape, *The Counterlife* actually provides another example of Kolodny's argument in *The Lay of the Land*, which specifically examines "the shared response to the landscape as woman" by European settlers and their literary descendants. Kolodny argues that such feminization "help[ed] Europeans accommodate themselves to a virtually unknown terrain and then provid[ed] the incentive for them to travel its extent" (157).

forcefully defines as “the indigenous American berserk” (86). The indigenous American berserk is the chaos, violence, and disorder—especially *urban* disorder—that is, as one character in *American Pastoral* terms it, “the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck!” (277). The pastoral produces the counterpastoral in order to define what it is and is not. The counterpastoral is the abjected “crazy shit,” to use Julia Kristeva’s well-known formulation (1 – 2),³⁶ that the national body must constantly expel in order to reconstitute the borders of its identity and therefore maintain the integrity of that identity. The pastoral needs to expel the waste products of its own processes of identity formation in order to fully incorporate itself, and this expelled “crazy shit” forms the pastoral’s “other side.” Thus a national myth like the pastoral *produces* its own counterpastoral in order to be able to form the boundaries of its identity.

For Roth, such theses and antitheses of American culture, like the pastoral and counterpastoral, are inherently irreconcilable. They constantly erupt into a conflicting, antagonistic relationship, and Roth uses the form of the trilogy to instantiate a coherence that he argues late twentieth-century American history does not inherently possess. The trilogy argues that American identity in the post-World War II United States is in search of some sort of form that would endow it with a unifying force, and this is precisely what the trilogy can give it—a formal unity and coherence that our national identity inherently lacks. Yet the trilogy simultaneously argues that such formal unity and coherence is necessarily fictive and therefore provisional; it is a function of an imaginative labor that we enact in order to counterbalance and

³⁶ Kristeva theorizes that the abject and the process of abjection demarcate the “place where meaning collapses” and, in that way, “safeguard” the subject from it (1 – 2).

counteract the contradictions that lie at the crux of American national identity. Whatever unity we achieve exists only on a fictional level rather than an ideological one, and therefore it is the responsibility of our fictional structures to achieve a coherence that eludes U.S. national identity. And this is what the trilogy does: it organizes the story of American history in the late twentieth into a novelistic structure that endows it with a familiar three-part narrative form. This fictional organization packages this irreconcilable division within American culture with a beginning point and an end point, thus rendering comprehensible the story of this internal schism within U.S. national identity. The trilogy form thereby locates the abjected counterpastoral with all its crazy shit on a familiar narrative map, and, by doing so, reveals the nature—and even the very existence—of an abjected territory that is foundational to U.S. national culture and identity. At the same time, the trilogy form simultaneously provides a commentary on and a partial satisfaction of our national desire for such structuring coherence.

Roth's trilogy consistently argues that the only way to productively channel the brutality and violence at the core of American national identity is through fictional structures—the novel, primarily, but also through oral storytelling and neo-classical forms associated with epic and narrative poetry. These structures cohere the chaos associated with this violence on an imaginative level, which in turn enables investigations into the brutal forces of 20th century American society and culture. The parameters of the novel form capture and shape this violent tendency so that it can be better examined and considered. Roth's novel trilogy provides a cognitive map for mentally apprehending this violence: a structure that locates particular points for

examination and coordinates their relationship to each other. The three novels of the trilogy spatially relate to each other, for their structural dependencies are dictated more by the space of late twentieth American culture than by the chronology of that period. The three novels do not represent a linear tour through the last sixty or so years of the twentieth century that begins at the earliest point and ends at the latest point; rather, they represent a tour through what Roth views to be important themes in the late twentieth century that begins with the social upheaval of the 1960s and ends with an examination of race and identity in the 1990s. Like Roth's conception of race, some of these themes, in his view, are more central to this period than others, while others saturate the entire landscape—pervasive violence, the attractiveness of rigid ideological structures, the possibilities and limitations of self-invention and self-transformation. In terms of using time as an ordering mechanism for history, the most pronounced temporal element of Roth's trilogy is its need to provide a sense of an ending for the century and even the millennium—to mark that moment in time and history. For Roth, this ending is ultimately pastoral, both in setting and theory. The last sentence of *The Human Stain*, which is the final book in the trilogy, observes “a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an Arcadian mountain in America” (HS 361). Despite the pastoral setting, this “solitary man” is not innocent; indeed, he is most likely guilty of killing a man and his girlfriend. Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century (*The Human Stain* was published in 2000), the American pastoral remains a bundle of sharp contradictions: innocent and almost utopic in its aspirations, and deeply guilty in its violent effects.

Each of the three novels in the trilogy identify a different coordinate for considering the way in which fictional structures can package an exploration of the chaos, violence, brutality, and disorder associated with the American berserk. This packaging is explicitly articulated by the meta-fictional super-structure that animates all three novels: it is Zuckerman in his role as novelist who, in various ways, provokes the stories of Swede Levov in *American Pastoral*, Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*. Zuckerman's novelistic tools are required in order to productively and constructively narrate late twentieth century American society in all its violent complexity. In *American Pastoral*, this is achieved through Zuckerman's initial framing of the Swede's story in addition to the application of a tripartite structure whose sections reference *Paradise Lost* and the neo-classical formalism of that epic poem. In *I Married a Communist*, the relationship of teller and listener create the productive parameters through which Ira Ringold's story can be fully relayed and "filed," as Ira's brother puts it, with Zuckerman. In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman's first-person narration, which is largely absent from *American Pastoral* and only half-realized in *I Married a Communist*, provides the architecture in which Coleman Silk's story can be housed. The person with the ability and experience to imaginatively sort and order the world, a *novelist*, is arguably most suited to the task of both revealing and organizing the indigenous American berserk.

In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman is the first-person frame narrator who sets up the text as a novel he has written about Seymour "Swede" Levov before completely (and quietly, for Zuckerman) receding from the primary diegesis altogether for the grand majority of the text. Even at the beginning, when Zuckerman

has a clear and distinctive narrative presence, Roth asserts this metafictional framework lightly; the sections in which Zuckerman actually talks about writing a novel about the Swede are—for Roth—relatively brief.³⁷ The result of Zuckerman’s disappearing act is that most of *American Pastoral* appears to be narrated by an omniscient third person narrator, which caused many reviewers to completely overlook the fact that the text was supposedly the result of Zuckerman’s novelistic imaginings.³⁸ In *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman’s presence is more pronounced; he narrates alternating chapters with Murray Ringold, his old high school English teacher. Zuckerman’s career as a writer provides an impetus for Murray to tell Zuckerman about the rise and fall of his brother, Ira “Iron Rinn” Ringold. In a nod to Scheherazade’s storytelling stamina, the 92-year-old Murray relates Ira’s story over a six-night period, with Zuckerman interjecting his chapter-length observations about Ira, whom he hero-worshipped when in high school, throughout the text. In the last novel of the trilogy, *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman evolves into the primary narrator of the novel. Like *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, the novel opens with an older man—Coleman Silk, in this case—seeking to use Zuckerman’s writing and storytelling skills in order to publicize and advance his own version of controversial events. This time around, however, Roth does not cede the text to other narrative positions. Zuckerman fully controls the story of his investigation into

³⁷ For more assertive and deployments of metafictional constructs in Roth’s work, see, for instance, *The Counterlife*, *The Plot Against America*, and Roth’s two autobiographies, *The Facts*. All these novels more extensively explore the role of writers in shaping their own fictions and realities and the fictions and realities of those around them.

³⁸ Derek Parker Royal discusses this critical oversight in the reviews of *American Pastoral* (120 – 121).

Coleman Silk's life, which, like *American Pastoral*, ultimately results in a novel—Zuckerman's novel.

What emerges from Zuckerman's fictional investigations into the historical forces that shaped these characters are portraits of men who embody the tensions within this myth and the actualities of American national identity. These novels, then, are character studies in many ways.³⁹ Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk all become sites of inquiry into the American ideals of self-invention and self-transformation. Taken together, they represent the possibilities and limitations of self-creation rooted in the pastoral fantasy, which is fueled by a sense of mythic freedom and innocence. Swede, Ira, and Coleman all believe in the pastoral promise of America, a nation whose vast landscape has mythically enabled citizens to imagine a multiplicity of physical and figurative locations where they can re-birth and re-invent themselves. *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* investigate the consequences of this fantasy when it confronts the brutality, violence, and ideological warfare of late-twentieth America.

American Pastoral: "The Indigenous American Berserk"

The first section of *American Pastoral*, "Paradise Remembered," posits the novel as Zuckerman's novelistic response to his own misconceptions about Seymour "The Swede" Levov. *American Pastoral* thereby constitutes a revisionist history. In this section, Zuckerman frames his novelistic inquiry as an investigation into the Swede's "opacity" (77), which Zuckerman believes masked the Swede's true subjectivity with a superficial sheen of "Swedean innocence" (4). Zuckerman had

³⁹ In her article about *The Human Stain*, Patrice Rankine drew my attention to this idea of Roth's novels as character studies. About Coleman Silk, Rankine argues: "The study of the self-made man is as much an inquiry into character as it is a social drama" (104).

formed this initial idea of the Swede at an idolatrous distance during his high school years when the Swede was an athletically superior senior and Zuckerman was a worshipful freshman. This portrait of Swedien innocence was emphasized again when, nearly 50 years after their boyhood acquaintance, the Swede asks Zuckerman to meet him for dinner in order to counsel him, the Swede, about a would-be memoir he wanted to write about his father. Even as a 70-something man, the Swede still presents himself to Zuckerman as someone without a psychological “substratum,” a man who ran “counter” to nothing” (38, 23) and possessed an uncomplicated, univalent personality (in other words, an anti-Zuckerman). Zuckerman, however, revises this impression of the Swede after he runs into the Swede’s brother, Jerry, at their high school reunion, a few months after his dinner with the Swede himself. Jerry tells Zuckerman that the Swede had just passed away from prostate cancer, which takes Zuckerman by surprise because he had not known the Swede was even sick, and then Jerry discloses the story about the Swede’s daughter, whom Jerry refers to as “the monster *Merry*” (67, emphasis original). Merry, it turns out, blew up her hometown post office in 1968 as a protest act against the Vietnam war, killing a much-liked local doctor and catapulting the Swede, with all his innocence, into “the real American crazy shit” (277), to use Jerry’s words. Jerry’s disclosure about his brother’s past provokes Zuckerman to experience a revelation about the Swede, his life, and his story, which is formally emphasized as a single-sentence paragraph at the end of the first chapter: “I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anything in my life” (39).

This first section provides meta-commentary about how history is made and re-made through the structures of fiction and storytelling. Roth frames *American Pastoral* as Zuckerman's novelistic effort to reveal the Swede's psychological substratum. As Roth perceives it, this multilayered complexity was shaped and formed by the collision between the complacent prosperity of post-World War II America and the radical, violent upheavals of the 1960s, as embodied by the Swede's daughter. Zuckerman decides to write a novel in order to understand how someone like the Swede, a man "built for convention" (65), became "history's plaything" (87). Zuckerman wants to understand how a man whose very subjectivity was built to conform with and benefit from the dominant historical paradigm of post-World War II prosperity—one of triumphant success—instead became a victim of American history's worst impulses. If anyone was going to embody an all-American success story, it was Swede Levov. Swede Levov, however, ends up embodying an American tragedy, and Zuckerman takes it upon himself to novelistically represent how and why this transformation occurred.

American Pastoral, then, like Morrison's *Beloved*, is a project of historical excavation. It articulates the methods by which authors deploy the narrative tools associated with storytelling—whether that story is presented as a novel or as an oral tale—in order to re-configure the story of the past (i.e., history) so that the narrative structure of that story more accurately represents the problems associated with "knowing" the past. Roth wants to re-narrate the past so that that the narrative structure itself manifests some of the epistemological limits of accurately representing that past, and he leverages Zuckerman's novel-writing background to do this. As

Debra Shostak and others point out,⁴⁰ Roth has engaged with problems of epistemology throughout his career, particularly epistemological questions that plague writers—for instance, whether it is ever possible to know someone well enough to accurately portray them in the pages of a novel.⁴¹ In this trilogy, however, these questions take on a distinctly historical inflection, and they become questions about what it means to author an accurate history about someone and historical era in which he lived.

In *American Pastoral*, the storyteller, Zuckerman-the-novelist, needs to excavate a more accurate version of a person and the events that shaped that person's life out from under the weight of his, the storyteller's, own misconceptions. However, even Zuckerman's revised version of the past, though it may take into account new information, is not guaranteed to yield the "truth" of past—inasmuch as the "truth" is predicated on authentic, verifiable knowledge. What is actually verifiable is the author's own version of past events, based on his criteria of selection and inclusion, which correlates to his feeling for the fictional form and structure. In his novelistic reconstruction of the Swede, Zuckerman admits,

...my Swede was not the primary Swede. Of course I was working with traces; of course essentials of what he was to Jerry were gone, expunged from my portrait, things I was ignorant of or I didn't want; of course the Swede was concentrated differently in my pages from how he'd been concentrated in the flesh. (76)

⁴⁰ Debra Shostak provides a broad discussion of the ways in which Roth has taken up questions of epistemology in his work, though she zeroes in on Zuckerman's role in the trilogy, stating that "Zuckerman represents the vexing epistemological project of the historian" (232).

⁴¹ This is one of Zuckerman's primary fixations in *The Counterlife* as he provides multiple versions of Maria, his girlfriend (or maybe Henry's girlfriend); his brother, Henry; and himself.

The “traces” of the Swede with which Zuckerman was working are related to Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historical traces. She argues that “we can only know the past (which really did exist) through its textualized remains” (288), which are the various texts that a culture constructs as the “traces” and “relics” of the past (289).⁴² Zuckerman acknowledges that he does not have—nor does any historian have—direct access to “real objects” from the Swede’s past; he only has access to the remnants that American culture has constructed as traces of that past: the houses where the Swede lived, the microfilm containing journalistic accounts of his athletic prowess, the glossy photo of his wife from the 1949 Miss America pageant (*AP* 75 – 76). The very nature of these traces makes it impossible for them to yield up a portrait of the “primary Swede,” and this impossibility is compounded by the role of the author in deciding what to include and exclude in his history—and information and artifacts of which the author remains ignorant.

Zuckerman’s dispersed narrative presence in the first section of the novel allows his authorial presence to unobtrusively fade into the background as soon as he articulates the nature of his inquiry and sets the parameters for it. The structure of the first section both mimics and makes visible how history is shaped and formed by the story its author wishes to tell. *American Pastoral* frames inquiry into the past as one in which the authorial presence asserts itself as a vehicle that engenders and then delimits the parameters of the inquiry before disappearing from the frame altogether.

⁴² Linda Hutcheon actually argues that “[t]he referent [of history] is always described within the discourses of our culture” (288); in other words, the events that constitute “history” and are deemed worthy of the “historical record” are constructed as such by the discourses within a culture. While Roth, unlike Morrison, does not explicitly confront the way in which discursive contexts construct certain events as history and other events as “unworthy” of history, he does acknowledge that our only access to the past is through its traces, which do not necessarily refer to a “real object” but rather a discursive context.

The first section provides a variety of narrative forms through which the Swede “remembers” the “paradise” of his youth in Newark. These narrative forms include monologue, conversation, and a formalized speech, though they are all filtered through Zuckerman’s first-person narrative perspective. They provide a way for Zuckerman to assert a multiplicity of narrative positions—observer, interrogator, expositor, listener—that diffuse his first-person narrative voice, subordinating it to other characters and then re-prioritizing it as necessary. In addition, these narrative forms also become a way for Roth (via Zuckerman) to demarcate the chronological shifts within this first section—as Zuckerman’s narrative position changes, so does the time period that he is recounting, from the distant past, to the recent past, to the present. This discursive narrative structure enables Zuckerman’s presence to condense and disperse as necessary as his focus shifts from the 1940s, to the 1980s, to the 1990s, and then back to the 1940s before he disappears from the narrative altogether. Indeed, more than two-thirds of text—from the end of the first section onward—appears to be narrated in the third-person. This disappearing act is so successful that, when the book was first published, many reviewers overlooked the fact that the book was not a third person narrative but rather Zuckerman’s imagined account of the Swede’s life.⁴³

Zuckerman introduces his investigation into the Swede’s life as a self-avowed correction to his own misconceptions about the Swede and the Swede’s particular “Swedian innocence” (*AP* 4). After his meeting with the Swede in the early 90s, Zuckerman initially reconfirms his original impressions of the Swede:

⁴³Again, I’m indebted to Derek Parker Royal for pointing this out in his article “Contesting the Historical Pastoral.”

There's nothing here but what you're looking at. He's all about being looked at. [...] He is not faking all this virginity. You're craving depths that don't exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing. (39)

A one-sentence paragraph appears after this mini-monologue: "I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life" (39). Thus, from the beginning, *American Pastoral* is packaged as a revelation about the type of person who seemingly embodies the "innocence" and "virginity" that Roth associates with a national pastoral ideal. The personal and the national become entwined; a novelist, the text argues, must attempt to correct our cultural "mistake[s]," and it is up to fiction to investigate national assumptions, to figure out how we know what we know. Fictional tools can help correct misperceptions about American "innocence" and "virginity," and they can reveal why we are wrong and mistaken about such ideals.

In addition, Zuckerman frames his Swede revisionism as providing a narrative service for the Swede. The Swede, he believes, had wanted to " 'give [his story] to a pro'" when he met Zuckerman in New York for lunch. In the end, however, the Swede had been unable to divulge his story, and his decision to reject "the exhibitionism inherent to a confession" makes Zuckerman respect him more, and to admit that he, Zuckerman—someone whose consciousness has been sharply honed by years of excavating the compelling story concealed within quotidian exchanges – "missed" "the story": "He turned to me, of all people, and he was conscious of everything and I missed everything" (82). Thus, at the very beginning of the novel, Roth ties the project of revealing "the comet of the American chaos" that had defined the Swede's life with the obligations of a writer to be conscious of this "other side" of

American pastoralness, which constitutes the doubleness at the core of the Swede's life and at the core of American culture and history. It is the duty of the novelist to be conscious to, to reveal and tell about, the abjected, expelled elements of the late twentieth century U.S. The novelist will be able to shape and form the waste products of American history into a tellable story.

Zuckerman increasingly alternates between the present of the 1990s, which is comprised of his high school reunion and his reminiscences about the Swede and his classmates, and the imaginative space of the working novelist, where he begins to assemble his version of the Swede. He begins to mentally shape the consequences and repercussions of Merry's violence as an "antithesis" of the Swedien innocence he both admired and denigrated, and such language—with its implied thesis—engenders the primary themes as binary structures. Merry's actions "initiat[e] the Swede into the displacement of another American entirely," for she is

[t]he daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk. (86)

As this version of the Swede's life begins to take shape in Zuckerman's mind, he begins to "lif[t] Swede up onto the stage" of his narrative (88), which means that the Swede and his story begin to assume the primary place in the text of *American Pastoral* itself, and the 1990s—Zuckerman's high school reunion, his recollections of his child- and adulthood interactions with the Swede—begin to recede. Once Zuckerman forms his novelistic thesis about the cause of the Swede's displacement

into “the indigenous American berserk,” Zuckerman’s first-person voice itself is displaced within the diegesis of the novel, which increasingly takes on the appearance of a third-person narrative. Thus, when Zuckerman fully articulates the binary oppositions that he sees as structuring the Swede’s life and, by extension, late twentieth century American history—place/displacement, pastoral/counterpastoral—the novelist has seemingly accomplished his task, which is to help form and structure the cultural narratives that form the American national imagination.

In Zuckerman’s last nod to the present-day, where he is dancing with an old high school classmate to Johnny Mercer’s 1940s song “Dream,” he states, “To the honeysweet strains of ‘Dream,’ I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed...I dreamed a realistic chronicle” (89). This sentence introduces the beginning of Zuckerman’s disappearance as narrator. As soon as the teller decides on the nature of the tale and explicitly frames it as such, the teller can then recede from the framework of the tale. His organizing work as a narrator is done, and the story has acquired enough narrative energy and definition to have the force of “history,” or “a history,” which is the trilogy’s mission.

In this case, Zuckerman decides to dream a chronicle, which is a type of narrative that organizes past events using a deeply familiar ordering mechanism—time. The “chronicle,” moreover, is supposedly a less-evolved ancestor to modern historiography; instead of attempting an interpretive analysis of past events, the chronicle merely endeavors to place those events in chronological order, thus applying a very crude framework to the past that merely sequences events rather than

interpreting them through a more sophisticated theoretical framework.⁴⁴ Finally, Zuckerman “dreams” this chronicle—that is, this basic history of the Swede is something Zuckerman *imagines* as a novelist, which further underscores how this novel (and the entire trilogy) explicitly exists at the intersection between fiction and historiography.

The fact that Zuckerman asserts that he is “only” writing a chronicle is a rather modest and self-effacing exit for someone whose narrative presence has traditionally saturated every Roth novel in which he has appeared—a reader familiar with Roth’s corpus would not expect Zuckerman-the-narrator to go so gently into that good night, so to speak. Indeed, even Zuckerman’s last I-statement in the novel is somewhat ingenuous, implying that, as an author, he merely stumbles on the Swede’s story in an unexpected place: “[...] and inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey, at the seaside cottage when his daughter was eleven [...]” (89). Zuckerman does not explicitly frame the entryway to the Swede’s story as something assembled through an author’s heady artifice; rather, the story is apparently out there, awaiting discovery, and Zuckerman merely happens upon one entry point in the narrative landscape, and decides to go in. The novel then turns its focus wholly on the Swede, and Zuckerman does not again assert his presence as a narrator. He does not again comment on the internal construction of the Swede’s story—the traces of the past he has integrated into the novel, the imaginative work he

⁴⁴ Lynette Felber in her monograph *Gender and Genre in Novels Without End* draws on Hayden White when discussing the difference between a chronicle and a history: “According to Hayden White’s definition, ‘The chronicle, like the annals but unlike the history, does not so much ‘conclude’ as simply terminate; typically it lacks closure, that summing up of the ‘meaning’ of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from the well-made story’” (34).

does to fill in the gaps between those traces—and Roth lets the meta-fictional frame slip away, leaving only the Swede himself on the stage. This quiet dissolution of Zuckerman’s framing narrative underscores the subtle way in which the authorial presence shapes the narrative and forms its premises, essentially giving birth to the conceptual architecture of cultural fictions, and then is required by the dictates of those fictions to disappear—to let them appear as if they were un-authored, as if such fictions simply arose from some primal truth of that culture. Historical narratives, as Hayden White reminds us, are not found as much as they are invented—in this case, invented by Zuckerman.

The novel turns its full attention to the Swede at a moment that he will attempt to identify as “the origins of their suffering” (92) after Merry has blown up the post office. Merry has possessed a horrible stutter for her entire childhood, a verbal deformity that foreshadows her later, more substantial philosophical deformation. During the summer that she is eleven, she and the Swede carry on a father-daughter “summer romance” (91) full of light flirtation and heavy Freudian undertones (Merry: “Daddy, kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother” [89]). When Merry is held hostage within a particularly bad stuttering episode, the Swede “lost his vaunted sense of proportion, drew her to him with one arm, and kissed her stammering mouth with the passion that she had been asking for all month long while knowing only obscurely what she was asking for” (91). This kiss, which “bore no resemblance to anything serious, was not an imitation of anything, had never been repeated” (92), haunts the Swede in later years, acquiring increasing power as he tries to identify a possible cause of Merry’s teen-aged violence. In the course of the novel, however, the Swede

contemplates many possible causes for Merry's behavior (e.g., his and Dawn's physical attractiveness, Merry's witnessing of the self-immolating Buddhist monk in Vietnam in 1963), and this kiss becomes merely one element in the cosmology of reasons that could explain why Merry might have done what she did. Yet the kiss episode, which is the gateway into the Swede's story, not only illustrates the intimate relationship between father and daughter, it also illustrates the way that Merry's stuttering provokes the Swede to aberrant actions—it causes him to lose his “vaunted sense of proportion” and transgress social boundaries. The “kiss” scene thereby becomes a primal scene within the novel, foreshadowing the breakdown of personal and social contract to which the Swede thought he was conforming.

When he kisses Merry, the Swede is trying to assuage the pain of her stutter for both of them by short-circuiting the language explosion that made, as the Swede's brother Jerry observed years after the Rimrock incident, “[E]very word she *spoke* [...] a bomb” (279). Before there was the violence of the actual bomb, there was the violence of the linguistic bombs that erupted from Merry's mouth on a minute-by-minute basis. This stammer inhibited her fluency in a way that set her apart from her parents, who both—an ex-football captain and an ex-beauty queen—exhibited substantial physical, social and verbal fluency in their lives. Indeed, Merry's stutter antagonized her mother and eventually even the Swede, the parent with more patience. While her mother would “wring [her] hands” or “watch her lips or mouth her words with her,” the Swede once went so far as to actually make fun of her by mimicking her (91). Her stutter thereby marks Merry as the disabled other within the small triad of her family from the time she is a small child, positioning her in

opposition to her able and fluent parents and already providing a glimpse of what the Swede comes to recognize as the unexpected thing on the other side of everything else, ready to explode (176). In the end, then, it is not so much that the taboo kiss between the Swede and Merry was the origin of the family's suffering at the hands of Merry's violence, but rather it is the origin of the Swede's introduction to the other side that undergirds his comfortable post-World War II American existence—Merry's stutter is the reason that initially provokes the Swede to confront this chaotic, disordered territory within himself.

The rest of this initial introduction to the Swede's story, which occupies the last section of Part I of the novel, briefly sketches Merry as a diligent, intelligent child: the substantial work that she did to overcome her stutter with the help of a speech therapist, a stuttering diary, and other therapeutic tools, as well as her childhood obsessions—Audrey Hepburn, astronomy, the 4-H club, and even Catholicism (93). This childhood portrait amounts to the opening gambit before everything changed when Merry was an adolescent. She “shot up, broke out, grew stout” and became a belligerent, antagonistic, and oppositional teenager whom her high school classmates nicknamed “Ho Chi Levov” (100)—quite a different brand of high school nickname than her father's, which referenced physical attractiveness rather than aggressive political sympathies.

The first part of *American Pastoral*, “Paradise Remembered,” ends on a fractious, sour note, summarizing the sixty-seven conversations (at least) between reasonable father and hostile daughter about whether or not she is allowed to go to New York to take part in anti-war activities (112). The same basic conversation

undergoes several iterations, and it reveals how Merry *herself* wants to occupy a place beyond the boundaries of the well-ordered world that the Swede has attempted to construct for his family and within himself. Whereas her stuttering provided a medium through which the Swede initially confronted this chaotic psychological and social location, the stuttering was only one of characteristic among many within Merry. The grotesque, outsized Merry—an aberration of the conventional femininity represented by her pretty, petite mother—wishes to occupy the other side. As she informs her father, “Limits. That’s all you care about. Not going to the extreme. Well, sometimes you have to fucking go to the extreme. What you think war is? War is an extreme. It isn’t life out here in little Rimrock. Nothing too extreme out here” (105). Moreover, Roth starts to tie such desire for disorder and chaos with the unquestioning ignorance that he believes that radical ideology breeds. Such ideology endows its practitioners with “the exhilarating power of total self-certainty” (101)—all questions are answered, and doubt, ambiguity, and skepticism are suppressed in service of this particular belief system. As Dawn informs the Swede, “I cannot *recognize* her. I thought she was smart. She’s not smart at all. She’s become *stupid*, Seymour; she gets more stupid each time we talk” (102). These conflicts with Merry only achieve a resolution (of sorts) when Merry finally does decide to focus her anti-war energies on her hometown—and ends up blowing up the Old Rimrock post office and general store, along with Dr. Fred Conlon, who happened to be mailing a letter in the early morning hours (113). The irony is that, in retrospect, these conversations and Merry’s truculent behavior do become part of the “remembered paradise” for the Swede after she blows up the post office and goes underground, physically

disappearing from his life almost altogether. Ultimately, these exhausting interactions come to occupy a similar place within the Swede's memory as Zuckerman's high school days occupy within his.

Part II of *American Pastoral* is entitled "The Fall," and it opens five years after Merry has blown up the post office. Part II very quickly transforms Zuckerman's modest "chronicle" of the Swede's life into a narrative with a more complex chronological structure. The opening of this second part is the most substantial in length of the three parts. It explores the five-year gap between the close of the first part and the beginning of the second; it describes the Swede's earlier life in high school, the army, and college; and it finally closes only after the Swede has seen Merry one last time, five years after she blew up the post office and her family. When the Swede reconnects with Merry, she has assumed the alias of Mary Stoltz and is living an almost completely self-abnegating existence as a devout Jain in the Newark slums while volunteering for a veterinary hospital.

The five years define the Swede's postlapsarian life after Merry's act of homicidal violence. When part II opens, the Swede is marked by his now-bifurcated existence. There is the way in which the bombing divided his life into "before" and "after," and, more importantly, the way in which Merry's violence blew the Swede's once-unified identity in half. Before the bombing, he had innocently presumed that he had definitively achieved "an undivided oneness of existence" (206) wherein all the parts of himself were integrated into a coherent identity. After the bombing, he became a man with dual existences, an "outer" life and an "inner" life:

That is the outer life. To the best of his ability, it is conducted just as it used to be. But now it is accompanied by an inner life, a gruesome inner life of tyrannical obsessions, stifled inclinations, superstitious expectations, horrible imaginings, fantasy conversations, unanswerable questions. (173)

For the Swede, then, the original sin that caused the fall was the bomb that Merry exploded within his own personality. Merry's violence dismantled his innocent preconceptions of his own wholeness—preconceptions that were predicated on an American cultural narrative of immigrant success, which the novel describes as “the flight of the immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory” (122). Such an unbroken trajectory engendered a confident sense of coherence within the Swede; in order to achieve this success, he naturally assumed that he had figured out how to assemble the puzzle pieces in his life so that they all fit together and added up to a whole that was larger than its parts—or a whole that correlated with its parts.

The second section is anchored by events that occur five years after Merry's bombing: the meetings with Rita Cohen, Merry's supposed political associate; the Swede's subsequent secret rendezvous with Merry herself (his only post-bombing meeting with her); and the tumultuous phone conversation he has with his brother, Jerry, after this meeting. In between these meetings, the second part of the book explores his early married life with Dawn and their family life when Merry was a young girl, the exact circumstances under which he earned his nickname “the Swede” (bestowed upon him by a high school gym teacher), and his time in the Marine Corps in the waning days of World War II. In all, these recollections serve to define the

Swede's prelapsarian life when "[e]verything always added up to something whole [...] when he felt *himself* add up, add up exactly to one" (190 – 191). "The fall," then, is the division within the Swede himself that Merry's violence engenders; it is the way in which his integrity—his wholeness—is permanently disrupted by her act. The subsequent encounters between the Swede and Rita, Jerry, and Merry compel the Swede, "whose center is the source of all order," to somehow confront "the daughter who is chaos itself" (231). In the majority of these meetings, this confrontation is mediated by bumptious personalities like Rita and Jerry, and the Swede, while destabilized by these interactions with such extreme personalities, is ultimately able to maintain his physical and psychological integrity; however, when he actually, quite *literally*, confronts his daughter, his integrity is shattered and he experiences a moment of abjection.

Part II opens when Rita Cohen visits the Swede at Newark Maid. She initially purports to be a Wharton Business School student; in reality, she is a follower-cum-compatriot of his daughter who wishes to blackmail the Swede. When he is under the impression that she is a business school student, he gives her a tour of the factory and provides her with detailed explanations about the minutiae of glove-making. As he expounds about the family business to a willing female listener around his daughter's age, the Swede experiences such a sense of familiar contentment that "[m]omentarily it was then again—nothing blown up, nothing ruined" (122). This line at the beginning of the second part illustrates the division that the Swede has experienced—there was a "then," when everything was whole, coherent, and made sense; and there is a now, where everything is blown up and ruined. Rita Cohen proves to be the

gatekeeper to the “now” in the Swede’s life; she is the gatekeeper at the boundary between the Swede’s “pur[e],” well-funded existence and the “reality” of late 1960s America (143). She informs him that her aim is “[t]o introduce [him] to reality” and “[t]o get [him] out there on the frontiers of reality,” which is not the pastoral reprise of Old Rimrock; instead, her sense of reality is far more brutal, aggressive, and emotionally violent than anything that the Swede thought he would encounter in the welcoming frontier of Old Rimrock. Rather than instating a welcome if transitory amnesia, Rita Cohen ends up reopening the portal to the other side for the Swede.

Through Rita, this brutality is again embodied as grotesquely feminine. She is an unusually small woman with wild hair who ends up coming on to the Swede, pantiless, in a hotel room. Like Merry, she is a sort of grotesque aberration of femininity, though rather than being outrageously oversized, she is outrageously undersized. This size allows Roth to emphasize the performative elements of her radical posturing. When Rita meets the Swede in the hotel room, she is “got up” in a skirt, blouse, and heels, which make her look like “a third grader who had ransacked her mother’s room” (142). She thus provides an exaggerated echo of the Oedipal “kiss” scene between Merry and the Swede earlier in the novel. Violence, again, is embodied as feminine abomination. Such outsized exaggerations of femininity contrasts the hyper-valorized, almost excessively orthodox masculinity of the Swede, and they are both, in their own ways, gendered caricatures. Thus, in *American Pastoral*, this binary between the thesis and the antithesis is gendered—the thesis is represented as masculine and the antithesis as feminine. However, such gendered

oppositions ultimately emphasize the very excessiveness of the ideological poles they respectively represent.

The Swede and his “ ‘famous purity’ ” (143) is, in its own way, just as calamitous within the context of late twentieth century America as Rita’s and Merry’s pathological “insurrection[ism]” (138). Such purity and insurrectionism are both crude and unsophisticated weapons in the face of the complexities of the United States in the late 1960s, with its widespread social unrest and disillusionment.

American Pastoral argues for a more nuanced approach to this time period than the obtuse innocence of a Swede or the “angry bullying” (139) of a Merry or Rita. Yet the weight of the novel is in sympathy with the Swede—he was, after all, the inspiration for the novel—and, because of that, his brand of orthodox, all-American masculinity is ultimately privileged over the grotesque femininity of Merry and Rita. Indeed, after listing all the Swede’s shortcomings at the beginning of *American Pastoral*, Jerry Levov abruptly claims, “‘My brother was the best you’re going to get in this country, by a long shot’ ” (65 - 66), and the novel ultimately agrees with him. For all the Swede’s serious flaws—and there are many—he is still a masculine archetype that embodies some of the best things about America. Women are therefore largely caricatured in *American Pastoral* (and in *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*), and female sexuality is portrayed as a pathological force that destroys conventional structures of authority—at great social and emotional cost. This is in keeping with Roth’s portrayal of women in many (if not most) of his novels. As David Wyatt points out about Roth’s fiction, women “are not given the same status of subjects interesting for their own sake but who function rather as objects or as screens

for projection by a self-absorbed and inescapably male narrative voice” (312 – 313). While the male narrative voice in the American Trilogy is mitigated by Zuckerman’s downgrade to a supporting role, Merry and Rita still function as projection screens for masculine anxiety and wish-fulfillment, as do Eve Frame in *I Married a Communist* and certainly Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain*, who is perhaps the most egregious example of this projection.

The Swede meets his daughter one last time a year after his meeting with Rita Cohen. Rita writes him a letter, informing him of Merry’s whereabouts: She is working in the old cat and dog hospital in a gutted section of Newark. The Swede waits for her to return from work; when she finally appears, she is like another piece of the urban squalor in which she has immersed herself: she is tall, unwashed, extremely emaciated, and wears as a veil a scrap of dirty pantyhose across the lower half of her face. When the Swede recognizes her, he experiences a moment of near-disintegration: “He felt as though he had no control over muscles that he’d mastered at the age of two—he wouldn’t have been surprised if everything, not excluding his blood, had come gushing from onto the pavement” (230). Yet he manages to hold himself together long enough to actually have a conversation with Merry in the barely habitable room where she lives; only after he has found out what she has done in the intervening years does he finally dissolve in the face of her chaos.

Merry is, by 1973, a Jain: a member of an ancient, Indian-based religion that practices non-violence towards all living things. Central to Jainism is the concept of *ahimsa*, which is described by the novel as “the systematic reverence for life and the commitment to harm no living being” (262). In *American Pastoral*, the non-violence

central to the practice of Jainism enables the novel to argue that a warped interpretation of that practice can actually vitiate the practice itself: as a Jain, Merry practices a particularly brutal form of the non-violence.⁴⁵ Like her disdain for Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy, she carries her practice of *ahimsa* to a radical extreme, chastising herself for eating the little she does: "I destroy plant life. I am insufficiently compassionate as yet to refuse to do that" (243). *American Pastoral* critiques Merry's fundamentalist interpretation of Jainism rather than Jainism itself. Her embrace of and approach to Jainism allows *American Pastoral* to highlight several themes that re-appear in *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*: the unwavering self-righteousness that can result from ideological purity and the irony inherent within the practices of an ideology's most rigid followers. Her particular brand of Jainism is at once a renunciation of her violent past and the complete apotheosis of her desire for an ideology that structures her entire existence. In the six years since she initially planted the bomb that blew up the local post office, killed a doctor, and detonated her family, Merry has been raped and robbed—and she also planted bombs that killed three more people (258 – 259). She underwent her conversion from the ideology of radical politics to the ideology of religion when she was caring for a dying black homeless woman and learned about Jainism at a local library. In her odyssey from violent provocateur to reformed religious ascetic, she has lost her stutter and is now "patien[t]" and "graciou[s]" in her speech (246). Where

⁴⁵ In practice, Jainism is much more flexible and adaptive than Merry Levov's fundamental interpretation of it. It allows for "different levels of compliance" with its tenets according to an individual practitioner's situation; it does not compel its non-monastic followers to adhere to the ultra-ascetic practice of Jain monks (see bbc.co.uk "Jainism").

once her “political identity was total” (254), now her religious identity is total. Her recitation of Jainism’s core beliefs and practices sounds to the Swede like

The monotonous chant of the indoctrinated, ideologically armored from head to foot—the monotonous, spellbound chant of those whose turbulence can be caged only within the suffocating straitjacket of the most supercoherent of dreams. (245)

“The most supercoherent of dreams” recurs throughout the trilogy—it is political radicalism, it is Jainism, it is Communism, and it is the puritanical morality of the political right-wing in the late 1990s.

The Swede, however, cannot reconcile himself to the acts that Merry has committed in the service of her supercoherent dreams—or, rather, that her totalistic understanding of those dreams has provided her with an excuse to commit. Merry herself recognizes this inability of her father to incorporate the violence she has both perpetuated and experienced into his personal and national identity, which for the Swede are intrinsically linked. “ ‘How strongly you still crave the idea,’ ” she informs him, “ ‘of your innocent offspring’ ” (248), thus conflating her father with the country he loves. In his craving for innocent offspring, the Swede symbolizes American culture, which privileges the fantasy of its pastoral innocence and refuses to recognize the violence and chaos it engenders—even though its historical DNA produces both innocence and violence in equal and substantial amounts. Merry is the antithesis of an innocent offspring; she embodies the violence that exists on the other side of that innocence, calmly confessing its crimes.

The knowledge that he has produced such violence ultimately proves too much for the Swede, and the borders that contain and delimit his identity—that help enact boundaries between him and the other side of things—disintegrate. The horrors of her recent biography—the rape, the robbery, the murder of three more people—combined with her ideologically armored and fluent speech make the Swede “disregar[d] a guideline he had never before overstepped—the injunction against violence,” and he forcibly tears the dirty scrap of pantyhose away from her face (264 – 265). In the end, the Swede confronts the violence within himself that he has not only engendered—the chaos and disorder that Merry represents—but also the violence he is capable of enacting. When he tears away the veil, he finally finds out that “[h]er foulness had reached him” (265); the veil had literally and metaphorically shielded him from her filth, and when the veil is gone, her foulness finally penetrates the boundaries of his consciousness in a way that it could not before. Her smell, released from the slight protection of the nylon scrap, “is the smell of no coherence,” and he throws up in her face (265 – 266). It is a moment of pure abjection, a moment when the Swede confronts, i.e., literally sees the face of, the foul matter he must expel from himself in order to maintain the integrity of his identity. The fact that his daughter is the embodiment of this filth temporarily overcomes his the boundaries that contain his identity, and the expulsion of his own waste through the act of vomiting represents this breach of subjective integrity. This is the Swede’s most intimate confrontation with these expelled parts of himself—the violence within him that he has reproduced in his daughter, the incoherence of the repressed other side that consistently returns in the form of his daughter. Merry, though her ideological

armor thoroughly shields her against nuance, uncertainty, and ambiguity, recognizes and accepts what her father cannot: that chaos, disorder, and violence are as much a part of late twentieth century America as the Swede's immigrant success story is. Merry knows that "sometimes you have to fucking go to the extreme" (105).

Once the Swede throws up in Merry's face, she calmly asks him to leave, and he does so. This leads to the last confrontation in Part II: his phone conversation with his brother, Jerry. As with his meetings with Rita, the phone conversation with Jerry compels the Swede to confront the incoherence his daughter represents, but it does not provoke an act of self-dissolution. Merry and the chaos and disorder she embodies is a product of the Swede's own genetic material; his innocence reproduced her violence. When he tears away her veil and "smells" her incoherence, he is sensing a part of himself that he has repressed and refused to acknowledge. When the Swede confronts Merry, he confronts the part of himself that is capable of reproducing such foulness, and that is what causes the boundaries of his identity to break down. When he talks to Jerry on the phone, he is able to maintain the boundaries that delimit the sides within himself—"everything" and the "other side" of everything. When speaking to his brother, Merry again becomes a conundrum, and the Swede is able to retreat, once again, into innocent bewilderment, wondering where someone like her comes from. Jerry, for all his bumptiousness, cannot breach the carefully maintained boundaries that contain the Swede's identity, try as he might. What Jerry does do, however, is reinforce the idea that Merry is, indeed, the true "Miss America" (277)—the feminine embodiment of American ideals of violence, chaos, and disorder.

Jerry orders the Swede to retrieve Merry from her squalid apartment, to “[g]et back in your fucking car and get over there and drag her out of that fucking room by her hair” (273). When the Swede refuses to do so, saying that Merry wanted him to leave her alone, Jerry explodes (further) at his brother’s passivity and paralysis (273). He then launches into a rant about how the Swede has “a false image of *everything*” (276), from his daughter to his country. Jerry’s belligerent monologue articulates how the Swede has conflated his ideal vision of himself, his daughter, and his family with his ideal vision of America. And, as Jerry dramatically points out, the irony of the Swede’s conflation of self, nation, and family was that it was ultimately an accurate understanding of the Swede’s position in late-twentieth century American society, just not in a way that he would have wished:

You wanted to be a real American jock, a real American marine, a real American hotshot with a beautiful Gentile babe on your arm? You longed to belong like everybody else to the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter. The reality of this place is right up to your kisser now. (277)

“The United States of America” that everybody else belongs to is much more “*frightening*,” as Jerry emphasizes (276), than anything the Swede ever imagined. And, like Rita Cohen, Jerry understands that the Swede has been living in unreality, a pastoral dream of his own making. The true America—the one of which his daughter is a paradigmatic example—is “the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck!” (277). The filth, violence, chaos, and disorder that the Swede has consistently expelled from his sense of national and personal identity is the real

America, the parts within himself that he has tried so hard to repress and deny.

Thanks to Merry, the Swede is finally a citizen of the “real” U.S.A., which the Swede thought constituted the “other side” of everything else; as Jerry tries to convince him, the “other side” is actually the “everything.”

Ideologically, Jerry exists on the same spectrum as Merry: he is as self-righteous in his certainty about what went “wrong” as Merry is in her practices of radical politics and Jainism. Yet, compared to Merry, Jerry is an analyst of the Swede’s situation. He conceptualizes the problematic of American culture in the late twentieth century—how this culture and society is predicated upon a sense of incoherence and disorder that easily generates the fundamentalist violence of a Merry Levov. While Jerry’s self-righteous certainly leads him to routinely explode his personal life (he has had three wives), his terrorism does extend beyond the domestic sphere. Merry, on the other hand, has come to fully embody this chaos and disorder. In the end, the Swede, though absolutely broken by his conversation/confrontation with Jerry, rejects his brother’s offer to do what he, the Swede, will not: “go in and get” Merry from her room. While Jerry does not specify what he will do with Merry once he “gets” her, he implies that it could be violent. After the Swede turns him down, Jerry recognizes, with disappointment, why the Swede rejected his offer, “‘Too brutal for you. In this world, too brutal’” (281). Even at the end of his bruising conversation with Jerry, the Swede is still unaware of the brutality inherent to American society in the second half of the twentieth century, compared to which Jerry’s offer to retrieve Merry is relatively humane. By the end of Part II, the fall has occurred; the Swede has confronted the elements within himself that beget the

violence perpetuated and symbolized by Merry. However, he is still unable to fully accept the existence of that brutality within himself and the world around him.

After the Fall comes “Paradise Lost,” the third and last part of *American Pastoral*. This is the briefest section of the novel, and its brevity is indicative of how quickly the Swede loses his final portion of paradise—his home and his wife. It opens in the summer of the 1973, during the Watergate hearings, when the Swede’s parents, Lou and Sylvia Levov, are visiting him and Dawn in Old Rimrock. Dawn has commissioned a new, modern house from a local architect (and WASP scion), Bill Orcutt, with whom she works closely on the plans and also, as it turns out, is having an affair. “Paradise Lost” refers to the loss of the pastoral dream that the Swede experiences once he finds out that his wife has been “unfaithful” to both their old stone farmhouse and to him (193), and this unfaithfulness is a betrayal of the Swede’s vision of American-ness, which lies at the crux of his identity. The centuries-old farmhouse out in Old Rimrock is the instantiation of the Swede’s pastoral ideals for himself, his country, and his family; it was “[a] hundred acres of America” (307) that existed beyond the claustrophobic boundaries of ethnic enclaves like the ones in which both he and wife grew up. They were, as the Swede emphatically assured Dawn, “thirty-five miles out *beyond* that resentment” bestowed upon them because they so thoroughly appeared to be rejecting their respective ethnic birthrights by moving to such an alien territory (310). Indeed, for the Swede, Old Rimrock held the limitless possibility of the American frontier (307), and, similar to that mythic location, this rural town seemingly offered boundless opportunity for self-invention and liberation from the outmoded structures of identity formation that had confined

him as “Keer Avenue Jew” in Newark. Indeed, the Swede envisioned himself “settling Revolutionary New Jersey for the first time” (310) and entertained long and involved fantasies about being Johnny Appleseed (315).

The central action of Part III takes place at a dinner party that the Swede and Dawn have when his parents are visiting. For the Swede, this dinner party is a representation of a fallen world. His daughter has killed four people. As the Swede finally understands,

He had seen the way that it is, seen out beyond number four to all there is that cannot be bounded. The order is minute. He had thought most of it was order an only a little of it was disorder. He’d had it backwards. (418)

The Swede’s sense of a prevailing social *disorder* is heightened by the discovery of his wife’s affair with Orcutt and his own confrontation with Sherry Salzman, Merry’s childhood speech therapist, who initially hid Merry after the post office bombing. As it turns out, the Swede had had an affair with Sherry when Dawn was experiencing the worst of her depression during the immediate post-bombing years. Like Merry, Sherry’s actions provoke the Swede to “savagery” when he confronts her (379)—his second intimate experience with violence. These transgressions mark the Swede’s fall into knowledge, an “unblinding” that he recognizes was engendered by Merry (418). The final act of violence occurs at the end of the novel, when Jessie Orcutt, Bill Orcutt’s alcoholic wife, stabs Lou Levov in the face with a fork as he tries to help her eat. While this violent transgression is confined within the domestic space of the home and kitchen, it is microcosmic example of the same fundamental chaos and

disorder that Merry represents. Like Merry, Jessie Orcutt “had overstepped a boundary fundamental to civilized life” (423), though, unlike Merry, she does not fully reside on the other side of that boundary. At the end, everyone at the dinner party acknowledges that “the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now it was opened it would not be closed again” (423). The indigenous American berserk had breached the borders of their safe post-World War II existence.

I Married a Communist: “Constructing a Story that Fits”

I Married a Communist is the second book in the trilogy. It was published in 1998, fast on the heels of *American Pastoral*. Like *American Pastoral*, the novel is framed by the first-person narration of Nathan Zuckerman, and, like *American Pastoral*, the past appears to Nathan as a remnant from his high school days, though this time the remnant is in the “shape of a very old man,” Murray Ringold (*IMC* 3 – 4). Murray was both Nathan’s high school English teacher and the brother of Ira Ringold, a radio personality who mentored Nathan and whom Nathan hero-worshipped through his high school and early college years. Like Jerry Levov, Murray proceeds to tell Nathan the story of his brother, though unlike Jerry’s brief, blustery account of his own brother’s tragedy, Murray’s storytelling takes place over a period of six nights, and his third-person recounting of Ira’s rise and fall is one of the primary mediums through which the novel is structured. The other medium is Zuckerman’s own first-person narrative, which takes a much more substantial diegetic role than it did in *American Pastoral*. While Murray initiates and establishes the theme and focus of his Scheherazade-like (262) storytelling performance,

Zuckerman interjects his own reflections, memories, and anecdotes about Ira into Murray's story, and the novel ends up alternating between his voice and Murray's. Unlike *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* is not structured by Zuckerman's novelistic framing, which allows his authorial presence to swiftly recede behind the curtains of third-person narration once he lifts the main object of his investigation (the Swede) onto the stage; nor is the novel divided up into three sections, the title and structure of which are a reference to the ordered literary forms of neo-classical texts. Rather, *I Married a Communist* is structured as person-to-person storytelling, an activity wherein the listener, Zuckerman-the-novelist, helps engender the narrative and the form it ultimately takes. He provides an impetus for Murray to tell the story in the first place by possessing the narrative expertise to aurally digest Murray's story and to respond to Murray's narrative cues with stories of his own.

Ultimately, this exchange between Murray and Zuckerman, between teller and listener, proves beneficial not just to Murray but also to Zuckerman. It provokes him to re-enter the realm of first-person recollection and narrative, from which he had withdrawn in *American Pastoral* as much as he had withdrawn from life in general by escaping to a solitary existence in the Berkshires. In *I Married a Communist*, he is still living a solitary life in his Berkshire cabin, but Murray's story and, significantly, his very presence in Nathan's cabin as he is relating this story, compel Nathan to re-engage with the activity that has proved foundational in his career as a novelist and in shaping his general life trajectory. As Zuckerman observes, "But whatever the reason, the book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: 'Listening.'" (222). Listening has provided Zuckerman

material for his own life's book and, by extension, for his books about others, which, over Zuckerman's (and Roth's) long career, have often been one-and-the-same.

Listening to Murray, then, reboots the novelist machinery that powers Zuckerman's first-person narrative presence in his own work and opens up his "book of voices" to readers again. In this way, *I Married a Communist* represents a re-emergence of Zuckerman-as-narrator, a presence that gains far more traction and purchase in the third book of the trilogy, *The Human Stain*.

This storytelling structure engenders a form through which the chaos can be successfully and productively narrativized. The transmission of the narrative from the storyteller to his listener produces the necessary parameters to contain the chaos, brutality, and violence associated with the underside of two mid-century ideologies: Communism and McCarthyism. The novel argues that, while these ideological platforms may appear diametrically opposed to each other, they actually function in similar ways by attempting to contain these seemingly aberrant American cultural impulses within a discursive construct of "purity." As Murray Ringold argues to Zuckerman, McCarthyism enabled its practitioners to "retain [their] purity at the same time [they were] patriotically betraying"—an act that ultimately yielded an almost sexual satisfaction (264). Those who betrayed their rivals, friends, and lovers could retain an unsullied sense of their own morality because they envisioned themselves as acting in service of a patriotic cause, one that gave them an orgasmic sense of their own righteousness. In a related fashion, Communism was predicated on its practitioners' willingness to assume an "iron pole of righteousness" (318) that rigidly and unyieldingly structured their belief system. Indeed, Communism presented itself

as a total and totalizing identity; to admit the possibility of weakness within Communist practice was to admit failure as a Communist. As Murray observes, “The ideologue is purer than the rest of us because he is the ideologue with everyone” (289). Ira Ringold embodies the structural force that opposes and therefore supports this discursively constructed notion of purity—he is the underside of McCarthyism and Communism that both ideologies are trying to expel in order to maintain their own coherence and purity. Ira is brutally excessive in his violence; he killed a man with a shovel when he was sixteen, first knocking the man out in self-defense, and then returning and purposefully murdering him (296). Like Merry Levov, Ira is *of* the “chaos” (297). *I Married a Communist* argues that the most productive way to delimit such violence and chaos is to funnel it through the narrative structure of storytelling. Storytelling does not expel the discursive waste material, but rather captures it within the transmission of one person to another.

Walter Benjamin’s idea about the functional purpose of the storyteller provides a framework for understanding Zuckerman’s narrative re-emergence in this middle novel and ultimately speaks to the function of the trilogy form in Roth’s work. In his well-known essay “The Storyteller,” Benjamin mourns the decline of person-to-person storytelling in favor of mass-produced “information,” a “new form of communication” whose paradigmatic manifestation in the years following World War I is the newspaper (88 – 89). In contrast to the purpose of mass-produced information, Benjamin perceives oral storytelling as an enabling social force that once created the conditions under which one person (the teller) could communicate *experience* to another person (the listener). It is this notion of “communicable experience” (84) that is

most important to Benjamin's thesis about storytelling. First, his definition of experience comes from the German word *Erfahrung*, which can be broadly defined as knowledge obtained by having done something or lived through something (Babylon.com); it is, as Jonathan Arac observes in his analysis of Benjamin's concept of experience, " 'practical knowledge,' such as a traveler or craftsman gains over a long period of time and can use in the future as part of the deep continuity of his life" (79). What is lost with decline of storytelling is the transfer of traditional knowledge gained through practical experience, such as a skilled craftsman has, from "afar," either temporally or spatially, e.g., experience transferred one generation to the next or from one geographic location to another (89). Viewed as a transactional vehicle for experience, a story becomes a verbal artifact, and each successive teller imprints the story with their distinctive traces of experience. As Benjamin observes in his essay "On Some Motifs of Baudelaire," the story "bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand" (159). The story acquires layers of narrative sediment that symbolize its continuity with distant locations—either temporal or spatial—and as the storyteller relates the story, his listener gets inserted into the connective ligature of the narrative and therefore into traditional experience.

In *I Married a Communist*, Murray Ringold represents that connection with the past and traditional knowledge that are the Benjamin-esque prerequisites for successfully communicating experience to his listener, Zuckerman. When Zuckerman spies the 90-year-old Murray in town while attending Athena College's continuing education program for the elderly, he says, "That's how the past turned up this time,

in the shape of a very old man whose talent was to give his troubles not one second more thought than they warranted and who still couldn't waste his time talking other than to a serious point" (*IMAC* 3 – 4). At 90, Murray has perspective, applies a sense of proportion to his trials, and "still" exhibits a laser-like focus on what matters. In addition, Murray, from the very beginning, is allied with the knowledge and wisdom made possible from a rigorous study of traditional literary texts—he had emphatically introduced the high-school-aged Zuckerman to the importance of "cri-ti-cal think-ing" (2), unashamedly performing scenes from *Macbeth* with the emotional investment they deserved. In short, he is a good vehicle for transferring Benjamin-esque experience, which he relates to Zuckerman with astounding stamina for a 90-year-old, telling the story of his brother to Nathan over a six-night period (262). Finally, Murray's storytelling provokes Zuckerman's re-emergence as a narrator, which lays down another layer of narrative sediment on the trilogy form itself, further marking the trilogy with Zuckerman's narrative traces and creating the necessary connective ligature to cohere the three books. As Benjamin remarks, "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories" (91); while Zuckerman does not explicitly frame this second novel of the trilogy as a novel, he does narrate it and, in so doing, repeats it, which allows him to rebirth his own narrative voice and presence.

I Married a Communist is as much occupied with the ways in which literature complicates schematic interpretations of socio-political systems as it is invested in examining the wide operative range of those systems. As Leo Glucksman informs the college-aged Zuckerman two-thirds of the way through the novel, "Literature disturbs the organization" (223). At the beginning of the novel, Murray Ringold is presented

as the embodiment of responsible intellectual thought, which he tried to nurture within his high school students through a rigorous analysis of literary texts that compelled them to be attentive to the nuances of language (27). He taught his high school students that “ ‘you don’t have to be Al Capone to transgress—you just have to think. In human society [...] thinking’s the greatest transgression of all’ ” (2). Concomitant to this responsible intellectual practice is what Zuckerman perceives as an existential “coherence” within Murray (16), which manifests itself as the ability to marshal his considerable mental and physical forces to achieve “a practical, clear, well-defined social goal” (16). So, from the beginning of the novel, the practice of literature—studying it, writing it, engaging with it—is allied with the responsible intellectual practices necessary to productively engage with social, political, and philosophical problems. These intellectual practices include the development and honing of critical thinking skills—or what Murray Ringold memorably termed “ ‘Critical think-ing,’ ” said as he “rapped out each of the syllables on his desktop” with his knuckles” (2). This intellectual coherence that Roth privileges in *I Married a Communist* is much like the coherence that he would like to trilogy to engender; it is, as Frederic Jameson would say, an “open totality” that allows for a sense of both wholeness and growth,⁴⁶ two criteria necessary, in Roth’s eyes, for responsible intellectual practice. Yet such adaptable coherence is often only possible as an ideal rather than as a lived practice. For, at the end of the novel, Nathan discovers that Murray has experienced his own moments of irrationality that cost him dearly, and

⁴⁶ In *The Jameson Reader*, Hardt and Weeks emphasize the dynamic nature of the totalities to which Jameson believes certain types aesthetic representations give us access (22). This dynamism allows for growth and the incorporation of new social forces.

this discovery qualifies, though it does not completely undermine, the sense of coherence that Nathan perceives Murray as embodying.

I Married a Communist, then, is essentially about two contrasting intellectual forces in mid-century America: the “dogmatizing” nature of both Communist and anti-Communist practices and the responsible thinking and feeling espoused by Nathan’s literary mentors, Murray Ringold in high school and then Leo Glucksman in college. Concomitant with this privileging of literary studies is the storytelling transaction between teller and listener that structures the novel. As rigorous study of literature engenders responsive and responsible activity, so does Murray’s telling and Nathan’s listening engender the discursive parameters through which the chaos and disorder of an Ira Ringold (or, for that matter, a Merry Levov) can be responsibly communicated. In such a situation, the story about chaos and disorder becomes communicable experience—practical wisdom that produces a continuity across generations. Storytelling then serves a practical and a political purpose.

Throughout *I Married a Communist*, the American drama of self-invention becomes inseparable from questions of political party dogma, rigorous critical thought, and the role of narrative and literature in framing questions about society, politics, and aesthetics. When the high-school-aged Nathan meets Ira for the first time at Murray’s house, Ira Ringold has already re-invented himself as the radio personality “Iron Rinn,” the host of weekly radio show *The Free and the Brave*, which dramatized well-known events in American history (18). Ira and Murray had grown up in a poor Italian section of Newark with an abusive father, their mother having died when Ira was a small child. Growing up, Ira was aggressive and

oversized for his age; he dropped out of school at sixteen and eventually ended up in the army, where he met Johnny O'Day, an "ascetic" follower of Communist doctrine (318). O'Day first introduced Ira to intellectualism as he, O'Day, practiced it: reading political philosophy, writing political pamphlets, and rigidly adhering to Communism tenets (35). Ira quickly adopts O'Day's intellectual pursuits. When Nathan meets Ira, Ira is at the apex of his arc of self-reinvention, and, perhaps at the farthest point he will ever be from the angry, street-fighting boy he was in his childhood: he is a successful, popular radio host, he is married to the well-known stage actress Eve Frame (née Chava Fromkin of Brooklyn), and he lives with Eve and her teenaged daughter, Sylphid, in a luxurious Manhattan apartment. Over fifty years later, Murray observes about Ira's sense of triumphalism at that moment: "He ha[d] pulled off a great big act of control over the story that was his life" (60). In the late 1940s, Ira thought he had successfully revised the narrative of his life by fitting it to the mold of a classic American success story, one which he pulls himself up by his own bootstraps from a miserable, impoverished childhood to an adulthood of fame and fortune, replete with a beautiful wife. Iron Rinn, the historical dramatist, provided Ira with a way to repudiate one history—his personal history—and embrace another type of history altogether, the epic drama of national history.

When Nathan encounters Ira, Ira has endowed his story with a deeply familiar cultural form, one that Ira needs to constantly buttress against his own excesses which always threaten to exceed the boundaries of the triumphal narrative he has constructed for himself. However, even the methods by which Ira attempts to contain his inbred excesses are themselves indicative of a schematic approach to mid-century

American society that relies on easy-to-grasp oppositions and contrasts. Ira's reliance on simplistic binaries is especially pronounced in the way in which he contrasts rural New Jersey to urban New York City. Ira has a retreat in Zinc Town, an old mining town in New Jersey and where he had once worked as a miner himself after dropping out of high school. His shack in zinc town is "an antidote" to the luxuries of the apartment that he shares with Eve Frame and it " 'keeps [him] in practice being poor'" (51). When presented with the highly polished social discourse of urban New York, it is easy to quickly pick its opposite—dirt poor rural New Jersey—as the location that will mitigate the vitiating excesses of wealthy society. The Zinc Town shack, as Zuckerman realizes, is obviously Thoreauvian (72) in the purpose that it serves. Ira equates the demands and allowances of a rustic existence with a more pure and deliberate lifestyle, unfettered from the requirements of society as it is realized in the Manhattan apartment. The shack shares some of the pastoral attributes that the Swede ascribes to Old Rimrock in *American Pastoral*, and it, too, is an example of the sentimental "flight from the city" attitude that Leo Marx articulates. As a location, Zinc Town offers a similar "independence and freedom" (72), but while the Swede sees Old Rimrock as a place that could liberate him and his family from the confining boundaries of hidebound ethnic identities and expectations, Ira uses his Zinc Town shack to liberate himself from civilization (or "sivilization," to paraphrase Huck Finn), where he can take off the social "uniforms" and the "costumes" (72) and return to a more authentic version of himself. Of course, Ira's motivations for escaping to the pastoral are just as idealistic and therefore impossible to realize as the Swede's. As Zuckerman points out, the "idea of the shack" "has a history" in both Western and

Eastern philosophical traditions (72), and Ira merely accesses these well-known narratives about retreating to a rural existence from confining society and applies them to the landscape of his own life. In the end, the Zinc Town shack becomes another borrowed story through which Ira tries to form and shape his own life, and this effort—like his other efforts—is ultimately unsuccessful. Towards the end of *I Married a Communist*, Murray pointedly warns Zuckerman, who had himself retreated to a shack-like existence in the Berkshires, “Beware the utopia of the shack in the woods” (315).

As Ira attempts to mold his identity to American cultural narratives of self-invention and pastoral authenticity, he is actually attempting to mitigate a much a different but equally powerful national narrative that he embodies: that of unrestricted brutality. Throughout the novel, Ira’s brutality, though it manifests itself in a variety of ways, is always immanent to his personality, much like another well-known American brute of American literature, *The Great Gatsby*’s Tom Buchanan⁴⁷; and, like Tom Buchanan, Ira’s brutality is arguably a manifestation of a variety of American cultural characteristics. Unlike Tom Buchanan, however, Ira is vulnerable to the consequences of his brutality, and his desire to force his life to take the shape of a recognizable and acceptable cultural story is a reaction to his desire to control that violence within himself. While the word “brute” provides the root for a constellation of words that describe Ira’s personality (brutish, brute, brutality), not all of them are intended to signify violence. However, at its core, Ira’s brutality does manifest itself

⁴⁷ At the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy accuses Tom of being “a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a” man (16), a description that foreshadows Tom’s casual violence towards his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, and his ultimate callow disregard for her death and Gatsby’s.

as unrestrained physical violence. In the last third of the novel, Murray eventually reveals that when Ira was sixteen, he murdered a bullying Italian ditch-digger named Strollo. What began as an act of self-defense on Ira's part ended as murder when he actually returned to Strollo after he had knocked him unconscious and hit him on the head until he died (295 – 296). When the sixteen-year-old Ira confessed this act to Murray, he actually joked about what he had done: “ ‘Strollo just took his last strollo’ ” (300). It is this joy in uninhibited violence that the adult Ira attempts to constrain within the clearly defined conceptual confines of Communism, the pastoral, and the performance of “Iron Rinn.” Yet the text argues that this brutality does not merely manifest itself in direct physical confrontation; there is an entire constellation of cultural traits that Ira embodies whose brutality is sometimes subtle but perhaps no less injurious in its consequences. The “brutish American stuff” (49) in Ira that the young Zuckerman initially finds so attractive is the sort of rough, scarred, and experienced masculinity associated lone-riding cowboy or frontiersman—a man whose violence is immanent within his posture and demeanor but never fully expressed except under the most demanding circumstances. This brutishness is also what attracted Eve to Ira; she “needed the brute”—a wild man like Ira—in order to “gaurant[ee]” her innocence (298 – 299). Ira's brutishness provided an apt contrast for her hard-won and -practiced refinement, so, when she was with him, all the qualities that arose from her refinement, such as worldly innocence and purity, became emphasized. He not only protected her innocence, he also continuously engendered her sense of that innocence by his very proximity to her. Eve needed him

to help perpetuate her own highly constructed sense of self, and he needed her for the same reason.

All three novels in the trilogy actually portray this “brutish American stuff” as just as immanent to the national cultural story as more attractive myths of national exceptionalism, such as opportunities for self-invention and the ideals of pastoral independence and freedom. The trilogy argues that acts of various types of brutality are required in order to engage with the American concepts and practices of self-liberation and self-actualization. What *I Married a Communist* provides for the trilogy is the stark portrayal of brutality in its most recognizable form, which is aggressive physical confrontation. Ira Ringold embodies a constellation of brutal behaviors in a way that *American Pastoral* merely gestures at. Merry Levov’s brutality is an accumulation of a variety of violent acts, the most injurious of which of which may actually register on an emotional, rather than physical, level. Similarly, in *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk’s repudiation of his African-American identity, heritage, and family is framed as emotional brutality. But Ira’s brutality takes the form of direct and intimate physical confrontation with another person—a sixteen-year-old boy gleefully bludgeoning a man to death. *I Married a Communist* thereby interjects conversations about such brutality into the middle—literally—of the trilogy, and interrogates the cultural narratives used to contain, control, and overwrite the brutality inherent in the American national story.

Ira’s “ ‘heroic reinvention of himself he called Iron Rinn’ ” (301) completely breaks down in the face of Eve Frame’s tell-all book about her relationship with Ira, which she entitled *I Married a Communist*. Roth, by calling *his* novel *I Married a*

Communist as well, emphasizes the instrument that destroyed Ira's reinvented self, and the point at which the identity he had originally constructed upon a simplistic interpretation of Communist philosophy comes apart, and he returned, as Murray relates to Zuckerman, to his "own uncorrected first self" (123). The title of Roth's novel thereby highlights the impossibility of a forced self-correction that seeks to use the blunt instrument of ideology to completely overwrite an older, more problematic identity. While Roth is, in the end, very ambivalent about one's ability to actually write over a "first self" (he quite literally attempts this to interesting comical and philosophical ends in *The Counterlife*), he is deeply attracted to the potential for and consequences of such reinvention and has consistently examined the issues around such transformations throughout his long writing career. *I Married a Communist* takes part in this long-running conversation in Roth's work by arguing that acts of self-invention are never complete, either in the sense of being "finished" or in the sense of being total—of completely saturating every filament of self. That was Ira's mistake; he understood Communism to be both totalizing in its transformative abilities and totalizing in its ability to completely finish off, or erase, his former self. This misunderstanding of what it means to reinvent the self left him vulnerable to his ex-wife's roman a clef with its sensationalist descriptions of pot-boiler-esque Communist activities; in the end, his misunderstanding of what it meant to reinvent himself made him an easy target to destroy.

Murray ultimately believes that Ira "never discovered his life [...] he could never construct one that fit" (319). He tried on narratives of up-by-the-bootstraps success, of Communist acolyte, of popular historian—and not one of them could

would contain the contain the brutal excesses that existed at the core of his identity. Ira, like Merry Levov, attempted to straightjacket his violent impulses within rigid ideological practices, but he did not possess the innate confidence in the righteousness of his convictions as Merry-as-political-radical or Merry-as-Jain did. His subjectivity was not as seamlessly constructed as hers; there were too many sutures that stretched apart due to the explosive internal pressure produced by warring impulses. Indeed, at one point after the publication of Eve's book had destroyed Ira's career and his personal life, Murray discovered that Ira planned to garotte Eve and Sylphid with a string from Sylphid's harp (303)—a sure sign that he had reverted to his uncorrected first self. Yet Ira and Merry are similar in that they are examples of the way in which rigidly practiced ideologies can weaponize their followers, though the two characters represent different types of weapons. Merry is a smoothly honed missile, sharpened by polished rhetoric and practiced logic, and Ira is a blunt instrument who focuses his entire being at a target and attacks it ferociously and without restraint. The rhetoric and logic that Merry used to sew together her ideological selves provided a smooth narrative armor for her, and she possessed the verbal capabilities necessary to construct an identity (or identities) to suit herself at any given phase of her life. Ira, on the other hand, does not possess the intellectual machinery necessary to engender the reams of flawless, specious logic that would enable him to completely and successfully re-narrativize himself.

When Murray's six-night storytelling marathon comes to an end, he sits silently with his eyes closed, so spent that Nathan "wonder[s] if he was dead, after his having remembered the whole of Ira's story—after having heard himself *tell* the

whole of Ira's story [...]” (313). The act of telling is an expulsion of energy and even vitality; it is an act that compels the practitioner to discharge something of himself into the world and therefore weakens him but also cleanses him. Ira's story is something that Murray had to put out there, to displace from himself onto another location—the imaginative plains of Nathan Zuckerman's mind. Murray's storytelling was, at its heart, an act of publication. As he informs Nathan about his storytelling, “My last task. To file Ira's story with Nathan Zuckerman” (265). “Filing a story” means submitting story to be published by a certain deadline and has traditionally been the penultimate step before publication. By filing his story with Zuckerman, Murray is, in effect, taking that penultimate step out of the expectation that Nathan will know how to appropriately make Ira's story public. Murray emphasizes that his responsibility is not to tell Zuckerman what to do with the story but merely to tell Zuckerman the story (265). It is ultimately Nathan's responsibility to figure out an appropriate way of making the story public.

The Human Stain: “The Boundless, Self-Defining Drama”

The Human Stain opens during the peak of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, in the summer of 1998, when the favorite topic of debate was about whether or not President Bill Clinton had actually had an affair with Lewinsky while she was an intern at the White House. Nathan Zuckerman observes the public fulmination concerning Clinton's extramarital activities and proclaims that this rumored affair had “revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony” (*HS* 2). This “ecstasy of sanctimony” suffuses the novel and provides a backdrop for Zuckerman's

investigation into and involvement with Coleman Silk, a former dean and classics professor at nearby Athena College, who is also arguably a victim of such hypocritical righteousness. By the summer of 1998, Coleman had lived, for two years, a rather isolated life since quitting his position at the college after being accused of racism by two students. He had referred to the two students as “spooks” because they had never come to class; these students, who were black, heard about his reference to them as “spooks,” interpreted it as a racial epithet, and promptly reported Coleman to the dean of faculty. Thus began an epic battle between Coleman and much of faculty, many of whom were merely looking for an excuse to attack him after his own imperious though institutionally effective reign as dean of faculty. After Coleman’s formidable wife, Iris, suffers a stroke and dies, having lobbied tirelessly to clear her husband’s name during the “spooks” incident, Coleman abruptly resigns from the faculty and withdraws from much of the life he knew for many years, actively nursing resentment against all whom he had perceived to have wronged him.

It is at this point in Coleman’s life that Zuckerman first connects with him; or more accurately, Coleman first approaches Zuckerman. Like Seymour “The Swede” Levov in *American Pastoral*, Coleman wants Zuckerman to write a book for him—or, rather, a raging Coleman standing on Zuckerman’s doorstep at his small Berkshire cabin “all but order[s]” Zuckerman to write a book that would exonerate him of the racist charges (11). As with the Swede, Zuckerman declines to write the particular book that Coleman wants him to write, but ultimately ends up writing another, which becomes *The Human Stain*. For it turns out that Coleman, like the Swede that Zuckerman brings to life in *American Pastoral*, is a bifurcated man who spends his

entire adult life—longer than the Swede—suturing over that initial violent split at the core of his identity in order to present himself, just as the Swede wishes to present himself, as a “seeming totality” of a man (213). As Zuckerman inadvertently discovers at Coleman’s funeral, Coleman was a black man who had spent the majority of his life passing as Jewish, as “one of those crimped-hair Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation” (15).

Overall, about half of the novel takes place in the late 1990s, in the few short years between the death of Coleman’s wife and his resignation from the Athena faculty and his own death and that of his girlfriend, Faunia Farley, in a suspicious car accident. During those years, Coleman actively befriends Zuckerman, who had been continuing to live his anchorite-like existence in his Berkshire cabin since an operation for prostate cancer left him impotent and incontinent. This friendship, a rarity for the reclusive Zuckerman, gives the novelist a front-row seat to Coleman’s transformation during that time from a resentful, grudging, and wronged man to a man sexually and psychically rejuvenated by his relationship with Faunia Farley, a woman forty years his junior. Faunia is the definition of damaged woman: she left her children alone in her house, and the house burnt down with them in it; her ex-husband and the father of her two dead children is an aggressive, unstable Vietnam veteran; she works two minimum-wage jobs as a janitor at the college and as a farmhand at a local dairy farm; and, to complete the package, she is illiterate. When Coleman’s relationship with Faunia becomes public knowledge, the local outrage over its seeming impropriety and exploitative nature—vaunted academic dating illiterate

janitor—mirrors the “ecstasy of sanctimony” that erupts over the Clinton-Lewinsky affair.

Like *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, the novel flashes back in time to the 1940s and later, from the time that Coleman Silk is a beloved, precocious child growing up in an intellectually rigorous African-American household in Orange, New Jersey, through his young adulthood years as a Howard University dropout and Navy enlisted man, to his conscious decision to pass for Jewish as a PhD student at NYU. Zuckerman’s conventional first-person narration, interrupted by third-person-esque flashbacks to Coleman’s past, saturates most of the novel. At the end, Zuckerman reveals his novelistic project, but, for most of the novel, he appears to act only in his capacity as a narrator—not a novelist-and-narrator. However, he is nevertheless exercising novelistic skill and speaking from his position as a novelist even as he is a mere narrator, and the person with the fiction-writing chops remains the most appropriate person to mediate and transmit Coleman’s story. Unlike *American Pastoral*, however, the fact that *The Human Stain* is actually Zuckerman’s novel is not revealed until the last quarter of the book. While Coleman’s true racial identity is revealed early in these flashbacks, the way in which Zuckerman finds out this identity and sets out to write a book about Coleman’s feat of concealment is not revealed until the last section of the book, when Zuckerman attends Coleman’s funeral and spies Coleman’s sister, Ernestine, who looks distinctly African-American and much like Coleman’s daughter, Lisa. So the birth of the book is coincidental with the death of the man—and the end of the trilogy.

For much of *The Human Stain*, then, Zuckerman assumes the function of a traditional first-person narrator—a character within the novel through whose perspective the narrative content is filtered. And the fact that Zuckerman asserts such a constant and consistent narrative presence in the third novel of the trilogy is significant, given his complete disappearing act in the first one and his role as story-telling co-pilot in the second one. *The Human Stain* is, indeed, is the story of Zuckerman's re-emergence as a consequential character in his own right; he is the teller of the primary diegesis and he is actually present during much of the novel's action. Overall, he is reborn as a fictional persona whose own personality and professional capabilities as a novelist engender the boundaries of the storyworld. So if there's one way in which the trilogy provides a smooth developmental arc over the three novels, it is in the return of Zuckerman from his self-imposed fictional exile, which positions him to reclaim a central place he has occupied throughout much of Roth's fiction.

The Human Stain, published in 2000, takes on the end of the twentieth century and, in a larger sense, the end of the millennium. These looming endings provide what Frank Kermode terms “the sense of an ending” necessary to give shape to human lives. People live in what he terms “ ‘the midst,’ ” (8), a seeming “intermediary” (7) state potentially untethered from either a beginning or an end point and therefore without a form or shape that would help us make sense of our place in the world. According to Kermode, “Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by provision of an end, make possible satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” (17). At a deep

level, Roth introjects this desire for the end to retroactively give shape to the century and thus provide a coherent pattern for 20th century American society and culture.

While Roth is explicitly suspicious of facile ideas of “closure” (HS 147), *The Human Stain* does evidence a feeling of curmudgeonly frustration about the what the end of the “American” century has wrought: a sanctimonious frenzy about a President’s sexual peccadillos. As Zuckerman remarks in the opening pages of the novel, the summer of 1998 was “the summer of an enormous piety binge, a purity binge, when terrorism—which had replaced communism as the prevailing threat to the country’s security—was succeeded by cocksucking” (2). From the tone of Zuckerman’s rant, “cocksucking” obviously does not quite earn the same respect as communism and terrorism when it comes to threats to national security. Or, as Coleman Silk remarks later about the public outcry over his affair with Faunia Farley,

“[...] all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. Here in America it’s either Faunia Farley or Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!” (153 – 154). In these two passages, the novel articulates obvious frustration that this, *this* is what the century should end on—an uproar over oral sex in the oval office. The 20th century, which ushered in the concept of a “world war” and made “Holocaust” a proper noun and a household word, was being closed out by an event that lacked the substance and profundity that its ending called for. So, while Roth does rail against ideas of easy narrative closure, he is *also* looking for an end to the century whose political, social, and cultural import is consonant with that of

middle and beginning.⁴⁸ And by consonant, Roth means *commensurate*: an ending that is fitting; it should be equal to or surpass the events, occurrences, or phenomena of the beginning and middle of the century. One that deserves to get in line behind Communism and terrorism (domestic and foreign) and fulfills its duty as a true “ending”—for both the century and for the trilogy. Not, as Roth sees it, a tiresome replay of what Nathaniel Hawthorne deemed “ ‘the persecuting spirit’ ” (2) within American culture that issues self-righteous moral approbation against “a virile, youthful middle-aged president” (2) for fooling around with a 21-year-old intern.

The novel attempts to rectify this situation by contrasting the Lewinsky scandal with a far more complex and substantive issue that has plagued the U.S. in the 20th century (and the centuries before): the boundaries of racial identity. *The Human Stain* attains formal thematic equilibrium by turning to an examination of what W.E.B Du Bois famously identified in 1903 as “the problem of the twentieth century,” which is “the problem of the color line” (1). Thus, in 1998, 95 years after *The Souls of Black Folk* was published, the trilogy bookends the twentieth century with an examination of race, passing, and self-invention—or “the color line” as realized through the prism of the formal and thematic preoccupations of Roth’s trilogy.⁴⁹

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois asks whether it is actually possible to both be “a Negro and an American,” to unite the “two-ness” that inherently defines

⁴⁸ Kermode uses the word “consonant” to describe the way in which “coherent patterns” are created through the applications of endings, which allow people to then make sense of middles and beginnings by bringing them into concordance with the ending—be it existential, fictional, or imaginary.

⁴⁹ Other critics have noticed the similarities between *The Human Stain* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, including Patrice Rankine in her article “Passing as Tragedy” and Donovan Ramon in the article “ ‘You’re Neither One Thing or the Other’: Nella Larson, Philip Roth, and The Passing Trope.”

black American consciousness into one unified identity. This two-ness arises from the “double consciousness” that African-Americans perforce develop in order to navigate a white culture that views them as “a problem.” African-Americans are marked as malfunctioning others, as people who exist outside the boundaries of normal, well-operating society—that is, white society. Black Americans, in Du Bois’s well-known argument, are thereby required to psychically introject white society’s dominant gaze and thus to “always loo[k] at one’s self through the eyes of others” and “measur[e] one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” It is the need to integrate the condescending gaze of dominant culture into their identity that produces a double-consciousness within African-American identity. This yields what Du Bois calls “second sight”—the ability to perceive two worlds, two cultures, black and white, at once. Blacks are forced to perceive their selves through the eyes of dominant white culture while simultaneously comprehending that the autonomous self, which the white population assumes and takes for granted in American society, is unavailable to them. In Du Bois’s words, this is “a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (5). While Roth is not explicitly interested in exploring the dueling perceptions of “self” and “other” inherent to Du Bois’s theory of double-consciousness, he is interested in examining whether it is possible to be both black and to achieve true self autonomy in the American tradition—to realize, as he calls this Whitman-esque self in *The Human Stain*, “the raw I” (HS 108).

So the novel asks a provocative and even audacious question: can racial passing be construed as liberating self-invention? Is the decision of Coleman Silk to

pass as a white Jew akin to Swede Levov's decision to move out to the "frontier" of Old Rimrock and therefore move "beyond" an outmoded ethnic identity (*AP* 310)? Are both men merely attempting to reinvent themselves according to American tradition? Roth's answer is complex and paradoxical: accessing this autonomous self, which is liberated from constraints of conventional society, requires a total repudiation of the older, traditional identities that could potentially prohibit this complete realization of the "I." When that older identity is repudiated, it becomes the forever suppressed, concealed, and haunting identity whose presence exists on the other side of the carefully constructed self, thus bifurcating subjectivity at its core. In their attempts to achieve a whole, total I, Roth's protagonists actually disallow such coherence: they forever splinter their identity in two. In the end then, Roth, like Du Bois, does not believe this bifurcated self can ever be properly sutured into a whole, integrated identity.

In posing this question, the novel, like the two books that precede it, co-opts the mythic landscape of the American frontier in order to metaphorically map the relationship between blackness, Jewishness, and whiteness. Indeed, "For Coleman's father, the Jews [...] were like Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, showing the social responsibility, showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done" (97). In referencing ideas of "outside" and "in" as locations that could be as carefully surveyed as "Indian scouts" surveyed the frontier, Roth positions blackness at the point farthest from the social center where whiteness is located; he positions Jewishness closer to this social center, but not quite *of* the center—to be Jewish in the U.S. in the 1940s is to be at the margins of the "in

crowd.” If, in the 1940s, the Jews were not quite the savages in the wilderness that the blacks were, they certainly remained on the outskirts of the town, occupying a still-precarious place between “inside” and “outside” as they attempted to more firmly establish themselves within the borders of (white) civilization.

What is most illuminating about Roth’s view of racial and ethnic identity is the fact that, in the novel, to be Jewish is *not* to be “white”—certainly not in the WASP sense of that identity. Indeed, in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, Roth presents distinct avatars of such WASP-y whiteness: Bill Orcutt in the former (“ ‘family goes back to the Revolution’” [AP 304]); Katrina Von Tassel Grant and her husband Bryden Grant in the latter (supposed descendents of Ulysses S. Grant [IMAC 133]). In both novels, these characters embody the accumulated whiteness of generations spent at the social center of American culture and society; they are privileged, confident, and socially assured, and very much view Jewishness as “otherness”—i.e. not white. *The Human Stain* does not offer up such pronounced representatives of WASP-derived whiteness, with the possible exception of Faunia Farley’s father. Arguably, this is because the novel does not need to. *The Human Stain* makes it clear that while Jewishness is toward the “white” end of the racial spectrum, Coleman still chose to embody an embattled ethnic minority—not WASP privilege. “Whiteness” thereby becomes a spectral presence: it is defined by its absence, by the fact that Coleman does not—and the text implies *cannot*—attain whiteness, but can attain an identity somewhat proximate to whiteness, which, in the novel’s conceptual map of race of ethnicity, is Jewishness. Whiteness, WASP-pure and otherwise, is a racial identity that lies outside the purview of even Coleman’s

admirable powers of self-transformation. Thus, whiteness marks the implicit boundaries of the space within which Coleman is allowed to reinvent himself; by doing so, its presence looms large as the one barrier that Coleman cannot willfully surmount, even if it is not represented by characters intended to provide that stark contrast.

Conclusion: The Arcadian Moment

The trilogy traces Zuckerman's three-stage process of narrative re-emergence. In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman is finally both narrator and novelist; he tells the story of Coleman Silk from a first-person perspective and also writes the story of Coleman Silk. From the first to final novel of the trilogy, Zuckerman leaves increasingly more distinct marks on the narrative; when the trilogy ends with *The Human Stain*, it ends with Zuckerman in full possession of the narrative, forming and crafting it through his storytelling skills. The trilogy ends with Zuckerman's full rebirth as a narrator and a novelist; the sense of an ending that distinguishes the trilogy from other serial forms is actually the point at which Zuckerman experiences full regeneration. Thus the trilogy argues that coherence arises from repeated tellings that culminate in a full assertion of narrative control; that is the only way that the narrative of late 20th century will achieve coherence—through its storytelling structures. Zuckerman has appeared in one more Roth novel since the publication of *The Human Stain: Exit Ghost*, which was published in 2007. *Exit Ghost* seemingly marks Zuckerman's exit from the stage of Roth's fiction; as many commentators noted, the title echoes that of *The Ghost Writer*, the novel that first introduced

Zuckerman in 1979, and thus provides a titular bookend to the Zuckerman series. With Roth now retired,⁵⁰ Zuckerman is as well.

What is significant about the return of Zuckerman within the narrative universe of the trilogy, however, is the way in which Zuckerman's first-person narrative provides the necessary structuring container for the story of Coleman Silk. All three novels have, at their core, acts of violence that rupture the post-war world for their respective protagonists. However, the violence at the core of *The Human Stain* occurs at the level of individual subjectivity; Coleman Silk's abrogation of his racial and family identities is arguably more brutal in its effects than either Merry Levov's bomb or Ira Ringold's murder of Strollo. Such startling brutality at the heart of the vaunted American Self requires a novelist operating on all cylinders to handle it; Coleman's crime hails Zuckerman back into full existence.

So the trilogy starts and ends with the novelist shaping and forming the story. In the middle, *I Married a Communist* makes an argument for a model of history-making that requires both the author and his subject participate in telling the story. This middle ground of participatory narrativization will appear in Morrison's trilogy as well, with the first-person narrator of *Jazz* exhorting her audience (and readers) to "[s]ay make me, remake me" at the end of the book (229). While the novelist begins the story, takes on the history, and lifts the appropriate people onto the stage, he needs the collaboration of his listeners and subjects. At the end of the twentieth century, the novelist may provide the sense of the ending, but life "in the midst" is the purview of not only the novelist but also his subject and listeners.

⁵⁰ Roth apparently decided to retire after the 2010 publication of his novel *Nemesis* but waited until the fall of 2012 to publicly announce his decision (McGrath, "Goodbye, Frustration").

The trilogy ends on a Gatsby-esque note, with Zuckerman observing Les Farley as he ice fishes, alone, on an isolated part of a lake in the Berkshire hills. Zuckerman is almost certain that Farley killed Coleman and Faunia; as he stands there, casually conversing with Farley, he knows that he's in the presence of a "brute" and a "killer" (358). As Farley shows Zuckerman the augur he uses to cut the ice—all five inches of it, right in Zuckerman's face—Zuckerman senses that Farley could kill him as well (359). When Zuckerman carefully takes his leave from Farley, he turns to look back. As David Wyatt points out, this act of turning to look back at the landscape as a way of "exit[ing]" a narrative is a canonical gesture in twentieth century American literature, enacted by both Nick Adams in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* and Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. Such turns to look back, Wyatt claims, are seeking the past, whose current is always pulling us towards it, as Nick Carraway intuitively grasps in the last line of *Gatsby* (328). This sense of an ending is appropriate for the trilogy. As the new millennium and the new century loom large, the pastoral past pulls us back to its "fresh, green breast," thereby reinvigorating its metaphorical powers through the introduction of new eras, new epochs. The last sentence of the trilogy is Zuckerman's rumination on Farley, the lake, and the mountains:

Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America. (*HS* 361)

And the pastoral continues to harbor death, violence, and brutality within its “pure and peaceful” landscape. The reference to Arcadia recalls the phrase “Et in Arcadia Ego,” or “In Arcadia I [am there],” a reminder that death, or “I,” is present everywhere, even paradise. At the end trilogy, death is embodied by Les Farley and the brutality he represents; this scene is, in a sense, the three books in miniature. Death is always present in the American pastoral, and not merely as an existential consequence, but as a foundational element without which the ideal pastoral cannot exist.

Toni Morrison's Love Trilogy: To Tell, to Refine, to Tell Again

Introduction

During the question and answer portion of a talk she gave in Baltimore in March 2011, Toni Morrison spoke about a desire to create a map of the Lorain, Ohio neighborhood in which she grew up. Her family had lived in several houses on one particular street, and she was attempting to remember a specific house. She admitted that though she “doesn’t remember anything,” her sister “remembers everything,” so she asked her sister to make a map of their old neighborhood with all the houses their family had lived in. Her sister complied and produced a hand-drawn map, labeling their neighbors’ houses with funny descriptions, such as “Drunk Mr. So-and-So” and “the Crazy McLachies.” Morrison then gave the map to her son, an architect, and asked him to re-draw it. With the aid of Google Maps, he superimposed the houses from her childhood on a present-day map of the neighborhood. When her son was done, Morrison looked at this rendition of her childhood landscape and realized nothing remained on the street where she had grown up—a few trees, some shrubs, and that was all (University of Baltimore, “An Evening with Toni Morrison”).

This anecdote suggests the intensity of Morrison’s desire to map the past, to literally pinpoint the coordinates of her own childhood and situate one part of it in relation to other parts. This map-making is an act of remembering,⁵¹ a complex event

⁵¹ Remembering is a significant theme in many of Morrison’s works. It manifests itself as such in many of her novels, perhaps most notably in *Beloved*, where it acquires the status of a noun and becomes “rememory.” It is Sethe’s “rememory” that causes her so much turmoil and confusion at the beginning of the novel. Several critics investigate the valences of remembering in Morrison’s work, including (to name a few) Nancy Peterson in *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*, Jill Matus in her monograph on Morrison’s work, *Toni Morrison*, and Elmar Lehmann in her article “Remembering the Past: Toni Morrison’s version of the Historical Novel.”

in Morrison's novels, but one that often involves assembling the fragmented the pieces of the past into a coherent whole—despite (or perhaps because of) the emotional toll such an act exacts from its (at times) unwilling practitioners. Indeed, as some critics point out, in Morrison's work "remembering" is perhaps best thought of as re-membering, a hyphenated phrase that emphasizes the act of joining fractured sections of the past to each other until they can function together as a complete, working history. As Morrison's childhood map indicates, remembering for her often involves mapping events of the past onto a certain space, whether those events are biographical, as they are in the above anecdote, or fictional, as they are in novels that range from *Song of Solomon* (1977) to *Home* (2012), both of which map the past and history that their respective protagonists must confront onto the geography of the American South.⁵² This need to spatialize the past and to assign history a concrete location is, I believe, Morrison's way of delimiting a totality of history. The boundaries provided by a physical space – a town, a city, or a single house as it is in *Beloved* – make the totality of history comprehensible by defining its limits and therefore making it sensible as a phenomenon.⁵³ In such a space, to paraphrase Kathi Hardt and Michael Weeks, it is possible to relate, and connect, to situate and interpret each object in the context of the forces that shape and enable it (Hardt and Weeks 23).

⁵² As Bo Ekelund argues, "[...]Morrison's historical novels draw on a particular organization of temporality and spatiality which was first evident in *Song of Solomon* (1977), and can be seen fully developed in *Beloved* (1987)" (138). I would add that *Home* echoes *The Song of Solomon* in using the South as a spatial location for the past.

⁵³ I should point out that Morrison herself has explicitly argued against a "totalization" of history, which she defines this type of view as "[a] definitive or an authoritarian view from somebody else or someone else speaking for us [African-Americans]" (Schappell 86). In doing so, she's actually rejecting model of totalization that Jameson himself rejects, what Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks describe as "a view [that] assumes that a cultural phenomenon can be completely and wholly known and therefore accurately objectified. To totalize something is to completely enclose it and seal it within a fixed and unchanging discursive structure" (Hardt and Weeks 21 - 22).

While delimiting the site of historical inquiry in order to better identify and relate events to each other is often necessary in Morrison's fiction, this task is certainly not always easy for or welcomed by her characters, who often actively mitigate against such re-construction of the past, as Sethe notably does in *Beloved*. In the end, however, I believe the ambivalence her novels manifest about this task breaks in favor of the hard project of assembling, or re-assembling, the past. Demonstrating how to put past events together into a tellable, sensible whole is precisely what the project of the trilogy—and much of Morrison's fiction—is about, no matter how hard, difficult, and downright painful such a project is.

That is precisely what the form of the trilogy provides to Morrison's work: the narrative space where it is possible to relate and connect the historical periods and events portrayed in *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997). There will always be gaps between these periods—missing pieces from the historical quilt—but the trilogy acts to figuratively bind these events, foregrounding their interrelationships and structural dependencies rather than the spaces that separate and distance them from each other. Morrison's trilogy is commonly called the "Love" trilogy. She has said that all three books are about " 'the ways women love' – whether children, men, or God – to the point of self-destruction" (Jaggi, "Profile"). Taken together, these three novels create a partial, though powerful map of the African-American past over roughly a hundred-year period. It begins with *Beloved*, which opens in 1873, goes through *Jazz*, which opens in 1926, and ends with *Paradise*, which closes in 1976. The trilogy directly relates the Fugitive Slave Act, the Civil War, and Reconstruction to the Jazz Age and the Great Migration as well as World

War II and the Civil Rights era. When studied as parts of a trilogy, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* turn into coordinates on a fictional landscape that enable comprehension of a totality of African-American experience. This totality is not complete or final in its representative capacities, but rather, as Frederic Jameson would have it, open and responsive to new forces and energies. The geography of Morrison's trilogy provides a way into, and a way to understand, a vast expanse of African-American history. The trilogy encourages readers to think big about this experience. The trilogy's landscape is both chronologically and geographically significant. The three books take place in chronological order, with each novel occurring roughly fifty years after the one before it. This ordered timeline sets Morrison's trilogy apart from McCarthy's and Roth's trilogies, both of which occur chronologically out of order. Geographically, Morrison uses spaces significant to African-American history: in *Beloved*, that space is the Ohio river and its surrounding environs, which acted as the boundary between freedom and slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War; in *Jazz*, that space is the urban landscape of New York City during the Jazz age; in *Paradise*, it is the space of the South, Oklahoma, and the all-black towns that cropped up during reconstruction.

Morrison's trilogy is also based on three actual historical events. *Beloved* is based on the story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her own daughter rather than allowing her to return to slavery. Morrison first came across Garner's story when editing *The Black Book* (1974), a pastiche of sources (newspaper clippings, personal genealogies, songs, anecdotes, to name a few) about African-American life in the nineteenth century (Matus 15). *Jazz* is based on a photograph of a young girl shot by her lover, which Morrison encountered when she wrote the

forward for *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978), a collection of poems and photographs inspired by those who had lived and died in Harlem (16). *Paradise* is based on the all-black towns that sprung up in the south and mid-west in the late nineteenth century. Morrison was particularly inspired by a newspaper headline that she found in her research for the novel, “Come Prepared or Not at All,” which appeared in the *Langston City Herald* from 1891 to 1892, exhorting blacks to settle to all-black towns in Kansas and Oklahoma (Peterson 90 – 91). Morrison’s use of archived primary sources—the textual remains of the past, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us—as the germinal sources for her trilogy distinguishes it from both Roth’s and McCarthy’s. It also positions her trilogy as the one most invested in confronting and revising the way in which U.S. national history gets constructed from those textual remains and artifacts. Finally, the historical texts around which the trilogy is constructed—a photograph and newspaper clippings—provide an internal, centripetal force that grounds the three novels and thematically pulls them towards each other. These traces are the stuff of African-American history in the late twentieth century, the trilogy argues, and this is how we can begin to grasp the totality of it.

The trilogy form delimits this investigation into African-American history by marking a point at which to start, with *Beloved*, and a point at which to stop, with *Paradise*. The trilogy does not, however, argue that it has identified a defining beginning and ending of contemporary African-American history; rather, it provides an open space through which it is possible to begin to capture the largesse and complexity of this history and experience. Like Roth’s and McCarthy’s trilogies, Morrison’s trilogy produces the ability to cognitively map African-American

experience and history. In Jameson's theory, cognitive mapping and the access it gives to a social and historical totality ultimately enables the individual subject to "regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (54). As the critic Rebecca Ferguson notes about *Beloved*, Morrison treats "storytelling as a political act" (154). In the trilogy, the practice of cognitive mapping is part of this political act.

In Morrison's world the crucial act of remembering is central to this activity, and gaining a position that enables such agency means relating the different pieces of the past to each other so that they coalesce as an intelligible story. Indeed, *Beloved* offers up a microcosmic example of this practice, providing three versions of Sethe's violent actions at the end of Part One, which come together to provide a full account of what happened before, during, and after a "pretty little slavegirl [...] split to the woodshed to kill her children" (*Beloved* 158).⁵⁴ The individual subject in the context of the trilogy is us, the readers, and the trilogy enacts a map of history that gives access to that totality. Morrison's trilogy argues that the African-American past, which has been erased⁵⁵ and written over, has not acquired its deserved place within our national memory. "To show the past as it really was" (Spargo 4 – 5)⁵⁶ for African-Americans requires a different set of narrative tools than those associated

⁵⁴ The last three sections at the end of Part One all provide different perspectives on Sethe's act: there is a third-person narrative about Schoolteacher and his nephews arriving at the woodshed after she had killed the crawling already? baby girl (148 – 153); there is Stamp Paid's version, which describes the party Baby Suggs gave in celebration of her grandchildren and daughter-in-law's arrival (154 – 158); and, ultimately, Sethe's own version, told in the first person (159 – 165).

⁵⁵ In her interview with Maya Jaggi, Toni Morrison remarked that "the erasure of history, and responses to it, are very much what we're still struggling with."

⁵⁶ Spargo provides a good overview of the development of historiography. Traditional historiography seeks, as the well-known nineteenth century German historian Leopold von Ranke claimed, "to show the past as it really was." This sort of approach believes that the past is a stable location that awaits our re-discovery of it through the proper chronological ordering of its records and artifacts.

with traditional historiographical practices, and these tools allow for the past to be re-imagined. Thus Morrison's trilogy differs from McCarthy's and Roth's is its desire to demonstrate how an alternative narrativization of history has always existed within more traditional modes of narrating the past.

The narrative methods of Morrison's trilogy reveal not a stable, fundamentally knowable past, but rather a past predicated upon erasures and appropriations—gaps that can only be recuperated through storytelling practices themselves. Only by deploying narrative structures that emphasize what is impossible to know about that past and what has been forcibly repressed about it—these lacunae in our collective national memory—can we begin to understand the past as that exists for African-Americans. From identifying those gaps, we can begin to re-member the past and exhume the alternative practices of historicization associated with the African-American experience.

Beloved, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* are united through their recursive narrative structures the circle around and back to a single act of violence. In *Beloved*, the central violent act is Sethe's killing of her baby daughter; in *Jazz*, it is Joe Trace's murder of Dorcas; and in *Paradise*, it is the murder of the Convent women by an all-male posse from the nearby town. Each novel then approaches this violent act by deploying different narrative tactics to investigate the social and historical forces that resulted in this violence. The narrative tactics—non-linear chronology, unreliable first-person narration, multiple narrative perspectives, to name the primary ones—pull the curtain back to reveal the inner workings of history-making. What results is a total (in the Jameson sense) re-presentation of U.S. national history that reveals the

way in which the African-American experience can be incorporated into the historical record that simultaneously accounts for the way it has been erased.

Morrison's approach to the past is an art of recovery. U.S. national history, the trilogy argues, does not need to be revised in light of this "new" understanding of its past; rather, these approaches need to be revealed as always having been there, buried within our national narrative practices. The narrative project of the trilogy is not merely to use the large fictional scope of the trilogy to present a way of understanding the past that we can then, in retrospect, apply to our entire national experience, but rather to assert that that particular mode of historiography has always been present, even in the nineteenth century, when theorists like Leopold von Ranke were conceptualizing modern historiographical practices that worked to exclude such marginalized histories (Spargo 4 -5).

However, Morrison's trilogy is also deeply rooted in late twentieth century American culture. The fictional aesthetics of the trilogy are a product of the post-1960s U.S. and the liberatory movements that defined that decade. The Civil Rights movement, the Women's Movement, and other social movements all attempted to render structures of dominant, exclusionist authority visible—to disrupt the transparency of those structures—in order to then dismantle their seemingly self-evident authority. In the U.S., then, and elsewhere as well, the death of "grand narratives" with their logocentric explanations of cultural phenomena was both a cause and an effect of this upheaval of traditional social authority. The fictional structures of the Love Trilogy, which represent an alternative way of narrativizing history and the past, acquire greater meaning and visibility in light of the breakdown

of older structures of authority—both aesthetic and epistemological—occurring in the last third of the twentieth century. Indeed, Morrison’s work argues that the past could not properly come back to haunt us until the late twentieth century.

Morrison’s trilogy also differs from those of McCarthy and Roth in its focus on what Morrison terms “throwaway” women in American society (*Beloved* 84, *Paradise* 4). McCarthy is unabashedly focused on issues of masculine development and cultural patrimony in late twentieth century American culture. Roth is primarily interested in a masculine problematic, and his powerful (and energetic) literary presence has successfully worked to place that problematic front and center in late twentieth century American literature. However, unlike McCarthy (for the most part), Roth attempts to represent feminine consciousness (as with Dawn Dwyer Levov) every so often, almost always with complicated, not entirely successful results. Morrison’s trilogy intervenes in this primarily male conversation. Her three novels lift neglected, forgotten, and overlooked women—the waste products of society—onto the stage of history, thereby positioning the issue of gender as central to the problem of American national narratives. The women in the trilogy are radically disempowered by traditional masculine structures of authority, and while these structures are often embodied as white, they are not only white; indeed, in *Paradise*, the male leaders of an all-black town represent this oppressive regime. Thus the trilogy, while obviously confronting the complicated legacies of slavery and racism, also confronts the systemic violence women of all colors endure in American society, especially women who do not have access to the systems and institutions that should (even if they do not) protect them.

What Morrison's trilogy does, then, is to offer society's throwaway women their own epic histories—she does not sing of arms and the man, she sings of arms and the woman. “Everywhere,” she writes in *Jazz*, “Black women were armed” (74), and the sharpest weapon she provides to these women is that of narrative: the ability to tell the stories of their pasts and integrate those stories into their present lives—and into American national consciousness.

Beloved: “To tell, to refine and tell again”

From the very beginning of *Beloved*, the past has thoroughly colonized the present, filling the home of Sethe and her daughter Denver with its presence in the form of the “baby ghost,” the powerful specter who saturates 124 Bluestone with its “spit[e]” (3). Sethe and Denver accept this colonization of their domestic space matter-of-factly; while they feel “persecut[ed]” by the baby ghost's antics (4), they are not particularly surprised by them. After all, this spectral manifestation of past trauma is something that African-Americans can expect in 1873, a mere eight years after the end of the Civil War. As Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, wearily observes before she dies: “Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby” (5).

Yet the presence of the baby ghost, with all its spiteful temper tantrums—furniture moved, items thrown across the room—is easier to manage than the more insidious specters of the past that haunt Sethe and Denver. The baby ghost is external, a presence outside the woman and the girl; the greater and more dangerous haunting exists within their minds, colonizing their psychological landscape and disabling their agency within the present. What haunts them centers around Sethe's actions eighteen

years before, when she “split to the woodshed to kill her children” (158) rather than allow them to be returned to the slavery from which she had just escaped. While she succeeded in slitting the throat of her “crawling already?” baby girl, her three other children, including the newborn Denver, were saved by another ex-slave, Stamp Paid. While this act of infanticide invokes the spiteful baby ghost who plagues them at the beginning of the novel, the complicated mechanisms of repression that Sethe enacts on a daily basis in order “to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (6) are what truly produce the spectral presences in her life and Denver’s. This repression largely manifests itself within Sethe’s stories and narratives, during which she gives “short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” to Denver’s inquiries about her and her mother’s past (58). Thus, it is the fragmented and incomplete story of Sethe’s past, which all its gaps and exclusions, that most powerfully haunt Sethe and Denver.

It is therefore appropriate in many ways that “telling” presents itself as an antidote to Sethe’s disordered narratives of the past. “Telling” becomes a talisman of mental order, an externalizing act that would enable Sethe to share the burden of her past with an understanding audience. Moreover, telling would allow her to finally acquire, through practice, the words that would describe what she did. In the first third of the novel, after she has listened to Paul D relate his own traumatic experiences, she observes, “Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word-shapes for—well, it would come in time [...]” (99). She imagines a situation in which both she and Paul D could acquire the “word shapes,” the vocabulary that could approximate the narrative form of their pasts, that would enable

them to finally tell in a meaningful way. In *Beloved*, however, the act of telling proves to be a double-edged sword: it is at once liberating and enslaving, both releasing Sethe from the past and further enmeshing her within its grip.

Beloved as a novel accomplishes what Sethe herself only partially achieves as a storyteller: it successfully tells the story of the repressed African-American past by narrativizing this past as occluded, fragmented, erased, and silenced. The narrative structure of *Beloved*, with its omissions and non-linear chronology, thereby articulates a historiographic idiom for the African-American experience. *Beloved* ultimately enacts the storytelling command that Sethe hears from Nan, the woman who compels Sethe to listen to her about Sethe's mother's experience during the middle passage, "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe" (62). The novel productively resurrects a history that effectively disempowers Sethe herself, and it commandingly says to readers, over and over again, "Telling you. I am telling you this." Ultimately the act of storytelling and its connection to a hurtful past ultimately *does* yield the word-shapes—the distinctive narrative structure of the novel—appropriate to talking about this history. In the end, then, *Beloved* is the opening gambit in Sethe's wish "to tell, to refine and tell again" even if the narrative agency she ultimately accesses is compromised (and haunted) by a past that almost consumes her whole.

Beloved is divided into three parts, and all three parts resonate with the consequences of Sethe's central act of storytelling. Roughly half-way through the novel, Sethe tells Paul D about how she "took and put [her] babies where they'd be safe" (164) when Schoolteacher (her master) and his nephew arrive in town to capture her and bring her and her children back to Sweet Home plantation. It turns out that

Sethe's idea of "safe" is to corral her four children into a woodshed and attempt to kill them rather than see them returned to slavery. She succeeds with one daughter, almost succeeds with another, and permanently traumatizes her two sons, creating an irrecoverable schism between them and her. This horrific episode constitutes what Stamp Paid wryly terms "Sethe's rough response to the Fugitive Bill" (171).

Part One of the novel is largely driven by storytelling events that culminate in Sethe's revelation to Paul D, which ultimately serves as the fulcrum of the narrative. It opens in 1876, with Sethe and Denver living at 124 Bluestone, haunted by the crawling already? baby ghost: Sethe's daughter and Denver's older sister who died when she was a baby. Sethe and Denver are isolated from the town and society, stuck in the miasma of the repressed past. They quickly incorporate two new people into their house: Paul D, who was Sethe's fellow slave at Sweet Home, the plantation they both tried to escape; and Beloved, a young woman, without friends and family, who appears in front of 124 Bluestone one day.

Part Two covers the fall-out of Sethe's confession. Sethe alienates Paul D with her admission that she killed her baby daughter and then quickly accepts Beloved as the resurrection of her once-crawling baby. Sethe, Denver, and Beloved sink deeply into the temporal and psychological paralysis of a "timeless present" (184) and erect an almost insurmountable wall between themselves and the outside world. The storytelling in Part Two is fragmented, recriminating, and punishing; it does not represent a path of psychological liberation, but rather a path of psychological imprisonment.

Part Three marks the breakdown of this miasma of co-dependency when Denver finally ventures forth into the town, seeking help for her mother. Denver's leave-taking undermines the tripartite structure that supports the women's enmeshed and sequestered existence; as she realizes, "Whatever was happening, it only worked with three—not two—and since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring [...], Denver knew it was on her" (243). Denver's act breaks the temporal vacuum of 124 Bluestone and exposes Sethe and Beloved to the exigencies of the present and town folks who inhabit it. In Part Three, storytelling becomes subordinate to everyday material needs that Denver must procure for herself, her mother, and Beloved as well as the growing sense of urgency on the part of the townspeople about what, exactly, is going on inside 124 Bluestone. Part Three ends with the exorcism of Beloved from the house and the town; the last chapter concludes with a mantra with multiple meanings: "This is not a story to pass on" (275).

The storytelling that occurs throughout *Beloved* is circumscribed by the "map" of 124 Bluestone, the house and the surrounding grounds. The opening line ascribes emotional agency to the house: "124 was spiteful" (3). This pathetic fallacy signifies house's stature as a discrete character within the novel, and the figurative gesture is repeated at the beginning of Part Two and Part Three, respectively: "124 was loud" (169) and "124 was quiet" (239). The space of 124 Bluestone holds an immense amount of power throughout the novel: its temperamental disposition provides the opening gambit for each of the three parts of the book, and the emotional energy conjured within its space dictates what can and cannot be said, or told, in the house or the yard. Additionally, it perverts the linear progression of time for its residents,

making it difficult for Sethe and Denver to move in a forward direction, which leaves them circling around the past, present, and future without being able to successfully access the crucial parts of any one of them. During Part One of the book, when 124 was “spiteful,” Sethe admits, “ ‘It’s so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay’ ” (35). 124 Bluestone, then, captures stories and the sense of time they access within its walls, which ultimately suspends its residents in a distorted space that saps their ability to move forwards or backwards in time.

Time is therefore mapped onto the space of 124 Bluestone, which makes it a classic case of the Bakhtinian “chronotope, the figurative fusion between space and time wherein the characteristics conventionally associated with each concept bleed into each other, thereby producing a material representation of time and a temporally-infused sense of space.”⁵⁷ Like Roth and McCarthy, Morrison’s portrayal of history is architectonic rather than simply linear. Morrison employs chronotopocity in both *Jazz* and *Paradise*, extending it from the intimate domestic space of a house to entirety of the urban landscape of the City in *Jazz* and the rural town of Ruby in *Paradise*.

Time is kept prisoner within the structure of 124 Bluestone, which results in an a-temporal space that disallows access to past, present, and future—and when that future does manifest itself, in the form of Paul D, he and the promise he represents (“A life. Could be” [47]) are ejected from its walls. Storytelling, which provides the primary access to both the horrific past and a better future, is either thwarted or distorted altogether or perverted in its consequences. The story that was supposed to

⁵⁷ Again, I am indebted to Bo Ekelund’s article for first using the chronotope concept to illuminate Morrison’s sense of history in *Beloved*, particularly his examination of 124 Bluestone as a chronotope (147 – 148). Justine Tally also applies the chronotope concept to her reading of Morrison’s trilogy in her piece “The Morrison Trilogy.”

tie Sethe closer to Paul D actually achieves the opposite; after Sethe recounts her story, “[...] a forest sprang up between them, trackless and quiet” (165). The chronotope of 124 Bluestone disables the catharsis of telling, and only when Denver finally ventures into the town by herself in Part Three, leaving 124 Bluestone, does time start to move forward again. 124 Bluestone thus structures the limits of the told stories throughout the entire novel, though its character shifts—from spiteful, to loud, to quiet—with the type of stories recounted in each part.

In Part One, Denver is the storytelling fulcrum. Her desire to consume and perpetuate stories ensure that they are constantly in circulation. The stories in this section are initially marked by the fragmented, incomplete, and rambling narratives that Sethe tells Denver (37, 38), which is a type of telling, or rather *non-telling*, that has structured Denver’s view of the world. As a result, large parts of the world and her mother’s past remain occluded to Denver and inaccessible to her. She is terribly lonely (12), isolated, and excluded from town life, and she lacks the necessary information and emotional sophistication to understand why this is. At the very beginning of the novel, she lashes out at her mother in frustration after Paul D arrives: “‘I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either’” (14). Sethe, on the other hand, accepts such fractured narratives as a by-product of her primary daily activity: “Working, working dough. Nothing better than to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (73). Fractured, fragmented, and broken-apart stories are preferable to a coherent version of history, which would force her reconstruct the past and therefore confront the whole of her actions.

Denver's voracious appetite for excessive telling is a counterbalance to Sethe's non-telling. Denver wants to hear the story of her birth, which was aided by a "whitegirl" named Amy (8), over and over again. As Sethe acknowledges, "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it" (62). Listening to the Amy story buttresses Denver's fragile sense of self and identity, which is seriously undermined by her isolated existence; her tenuous self-definition is reliant solely on her mother, her mother's stories, and the world of 124 Bluestone. For Denver, the Amy story is, literally, her origin story, the moment she came to be, and it is the only scrap of personal history to which she has access. It augments her own importance and reinforces her own sense of existence and subjectivity. Additionally, this story offers Denver the solaces of genre—the comfort of knowing the general trajectory of the plot and character development, of what is going to happen and when, and how the story ends. The story is deeply familiar, and she uses it to both comfort herself and draw herself together in the face of perceived threats. In much the way that time assumes the shape and structure of 124 Bluestone, the Amy story becomes a space into which Denver can immerse herself: "Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed from the window" (29).

This is the condition of 124 Bluestone and its inhabitants when Paul D arrives: a mother and a daughter severed from any meaningful and productive interaction with past, present, or future. The primary method for accessing the past, storytelling, is denied by the mother, who "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was

safe” (6), and therefore delivers stories in near non-sensical fragments. The daughter, on the other hand, is thoroughly addicted to a single story that reinforces her own fragile sense of subjectivity. Into this world walks Paul D, who disrupts the temporal status quo by introducing a sense of the future, one full of “[p]lans” (37) and the hope of a “life” together with Sethe (47). One the first things he does is rid the house of the baby ghost (18), which temporarily releases Sethe and Denver from the spell of 124 Bluestone. After Paul D banishes the baby ghost, he, Sethe, and Denver go to the carnival, an outing that tenuously bestows a sense of social identify on mother and daughter, aided in great amount by Paul D’s good spirits and quick wit (47 – 49). It is a heartbreaking scene. This specter of a possible family unit is Morrison’s way of quickly acknowledging conventional expectations of a “happy ending” (a newly formed family) and then as quickly dismissing them. The point of the novel is not to get these three characters to this place, the point is to get them to another, more emotionally complex place entirely.

And this “other place” is signified by Beloved, who appears in the front yard of 124 Bluestone right after the carnival. If Paul D embodies the future, then Beloved embodies the past-less “now.” Water harkens her appearance, for she walks out of the water “fully dressed” and seats herself beneath a mulberry tree at 124 Bluestone; and, when Sethe first sees her, she “break[s] water” in much the same way she broke water when Denver was born (51). Beloved’s appearance is a birth scene, and, like a newborn, she is devoid of markers of the past; she does not have a last name, and if she has people, then she is certainly divorced from them (52). Beloved is essentially a chimera, a fantastical amalgamation of history and ghosts wrapped up in a woman’s

body. In the course of the novel, she transmogrifies from a physically real young woman, asleep under a mulberry tree, to a legend from the past and a haunt of history, tormenting Sethe with her demands for reparations. Only a few people ever lay eyes on her, and it is somewhat questionable whether she actually exists outside the small space of 124 Bluestone. People who need her, like Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, see her; those who don't, may not.

Once Paul D and Beloved take up residence at 124 Bluestone, the stakes of storytelling change drastically as they infuse the house with new ideas of time. It turns out that Beloved receives a "profound satisfaction" from storytelling (58) and demonstrates a precocious knowledge of Sethe's past, exhorting Sethe to "[t]ell me your diamonds" (58), which are the glass earrings Mrs. Garner (her original owner) gave her when she "married" Halle on Sweet Home plantation. Sethe had not told anyone about these earrings. Beloved's predilection for storytelling and her knowledge of Sethe's past "amaze[s]" Sethe, for whom "every mention of her past life hurt" (58). It also gives Denver an opportunity to try to satiate that desire, therefore making Beloved beholden to her. On one occasion, Beloved insistently bids Denver, "Tell me [...] Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat [...] tell me" (76). Instead of the teller transferring the past to the listener, Beloved is the listener attempting to devour the past. Lonely Denver enables this behavior, "[...] nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved" (78). For Denver and Beloved, storytelling is both a co-creational and co-dependent act, a mutually beneficial transaction that sutures them together in a cycle of need and nurture. Denver needs Beloved's company, Beloved needs Denver to be a medium for

Sethe, and they both need each other to nurture their inchoate sense of selves. As Denver and Beloved feed upon each other, Beloved's capacity for stories come to represent her need to both consume and manifest the past. She consumes the past through her voracious appetite for it, and she manifests the past through her unaccountable knowledge of it.

Paul D, on the other hand, tells a very different type of story. His story answers questions, fills in gaps, and makes the past make sense. His storytelling is antithetical to Sethe's in that it coheres history rather than fragmenting it; it connects the dots rather than erasing those connections. The best example of this is when he finally reveals to Sethe why Halle did not meet her at the pre-arranged location on the night they were supposed to run away from Sweet Home. Halle, it turns out, witnessed Schoolteacher's nephews beating Sethe and then drinking her breast milk. In response to his wife's violation, Halle sat down near the butter churn and smeared clabber all over his face. As Paul D puts it: " 'It broke him, Sethe' " (68). When Sethe pushes Paul D about why he didn't say anything to Halle, Paul D admits he couldn't: " 'I had a bit in my mouth'" (69). And there is the answer to two long-standing questions: why Halle didn't meet her and what had happened to him. Paul D's revelation also introduces another layer of complexity to that evening: the abuse and violation he had suffered at the hands of Schoolteacher. Paul D's story is precisely the type of information with which Sethe has waged daily battle over the last 18 years. At this point, she was "resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?" (70).

Yet Paul D's story is also indicative of a paradigm shift. While it does overload Sethe's already overloaded brain, the rhetorical situation engendered between teller, listener, and subject produces a new context through which stories of the past could be safely integrated into Sethe's and Paul D's mutual history. It opens up the possibility that there is a way to discuss a painful and traumatic past that might psychically benefit teller and listener rather than emotionally eviscerate them. This is evident in the discussion that follows Paul D's revelations:

“I didn't plan on telling you that.”

“I didn't plan on hearing it.”

“I can't take it back, but I can leave it alone.” (71)

This exchange demonstrates a mutual understanding between Sethe and Paul D about how a story like Paul's can resonate with unintended consequences, and the best way to control these consequences is, perhaps, silence, until both parties are ready to discuss it further. After this assurance from Paul D, Sethe even feels brave enough to delve a little deeper into his experience with the bit in his mouth, telling him, “ ‘Go ahead. I can hear it.’ ” To which he says, “ ‘Maybe you can hear it. I just ain't sure I can say it’ ” (71). By the end of the scene, Sethe and Paul D are beginning to identify the most appropriate idiom through which they can safely say what they need to say, and hear what they need to hear.

However, the unique chronotopicity of 124 Bluestone eventually causes Paul D and Beloved to confront each other. They come to occupy opposing camps, waging a battle over Sethe—or, rather, the repressed past that Sethe represents. Paul D embodies the lure of the future and the release from that past; Beloved, the lure of a

timeless now and a past that never leaves. Their respective projects become exclusive of each other, and the space of 124 Bluestone disallows reconciliation between them. As Beloved continues to feed on the past that Denver and Sethe offer up in their stories—and, at one point, to almost feed on Sethe herself (101)—Beloved starts to “shin[e]” (64). She acquires a sexualized power, becoming stronger and stronger as she laps up attention from Denver and especially Sethe. As Beloved grows in strength, she begins to “mov[e]” Paul D out of 124 Bluestone (114), displacing him from the crucial site of Sethe’s existence. He unwillingly moves from Sethe’s bedroom, to a chair in the kitchen, to Baby Suggs’s bed, to a pallet in the store room, and, finally, to the cold house, a separate structure entirely from the main house (114 – 117). Beloved, however, tracks him down to the cold house and focuses her sexual, shining energy on him, asking him repeatedly to “touch me on the inside part” (116). She ultimately seduces Paul D, who is weakly positioned to resist her enticements. Beloved thereby overcomes and overpowers Paul D, placing him outside the powerful center of 124 Bluestone and then sexually subjugating him as well.

This confrontation between the future and the past finally ignites, and Sethe tells her story from start to finish. This crucial event occurs almost in the exact middle of the novel, and its location within the overall narrative of the book signifies its importance. When Sethe decides to tell her story, she does so because she has decided to embrace Paul D and what he has to offer: “Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word-shapes for—well, it would come in time [...]” (99). Sethe could bear her past because Paul D was there to ease the weight of it. More

importantly, and more reflective of the project of the trilogy overall, they have time and space to tell this story and to refine it as necessary in order to make history make sense to them. The language of this story has a shape that can only be acquired through tellings and re-tellings; or, put another way, the architecture for this history will eventually emerge through its repeated narration. Such telling is yet another example of Hayden White's axiom: "History is made, not found." Sethe's optimistic observations about sharing the weight of the past, creating a space to repeatedly tell and therefore refine history and its meaning, and acquiring a shape for that history which would help make sense of it—these all articulate a historical praxis that undergirds Morrison's entire trilogy. The form of the trilogy provides the necessary space to tell, to refine, and to tell again, and it also endows this past with a formal architecture that enables us to make sense of this history.

As Sethe tells Paul D about how she "saved" her children from returning to Sweet Home (164), her physical actions mirror the circular nature of her storytelling practices, which repeatedly circled around the central event of her past without ever approaching it directly: "She was spinning. Round and round and round the room [...] turning like a slow but steady wheel [...] Once in a while she rubbed her hips as she turned, but the wheel never stopped (159). The descriptions of her physical movements are in the third person even though she tells the story in the first person, and this switch in narrative perspective is significant. Her physical movements represent her emotional state, which is absent from the first-person dialogue; thus the descriptive, third-person passages symbolize her agitated emotional state, giving access to her interiority in a way that her spoken words do not. Sethe's spinning also

instantiates the centripetal energy this story exerts on those around her, especially Paul D and Denver, who must position themselves in relation to her past—whether they deny it, ignore it, or probe it—in order to emotionally engage her. Throughout her telling, Sethe relies on unique rhetorical situation engendered between her, Paul D, and their respective histories to enable Paul D to infer “the point” of her story (162). Otherwise,

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. (163)

Conventional exposition could not adequately convey the “simple truth” of the situation (163), and she needed a listener who could grasp the truth that lay in the midst of a “drawn-out record” of fragmented images that she strung together in an attempt to describe her actions: “flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells” (163). Her motivations, she believes, were actually quite simple: to put her children “[...] away, over there, where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (163).

It is this concept of “safety” that she offers Paul D as the ultimate explanation about why she did what she did: kill her crawling baby by slicing her neck with a handsaw; almost kill her newborn baby by holding her feet and swinging her toward the wall of the woodshed, only to be interrupted by Stamp Pad; and completely alienate and traumatize both her older children, who witnessed their mother kill one sister and almost kill the other. She tells Paul D, “ ‘I stopped [Schoolteacher] [...] I

took and put my babies where they'd be safe” and emphasizes the word “safe” with a final, confident “pat” that denotes her belief in the rightness and correctness of her actions (164). Paul D realizes that “what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (164).

Instead of assuming the burdens of Sethe's story as his own, Paul D contradicts her interpretation of her actions; his decision to do so ultimately interjects space between him and Sethe rather knitting them together more closely in a shared narrative project that would help them assign meaning to their pasts and the history they had experienced. When Sethe assures him that her plan “worked,” he aggressively questions her, “ ‘How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?’ ” (165). After telling her that “ [w]hat you did was wrong,” he issues the final verbal assault when he tells her, “ ‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four.’ ” When he compares her to an animal that eats and kills its young, “a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet” (165).

Paul D's rejection of Sethe's story and her definition of maternal love precipitates Part Two of *Beloved*, when Sethe chooses the easy, cloying embrace of an ever-present “now” over the sharp difficulty of re-constructing the past. In rejecting Sethe's story, he rejects the way in which she has narrativized herself and her past. It is also a rejection of a shared space of narration that would have allowed them to mould their story into a recognizable form from which they could make sense of this past and begin to move through that past, rather than getting stuck within it. By rejecting Sethe's version of events, Paul D ultimately rejects the liberation from the past that Sethe believed sharing her story with him would result in. In retaliation for

Paul D's betrayal, Sethe not only makes a u-turn back into the foggy time-space she has inhabited for eighteen years, but also delves deeper into that chronotope by actively embracing Beloved as the resurrection of her dead daughter. As soon as she decides this, she releases herself from any obligation to make sense of the past or to assemble a coherent narrative that would enable her to put the past in its place. She tells herself with a sense of "giddiness" that " 'I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all'" (183). Sethe does not have to attempt the hard work of re-assembling the past by stringing together fragments of images or defending her definition of "safety." She does not need to articulate anything; she does not even need to offer the "short replies or rambling incomplete reveries" she used to give Denver (58). In short, she becomes "wrapped in the timeless present" (184).

This retreat into an a-temporal present is signified by a retreat into 124 Bluestone, which stakes out the limits of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved's world. The interior space of the house enables boundless reveries that fuse the three women together: "When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds" (199). This fusion is formally manifested by four chapters that become increasingly lyrical in nature and poetic in form. The first chapter is an internal monologue by Sethe that begins with "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (200), and the second is a monologue by Denver that begins with "Beloved is my sister" (205). The third and fourth chapters begin to break down and break apart the conventional monologue form. The third chapter is Beloved's perspective; the fourth is a chorus of all three

voices. These chapters introduce different speaking perspectives, such as first-person plural, and break up sentence structure by interjecting quasi-caesuras and eradicating punctuation (“one time they bring us sweet rocks to suck we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it” [210]⁵⁸). Finally, the women’s reveries blossom into full-blown poetry that indicates a complete join between them:

Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me (216)

The poetic form signifies the culmination of intersubjectivity that occurs between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved once they sever themselves from the outside world. Each woman fully incorporates the other two into her subjectivity, and the boundaries between them dissipate in the face of this forceful merging. Their respective identities no longer end with their own personal sense of self; their identities now surpass those individual boundaries and are only limited by the communal identity the three women have created among themselves. This linguistic merging signifies the way in which Sethe and Denver have figuratively created Beloved as an antidote to the missing parts of themselves, which emphasizes Beloved’s role as a metaphor for the repressed past whose erasure creates hidden holes in our national narratives.

This section thereby provides the word-shapes, to use Morrison’s term, that could enable the integration of the repressed national past into U.S. national

⁵⁸ According to Morrison herself, *Beloved* is supposed to be “a survivor from the true, factual slave ship” and embody the trauma of the Middle Passage. Thus, this monologue can be understood as manifesting the “traumatized language” of a survivor (Darling 247).

consciousness. We have to first understand *Beloved* as part of the U.S. national story—as part of *us*—in order to then properly integrate the history she represents into the national narrative. She is our sister and our daughter in that she is erased black female presence that has so thoroughly defined the traditional white masculine power structure, which has controlled and written the national narrative for centuries. She is us in that her story is our story. However, Part Two of *Beloved* also constitutes a cautionary tale about such merging, about the limitless embrace of a harmful past without a firm sense of how to then engage the future. Indeed, I believe *Beloved* as text manifests a large degree of ambivalence towards such a self-abnegating relationship to the past. Ultimately, the novel seeks a middle ground between suppression and erasure of the past and its violent return.

After this fusion occurs between the three women, the rest of Part Two is without stories. Sethe and Denver accept *Beloved* as the missing part of themselves—as their daughter and sister, as the past they couldn't talk about and the history they had tried to beat back or ignore altogether. This absolute acceptance of *Beloved* as the resurrection of the crawling baby, the second coming of the past, and the full embodiment of the history Sethe did her best to forget completely obviates the need for stories, for telling, or for any sort of narrative act that would attempt to make sense of the past and give it shape and form—because *Beloved* embodies the shape and form herself. Once this acceptance is complete, Sethe feels no need to “remember” any more (183), which means the various types of stories and telling that constitute the remembering process are no longer necessary. As for Denver, her appetite for sisterly company is finally sated. *Beloved* has fully integrated herself into

the household, and Denver no longer needs to entice her to stay by feeding her stories from the family's past.

As for Beloved herself, she continues her transition into an abstraction. This transition is marked by the prose-poem nature of her monologue, wherein she assumes a variety of speaking voices that indicate she is beginning to acquire the characteristics of a metaphor—a poetic persona that represents the repressed experiences of the African-American population. As Denver and especially Sethe project their own meanings onto her, Beloved continues to lose her specificity as a human and gains meaning as a symbol of the repressed past, returning to haunt Sethe and Denver.

Like the women in 124, Paul D is also reeling from the wreckage of Sethe's storytelling revelation. While Sethe's world implodes, collapsing in on itself within the space of her house, Paul D's explodes with her story. As Sethe, Denver, and Beloved thoroughly immerse themselves in the chronotope of 124 Bluestone, suspended in a time and space of their own creation, Paul D is also paralyzed in his own way, sleeping in a storefront church cellar and drinking in his off hours (218, 231). Like Sethe, Paul D has also struggled to manage and relate to the past, which he keeps locked in the "tobacco tin lodged in his chest" (113); after hearing Sethe's story, however, the past swirled around him, dangerous in its uncontained state: "His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey" (218). The storytelling momentum that culminated in Sethe's explosive narrative comes to a complete halt, and with it, any sort of productive or constructive reckoning with the past.

This is the state of affairs when Part Two closes: the three women and Paul D are all paralyzed by the wreckage of the past and are unwilling to mobilize themselves out of this state. When Part Three opens, Denver takes action to disrupt this paralysis: she leaves 124 Bluestone in order to get help for her mother. She does this because she has essentially become a one-woman audience for Sethe and Beloved's intimate and ultimately destructive co-dependent spectacle. Sethe spends her days "trying to take care and make up for," and Beloved spends most of her days ensuring that Sethe does take care of her and makes up for her, Sethe's, sins (243). Sethe is the food that Beloved consumes; as Beloved gets larger, Sethe gets smaller and thinner (242, 240). Hunger and complete desperation finally propel Denver into the outside world, pushing her out of the time-space vacuum of 124 and into the time and rhythms of daily life. Denver realizes that "[s]he had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't, they all would" (240). Denver begins her tentative forays into ordinary society first by visiting Lady Jones, her erstwhile teacher who had instructed Denver when Denver was a small child (247), and she then ventures forth to say "thank you" to the church women who provide her starving family with food (249). Denver gains an "outside life" (250) that revolves around renewed, informal lessons with Lady Jones and small conversations with the women who leave food on the outskirts of Bluestone. Like her father, Denver proves herself able "to do the necessary": ask for help and get work (252). Denver's outside life gives her a nascent sense of self, which provides her with additional motivation for engaging with the world beyond Bluestone: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Appropriately enough, Denver becomes an avatar of the future. The idea of a young woman as the

Ultimately, Denver ensures her own survival and her mother's by telling the last story of the novel: the story of her mother's rapid decline at the hands of Beloved. This act of telling is a relatively minor incident in the novel; it is not introduced by the descriptive apparatus that other stories are, and it occurs quickly, with minimal exchange between Denver and her listener. Though this story is swiftly told, it turns out to be the story that liberates Sethe from the past. The consequences of Denver's telling are large: Janey quickly disseminates this story through the black female community, and the community ultimately takes action. Most of this action comes in the form of Ella, "a practical woman" whose clear-eyed sense of the past and future drive the community's approach to Sethe's situation: for Ella, "[t]he future was sunset, the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (258). Unlike Sethe, who had gotten to a point where she refused to release herself from her sins, thus allowing her sin—in the shape of Beloved—to accumulate power and size, "Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (256).

Eventually, a band of thirty singing women appear at 124 Bluestone and banish Beloved, though whether this is permanent or temporary is unclear. Beloved and what she represents is, in the end, a community and a society "bedevil[ment]"—not just the bedevilment of one woman (255), and text argues that the community must take responsibility for excising her from the present. This banishment is not without one last re-enactment of the original trauma, though now this time the

embodiment of the future occurs in the other two novels of the trilogy as well: Felice is a good example of this in *Jazz*, and Billie Delia is another example in *Paradise*. These young women exhibit the characteristics that Morrison believes the future requires: the courage to confront difficult situations and to act as individual agents, despite family and social forces that would encourage them to do otherwise.

violence is directed outward. Sethe confuses Mr. Bodwin (Denver's employer) with Schoolteacher, and attacks him with an ice pick, only to be felled by Denver and Ella (265). During the confusion, Beloved slips away—or "It" slipped away, which is how the women and Paul D refer come to refer to her (267, 261). This linguistic transition from a person to a thing completes Beloved's transmogrification into a putatively supernatural being. Even Denver admits that though she thought Beloved was her sister "[a]t times," but she also thinks Beloved was "more" (266).

The community finally takes responsibility for Sethe and her story, and Denver has gained an outside life that may take her all the way to Oberlin College (266). However, Sethe herself is "not a bit all right" (266). She takes to bed, a la Baby Suggs, to mourn the passing of her "best thing", Beloved (272). Paul D takes it upon himself to give Sethe back to herself, telling her (or perhaps reminding her), "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." At the end of the novel, Paul D ultimately commits to "put[ting] his story next to hers" and to provide a sense of the future: "Sethe [. . .] me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). This is a strong affirmation of the need to share histories, both by telling about them and by helping others bear them, and to engage with the future.

The last chapter functions almost as a coda to the novel, and it is not as affirmative in its embrace of the future or its faith in a communal ability to bear the stories of the past. Rather, this chapter expresses a deep ambivalence about whether Beloved, and the repressed past she represents, should be integrated into the memory and consciousness of those who encountered her:

Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (274)

The historical erasure against which Beloved's (re)appearance actively mitigated is already beginning again; she is receding, once more, into obscurity, and she cannot even be dignified with the label "lost" because that assumes that someone actually knows she is missing from the record. In the end, "[r]emembering seemed unwise," and this decision to forget is reinforced by the repetition of the single line "[i]t was not a story to pass on" (274, 275). This line, of course, has a double meaning, one that supports the decision to "disremember" and another that actively contradicts that decision. Beloved's story is both not a story to *pass down* to future generations nor is it a story to *pass over* and neglect, a paradoxical position that liminalizes her story within the national imagination: is it necessary for us to remember this past, or forget it? Which solution is, in the end, more liberating? When the line appears for a third time, it semantically shifts to "[t]his is not a story to pass on" (275), and the change in pronoun and verb tense is significant. "This is not a story to pass on" now refers to the novel *Beloved*. The novel itself now leaves readers with this conundrum: how to determine the best way to tell the story of Beloved so that we will actively engage it, for the future, and are not tempted to forget it, erase it, or write it over.

Beloved as a novel succeeds what Sethe herself only partially achieves as a storyteller: it successfully tells the story of the repressed African-American past by narrativizing this past as occluded, fragmented, erased, and silenced. Sethe's seminal

act of storytelling is not as successful as it could be due to the fact her audience, Paul D, fails to adequately hear her. Storytelling requires an active listener; it is not a one-way transaction, and Paul D, as empathetic as he is, fails as that listener. *Beloved*, on the other hand, demands that readers be active and dislodges them from passivity and complacency. The narrative structure of *Beloved*, with its omissions and non-linear chronology, thereby articulates a historiographic idiom for the African-American experience. *Beloved* ultimately enacts the storytelling command that Sethe hears from Nan, the woman who compels Sethe to listen to her about Sethe's mother's experience during the middle passage, " 'Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe'" (62). The novel productively resurrects a history that, in effect, disempowers Sethe herself, and it commandingly says to readers, over and over again, "Telling you. I am telling you this." In the end, the act of storytelling and its connection to a hurtful past ultimately does yield the word-shapes—the distinctive narrative structure of the novel—appropriate to talking about this history. As the first novel in the trilogy, *Beloved* is a powerful opening gambit for an exploration of the way in which history gets constructed. The next novel in the trilogy, *Jazz*, furthers this exploration by taking up questions of authorship.

Jazz: "History is over, you all"

If *Beloved* is about the difficulty in finding the right words and narrative form to narrate a traumatic history, *Jazz* is about the sheer joy found in the rhythms of storytelling and the beat of language. The first-person narrator opens the novel with the attitude of a gossipy confidant who is in the middle of setting the record straight for her listeners: "Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on

Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too” (3). There are no throttled, strangled, or half-said utterances from this narrator; she is confident in her storytelling faculties and comfortable with the flow of language. She is an appropriate narrator for the time and place of the novel, which takes place in 1926 in the “City,” a one-word reference for New York City, though the novel never explicitly refers to the City by that name.

Jazz takes place about 50 years after *Beloved*, providing another coordinate in Morrison’s map of contemporary African-American history and experience. As in *Beloved*, *Jazz* is organized around a central act of violence: the murder of Dorcas, a teenaged girl, by her middle-aged lover, Joe Trace. Unlike *Beloved*, though, the nature of this murder is revealed at the very beginning of the novel. The rest of the text is an exploration of the motivations and the consequences of this act, and the social and historical forces that interpenetrate the major players: the jazz age and its music, the great migration of African-Americans from rural areas to urban centers, and the treatment of African-American World War I veterans. The narrative, like that of *Beloved*, jumps around in time, going back to rural Virginia in the late 19th century, where Joe and Violet grew up, and before then, to Baltimore, where Violet’s grandmother True Belle ministered to the needs of her mistress’s illegitimate bi-racial son, Golden Gray,

Jazz, like *Beloved*, is deeply concerned with the way in which the African-American past and history get narrated. However, *Jazz* adds a new valence to this investigation of narrative forms by repeatedly raising questions about the role, place, and position of the narrator in shaping and forming this story. The novel therefore constitutes a meta-narrative about this process of narrativization, delving into the

decisions the teller makes when relating her tale. The unnamed first-person narrator therefore plays a fictional role that is related to Nathan Zuckerman's in Philip Roth's trilogy. She provides a glimpse behind the curtain of storytelling, letting her audience see her fallibility, her ignorance, and her biases—and how those shortcomings affect her story. In addition, the narrator intermittently hands off the reins of first-person narrative control to her subjects: Joe Trace, his wife, Violet, Dorca's friend Felice. This interchange of narrative control between the story's author, the first-person narrator, and her subjects suggests the necessity of implicating participant-narrators (and readers) in this investigation into suppressed histories.

The devices that make the first-person narration complex serve the “music” of the book's language. The narration provides an appropriate texture and rhythm for the City in 1926, a place that clicks along fast and confidently, with little time for the past. As the narrator pronounces at the very beginning of the novel:

History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath. (7)

The phrase “history is over” is a purposeful, ironic overstatement.⁶⁰ It is brazen, designed to command attention and continue the narrator's confident, almost sassy introduction to the novel. While it is not intended as a truism, the point of this statement is clear: the City is a chronotope that is fully engaged with the concept of the future, and history may as well be over for all the attention it receives there. The fusion of time and space within the confines of the City starkly contrasts that of 124

⁶⁰ This statement echoes the title of Francis Fukayama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, also published in 1992, which theorizes the permanent ascendance of democracy after the fall of Communism.

Bluestone; the City is a space of the future, a forward-looking, fast-moving place that takes its inhabitants by the hands, pulling them away from the farms and rural landscapes of their past and into the technology of the future. However, the chronotopic nature of the City, like that of 124 Bluestone, is used to mark shifts in the narrator's relationship to her stories. As *Beloved* always returned to one-line descriptions of 124 Bluestone at the beginning of each section, so *Jazz* always returns to present-tense descriptions of the City when the narrator re-asserts her presence in the primary diegesis.

The multi-tasking demanded by a future-oriented place—projects, bridges, trains—necessitates a linguistic rhythm that echoes the quick pace of the City's development. The rhythm of this language is a jazz rhythm As Morrison herself admits,⁶¹ she wanted the language to manifest the syncopation and improvisation of jazz, so the narrative manifests an almost metered prose at times. The inhabitants of the city, “regardless of their accent, treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play” (33). Phrases like “about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath,” which describe the future-oriented preoccupations of the City, could easily fit into a poetic line and provides rhythmic momentum that lands at the last word, “underneath,” with a solid downbeat. This is a far cry from the fragmented sentences with their quasi-caesuras that defined Part Two of *Beloved*.

The disappearance and reappearance of the narrator throughout *Jazz* is indicative of the novel's interest in authoring mechanisms, which are those narrative

⁶¹ Morrison described her goals with the language of *Jazz* as “want(ing) to re-present two contradictory things—artifice and improvisation, where you have an artwork, planned, thought through, but at the same time appears invented, like jazz (Schapell 85).

methods by which an author births a story or history. *Jazz* argues that to author a story is at once an astoundingly arrogant and extremely humbling act. Like *Jazz*'s narrator, a keen, quiet observer, an author may believe that she "knows" her subjects, but those subjects continuously surprise her with their motivations, and, as much as an author can imagine the past, the players in that history—personal, local, or more national—will pervert her expectations. In *Jazz*, these mechanisms are registered through conversational asides, interjections, self-correction, and multiple narrative perspectives—the various narrative methods that cumulate into a stories and histories.

Jazz continues the trilogy's focus on society's "throw away" people that *Beloved* first provides. Violet Trace is a skinny unlicensed hair dresser who used to keep birds in the apartment she shares with Joe; before coming to the City, she, like Joe, did farm labor in Virginia. Joe is a "sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man" (73). They are non-descript people who live on the edge of society, and who are pushed even further onto that edge by Joe's actions; he killed a throw-away girl whose death the police really didn't bother to investigate, and he himself is rendered even more unnecessary by the fact that his actions did not even necessitate a legal action. Dorcas didn't matter, and neither did he, for like *Beloved*, Joe, Violet, and Dorcas can't be lost because no one is looking for them. Thus, *Jazz* also examines lives erased from the historical record; this examination is saturated, however, by a joy of linguistic meter and rhythm and possibilities of language that stands in contradistinction to the haunted and intense atmosphere in *Beloved*.

Finally, *Jazz* pulls into focus another burgeoning theme of Morrison's trilogy: armed black women (74), which is a compliment to the trilogy's focus on throw-away

people: black women arm themselves precisely because of their throw-away status. The novel evokes images of black women across the U.S. “with folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass taped to their hands” (78), prepared to retaliate against the violence visited upon them. This violence could be physical, perpetrated by abusive lovers, or more psychological, such as the abusiveness inherent in a society that devalues black female life. As the trilogy works its way through events that inform and shape contemporary African-American history and experience, the need for black women to arm themselves against real and figurative abuses becomes central to this examination. In *Beloved*, Sethe was armed twice: once with a handsaw and then again with an ice pick. In *Jazz*, Violet Trace arms herself with a knife when she barges into Dorcas’s funeral, attempting to attack her husband’s dead girlfriend in her coffin (3). Finally, the third novel in the trilogy, *Paradise*, ends with images of black women dressed, armed, and generally prepared for warfare (*Paradise* 310). These weapons, as *Jazz* points out, may be knives or shards of glass, but they could also be “leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease” (*Jazz* 78)—social armaments appropriate for social warfare. As much as the abuse takes on many forms, so do does the armed protection against that abuse.

From the very beginning of the novel, violence is enmeshed with the swift urban rhythms of the City, its forward-looking attitude, and the watchful, furtive nature of the narrator. In the first few sentences of the novel, after the narrator assures us that she “know[s] that woman,” she introduces Violet and Joe Trace, and the violence they both perpetuated and reacted to: Joe shot Dorcas just to keep the feeling

of a “deepdown, spooky lov[e]” going, and then “Violet went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face” (3). Violet then became known as “Violent” (75). After the narrator provides a brief, conversational précis about Joe and Violet’s trials, she then breaks off to describe the wonders of the city in 1926 with a concise announcement: “I’m crazy about this city” (7). Her description of the City celebrates the “future thoughts” of its residents and catalogues the signs of African-American progress: The A & P hires a colored clerk, Harlem Hospital has a visiting Negro surgeon, and Bellevue graduates its first class of colored nurses (7 – 8).

At this point, the narrator also reveals how she works, and the fact that she questions her own narrative methods: “Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do” (8). She is secretive and speculative, which makes her a good medium for other people’s stories; she works hard at watching people and imagining their motivations without revealing much about herself, thus appearing to withhold her personality from impinging on the story. These are good traits to have, because they allow her to assume the position of a third-person narrator at times, seemingly disappearing from the text altogether but then suddenly asserting herself again. The narrator admits, “I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind” (9), which creates a fruitful environment for imagining the lives of other people. Throughout *Jazz*, the narrator’s voice alternately recedes and asserts itself, but the self-profile the narrator provides at the beginning marks the parameters of her imaginative input, which is substantial. She reminds us how she, as a teller, shapes the stories she tells about, which gestures at the way in

which histories are authored: by careful observation and choice, by a narrator with the ability to apparently vanish from the story she has shaped and formed.

The narrator then begins Violet's story in earnest, describing her life with Joe since he killed Dorcas and she tried to stab the dead girl in her coffin. They live in a state of stasis in their apartment that is not unlike Sethe and Denver's existence at 124 Bluestone at the beginning of *Beloved*. The Trace apartment is dominated by a framed picture of Dorcas, which dominates both Violet's attention and Joe's, and "empty birdcages wrapped in cloth" that once held Violet's collection of birds (11). Like Bluestone, the apartment is a place where the dead possess the living, though unlike Bluestone, it is welcoming towards its living inhabitants, with furniture arranged in a way that "suits the habits of the body, the way a person walks from one room to another without bumping into anything, and what he wants to do when he sits down" (12). The space of the apartment is intended to answer needs and gratify homely desires, not oppose, contradict or completely reject those needs and desires. Violet, however, is at odds with Joe, the world, and, most importantly, herself. Long before Joe took up with Dorcas, she was manifesting "private cracks," which were "dark fissures in the globe light of the day" (22). She had a bout of "street-sitting," when she just sat down in the middle of the street and didn't move for half an hour (17); she most likely tried to steal a baby, though she vehemently denied it (20 – 21); most importantly, though, was her "renegade tongue" (24) which meant "[w]ords connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). Violet was losing her language, the sense-making building blocks that allowed her to communicate with other people. She used have the "snatch-gossip tongue of a

beautician” but was reduced to one or two half-phrases, “ ‘uh’ ” and “ ‘have mercy’ ” (23, 24). The City in 1926 was a time and a place where the rhythmic beat of language set the tempo for life, and Violet was losing her ability to participate in that life. Violet was becoming out of time with life. Joe eventually could not take Violet’s “ ‘quiet’ ” anymore (49) and begins his affair with Dorcas.

As Joe and Violet’s history begins to acquire shape through the narrator’s telling, the narrator’s presence recedes from the primary diegesis, interrupting it only occasionally with general observations about the characters, or the City, or some other piece of the narrative. This occurs when the narrative again goes back in time to 1917, to the summer when nine-year-old Dorcas lost both parents to the East St. Louis riots, and her aunt, Alice Manfred, takes her in (57). At the moment the novel absorbs actual historical events into its narrative, the narrator steps back. Arguably, this is an example of how recounting history can impel its authors to distance themselves from the narrative, leaving no trace of their authoring presence. Such disappearances caused histories to earn a reputation as “found” narratives—events and occurrences that were there, in the past, already related to each other in such a way that the story they told was an obvious one. It was just waiting for the right person to discover it. The project of *Jazz*, however, is not to instantiate such historical de-authoring; rather, its project is to reveal the narrative mechanics that make such disappearing acts possible. The narrator’s disappearance can occur only because she has, like Nathan Zuckerman in *American Pastoral*, lifted her characters onto the stage of the story and created the architecture to hold them. The narrative has its own shape at this point, and that shape further coalesces when history returns in the shape of the

East St. Louis riots. The narrator will return, later, and with force, reminding her readers and listeners that she is still the one shaping history.

Dorcas's life in the City, like *Beloved's* in 124 Bluestone, was born of violence. The East St. Louis riots were very destructive, and the silent march of 10,000 people in New York City that occurred as a response to them—and to which Alice Manfred takes her newly orphaned niece (53)—was a powerful protest and counter-act to that violence. Dorcas, however, “never said a word” about her parents’ deaths, either during the funeral or after (57). Once Alice gets a hold of Dorcas, she begins a life-long process of de-sexualizing Dorcas, which is difficult in New York City in the 1920s, with jazz offering up songs that “dropped down, down to places below the sash and buckled belts” (56). This makes Alice even more determined that Dorcas does not become the prey of “whiteboy[s] over the age of eleven” (55). She attempted to hide Dorcas’s most signifying beauty, her hair, which was straight and wavy enough that the narrator thinks “that girl didn’t need to straighten her hair” (5). In the end, of course, all of this is for nought. Dorcas proved “heardheaded,” “sly,” (6) and unafraid, a lover of “secret stuff,” such as deceiving her aunt and “slipping on vampy underwear to go walking in” (201). This led Dorcas first to Joe and then to her prize boyfriend, Acton, who brought her to the party where she was eventually killed.

The violence that initiates Dorcas’s life in the City provides the opportunity for an extended meditation on both the music that provides a soundtrack for her brief life and the need for black women to arm themselves against physical and figurative attacks. Three major themes of the novel are therefore intertwined: historical violence, personal violence, and the jazz beat, the lyrics of which were

greedy, reckless words, loose and infuriating, but hard to dismiss because underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm, are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus. (60)

Jazz argues that jazz music is a result and continuation of the protests fueled by historical events in the first 20 years of the twentieth century. The violence of these events ultimately helped engender a music commensurate to them. The music is releasing, energizing, and sexualizing all at once; it is an antidote to the suppression that gave rise to events like the East St. Louis riots as well as the suppression that fueled Alice Manfred's fearfulness. This below-the-belt music encourages a sexual expression that undermines the sexual fear provoked by "whiteboys" looking to prey on black women with loose hair.

Jazz is one antidote for this sexual fear; another is armed resistance. Arguably, the two dovetail: jazz does provide a type of weapon that is aesthetic in its nature: the rhythm necessary to tell the story therefore control the narrative. But the need for armed resistance is not only aesthetic; it is literal. The literal element of this weaponry appeals to Alice Manfred after her niece is killed because it expresses not only the fear she has felt for almost her entire life, but also a newer, more aggressive feeling: "anger" (75). Alice, and women like her, were "starving for blood" (86) after decades of trying to make themselves invisible to the hunters that threatened to sexually assault them and otherwise viciously attack them: "Natural prey? Easy pickings? 'I don't think so'" Alice says aloud to herself (75). Throughout the country, "Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose" (77). Violet is perhaps the best example of

such a woman: she armed herself with a kitchen knife and set out to kill a dead girl. In a way, then, Alice and Violet are alike: one woman understands the violence, the hunger for blood, and another woman actually enacts that violence. It is unsurprising that they strike up a tentative and awkward connection, looking for explanations from each other about the motivations of their respective kinfolk (83 – 87). They embody two different but related responses to the violence that surrounds them and with which they are attempting to come to terms.

Violet's visits with Alice are part of the self-examination that Violet undergoes in the wake of Joe's murderous act. When Joe kills Dorcas, Violet's already fragile subjectivity finally splinters: she became both Violet and Violent. She spends much of the rest of the novel trying suture this subjectivity together. Violet reviews a catalog of instances where "*that* Violet" (90), the other Violet, apparently knew and did things that normal Violet would not do, from stabbing a dead girl to releasing her cherished parrot into the city (90 – 92). However, "*that* Violet" was also physically strong and capable, the Violet of rural Virginia who was able to perform fieldwork like a man (92). Violet therefore eventually comes to realize that there were parts of "*that* Violet" that she should own and even nurture: "[...] shit no *that* Violet is me! The me that hauled a four-mule team in the brace" (96).

For Violet, knitting together her two selves requires that she delve into the past, both her own and hers with Joe. As children, both he and she were haunted by myths, specters, and ghosts. For Joe, it was his feral-like mother, Wild, who made intermittent and skittish appearances in his life, and his never-named father; for Violet, it was her crazy mother, Rose Dear, broken by poverty and caring for five

children by herself, and the stories her grandmother, True Belle, told of Golden Gray, whose presence “tore up” Violet’s girlhood as if they’d “been the best of lovers” (97). As Violet realizes, for her and Joe, such spectral presences “means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he” (97). As a couple, they functioned in part because each was the subject of the other’s displaced emotions. There was, then, a foundational divide at the core of their relationship between the original objects of their respective desires and their replacements for that desire. The split identity Violet suffers from after Dorcas’s death was there, almost in an *a priori* sense; from childhood, her world had been divided between the rough existence of impoverished rural life, and Golden Gray’s indulged and privileged existence in Baltimore under True Belle’s care. Dorcas’s death was merely the event that finally provoked an explicit split. By combining an investigation into the past and an examination of the present, which her visits with Alice provide (109 – 113), Violet might regain her mind and her voice (97).

The narrator then returns with force, describing the delights of the City in the spring before turning her considerable attention to Joe. She thus firmly re-situates the narrative within the chronotope of the City, grounding the story in the rebirth and regeneration associated with springtime. The future-time of this chronotope provides a transitional platform for her; she hands off narrative control to Joe and then slips off stage again. As the City comes to life again after the winter, so the narrative births another voice and perspective. The narrator introduces Joe’s monologue by saying, “I know him so well,” and then offers a list of his idiosyncracies, almost in an effort to prove this knowledge to her listener (119). *Jazz* is mostly a story of women, but Joe

is allowed a monologue, which ranges wide, covering his orphan childhood in Virginia to his motivations for taking up with Dorcas. It is, then, an embedded narrative, a device that McCarthy uses often to signal a shift in time-space (from Mexico in the 1949, for instance, to Mexico in late nineteenth century). Morrison also uses the embedded narrative to shift down from the manic urban space associated with the future to the rural space of Joe's Virginia childhood and the past.

Like Violet, Joe has experience with multiple identities: before he met Dorcas, he had "changed into new seven times" (123). Unlike Violet, however, these identities were consecutive, not simultaneous. They bespeak of an identity formation process that was reconfigured as a response to gaps, breaks, and migration; for Joe, the traditional method of defining himself was unavailable due to his social position as poor, black, and orphaned. The first time he changed himself was when he named himself Joseph Trace, because his foster mother told him, "O honey they disappeared without a trace" (124). Joe's last name, then, is the very signifier of his unknown history. Joe kept on changing as he assumed new identities and molted old ones, and the largest break, at least before his encounter with Dorcas, was probably moving to the City with Violet (126). At one point, Joe (or perhaps Morrison) wryly observes, "You could say I've been a new Negro all my life" (129), a statement that pointedly references Alain Locke's well-known collection of essays, *The New Negro*,⁶² which was published in 1925. But for Joe, to be a "new negro" is not limited to the

⁶² Locke's book is considered a seminal work of the Harlem Renaissance; Morrison's point is that African-Americans, like Joe, have constantly needed to reinvent themselves in order to survive. To be a "new negro" is to be a black American, regardless of historical era or geographical location, or whether one was part of a class of intellectual and aesthetic tastemakers that have come to define the Harlem Renaissance.

comparatively narrow realm of the Harlem Renaissance; to be a new negro is merely to be black in America. Indeed, Joe rounds out his monologue with a meditation on what it means to be a “new negro,” which he addresses to Dorcas,

... back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And [...] in those days it was more than a state of mind.

(135)

To become new on a daily basis was a survival tactic. And both Joe and Violet have survived in the city in part due to their ability to split off slivers of their identity, as Violet has, or to assume new ones altogether, as Joe has. At this point, their work lies in somehow constructing those identities into a workable whole as self-alienation and self-shedding are no longer viable practices for either one of them.

After Joe’s monologue, the narrator intervenes in the primary diegesis again, raising questions about her personal reliability of all narratives. She illustrates the slippery location of the author within the narrative, and the variety of liminal sites the author can reside in relationship to her characters, her narrative, and her story. The narrator makes a complicated move by adopting a dual narrative position. She is both the chatty neighbor who dismisses the insights Joe offered up in his monologue (“Joe acts he knew all about what the old folks did to keep on going” [137]) and also the progenitor of the story itself. It is unclear as to the extent of the role she played in helping to narrate Joe’s monologue, even though she treats it as emerging from his consciousness, which in turn allows her to take issue with it. While the narrator accepts responsibility for one part of the story, she denies her responsibility for

another part, even though Joe's monologue was a product of her narrative sculpting—she introduced him, she set him on the stage, she provided the frame that allowed him to speak.

The narrator, having marked out her liminal position in relation to the narrative, now shifts ground into the deeper past of Virginia. This move reconnects the story to the aftermath of slavery and a deeper history of race in the U.S. She picks up the tools of her trade: curiosity, inventiveness, and information in order to “imagine what it must have been like” (137) for True Belle, Violet's grandmother, announcing that True Belle's “state of mind must have been a study” when she returned rural Virginia a free woman after leaving the area a slave (137). Indeed, the narrator then goes on to treat True Belle as a study: she scrutinizes and dissects True Belle's actions and emotions in order to excavate a deeper layer of history within Violet and Joe's story. True Belle's experiences as a slave first in Virginia and then in Baltimore (and eventually as a free woman in Virginia again) connects the period of *Jazz* to that of *Beloved*, thus imbricating *Jazz* with *Beloved* through this period of historical overlap. However, the fact that this section of the novel—the deep history, so to speak—is an explicit product of the narrator's curiosity and inventiveness is an argument in favor of such imaginative excavation. That level of history in the African-American experience requires vigorous digging, but it can also remain inaccessible due to erasures and silences within the historical record. Thus, imagination is a necessary tool when attempting to tell that history, such as the story of the illiterate slave woman who was shipped off to Baltimore with her mistress

when her mistress became pregnant with a black man's baby. *Jazz* argues that this type of curiosity was as necessary in 1926 as it is at the end of the twentieth century.

The story of True Belle is also the story of Golden Gray, the baby born to her mistress, Vera Louise. It was Golden Gray who tore through Violet's childhood in the form of stories that True Belle told her about him, and Golden Gray quickly reclaims his spot as the narrative focus in the narrator's examination of True Belle's life.

Gorgeous Golden Gray is cosseted by his mother and True Belle for his entire Baltimore childhood, but he is *a priori* crippled by his murky multiracial origins, a crippling that is aided by Vera Louise's shame and arrogance, both of which she possessed in great degrees. While she never clarifies "whether she was his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor," she does let him know in no uncertain terms "that his father was a dark-skinned nigger" (143). Joe is an orphan and in several important ways Golden Gray is as well, and the narrator intertwines their respective stories of orphaning. Golden Gray sets out to Virginia to find his father, Henry LesTroy, a.k.a. Hunter's Hunter, the master hunter who mentored Joe when he was a child. Golden Gray's search for his father ultimately becomes the story of Joe's birth, and three men's and one woman's lives intersect in a rural hunting cabin in Virginia.

As the narrator recounts Golden Gray's odyssey from Baltimore to backwoods Virginia, she switches into present tense. This tense change conveys the tone of someone attempting to assemble the story as she tells it, reciting the details to herself in order to render them accurately and correctly. This section becomes, then, a glimpse into the mechanics of authoring—particularly of authoring the past—and the problems and possibilities immanent to that authoring. This present tense signals that

the narrator will be an active presence in her tale as she attempts to work out her own feelings about these characters. The entire section is ultimately a portrait of a storyteller trying to capture the spirit of her characters as accurately and as fairly as possible.

When Golden Gray reaches the area of Virginia in which his father lives, he encounters a naked, heavily pregnant, “berry-black” woman who swiftly becomes his responsibility after she knocks herself out trying to get away from him (144). This is Wild, Joe Trace’s quasi-feral mother, and the baby she is about to give birth to is Joe. At this point, Wild represents everything that Golden Gray has to repress within himself: his blackness and the potential savagery associated with her dark, naked, dirty state. As Golden Gray grudgingly takes the woman to Henry LesTroy’s cabin, the narrator compares the care Golden Gray takes with his horse, carriage, and clothes to the apparent disregard he has for the woman herself (147, 150 – 151). Golden Gray’s treatment of Wild provokes worry and disapproval from the narrator, whose reading of his character changes from a wistful, “I like to think of him this way” (150), to “[t]his is what makes me worry about him” (151) and finally, “He is lying, the hypocrite” (154).

When Golden Gray finally meets Henry LesTroy, Golden Gray realizes that something he thought everyone lacked—a sense of patriarchy, lineage, and history—had actually been brutally severed from him: “Before, I thought everyone was one-armed like me. Now I feel the surgery” (158). This element of “hurt” (160) in Golden Gray humanizes him for the narrator and provokes her into an extended meditation on her own shortfalls as a narrative progenitor: “I have been careless and stupid and it

infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (160). In owning up to her own unreliability as a narrator and her own inability to perceive all the emotional layers of the characters in her tale, she also claims responsibility for her role in shaping and forming these characters. She flags reliability as a possible issue for her audience, warning them that they should not completely trust her story, or even previous stories, as she has been unreliable before. She then leads her audience through the thought process she employs when exploring the motivations of the people in her stories, repositioning those people as necessary:

Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another understanding [...] Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things. (161)

Indeed, this is precisely what the narrator does in the next section, which is a continuation of the story of Henry LesTroy--or Hunter's Hunter—Golden Gray, Wild, and Joe. The narrator again retracts, leaving the characters to occupy a seemingly mythic space, like McCarthy's, in which archetypal roles are assumed and played out. This space provides an opportunity for a consideration of hunters and prey, a metaphor that will extend itself far into the future when the hunter is Joe and the prey is Dorcas—or, even more generally, the hunter is white-dominated society and the prey is black women, who finally attempt to arm themselves against that hunter. Wild quickly becomes more metaphor than woman (echoing *Beloved's* transformation at the end of *Beloved*). She is named by Hunter's Hunter when he first encounters her, about to give birth, in his cabin (166). Like her name, she comes to represent any element not restrained, trained, or civilized; she is the symbol of any

potentially disruptive and a-social force that could “harm” the denizens (particularly pregnant woman and old men) of this rural community (165). Joe grows up with her wild shadow lurking in the background, wrestling with her legacy (178). She is an uncontrollable feminine force that cannot be captured and tamed, despite her apparent vulnerabilities: “[s]he was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere” (179). Indeed, she is so powerful that Joe comes to define himself in terms of the wild prey she potentially represents, which in turn makes him a hunter—a role that he inadvertently assumes again, 30 years later, in the City. However, he becomes a different type of hunter; Hunter’s Hunter cautioned the young Joe against killing “something tender” (187), a philosophy of hunting that Joe faithfully heeds as a youngster in Virginia and comes to blatantly disregard as a middle-aged man in Jazz-age New York. The emphatic question asked at the end of this section, “But where is *she*?” no longer refers to Wild, but to Dorcas (182).

The text quickly and firmly re-locates to 1926, answering the question with “[t]here she is”: Dorcas is at a party with her current boyfriend, Anton (187). The chapter quickly turns to Dorcas’s first-person narration in the present tense, which demonstrates her understanding that Joe is hunting her and she is the prey: “ ‘He is coming for me’ ” (189). This brief section recounts Dorcas’s knowledge that she is prey, and the moment at which Joe shoots her: “ ‘He’s here. Oh, look. God. He’s crying. Am I falling? Why am I falling?’ ” (192). Joe, the hunter, has shot his tender prey as she was dancing at a party with her new boyfriend, and the last piece of Dorcas’s monologue is about the music she hears in the background before she loses consciousness (193).

The narrator returns after Dorcas's monologue, expounding on the beauties of the spring weather and bringing the narrative into the present moment of the novel: after Joe has shot Dorcas, after Violet has begun her visits to Alice Manfred's house, after Violet has decided to suture the two halves of her self back together, "Violent" and "*that* Violet." The narrator's consideration of the spring weather is intermingled with her description of the "young men" playing music on the rooftops of the nearby apartment buildings (198). Into this picture walks Felice, Dorcas's friend, who makes the narrator suspicious with her confident "sauntering" (198). The narrator prides herself on her intimate knowledge of Violet, Joe, and Dorcas. As with Golden Gray, she does not know Felice in the same way, and when presented with evidence of Felice's personality, an unknown quantity, the narrator gets "nervous" and begins to doubt herself (198). It is at these moments that the narrator exhibits her vulnerabilities as a storyteller; her own prejudices and shortcomings, for she does not know Felice so therefore Felice is cause for suspicion. However, as the text demonstrates, telling a story about someone is an epistemological act; the teller comes to a new type of knowledge through the work of narration.

Felice ends up visiting with Violet and Joe Trace, which produces the last monologue of the novel. Felice's presence and her revelation about Dorcas provides a medium through which Joe and Violet make it to the other side of this tragedy. Felice is looking for a ring of hers that Dorcas borrowed right before she died; she ends up telling Dorcas's story to Violet and Joe, recounting the reasons she liked Dorcas as well as Dorcas's shortfalls before she finally reveals to Violet and Joe know that " 'Dorcas didn't have to die'" (209). The bullet had gone through her shoulder, but

Dorcas refused to go the hospital (209 – 210). Felice’s statement simultaneously exonerates Joe from murder and impugns Dorcas’s judgment and her desire for drama—Dorcas, it turns out, was self-indulgent until the end.

With Felice’s revelation, Violet inches closer to a coherent, unfractured sense of self: she has killed her second self, and then she “killed the me that killed her”; what’s left in Violet is only “[m]e”—a singular identity (209). Joe and Violet are “‘working on it’” together, though Felice’s visit has expedited that process enormously. At the end of Felice’s visit, they are dancing together and talking about the need for birds and a Victrola to liven the place up. They have exorcised their demons and are back engaging with the music of life and the city—as is Felice, who promises to stop by and bring records with her when she does (215).

The final chapter of *Jazz* is another monologue by the narrator, and it is an extended examination of the fallability inherent to the authoring act. Stylistically, it is on the same spectrum as the last brief chapter of *Beloved*: the language is metaphorical and figurative, full of vivid imagery and terse, grammatically incomplete sentences that argue for a lyrical and multi-layered understanding of a narrator’s role in shaping and forming—i.e., authoring—a tale. *Jazz* thereby continues the argument that *Beloved* initializes: the profound impact that narrative has on our culture is perhaps most aptly expressed through the language of poetry, not prose. For all the power that narrative has to make sense of history and the past, the best way to talk about that power is to couch that discussion in near-poetry. Indeed, the narrator speaks metaphorically about her own inability to accurately capture her subjects’

experiences through language: “[...] what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder? Without aching words that set, then miss, the mark?” (219).

When it comes to narrative, language can play a game of bait-and-switch: it both provides the units of communication that define the terms and parameters of that narrative, and it is also ultimately inadequate for appropriately communicating that story. Because of this bind, the narrator is never fully in control of the story; the story is always to some extent manipulating her, especially the people whom her words target. As the narrator finally admits about her human subjects, “[...] they knew me all along. [...] when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent, and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other” (220). Morrison, I believe, wants this to be a larger comment on the way that the story ultimately tells the author, in that the story reveals the author’s foibles and manipulates the author in unforeseen ways. The author is never completely invisible to or in control of her characters; they acquire a life of their own and to some extent impose unexpected demands on their creators.

This condition is realized in a coda about the major characters of her story: Felice, Alice Manfred, and Joe and Violet. Like Denver at the end of *Beloved*, Felice as “next year’s news” is the embodiment of the future. She is a woman for the contemporary age, “nobody’s alibi or hammer or toy” (222). Just as *Beloved* last presents Denver strongly walking down the street, outside of 124 Bluestone and engaging with society, Felice is also last seen walking down the street, following her own “tempo” and rhythm as she makes her way through the city; she is defining the space around herself. Alice moves away from the city, but Joe and Violet are thriving

on their own terms. They have integrated themselves back into their small social circle and, most importantly, into their relationship. At the very end of *Jazz*, the narrator draws the audience into her make-believe world, implicating the audience—whether a reader or a listener—in her authoring project. She commands, “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). The story is, ultimately, a collaborative effort between the author, her subjects, and the audience. The story is both profoundly classical in its rhetorical implications and profoundly contemporary in its historical ones.

Yet here, at the end of *Jazz*, Morrison poses an interesting question about what it means to author a story about the past and therefore to author the past itself. The narrator admits that she was “so sure” “[t]hat 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,” but her characters “danced and walked all over” her in retaliation (220). This is a thought-provoking quote in a book written by a woman who has basically devoted herself to a literary re-evaluation of that “abused record” for the last forty years. With this quote, Morrison invokes the complicated problematic she articulates at the end of *Beloved*: Is this a story to pass *on*? To tell others? Or to pass *over*, to leave alone? With *Jazz*, Morrison is still struggling with the best way to integrate this narrative of the past into the national historical record. She is attempting to avoid harmful reiterations of trauma that actually warps the story itself rather revealing and uncovering the trauma at the heart of that past. As an author, Morrison appears to want escape this obsessive focus, to yield to the jazz-like energy of

language that provides a forward-moving, future-focused momentum, but *Jazz* as a text is ambivalent about such escape. And this ambivalence is only emphasized by the final novel in the trilogy, *Paradise*, which explicitly takes up the way a too-often repeated historical record can inflict injury on the story itself.

Paradise and “The controlling story”

The last book in the trilogy, *Paradise*, launches the trilogy into the contemporary era. It ends in 1976, 100 years after *Beloved* and 50 years after *Jazz*. It was published in 1997, ten years after *Beloved* and five years after *Jazz* and picks up several thematic strains that appear in both *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Like those two novels, *Paradise* is interested in how controlling cultural narratives get constructed, memorialized, and passed on through generations, and how those narratives suppress the stories and histories of those without power—the “throwaway people” in a society. It is also constructed around a central act of violence: the murder of several women in an isolated former convent by an all-male posse from a nearby town. Like *Jazz*, this murder opens the novel, and the rest of novel explores the how and the why of it. *Paradise* also takes up issues of violence against women, exploring the many forms this violence takes: physical, emotional, cultural, and historical. This last novel departs from the previous two, however, in that the agents of oppression in the text are black men, themselves refugees from oppression. Its narrative strategies are also more straightforward and less formally experimental than those of *Beloved* or *Jazz*. While it does go back-and-forth in time, the oclusions that mark *Beloved* and the narrative instability that saturate *Jazz* are either not as prevalent or absent altogether. *Paradise* explicitly takes up several powerful American myths in way that *Beloved*

and *Jazz* do not; its narrative is revisionist in that it attempts to refract the idea of a pastoral “paradise” through a black experience of it.

Paradise is set in rural Oklahoma, and it examines the inhabitants of an all-black town named Ruby and their relationship to the women who live in a former convent on the outskirts of town. The town is largely populated by the descendents of 15 families who first came to Oklahoma in 1890, attracted to the then-territory by an advertisement in an African-American paper to “ ‘Come Prepared or Not at All’ ” (16, 13).⁶³ In an act they came to name the “Disallowing” (189), the 15 families were initially turned away from a succession of all-black towns because they were deemed not light-skinned enough (195). After the Disallowing, the families finally founded Haven, a town that survived until 1949, when it threatened to collapse in the face of mid-twentieth century Jim Crow America (16), the depression and war. The descendents of the original 15 families, led by the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, took the town’s inhabitants “deeper into Oklahoma” and founded Ruby, a town named after the Morgans’ dead sister. Ruby is the closest town to the Convent. The Convent stands in stark contrast to the tightly-knit, insular Ruby; though once populated by nuns who inculcated Arapaho girls with the tenets of Christianity and western civilization (4), by the time the novel opens, it is home to a group of women who rotate in and out of it, nursing their myriad physical and psychological injuries. These women are liminal members of society, holding on to their existence in a culture that does not care if they exist or not. Like Sethe and Amy in *Beloved*, conventional society, as represented by patriarchal Ruby, come to think of the

⁶³ Morrison takes this quote directly from the historical record; it appeared in the *Langston City Herald* from 1891 to 1892 (Peterson 90).

Convent women as “detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door” (4).

Ruby and the Convent are contrasting chronotopes, which ultimately become mutually threatening. Ruby is a town controlled by the past: the Disallowing and all the memorials (real and imagined) the town has built to commemorate this foundational story. It is a town trying hard to ignore the present (Vietnam, the Civil Rights movements, the 1970’s in general) and reify traditional social roles for its inhabitants, which results in women treading a very narrow path in order to conform to conventional standards of femininity. The Convent, on the other hand, represents a sort of suspended timelessness, akin to 124 Bluestone in the Part Two of *Beloved*, but more beneficial in its effects. It offers a place where visitors—largely women—can step out of time and, as one character says, “‘collect’” themselves and think things through, without being bothered (176). While the chronotopicity of the convent also enables its inhabitants to avoid what should be confronted, it generally provides respite from dangerous ideas of the past and present, even for down-on-their-luck Ruby denizens, who sometimes find themselves there.

Like *Jazz*, *Paradise* opens with murder: the violent confrontation between the men folk of Ruby and the women of the Convent. “They shoot the white girl first” (3) is the first line of the novel; the rest of the novel goes back and forth in time as it traces the reasons behind the growing tension between the Ruby men and the Convent women. The novel is divided into sections, each labeled with a female name that refers to a woman who is often, but not always, an inhabitant of the convent, taking solace in its “blessed malelessness” (177). At other times, the women of the section

titles are female inhabitants of Ruby or somehow connected to Ruby or the Convent. When *Paradise* ends, the novel has fully circled back to its beginning: with the male town leaders of Ruby shooting the white girl first before they shoot the other women.

Paradise is an appropriate capstone to Morrison's investigation into how histories are authored and integrated into American national consciousness. It takes on some substantial and well-known American mythologies, echoing Roth and McCarthy in its examination of the pastoral promise inherent to the concept of free and available space—what it means to “come prepared or not at all” to the vast open frontier. This pastoral dream that the 15 families and their descendents pursue provides one meaning of the “paradise” of Morrison's title. The novel also provides a generic counterpart to McCarthy's trilogy in that it is arguably a Western: it takes place in rural, isolated Oklahoma, and it's replete with scenes of townsfolk staring down strangers suspiciously in a deserted street (121 – 123) and men who are comfortable making “friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns” as they hunt their prey (4). Finally, the novel re-enacts the Puritans' pilgrimage from Europe to America, only this time the pilgrims are black, the freedom they seek is racial, and their migration is intra-national, not international. Like the Puritans, the 15 families perceive their destiny in distinctly biblical terms, and their attempt to found a Christian paradise for themselves and their families provides yet another meaning for the title of the novel. Indeed, their attitude to first Haven and then Ruby mirrors that of Robert Beverley's early eighteenth century account of English explorers' first encounter with the New World: “[...] Paradise it self seem'd to be there, in its first Native luster” (qtd. in Marx 76). The apotheosis of *Paradise*'s similarities to the

Puritan saga is the Puritan-like witch hunt that the Ruby men re-enact when they attack the Convent women. In the eyes of the male leaders of Ruby, these women morph from “[b]itches” to something far more dangerous: “witches” (276).

In Morrison’s hands, these mythologies are funneled through the African-American experience of them, ultimately producing a syncretic version of these well-known and foundational national narratives. The idea of free and available space inherent to the concept of the pastoral, the Western, and the Pilgrimage myths becomes, in the eyes of *Paradise’s* black pilgrims, “Out There,” a “space, once beckoning and free” that “became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose [...] where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled” (16). In Morrison’s conceptual geography, the beckoning space of freedom must integrate the harsh constraints of race-based violence and abrogation. This re-imagining of national origin myths points to another meaning for the title of the novel, which is the United States itself—a nation whose sense of exceptionalism is deeply rooted in a cherished idea of itself as a New World paradise, full of boundless opportunity and freedoms. One of *Paradise’s* primary accomplishments, then, is to revise these myths to accommodate a black experience of them, which essentially means reconciling oppositional experiences of the same idealized pastoral space, and then to reveal such syncretism as existing at the hidden heart of these national narratives. *Paradise* does not merely present an African-American iteration of these foundational myths; it posits African-Americans as original participants in this myth-making.⁶⁴ The novel is

⁶⁴ In her slim monograph, *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison extensively discusses the black presence operating at the heart of white representations within American literature.

not a re-imagining, but a merely a more capacious imagining; the idealized pastoral space that frees and liberates has always been an admixture of opposing forces, conceptions, and experiences. Morrison's *Paradise* may ultimately be a more accurate version of an American "paradise," with its violence, racism, misogyny, and a predatory "Out There" mixed with the opportunities, liberation, and freedoms so commonly ascribed to that space.

The novel's conceptualization of these national narratives brings up questions about what Morrison calls the "controlling story" (13): the narrative that dictates a society's understanding of itself, its history, and its motivations. The controlling stories that Morrison's trilogy confronts as a whole are quite substantial in nature; they are historical narratives that control our understanding of American identity and what constitutes U.S. national experiences. *Paradise* provides microcosmic examples of such narratives and how those who control them can distort them and use them as bludgeons to police the boundaries of social behaviors. The controlling story in the novel is the great Disallowing, the "story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendents could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). The male leaders of Ruby, who have traditionally controlled this story, seek to codify their power over the town's foundational narrative in all the pulpits and public spaces. The concrete symbol (almost literally) of this story is the town's Oven, a huge brick and stone structure centrally located in the public square and historically a gathering place for the town's inhabitants. The "Old Fathers" (6) had affixed a large iron plate to the Oven with an inscription on it that now reads only "the Furrow of His Brow" (86), a fragment of the original and once grammatically complete phrase. The arguments

over what the inscription should say—and how Ruby townfolk should understand it—provide many heated debates within the novel (6 – 7). Of course, the arguments are really about the intent of founding fathers, and whether the dictates of such men can be understood to be as unalterable as “words of beaten iron” (99) or whether there is freedom re-interpret language whose very nature has changed with the passage of time.

The trilogy clearly comes down on the side of allowing living people to re-interpret the foundational texts of their society in response to their changing understanding of themselves, their history, and their social order. This is the “openness” inherent to the trilogy’s representation of a historical totality: allowing fresh forces to open up and re-configure the historical record in order to accommodate new understandings of “what happened.” Yet *Paradise* suggests that the social and political interests that are invested in these texts are powerfully entrenched, and that these interests interpret the texts themselves as fixed and iron-like in their unalterability. The texts serve the dominant social order, and altering the texts would alter the social order, potentially destabilizing conventional power structure. In the novel, these interests are inherently patriarchal and conservative, invested in maintaining masculine authority and a pure masculine lineage, unsullied by racial outsiders, black, white, red, or yellow—essentially any other color than the deep “blue-black” of the founding families (193). Deacon and Steward Morgan, the identical twins who spearheaded the founding of Ruby, are the embodiment of this type of authority, but they are abetted by the town’s power structure: two of three ministers, and other descendents of the original 15 families. Deek and Steward also

represent corporate interests in Ruby, such as they are: they own the bank and therefore they own the money and the capital that power the town, and, as such, a large portion of the town's citizens are somehow indebted to them. They work to keep out contemporary American culture from the borders of Ruby, and this meant everything from the fashion and music to the protests of the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War. However, Ruby is also a town, isolated though it may be, in the U.S. in the mid-1970s; there is only so much it can successfully escape. When the novel opens, change and unrest are beginning to percolate through the town's well-guarded borders, which compel Deek, Steward, and the rest of the town's male leaders to identify an external source for the town's agitation because they refuse to believe that Ruby itself is somehow the source of this contamination. They decide that the "unholy" Convent women (297), who represent female force and authority that the men could not control, are responsible for Ruby's vitiated state.

The first section of the novel, which portrays the witch-hunt massacre at the Convent, is titled *Ruby*, after the town and the woman, Ruby Morgan, for whom the town is named. As with *Jazz*, this novel plunges headfirst into its denouement, and then spends much of the remaining narrative describing the forces that lead up to that fatal act. Yet again, a violent act against defenseless women provides the opening act to a novel in the trilogy. As the trilogy has unfolded, violence against women has increasingly occupied a primary place in these historical re-tellings, marking a group of women, "throwaway people," whose stories are particularly vulnerable to violent eradication. These are the people who, to borrow Roth's phrase, Morrison immediately lifts onto the stage as an author—they are the people whose stories she is

attempting to excavate out from under the weight of the controlling narrative. This section gives a brief précis of the major actors in this killing spree, their own particular history as founders of an all-black town, as well as announcing that one of the women shot was white, though the novel never clarifies who that is. Such racial indeterminacy marks race as both vitally important—it is what clearly identifies the first victim and therefore it is worth noting—and ultimately inconsequential to the larger forces at work in the novel.⁶⁵

The novel then begins to move back-and-forth in time, telling the stories of the women who came to end up at the Convent on that day and of the townspeople who also had connections to the Convent. This non-linear chronology, a favorite tool of Morrison's, structures all three novels in the trilogy. Using murder as the opening gambit directly references the beginning of *Jazz*, and the mysterious, never-identified "whitegirl" echoes the layers of mysteries gestured to at the beginning of *Beloved* (e.g., the baby ghost). *Paradise*, however, is then divided up into multiple sections, each labeled with the name of woman: Ruby, Mavis, Grace, etc. The stories of these women are told straightforwardly, but their stories come together to create the overarching story of the novel.

There were five women at the Convent the day the men arrive to kill them: Mavis, Gigi (born Grace), Seneca, Pallas, and Connie. Connie is short for Consolata, and she is the oldest of the women and the one with the strongest connection to the nuns who used to run the Convent as a school. The Mother Superior, or just "Mother"

⁶⁵ Morrison actually uses racial indeterminacy as a theme in and of itself in her short story *Recitatif*. In this story, she sets up two main characters, a white woman and a black woman, though she never identifies which woman is white and which is black. The story thereby interrogates ideas about race as a determining signifier of identity in American society and raises questions about the importance of class, gender, and other constructs in identity formation.

as Connie comes to call her, literally picked up the orphan girl Consolata off the streets of Portugal and brought the girl back with her to Oklahoma (223). The “not white” (223) Connie easily joined the other “not white” Native American girls at the school, only, unlike them, she never left; she stayed as the school slowly shut down and through Mother’s last, lingering illness. During her time as first a student, then a caretaker, and finally the sole proprietor of the house, Connie discovers that she has a gift: she could “step in” to dead and dying people and bring them back to life (289). This gift marks Connie as someone with easy access to a healing, spiritual realm, and it’s unsurprising when she begins to welcome the lost and wandering women who somehow find their way to the Convent. Mavis is the first to appear, then Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas arrive in succession.

Like *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* ensures all these women’s stories are fully told, though society considers these women to be, literally, trash that keeps re-appearing even after it has been thrown out (4). They and their stories exist as waste products of the controlling, dominant narrative, which, as Morrison argues throughout the trilogy, must continually expel these stories in order to safely maintain the sanctity of its own borders and sense of purity. *Paradise* thus continues one of the trilogy’s major projects, which is to integrate the stories of women like Connie and Mavis into national, cultural, and social narratives. Their stories are contrasted with the origin stories of first Haven and then Ruby, and the men with “total memor[ies]” (107) who think they own those narratives.

Mavis’s story is the first to get told after the initial section. She accidentally kills her infant twins, Merle and Pearle, by leaving them in a hot car, and then walks

out on her three other children and her alcoholic, abusive husband early one morning in her husband's mint green Cadillac. She never returns, though the ghosts of Merle and Pearle haunt the convent during her time there, much like that of the Crawling Already? baby girl. Gigi's story comes after Mavis's. While Mavis is maternal and solicitous of Connie and has the nicer manners of someone who always aspired to more solid membership in the middle class, Gigi is independent, confrontational, and overtly sexual. She gets lost on her way to meet a quasi-boyfriend at a rock in the Arizona desert that looks like a "man and woman fucking forever" (63).

Unsurprisingly, neither the rock nor the boyfriend are where they're supposed to be. Gigi, without any connections in the world except for an elderly grandfather and a jailed father, ends up staying at the Convent as well. Seneca arrives after Gigi, bearing her own baggage—specifically, a sister (who may have actually been her mother) who abandoned her when she was young. Seneca finds herself at the Convent after a string of semi-abusive foster homes and a paid stint as a rich woman's sexual toy; she cuts herself in response to these traumas (261). Pallas is the last inhabitant of the Convent to arrive there. Sixteen years old and pregnant, she is on the run from bad decisions (a boyfriend who was with her for her money) and divorced parents who are at best distracted and at most disinterested, particularly her self-centered artist mother who steals said boyfriend.

These women, then, are all without husbands, fathers, or other male protectors who would give them legitimacy in the eyes of patriarchal Ruby society. They are also un-mothered (Mavis) and improperly mothered (Pallas), and, in Gigi's case, completely sexual for purposes other than reproduction. They have repudiated the

social structures that hold the women of Ruby in place and control the parameters of their behavior—family, marriage, and motherhood. They are, therefore, threatening the conservative social contracts to which Ruby has acceded in exchange for safety, isolation, and security. This makes the women vulnerable to rampant speculation in the town: they are “fornicators at the least, abortionists at the most” (297), they are a “brothel” (114), and they “snatch” god-fearing wives and mothers off the road (130).

Yet the stories of these women are interwoven with the stories of the inhabitants of Ruby, both thematically and within the narrative structure of the novel. Their stories are, then, interdependent and cannot be separated; the story of Ruby cannot exist without the story of the Convent, and the story of the Convent cannot exist without that of Ruby. The Convent becomes the repository for Ruby’s suppressed fears and expelled social waste: the town cannot have purity without adultery and fornication, righteousness without sin. So, as the stories unfold about the Convent women, so also does the story unfold about Ruby. And this story does not flatter the town’s vision of itself as a paradise. Instead, it emphasizes the disservice the town has done to its inhabitants, particularly its woman, in the social bargain it made with itself when it decided to totally cut itself from contemporary American life. The woman of Ruby labored under an ideal vision of femininity predicated on being good wives, mothers, and housekeepers, and their sexuality was reserved for reproductive purposes only—and *that* was only appropriate within marriage. Because to be a woman in Ruby meant adhering to such a narrow, suffocating path, Ruby women often found themselves slipping off this path, and when that happened, they want to the Convent:

For more than twenty years [they went] [b]ack and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost [...] women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. (270)

Thus the Convent became an outlet for the flawed and damaged versions of femininity that Ruby, with its narrow strictures on feminine identity, perforce produced.

There are Ruby women who understand the social purpose that the Convent served, but these women themselves exist on the social boundaries of the town or are practically outcasts altogether. The young woman Billie Delia is erroneously labeled as “the fastest girl in town” (59) due to her impure racial background (her grandmother was racially mixed) and a flashing incident that occurred when she was three years old (197, 151). She points Pallas to the Convent when the girl appears at the clinic where she works (176). Lone DuPres, a midwife and therefore a repository of female knowledge, also exists on the borders of Ruby society, and sounds the alarm about the men who plan to go off to the Convent with “guns with sights on them” (281). Pat Best, Billie Delia’s mother and therefore a product of “racial tampering” herself (197), figures out why the Convent women are so threatening. She is working on a genealogy on the Ruby families, and she realizes that “[u]nadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby [...] In that case [...] everything that worries them must come from women” (217). The only way to ensure that pure racial genes are perpetuated through the generations is to ensure the mothers are racially pure themselves—and therefore

female sexuality must be controlled so that they mate with the appropriate people.

This social interdependence extends to the men of Ruby as well, who access the Convent for services the town refuses to provide or denies are necessary. Thus the Convent, while primarily a repository for women who are socially damaged, also becomes a sanctuary for aberrant masculinity. Menus Jury, an alcoholic Vietnam veteran and member of one of the foundational “8-rock” families, dries out for a few weeks at the Convent (277); thin-skinned, immature K.D., the Morgan twins’ nephew and only surviving male heir, freely takes advantage of Gigi’s proffered sexuality and they carry on a tumultuous affair over a period of years (114); finally, Steward Morgan himself actually had an affair with Connie back in the early 1950’s, risking everything—his town, his family, his reputation—for her (223). Sex, substance abuse, adultery: all of these activities are displaced onto the Convent so that Ruby remains pure and uncontaminated, and so that the men of Ruby can convince themselves that they are pure and uncontaminated as well.

The Convent, then, is a necessary site of projection for the town of Ruby. Yet, as unrest in Ruby gathers force and momentum—there’s graffiti on the Oven, violence between brothers, children punching their parents, and VD shots are “common” (11)—the Convent, and the women who live there, are blamed. The Convent women represent what the town cannot control: sexuality, violence, and collapsing family units. The controlling story that dictates the town’s purpose, motivations, and identity disallows revisions by its very nature, and the foundational texts, while worn, are still present. This history continues to pass itself off as iron-

bound truth, completely logocentric in nature; the language of the controlling story accurately captures the truth of the town's external reality. Ruby cannot re-imagine itself or its history; thus, like Sethe in *Beloved*, it has a hard time imagining a future (161)—or even a present that more thoroughly reflects the reality of American society in 1976.

Yet, even as town languishes in a tautological vision of its holy and right nature, the Convent women attempt to re-incorporate their own histories into themselves and therefore renew their own stories. Towards the end of the novel, the women attempt to confront their own past traumas. Connie leads the deep investigation into their histories, urging them to meet themselves in the Convent's cellar, where they lie down, naked, surrounded by lit candles and draw silhouettes around their prone bodies (262 - 263). Over the course of months, "the stories rose in that place" as the women worked to integrate their painful pasts into their presents lives, and the chalked silhouettes on the cellar floor become more alive to them than their moving bodies (265). At the end of this months-long transformative process, "unlike some people of Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266).

However, the Convent women are still hunted. Echoing the hunters and prey that populate the landscape of *Jazz*, the men of Ruby decide to hunt the women of the Convent in an attempt to kill off the source of the impure elements saturating Ruby. Which they do, successfully—in that their killing spree forever damages their own righteous sense of purpose: "How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (292). Yet the men—and the town—are lucky in the end. Though they manage to shoot all the women, there are no bodies to

bury or to explain away to unwelcome white law authorities; the women have all disappeared, along with Mavis's large Cadillac. The reason for the disappearing bodies is never made clear. Connie, who stepped in to save the white woman shot first (289), may have stepped in to save all of them—including herself. However, this disappearing act metaphorically emphasizes the women's resilience and their refusal to yield to the male-perpetrated violence that has saturated their lives. While the women escape the ravages of the killing spree, a "seismic change" occurs in Ruby as its inhabitants attempt to wrestle with the consequences of its self-perpetuated violence (296). As one reverend wonders to himself, "How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (292), a statement that could be as easily applied to the U.S. itself as it could to the town of Ruby.

At the end of *Paradise*, the Convent women are roaming free and preparing for battle, dressed in fatigues and packing guns (310). They have responded to the battle cry of the Convent attack, and they are prepared to confront whatever violence they find and defend themselves against whoever attacks them. In their assertive, aggressive posture, they are fulfilling Billie Delia's wish for them, for she "hoped with all her heart the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors – but out there" (308). They are empowered soldiers whose assertive, aggressive posture calls to mind the well-known last lines of Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air."

Conclusion: Telling, Refining, and Telling Again

Morrison's trilogy begins with a haunting; it ends with a declaration of war.

This is perhaps the best response to a past that haunts and shapes our present consciousness: to forcefully confront it. Her interest in excavating the buried past with precision and care echoes the speaker of Adrienne Rich's poem, *Diving into the Wreck*:

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail...
We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which our names do not appear.

Adrienne Rich (1929 - 2012) and Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963) were contemporaries of Toni Morrison (b. 1931), and the messages of *Lady Lazarus* and *Diving into the Wreck* resonate with Morrison's project. The project of her trilogy is ultimately one of excavation and resurrection—of history, of female power and vitality, and of the “book of myths in which our names do not appear.” The three novels in the trilogy move from paralysis to activation (or mobilization), with an

exhortation at the mid-point to participate in construction of history, the making and remaking of it. The future, the trilogy argues, is young, female and colored: Denver, Felice, Billie Delia, Gigi and Seneca. And these women are prepared for armed conflict. This is a stark contrast to the end of McCarthy's trilogy, with elderly, white, and weak Billy Parham trying to make a claim for relevance at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The architectonics of Morrison's trilogy are defined by the primary chronotopes in each of the three novels: the domestic, the urban, and the rural. By making these three units of time-space contiguous with each other, the trilogy is presenting a totality of African-American experience that mitigates the occluded spaces of the repressed past with the rhythm and tempo of narrative and storytelling, the music that leads forward into the future. The claustrophobia of the haunted domestic space in *Beloved* is mediated by its juxtaposition to *Jazz*, where people train-dance into the City, thinking future thoughts. History is loosed from the paralyzing intimacy of 124 Bluestone and explodes outward into a complex, chaotic urban landscape, full of music and sound. *Paradise* then circles back to the paralysis of the intimate space with the town of Ruby, but Ruby is counterbalanced by the chaotic "no-time" of the Convent, with its messy women and their messy housekeeping practices that are barely dictated by the natural rhythms of the day, much less the rhythms of conventional society or the practices associated with conventional womanhood. In the end, the Convent gives these women the power to resurrect themselves, something that Sethe, at the end of *Beloved*, is incapable of doing without help. Mapping African-American history, the trilogy argues, is an iterative process: we must keep

coming back and through the coordinates of this history in order to gain some sense of its totality. This history is not only a strangled, repressed past that comes back to haunt us, as it does it in *Beloved*; it is also the joy of future as represented by the music of language and the power gained from confronting our own stories. At the end of the twentieth century, the trilogy argues that we must continue to reckon with our repressed national past, but also gain power from that reckoning.

Conclusion: Inventing Histories

As Hayden White reminds us, historical narratives are “as much invented as found.” The trilogies in this study use the trilogy form in order to investigate how histories get invented, and they come to provocative conclusions. At the end of the twentieth century, all three trilogies argue that national history can be adaptively represented through the spaces that have deeply embedded themselves in American cultural imagination: the border, the pastoral, the urban northeast and the southern rural. McCarthy, Roth, and Morrison use the trilogy form to configure—to invent—this history as a problem of scale: identifying coordinates and providing a way to cognitively map it so that we can gain a sense of the totality of the past and the epic scale of historical narratives. In *The Border Trilogy*, this is achieved through the grand geography of U.S. and Mexico borderlands, the existential preoccupations of its storytellers, and the desire to capture the boundary edge of the new millennium, 2001, in a novel that was published in 1998. In the *American Trilogy*, the epic resides in the deep exploration of mythic American themes: the pastoral space, the promise and limitations of self-invention, the fallacy of American “innocence.” These themes are mapped onto the landscape of New Jersey and embodied by a variety of masculine figures, from the successful Jewish businessman to the African-American classics professor who has passed for Jewish most of his adult life. In the *Love Trilogy*, this epic is represented by the breadth of chronological time and the depth of its excavation of African-American historical events, narratives, and narrative processes.

Morrison foretells of armed black women, rising up in the face of the real and metaphorical violence they have experienced.

The sense of an ending provided by each of the trilogies reconfigures conventional options for closure. In McCarthy's trilogy, the end is really an ending in the way that we conventionally understand the term—the national mythos that governed U.S. interaction with American border spaces is dying. Old ways of life are ceasing, the century is gone, a particular type of masculine figure and lifestyle, not suited for the 21st century, is disappearing. These endings, however, are largely overdetermined, given that *The Border Trilogy* is constantly prefiguring the apocalypse of western civilization (emphasis on the “Western”) at the end of each novel. Indeed, after 9/11, McCarthy launches into full apocalyptic mode with *The Road*, published in 2006. In a post-9/11 world, the national frontier was merely moved to different places, displaced onto middle eastern locations—Iraq, Afghanistan. Roth's trilogy ends where *The Great Gatsby* ends, on the green breast of the new world, with a nation rowing ceaselessly into the past as it attempts, yet again, to enter to the future. Ultimately, his trilogy envisions a cyclical re-engagement with these national myths, one that will consistently land us in the same location over and over again. His ending, then, is just the end of another revolution in this cycle. Roth heeded a call, at the end of the century, to re-engage and re-assess these myths, to attempt to dismantle them, only to find out that that they will survive, in one way or another, into the new millennium. Zuckerman, however, is successfully reborn, and lives on for another novel, *Exit Ghost* (2007). Morrison's trilogy ends with armed women, ready to march into war. They are “tomorrow's news.” While McCarthy's trilogy signifies the

death of the white male warrior, Morrison's signifies the birth of the colored woman warrior. What dies in her trilogy is the controlling story, the hegemonic historical narrative that erased, wrote over, and otherwise silenced the African-American experience. It is a re-birth of the buried, supposedly dead past. McCarthy's trilogy, then, signifies death and annihilating destruction; Morrison's, re-birth and re-generation; Roth's, another cycle in the well-worn treads of our national mythology. All three end up in different locations and envision different "endings"—and beginnings. Their trilogies manifest a persistent refiguration of the national story.

The processes of historical narrativization that each trilogy articulates vary in their effects. The "stories" immanent in history, as Hayden White reminds us, are sense-making strategies, and that is precisely what each of these trilogies is attempting to do. *The Border Trilogy* is interested in examining the stories that dictate existential order—those authoritative narratives that structure our sense of where the world begins and ends. In a place as unstructured and undefined as the U.S./Mexico border, these stories take on added importance because they give shape to world that, to McCarthy's protagonists, does not make sense. Roth's *American Trilogy* focuses more precisely on the novelist's role in imagining historical events, and investigates the epistemological problems inherent in reconstructing the past from its textual traces. Zuckerman proves once again to be an articulate medium for a meta-analysis about the constructs of fictionality. Finally, Morrison's trilogy investigates the method by which African-American narratives are excavated out from under the weight of the controlling story. The trilogy portrays how these histories and stories

are authored, understood, and even the mythology they can acquire as counter-narratives.

What, then, does the form of the trilogy amount to in the hands of these authors at the end of the twentieth century? It becomes an argument for space, scale, and complexity; the whole of each trilogy is more than its parts. The individual novels that make up each of the trilogies in this study, as good as they are, cannot alone convey the complex process of narrativizing the past that the trilogies as a whole can. To narratively map this past in responsible way requires multiple coordinates, and that is what the trilogy form offers. The overall effect adds layers of complexity and diffuses the historical project over the landscape of three novels, expanding and expounding on it, and, importantly, re-contextualizing the argument of each individual novel in context of the trilogy as a whole.

The Border Trilogy is not only a re-telling of the Western, which *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* can indicate, it is also an examination of how stories shape and mold the reality of the border space. When all three novels are taken together, the motifs of the Western are slotted alongside the existential preoccupations of the storytellers in *The Crossing*, and take their place as one way, among many, to narrativize the border space. The American Trilogy is about radical ideology and the possibilities and limitations of self-invention, but it is also about the power of literature, literary inquiry, and storytelling—and those themes only become evident when all three novels are read together. *I Married a Communist*, which is often considered the weakest of the three novels, is where those themes are emphasized, and they then reverberate through *American Pastoral* and *The Human*

Stain. Finally, the Love Trilogy proves that the African-American experience of the past is not only about *Beloved*; is not only marked by a haunting paralysis and a distinct ambivalence about what should be passed on to future generations. This experience also comprises the forward-looking momentum of the city and energy of empowered women, armed for the necessary battles of the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries. In the end, then, the trilogies offer up three ways of inventing this history at the end of the century—and they also offer their own “sense of an ending.”

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