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AFRICANIZING THE TERRITORY: THE HISTORY, MEMORY AND CONTEMPORARY IMAGINATION OF BLACK FRONTIER SETTLEMENTS IN THE OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

A Dissertation Presented

by

CATHERINE LYNN ADAMS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SEPTEMBER 2010

DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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DEDICATION

For my loving mother, my storytelling grandmother and my history-teaching father

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I would like to thank Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, a Master Teacher, for his thoughtful, patient guidance and nurturing. Thanks are also due to Robert Paul Wolff for all of his support and encouragement before and after his retirement. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Yemisi Jimoh and the members of my committee, James Smethurst, Steven C. Tracy and John Higginson, for their scholarly contributions and willingness to serve.

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANIZING THE TERRITORY: THE HISTORY, MEMORY AND CONTEMPORARY IMAGINATION OF BLACK FRONTIER SETTLEMENTS IN THE OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

SEPTEMBER 2010

CATHERINE LYNN ADAMS, B.A., JOHNSON C. SMITH UNIVERSITY

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This dissertation articulates the ways in which black (e)migration to the territorial frontier challenges the master frontier narratives as well as African American migration narratives, and to capture how black frontier settlers and settlements are represented in three contemporary novels. I explore through the lens of cultural geography the racialized landscapes of the real and symbolic American South and the real, symbolic and imaginary black territorial frontier. Borrowing perspectives from cultural and critical race studies, I aim to show the theoretical and practical significance of contemporary literary representations of an almost forgotten historical past.

Chapter I traces the sites of history, memory and imagination in migration and frontier narratives of enslaved and newly freed black people in the Oklahoma Territory. Chapter II addresses an oppositional narrative of masculinity in frontier narratives

depicted in Guy Johnson's *Standing at the Scratch Line*. Chapter III examines how the black frontier landscape can be created and recreated across three generations who endure racial threats, violence and the razing of Greenwood during the Tulsa Riot of 1921 in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Magic City*. Chapter IV scrutinizes the construction of black frontier subjects and exclusive black communities in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*.

My dissertation seeks to add to and expand the literary studies of migration and frontier narratives, taking into account two popular novels alongside a more academically recognized novel. The selected novels mobilize very different resources, but collectively offer insights into black frontier identities and settlements as sites of a past, present and future African American collective consciousness.

KEYWORDS: migration, frontier, cultural landscapes, collective consciousness

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The title of this dissertation, "Africanizing the Territory: The History, Memory and Contemporary Imagination of Black Frontier Settlements in the Oklahoma Territory," indicates the goal of my study: to articulate the ways in which black (e)migration to the territorial frontier challenges the master frontier narratives as well as African-American migration narratives, and in so doing illustrate how the history and memory of black frontier settlers and settlements are represented in contemporary African American novels.[1] I focus on the formation of black frontier communities and characters forged by self-segregation and racial exclusion. In addition, I explore through the lens of cultural geography how narratives produce identities by constructing symbolic and imagined racialized landscapes of the American South and the territorial frontier. Using perspectives provided by cultural and critical race studies, I intend to examine the theoretical and practical significance of contemporary literary representations of an almost forgotten historical past.[2]

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[1] Throughout this study, I use the terms "emigrants" and "emigration" to address people and events related to occurrences in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories during the nineteenth century and first few years of the twentieth century. Similarly, I use "migrants" and "migration" to address people and events related to occurrences after statehood in 1907.

[2] Throughout this study "black" is the more commonly used word for the racial category of people of African descent in America—especially the descendants of people who were enslaved in the American South. However, I recognize, as do scholars of critical race theory, that "race" is socially, politically, and even geographically constructed.

This introduction sets forth a theoretical framework by tracing the sites of history, memory and imagination in migration and frontier narratives of enslaved and newly freed black people in the Oklahoma Territory. Chapter Two, entitled, "'Where in this Land Can a Black Man Go and Be Free?': Masculinity in a Black Frontier Town in Guy Johnson's *Standing at the Scratch Line*," interrogates the construction of black masculine subjectivity as a counter or oppositional narrative to the myth of the frontier used to justify power gained by way of racism. Chapter Three, entitled "'A Landscape Big Enough to Hold Dreams': Greenwood Before, During and After the Riot of 1921 in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Magic City*," examines how the black frontier landscape can be created and recreated across three generations all while enduring racial threats, violence and the razing of Greenwood. Finally, Chapter Four, entitled "'Come Prepared or Not at All': Race, Gender and Isolation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," scrutinizes the construction of black frontier subjects and exclusive black communities along the territorial frontier.

In this study, I call into question the traditional study of African American migration narratives, which has been preoccupied with black migrants in the geographical contexts of North and South, and the study of American and frontier literary narratives, which usually exclude black migrants and black communities. I assert that memory and history inform imagination resulting in fuller, more accessible stories of why some of the earliest black people traveled to the western frontier and what kinds of communities they built once there.

Each of the novels selected for this study—*Standing at the Scratch Line* (1998), *Magic City* (1997), and *Paradise* (1998)—is set in an imagined, all-black frontier community in a seemingly unlikely setting—Oklahoma. This setting is unlikely because the breadth and depth of the black presence in Oklahoma is no longer widely known save to historians of the African American experience and black Oklahomans. In many cases, these black Oklahomans are the descendants of black frontierspeople from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The early frontier inhabitants who emigrated from the American South prior to the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment became what Stephen Knadler calls "transnational figures" in the "borderland West" (118). They were no longer black Southerners and not yet Americans. These people of African descent forged new identities for themselves in majority black communities and towns on the territorial frontier as natives, freedmen, Sooners, homesteaders, promoters, founders, and powerbrokers. Their families remembered stories of these early black frontierspeople. Yet, the representation of their lives was limited and mostly non-existent in the African American and American literary traditions.[3] However, at the end of the twentieth century, black frontier settlements resurfaced in the African American imagination in the novels by Rhodes, Johnson and Morrison. Each of the named works of fiction reveals black frontier settlements in Oklahoma as a significant site of memory, history and imagination

[3] For discussions of autobiographical fugitive and frontier narratives set in the West (but not specifically in Oklahoma), see *Imagining the African American West* (2005) by Blake Allmendinger; *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (2005) by William Loren Katz; and *Remapping Citizenship and the Nation in African-American Literature* (2010) by Stephen Knadler.

in the collective consciousness of black people in Oklahoma and throughout the United States.

In the past three decades, scholars have given much attention to the intersection and interdependence between memory and history. In the 1980s, French historian, Pierre Nora, theorized about their relation and coined the term, *lieux de mémoire*, or site of memory:

> where memory crystallizes and secretes itself . . . at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (Nora 7)

In the 1990s, Nora's work became the framework for more than a dozen scholarly essays on African-American phenomena, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994) edited by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally. In the introduction, Fabre and O'Meally discuss how sites of memory, history, culture—and specifically literature—can work in concert with each other:

> For us African Americanists perhaps the most significant aspect of the idea of *lieux de mémoire* was its capacity to suggest new categories of sources for the historian: new sets of sometimes very difficult readings. We considered, for example, how to read certain dances, paintings, buildings, journals, and oral forms of expression. More than ever, we saw novels, poems, slave narratives, autobiographies, and oral testimonies as crucial parts of the historical record. These varied repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory. (9)

Additionally, by the end of the 1990s, in an essay titled "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison connects Nora's work to her own fiction. Morrison writes, "memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. . . . But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life. . . . Only the act of the imagination can help me" (191-192). Thus, we can look to imagination to reconstruct the previously unrecorded interior life of black migrants and settlers in Oklahoma, in conjunction with conventional historical records and remembrances.

Understanding the historical roots of black frontier settlements and their early inhabitants in the region is crucial to understanding the roots of the main characters and communities depicted in the three selected novels by Rhodes, Johnson and Morrison. The history of the settlements begins with two distinct waves of emigrants that began arriving prior to statehood in 1907. The first wave began with black westward emigration from Southern states to any one of the five frontier areas reassigned by the U.S. government to the Five Nation Indians. In fact, this little-known, earlier emigration was intertwined with the better known "Trail of Tears." For many black emigrants during the first wave, journeying westward with the Five Nation Indians along the "Trail of Tears" was not of their choosing. According to Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (1998), "The Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole entered the region after the Indian removal treaties of the 1830s, and they brought slaves with them. Of the five hundred Indian nations that inhabited the United States, the Five Nations were virtually the only Indians holding

blacks in bondage" (62). The majority of Indians were not slaveholders, but the presence of thousands of enslaved black people firmly established an economy based on their labor. Together, the five Indian nations were second only to Texas in their numbers of enslaved people in the West.[4]

The lives of the enslaved on the frontier were similar to their lives in the American South. Their roles as workers involved skill and expertise in manual, agricultural, technological, service, transportation, and gendered divisions of labor. According to Taylor:

> Blacks cleared and improved land, split rails, built fences, plowed, planted and harvested cotton, tended livestock and cultivated vegetable, rice, and corn. Female slaves cooked, operated spinning wheels, cleaned, and cared for children. Male and female slaves produced tools, cotton and woolen cloth; knitted stockings, gloves, and scarves; and tanned hides for shoes and harnesses. Since the Indians had few mechanics, blacks, slave and free, often served as the artisans and blacksmiths. The wealthier Indians had slave coachmen, butlers, and maids. Black slaves were used as saltworks operatives, ferrymen, and stevedores, who loaded and unloaded steamships and flatboats. (66)

They also served as valued language interpreters and translators on the frontier, which was a "multiracial, multicultural, and multinational contact zone" (Knadler 2). Many members of the enslaved communities adopted the language, dress, diet, and other cultural practices of their respective Five Nation owners. The process of acculturation resulted in black frontier women and men born in the Indian nations referring to

[4] According to U.S. Census data reprinted by Taylor, the Black Population in Western States and Territory in 1860 included the following population numbers and total percentages: Texas, total population 604,215, total black population 182,921, total percentage of black population 30.3%; Indian Territory, total population 58,594, total black population 8,376, total percentage of black population 14.2% (76).

themselves as "natives." However, despite their assumed tribal affiliations, they labored, they resisted, and some rebelled against their owners—as they did in the American South.

The memories of this first wave of black emigrants are also informative. One hundred years after the removal treaties, the Oklahoma Writers' Project conducted oral history interviews with formerly enslaved Oklahomans. Once transcribed, those interviews made remembrances of enslavement and emigration to an Indian nation widely accessible through the state and national archives. Henry Clay, a formerly enslaved Oklahoman, was about 100 years old when a field worker interviewed him in 1937.[5] He told the interviewer he was born on a plantation in Jefferson County, North Carolina and "was home with my folks until I was about fifteen years old." Then Clay's owner sold him to Dyson Cheet, who moved to Louisiana. According to Clay: "Then he give me or will me to his boy Tom Cheet and he bring me to the Creek Nation" (Baker and Baker 79-80). Given Clay's advanced age at the time of the interview, this kind of memory and first-hand experience stands out among the more than 100 collected interviews.

Prior to the written records of black emigration to the frontier, enslaved men and women used the oral tradition to record their emigration experiences. For example, descendants who were born in the Indian nations recalled bits of emigration stories passed on to them from their parents. Rochelle Allred Ward was born in the old Cherokee Nation and recounted the circumstances that led to her father's relocation, "I want to tell

[5] See *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (1996) edited by T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker. In the introduction, Baker and Baker discuss previous publications that included some of the narratives, but none compiled as many as the 130 narratives found in their volume.

about paw; Jim he was named, and belong to Sarah Eaton, who must have stole him when he about eight or nine year old from his folks in Georgia and brought him out here, maybe to Fort Gibson near as he could tell" (445). Mary Lindsay, a Chickasaw Freedwoman, told an interviewer:

> "My mammy come out to the Indian country from Mississippi two years before I was born. She was the slave of a Chickasaw part-breed name Sobe Love. He was kinfolks of Mr. Benjamin Love, and Mr. Henry Love what bring two big bunches of the Chickasaws out from Mississippi to the Choctaw country when the Chickasaws sign up de treaty to leave Mississippi, and the whole Love family settle 'round on the Red River below Fort Washita. There whar I was born. (246)

Because of the oral and written intergeneration transmission of emigration stories, memories of being sold, willed, stolen, transported, and enslaved in the Indian nations are a part of the African American collective consciousness.

Some of the first wave black emigrants were freer than others. Black emigrants measured freedom by the ability to construct their own communities, commonly found within the Seminole nation more than in the adjacent nations. In his monograph, *The Seminole Freedmen: A History* (2007), Kevin Mulroy connects the frontier relationship between black emigrants and Seminoles to "the maroon context" previously developed between the two groups in Florida (xxii). Mulroy explains further, "Most blacks apparently began their relationship with Seminoles by living in an Indian town, as either a slave or free person. But once their numbers had grown sufficiently to support a community, the great majority moved off and formed separate maroon societies under African leadership." These Seminole maroon communities in both the South and the

West consisted of "enslaved Africans, tributary allies, and a smaller number of free nontributary blacks." Mulroy adds, "Though retaining a close relationship with Seminoles, all three classes of maroons became highly independent and autonomous, pursuing their own political and diplomatic agendas and their own economic, social, and cultural arrangements" (xxvi). These autonomous black native communities were precursors to the communities of native freedmen and women who became landowners during the postbellum period.

Initially, land ownership by black natives was the result of imposed reforms. According to Taylor's work on this subject, after emancipation, "The federal government reallocated land from Indians to the freedpeople, a crucial reform that it was unable or unwilling to require in the states of the former Confederacy. Each tribe was required to relinquish control of the sparsely settled portions of its lands west of the ninety-eighth meridian. This region [was] eventually called Oklahoma Territory" (114).[6] For those receiving land allotments in the region the new territory was now becoming a symbol of freedom that included the opportunity to own one's own land.

The WPA Oklahoma Narratives contain interviews with new landowners who shared their experiences with WPA field workers. Frances Banks told an interviewer,

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[6] Taylor writes further: "In October 1865 Congress appointed Brevet Major General John Sanborn special commissioner to investigate conditions among the freedpeople in Indian Territory. Sanborn visited every nation between November 1865 and April 1866. He reported to Congress that both the Indians and the freedpeople were eager for the ex-slaves to remain in the territory but 'upon a tract of country by themselves.' He urged that such a tract, 'large enough to give a square mile to every four persons,' be set aside and that it 'should be the most fertile in the territory as the freedmen are the principal producers.' Anticipating opposition from the nations, Sanborn called on the federal government to grant the land quickly and resolutely. "When tribes know this policy is determined upon by the government,' he argued, 'they will submit to it without any open resistance…and the freedmen will rejoice that…they have a prospect of a permanent home for themselves and their children.'" (114)

“After de War I was what you call a freedman. De Indians had to give all dey slaves forty acres of land. I'se allus lived on dis land which jines dat of Ole Master's and I'se never stayed away from it long at a time. I'se allus been willing to go an nuss de sick an 'flicted, but I allus come back home for a while” (28). Polly Colbert told her interviewer, “I am now living on de forty-acre farm dat de Government give me and it is just about three miles from my old home on Master Holmes Colbert's plantation where I lived when I was a slave” (86). In settling on allotments in new areas and, as in the cases of Banks and Colbert, in more familiar areas, black native landowners decided for themselves to make the Territory home.

Beginning with the opening of Indian lands for homesteading in the late 1880s, the second wave of black emigrants willingly chose to travel to the Territory. Like the Seminole maroons, non-native homesteaders sought independence and autonomy in the Territory. However, the desire for homesteading and self-determination were not the only factors that influenced black emigrants. Racial repression was also a factor. According to Cedric Robinson, “the most dramatic and terrifying instrument in the repression of Blacks was lynching” (105).[7] Robinson goes on to report: “lynching as defined narrowly (‘an illegal death at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of serving justice’) did not include the varied forms of terrorism (rape, beating, torture, mutilation, arson, threats)

[7] From *Black Movements in America*: “According to the Department of Records and Research at Tuskegee Institute, between 1882 and 1968 there were 4,743 cases of death by lynching in America, with the period between 1892 and 1902 recording the most activity. The largest totals were for the states of Mississippi (581), Georgia (531), and Texas (493). As a result of political indifference and moral abnegation, no federal agency amassed a complete record as that at Tuskegee, so there is no ‘official’ count. As exhaustive and meticulous researchers as the Tuskegee were over the eight decades, it can still be surmised that the actual number of lynchings was considerably higher. (105)

that completed the circle of horror drawn around Black men, women, and children" (105). For newly freed men and women, this "circle of horror" severely halted their hopes for social, political, and economic equality in communities where whites lived. Increasing incidents of violence led up to and coincided with black migrations to safer, separate spaces.

The post-Reconstruction mobility of black people resulted in mass migrations to the North and West and emigration to the Territory. Understandably, the Great Migration of more than one million black people to northern urban centers by 1940, usually overshadows (e)migration and settlement on the western frontier. When there is some mention of black western migration, scholars cite the Kansas Exodusters Movement far more often than emigration to the Territory.[8] Beginning in 1879, as many as 40,000 black migrants settled in Kansas and even founded the all-black town of Nicodemus. However, the search for collective black self-determination in the Territory led to the establishment of numerous black towns and settlements by over 100,000 migrants—more than double that of the Kansas movement. They founded and settled at least 30 all-black towns prior to Oklahoma statehood in 1907. Between 1886 and 1920, there were as many as 50 towns and settlements—more than any other territory or state in the United States. Thus, historians who study this phenomenon refer to it as the "All-Black Town Movement."[9] The preponderance of such experiments in self-reliance and self-governance distinguishes the All-Black Town Movement from the better-known black migration

[8] See Taylor, 147. See also Nell Irvin Painter's monograph, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction.* (1977).

[9] See Taylor, 148. See also Hannibal B. Johnson's *Acres of Aspiration*, 78.

movements. Although black towns and settlements existed and continue to exist across the country, these black communities are unique in African American history because of their concentrated numbers in the Territory.[10]

Oftentimes, (e)migration was only a temporary fix. Racial violence continued to be an ongoing threat against black separatist communities correlating with the successes of those communities. However, racial violence was not the only tactic used to thwart the successes of self-determining black communities. Ironically, as states throughout the country were institutionalizing forced racial segregation (popularly known as Jim Crow), black self-segregation was being mocked in white popular culture. In *Photography on the Color Line* (2004), Shawn Michelle Smith discusses the racist caricatures of the growing black middle class (and certainly the land and business owners in black towns) that ran in *Harper's Weekly*:

> Throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, *Harper's Weekly*, the premier national weekly newspaper, ran a series of cartoons and "Blackville" sketches that ridiculed an African American elite. Even as it increasingly condemned the extreme white supremacism of a violent and growing Ku Klux Klan in the post-Reconstruction years, *Harper's* contentedly depicted African Americans as incapable of effecting upward class mobility, as inherently unable to embody and perform class and cultural refinement. (80)

The "Blackville" sketches were drawn by Sol Eytinge Jun, and Smith credits the caricaturist with influencing "Thomas Worth's later Darktown Comics for the famous lithograph company Currier and Ives" (82). In a recent article published in the journal

[10] See also *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (1963) by William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease; *The Black Towns* (1979) by Norman L. Crockett; *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (2000) by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua.

Imprint, James Smethurst describes the Darktown series as "a group of at least several dozen caricatures of life in a black town" (18). Smethurst further explains:

> The most famous, or infamous, representations of African Americans among the Currier & Ives prints are unquestionably the 'Darktown Series,' caricatures that make no attempt at realism—though they certainly were intended, I argue, to have a political effect in the real world. These prints were the product of the late Reconstruction and immediate post-Reconstruction era. They allegedly depict life in a small all-black town somewhere outside the South—perhaps based on the towns that black migrants from the South established in the Great Plains and the Southwest, such as the Exodusters in Kansas, in the years immediately following the Compromise of 1877. (25)[11]

The existence and stereotypical content of these series is not surprising being totally consonant with the blackface racial parody prominent in the white media of the period. Their placement however, is revelatory and thought provoking. *Harper's Weekly* was an eminently respectable journal of American middle class cultural and political discourse. Currier & Ives was itself the dominant, iconic, most widely distributed, and influential instrument of American middlebrow consciousness and taste. It is almost impossible to exaggerate their importance in the formation of mainstream American consciousness. Their finely wrought, sentimental engravings of scenes of American life hung in millions of white American homes. Today they grace collections of Americana in American museums.

That two media entities of such high pretention and influence would undertake series portraying autonomous all-black townships suggest a more widespread awareness

[11] Smethurst, "Emancipation Day: Postbellum Visions of African Americans in Currier & Ives Prints," *Imprint*, 31:2, 2006.

of the phenomenon among the general population of the times than might have been expected. The stereotypical and parodic disparagement informing the portrayals is significant. But what does it mean? Is it nothing more than a casual expression of the then prevalent popular racism or does it bespeak more fundamental political motives? Was middle class America far more aware of, somehow threatened by and consequentially hostile to the very notion of autonomy or self-determination among newly freed blacks? In short, was this impulse and phenomenon among all people a more significant political issue of the times than conventional history would have us believe?

Black inhabitants in the Territory navigated a complex set of frontier relations between Native Americans, "native" African Americans and European Americans. Tribal affiliation, ancestry, social status, racial stereotypes, racial assimilation, and cultural assimilation were the wedge issues of the day. Black emigration during the Post-Reconstruction Era further complicated frontier relations. In *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907* (1996), Murray R. Wickett explains, "the exodus of African Americans to the territories created a backlash among white settlers and many mixed-blood Native Americans. Fearful of a massive influx of African Americans, they sought to enact laws, which would curtail the civil rights of blacks. By so doing, they hoped to discourage African American immigration" (13). The largely unsuccessful early enactments of legalized racial segregation in response to these inter- and intra-racial complications would eventually lead to threats of racial violence.

Whites commonly threatened racial violence following some economic or political advancement made by the frontier's upwardly mobile black leadership and communities. For example, in 1890, black frontiersmen made national headlines. An article in the *New York Times* was titled: "To Make a Negro State: Western Black Men Organizing in Oklahoma. They Propose to Control that Territory—Equality Demanded—A Race War Threatened." The article cited a "rapidly growing . . . anti-negro sentiment caused by the aggressiveness of the blacks wherever they are strong." According to the article, statements from a group called The First Grand Independent Brotherhood specifically fueled the "anti-negro sentiment." From the state of Kansas, the Brotherhood promoted emigration to Oklahoma. To achieve such a significant political step, black leaders needed to form a critical mass or to "Africanize" the Territory.

As fears of the movement heightened, "Edwin P. McCabe came to symbolize the emigration movement" (Taylor 144). In 1889, McCabe, a promoter and politician in Kansas, left the state for the Territory, some said expecting an appointment from President Benjamin Harrison to be the first governor of Oklahoma Territory (Taylor 145; Wickett 57). He founded the Territory's first black town and secured funding for the construction of a black university named after the town. According to Kenneth Hamilton's *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915* (1991):

> [McCabe] purchased 320 acres of land near Guthrie, improved it, attracted settlers to the area, and built a town. He called it Langston in honor of the black Virginia congressman by that name. McCabe effectively employed climate, economic opportunity, and race as promotional tools. The founder of Langston proudly called attention to

> the political positions occupied by blacks in the town's government, and his literature sounded the themes of self-help and self-determination. What the black man needed, he emphasized, was a free atmosphere for progressive development, isolation from the kind of oppressive environment that characterized the 'New South,' and a healthy political setting unmarred by unwarranted restraints. (13)

The calls issued to establish a larger black presence in the Territory were cautious ones. For nearly a year a column titled "Come Prepared or Don't Come at All" ran in McCabe's Langston *Herald* which was distributed and read in Kansas, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Tennessee. The column announced the preference for "'active, energetic men and women with some money' who were 'prepared to support themselves and families until they could raise a crop.' The *Herald* told the poor, 'If you come penniless you must expect to get it rough.'" (Taylor 146). Remembering the homesteading hardships from the Kansas Movement, McCabe's message of racial uplift focused on would-be migrants and settlers who were able to support politically, and, maybe more important, financially his vision of the Territory as a "paradise of Eden and the garden of the Gods" (quoted in Taylor 145).

Despite his successful founding of Langston, McCabe did not realize his dream for the Territory. However, his calls to such a purpose did cause quite a stir among the groups of the Territory's other inhabitants. In *Contested Territory*, Wickett writes, "there was variation in the attitude between freedmen who had lived their entire lives in the Indian nations (who called themselves 'natives') and those African Americans who had emigrated to the Indian lands after they were opened up to settlement (referred to by the 'native' freedmen as 'state negroes')."

The response to the freed southerners was two pronged. An increase in restrictive laws and violence aimed toward black inhabitants—native and new settlers—primarily fueled the friction between the two groups (31). Most of the Five Nation Indians strengthened restrictions against intermarriage between blacks and Indians fearing increased black citizenship within their numbers. According to Wickett, they "also made it difficult for their freedmen to marry blacks from outside of their nation, hoping to discourage the immigration of African Americans from the surrounding southern states" (35). White inhabitants responded to the black emigration movement with published threats of violence. Wickett quotes one white Republican who "predicted that if blacks moved into Oklahoma and tried to assert their political rights it would lead to racial violence, and he threatened, 'dead niggers make an excellent fertilizer and if the negroes try to Africanize Oklahoma they will find that we will enrich our soil with them'" (58). Such threats were the warning signs of the territorial violence that increased in relation to the growing numbers of black emigrants on the frontier. Nevertheless, the calls for black men and women to migrate and settle in black towns in the Territory continued until statehood. With statehood came the institutionalization of "black codes" and Jim Crow laws, which duplicated the conditions many migrants sought to leave behind. The worsening social and political conditions contributed greatly to the end of the All-Black Town Movement.

Despite the movement's end, the two major waves of black emigration to the territorial frontier and the lingering memories all-black settlements would produce notable black Oklahomans. A few include: John Hope Franklin, historian, born in

Rentiesville in 1915; Cornel West, philosopher, born in Greenwood (Tulsa); and The Greenwood, Archer and Pine Street Band, popularly known as The Gap Band, an R&B group so named to honor streets from the black business district in Tulsa's all-black Greenwood community. In addition, in 1947, the town of Langston adopted Melvin Tolson, the scholar and poet, who as an Oklahoman transplant would eventually serve as mayor of the town for four consecutive terms.[12] Today, many of the frontier towns no longer exist, which makes their study difficult, but not impossible. Some of these communities, like Langston and Greenwood still do exist. This somewhat lengthy discussion of the history of black frontier inhabitants and towns is necessary to call attention to some of the scholarly interest in the last three decades. The historical narratives and remembrances tell of the people and places that represent both the individual and collective mobility, (e)migration and settlement of African Americans.[13] However, there is another way to reconnect with the stories of black emigration and settlement in the Territory and later Oklahoma.

The creative imaginative process of the novelist working in conjunction with sites of history and memory can help reconstruct unrecorded dimensions of the black (e)migrant/settler experience but geography matters also. Particularly, the racialized landscapes of the South and West matter. In *Landscape and Race in the United States*,

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[12] See *Melvin B. Tolson, 1898-1966: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (1984) by Robert M. Farnsworth. Prior to relocating to Langston, Tolson's Forensic Society at Wiley College was an award-winning debate team, through which he mentored students who would become civil rights activists such as James L. Farmer, Jr. and Herman Sweatt.

[13] According to the Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department, as many as thirteen all-black towns in Oklahoma are still incorporated: Boley, Brooksville, Clearview, Grayson, Langston, Lima, Redbird, Rentiesville, Summit, Taft, Tatums, Tullahasee, and Vernon.

Richard H. Schein, a cultural geographer argues, "not only can we interrogate the historical and geographical dimensions of the landscape as an object in and of itself (as a material thing or set of things), we can also read and interpret cultural landscapes for what they might tell us more broadly about social worlds of the past" (5). Landscapes such as the scores of black settlements founded in Oklahoma as well as the antebellum and postbellum southern states reveal something about the social world inhabited by black frontierspeople and the social world they left behind.

Writer Ralph Ellison understood the importance of geography. Ellison was an Oklahoma native and one generation removed from the South. In 1910, Lewis and Ida Millsap Ellison, both southerners, migrated to Oklahoma because "they heard the stories about opportunity in the new state, Oklahoma, 'the promised land.'"[14] Unfortunately, the political landscape in Oklahoma had begun to change with the adoption of the Jim Crow laws ushered in with statehood. Nevertheless, the Ellisons and black southerners like them saw the Territory as an alternative to northern migration.[15] They settled in Oklahoma City where their son, Ralph Waldo Ellison, was born in 1913. Ellison's intimate knowledge of Oklahoma would also eventually occupy a place in his essays and imaginative work.

In a book and essay both titled "Going to the Territory," Ellison describes the historical, geographical and cultural significance of the American South and the Territory to the enslaved:

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[14] Bob Burke and Denyvetta Davis. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2003). Oklahoma Heritage Association.

[15] See Steven C. Tracy's *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison* (2004); Lawrence P. Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of a Genius* (2007); and Arnold Rampersand's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2008).

> As slaves they had long been aware that for themselves, as for most of their countrymen, geography was fate. Not only had they observed the transformation of individual fortune made possible by the westward movement along the frontier, but the Mason-Dixon Line had taught them the relationship between geography and freedom. They knew that to be sold down the Mississippi usually meant that they would suffer a harsher form of slavery. And they knew that to escape across the Mason-Dixon Line northward was to move in the direction of greater freedom. But freedom was also to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory. Bessie Smith gave voice to this knowledge when she sang of "Goin' to the Nation, Going to the Terr'tor'," and it is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography. (131)

According to Ellison, migration out of the South as well as (e)migration to the Territory represented freedom—a freedom that informed the collective consciousness of the enslaved and their descendants. Ellison revisited the folklore of the Territory in his second novel, which was a work in progress when he died in 1994. Five years later, Ellison's literary executor, John Callahan, published an edited version of the unfinished novel and titled it *Juneteenth*. In the novel, Alonzo "Daddy" Hickman, a black jazz musician turned preacher, has a bittersweet reunion with Adam "Bliss" Sunraider, the preacher's adopted, biracial protégé turned state senator. The reunion occurs in Washington, D.C., but in flashbacks Hickman remembers himself as a "preacher's hellion son" who once "rambled and gambled out there in the Territory" (290). The same Territory that represented wide-open freedom on the frontier would also seemingly instill a sense of self-determination in Hickman—the kind of determination associated with black settlers in the Territory. In *Juneteenth*, there are a few allusions to the Territory by way of oral and jazz traditions, but as critics have noted, "if Ellison had wanted the novel

to have a southwestern focus, that focus is not present in the published novel" (Graham and Mack 52-53). The novel reveals little of the collective identity and interior lives of the people who inhabited black towns in the Territory.

Blues singers, who as Jaheinz Jahn notes, express and make themselves the spokespersons for the experiences of the community, reclaimed the Territory in the early decades of the twentieth century in their lyrics.[16] As mentioned in Ellison's essay, blues singers like Bessie Smith preserved Oklahoma in the collective memory when she and others mentioned or referred to Oklahoma or the Territory in their lyrics. Chris Smith (no relation) focuses on the repeated imagery of Oklahoma in his article entitled, "Going to the Nation: The Idea of Oklahoma in Early Blues Recordings." Smith explicates lyrics from Bessie Smith's recordings of "Pinchbacks—Take 'Em Away" and "Work House Blues." Excerpted lines from "Work House Blues" include:

> Everybody's cryin' the workhouse blues all day, oh, Lord, oh, Lord
> The work is so hard, thirty days is so long, oh, Lord, oh, Lord
> I can't plough, I can't cook
> If I'd run away wouldn't that be good?
>
> 'Cause I'm goin' to the Nation, goin' to the Territo' (×2)
> I got to leave here, I got to get the next train goin'.[17]

The lyrics convey a communal sense of frustration, the desire to leave the present circumstances, and a determination to migrate to the place where the former Indian Nations and the former Oklahoma Territory meant freedom in the blues tradition and in the African American collective memory. Other recordings discussed by Smith include:

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[16] *Muntu*, p 223; See also Jahn's "From Blues: The Conflict of Cultures" in *Write Me a Few of Your Lines* edited by Steven C. Tracy, 29.

[17] Smith 85; See also Angela Y. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 352-353.

Papa Charlie Jackson's "The Faking Blues"; Freezone's "Indian Squaw Blues"; Priscilla Stewart's "Going to the Nation"; Bo Carter's "So Long, Baby, So Long," "World in a Jug," and "The County Farm Blues"; Jesse James's "Lonesome Day Blues"; and Charley Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues." Smith notes that the recordings from 1924 to 1941, several decades after statehood, show that the reality for African Americans in Oklahoma at that time was not very different from the conditions in the South left behind by the previous generation or two of westward migrants. Nevertheless, Oklahoma remained "a potent image of what might have been, and one day might still be."[18]

A few novels serve as precursors to this work in that they are set in a western landscape and incorporate (e)migration and frontier settlements. Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) is one of, if not the first of, these precursory novels. Griggs's protagonist and anti-hero in the novel oppose each other in a scheme to establish an all-black government in Waco, Texas. Following the lynching of a black postmaster, the plot accelerates into plans to emigrate *en masse* and to claim all of Texas as an all-black territory within the United States—a "nation within a nation" to which Griggs's title refers. In 1902, Pauline Hopkins's serialized novel, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* ran in the *Colored American Magazine*. In *Winona*, Hopkins retells the story of the anti-slavery revolt in Kansas led by John Brown in 1856. The title character, Winona, becomes a victim of the Fugitive Slave Act and is enslaved in Missouri. She migrates to Kansas where she aids in the strategies for political resistance, which include murder in defense of the community. Also, in the epilogue of Sherley

[18] Smith, 94.

Anne Williams's novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986), Dessa, as the narrator/protagonist, tells of her westward migration from the South with a small group of self-emancipated men and women prior to the Civil War. The novel doesn't reveal how far west they settled, but it ends with the themes of migration out of the South and settlement in the West as necessary to finding a space where the group can truly be free.[19]

Some of the most influential literary scholarship on African American migration was published just prior to the years in which novels selected for this study were published. Farah Griffin's interdisciplinary work, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, was published in 1995. According to Griffin, "migration narratives portray the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area. Within the migration narrative the protagonist or central figure who most influences the protagonist is a migrant" (3).[20] Griffin's migration narratives are found in literary, musical and visual art forms. In each of the narratives, the South is a site of "immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power" (4). However, Griffin's

[19] There should also be some mention of the western frontier novels written by Oscar Micheaux, each set in South Dakota: *The Conquest* (1913), *The Homesteader* (1917), and *The Wind from Nowhere* (1941). The protagonists in his frontier novels correlate to Micheaux's own experiences as a porter-turned-homesteader who migrated to South Dakota from Chicago after hearing stories from passengers. However, as Dan Moos observes in his article "Reclaiming the Frontier: Oscar Micheaux as Black Turnerian," Micheaux's novels are unlike those selected for this study in that they are not linked to the establishment of all-black communities (365).

[20] Griffin adds, "The narrative is marked by four pivotal moments: (1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South" (3). These pivotal moments were useful in thinking about migration and settlement in black frontier narratives.

work also centers on confrontation, negotiation, and further contemplation of the modern, urban landscape of Northern cities. Her emphasis on the urban landscape of Northern cities is useful, but doesn't include examples of the western frontier as a legitimate site for African American migrants, even though at the time existing texts set in places such as Kansas and California chronicled some of the same motivations as those of characters bound for New York and Chicago.[21]

Lawrence Rodgers's *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel*, was published in 1997. It surveys novels connecting history, geography and identity. Rodgers characterizes the migration novel as a real or symbolic journey from south to north. However, for his migrants, leaving the South marks a critical separation from family, friends, and geographic identity that is difficult to reclaim. Rodgers's work begins with Paul Lawrence Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* (1902) and ends with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). He also includes recent novels published throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Like Griffin, Rodgers does not include examples of narratives set in the landscape of the western frontier. In addition, according to Rodgers, migration to northern cities "almost always meant leaving a supportive network of family, friends, community, and church" (15). However, for newly freedpeople and their descendants who (e)migrated to the Territory for its homesteading opportunities, the journey sometimes meant relocating such networks to work the land and populate black settlements. Historically, great numbers of western (e)migrants journeyed with family

[21] See Blake Allmendiger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005), which includes discussions of novels such as *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (1902) by Pauline Hopkins, *Not Without Laughter* (1930) by Langston Hughes, and *If He Hollers* (1945) by Chester Himes.

members to aid in the settlement of new and "freer" spaces, a fact that I consider in my examination of novels set in the Territory.

This study adds to the existing critical work of Griffin, Rodgers, and other literary scholars who study African American migration narratives. Yet, the stories of the Territory are more than just (e)migration narratives. They are contemporary frontier narratives—much like the contemporary narratives of slavery discussed by Arlene R. Keizer in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004). [22] Contemporary frontier narratives serve as oppositional or counternarratives to the prevailing myth of the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" espoused by Frederick J. Turner in 1894. Using colonial and post-colonial discourse to challenge the myth, Dolores E. Janiewski writes, "Imaginative acts of boundary-crossing can expose the patriarchal and white supremacist constructions of the 'Imperial self' embodied in the frontier myth of rugged frontiersmen articulated by Turner and other authors" (82). The selected novels use folk material, sites of memory and history to challenge the myth and to tell a modern narrative of a collective black presence on the western frontier.

Though each of the selected novelists—Rhodes, Johnson and Morrison—writes of the interior lives of black town inhabitants in Oklahoma, each novel is different in character and in reach. *Standing at the Scratch Line* uses archetypes derived from the black folk tradition and a linear narrative timeline that makes the novel popular with

[22] The literary criticism of Bernard Bell and Ashraf H.A. Rushdy regarding neo-slave narratives influenced both my thinking and Keizer's work regarding contemporary fictional accounts of the African American past.

African American readers.[23] *Magic City*, like *Scratch Line*, is a popular novel, but Rhodes utilizes a greater degree of high literary devices. The novel combines oral history and folk tradition with the obvious intention, more often than not successful, to transform them into "high" literature. *Paradise* represents higher reaches of contemporary literary fashion—the postmodernist mode—in which Morrison evokes the processes and gaps of memory in a non-linear and elliptical narrative strategy and an ever-changing narrative point of view. The result is often an evocative but dense prose extremely challenging to the readership. This study intends to take chances and break new ground by including two popular novels alongside a more critically recognized work in academic circles: a literary masterpiece or a masterpiece of literariness, take your choice.

Obviously, these three literary narratives will mobilize very different resources, literary techniques and concerns of craft. But they will, from these varied resources, preoccupations and tendencies, offer collective insights on the meanings of self-determining, territorial black towns in the popular consciousness of the race. Black (e)migrants pursue settlement in black frontier towns because they offer opportunities not widely available in northern cities—such as cheap land, self-government, and entrepreneurial opportunities. The novelists depict the landscape of Oklahoma as a haven, a place of magic, and a paradise that is potentially better than the southern and northern landscapes. The black frontier towns in these novels are places to which characters eagerly (e)migrate with their families, places where black businesses are self-sufficient

[23] In October 1999, aalbc.com selected the novel for the on-line book club reading selection of the month. Since its publishing, the novel has become somewhat of a cult favorite among black male readers and black male book club participants.

and profitable, places where black women are not prey, and places where black veterans can openly exercise at home the rights fought for abroad on behalf of foreign allies. The novels depict the history, memory and geography of black frontierfolk in ways that expand ways of knowing a past that would be otherwise missing.

Just as in each novel the Territory is supposed to be a safe haven, the South is a site of slavery, racial oppression and disenfranchisement. Experiences in the South are powerful determinants for (e)migrants and their descendants. King and Serena Tremain in *Standing at the Scratch Line* choose to migrate to the town of Bodie Wells so that they can leave the violent and painful history of New Orleans behind them before starting their family. The Old Fathers in *Paradise* emigrate to Haven from Louisiana and Mississippi with their families, leaving behind the reminders of freedom interrupted by disenfranchisement at the close of Reconstruction. Even in *Magic City*, none of which takes place in the South, references to the region mostly revolve around enslavement. The (e)migrants in each novel discover that travel from the South to West does not shield them from the history of enslavement or the occurrences of racial oppression, but the South does inform how they exercise self-determination for themselves and their families in the face of racism on the frontier.

The novels also reveal how internal and external forces often thwart attempts to construct and maintain black free spaces. Internally, the meaning of these sites changes for each generation. The daughters and sons or granddaughters and grandsons have to balance the intentions of the early territorial founders and leaders with the draw of large cities. Also, maintenance of exclusive communities often requires limiting the roles of

women and men, old and young. Externally, threats and terroristic acts from surrounding white communities were always eminent. The reconstructed memories in the novels selected for this study depict these internal and external forces.

The depiction of black settlements in each of the novels is unique to the circumstances of early (e)migrants. The narrator in Johnson's novel refers to antebellum black sharecroppers, which alludes to the previously discussed land arrangements between black maroons and Seminoles. On the adjacent land, after the Civil War, a collective group of landowners builds the fictional town of Bodie Wells. Rhodes's emigrant arrives in what would become Tulsa as a recent freedman just before the federal government opens lands reclaimed from Native Americans. His family becomes the first to settle the black township of Greenwood and major property owners. Morrison's southern emigrants arrive after the land runs and wander through the Territory until they find relative isolation for their new settlement. Nevertheless, in each of the novels, the residents of the black towns have to be mindful the following common circumstances: proximity to territorial white communities; the draw of large, urban city life; and defining the community insiders and outsiders.

It is important to note that the novels by Rhodes, Johnson and Morrison are reminders of how many stories are still left untold about the experiences of black people in America as inhabitants of the territorial frontier and borderlands. For example, all three of the novels look at race and identity as primarily a black-white binary with only passing mention of the relations between African Americans, Native Americans and European Americans. In addition, there is no mention of the Asian laborers who inhabited the

frontier especially during the construction of rail transportation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. More obvious, is that there are no female protagonists in this lot of contemporary black frontier narratives. Nevertheless, *Magic City*, *Standing at the Scratch Line* and *Paradise* are diverse enough in their attention to the frontier to inspire the recovery of and the examination of additional stories that are sure to come.

In the more than 100 years since the call to "Africanize" Oklahoma, the Territory has existed—albeit dormant at times—in the collective history, memory and culture of African Americans. From the Post-Reconstruction announcements in black newspapers, to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century stories like those that lured the Ellisons to Oklahoma, to the Post-World War blues recordings, and now the end-of-the-twentieth-century novels, the Territory as a potential refuge for African Americans has a longer history than statehood. Ironically, at a time referred to by scholars of African American history as the Nadir, or the lowest point of African American political agency, the inhabitants of black communities and black towns found their own ways to provide for their families and to govern themselves locally. The establishment of black frontier towns began as a strategy to combat exclusion from the full spectrum of American citizenship. Yet, the depictions of Johnson, Rhodes and Morrison are about why the frontier and freedom are, for African Americans, still worthy of dreaming, writing, and striving.

CHAPTER II

"WHERE IN THIS LAND CAN A BLACK MAN GO AND BE FREE?": BLACK MASCULINITY ON THE FRONTIER IN GUY JOHNSON'S *STANDING AT THE SCRATCH LINE*[24]

I open this discussion of imagined black frontier settlements in the Oklahoma Territory with *Standing at the Scratch Line* by Guy Johnson, the only one of the selected novels authored by a male writer. At first glance this is a novel of a genre, quality, sensibility and provenance that would tend to disqualify it from serious academic attention. Upon a second, more thoughtful look, however it is precisely those disqualifying factors that most strongly recommend it to the purposes of this study.

Standing at the Scratch Line is not a particularly elegantly written or elaborately constructed novel. It displays no post-modernist, non-linear experimentation with form or narrative techniques. This novel does not lure its readers into elaborate word games and literary puzzles. Instead the plot is uncomplicated, clear, swift, unabashedly linear and so familiar as to be frequently predictable. The prose does not aspire to elegance: it is simple, direct, fast-moving and muscular. The action is violent, so much so in fact, as to be described as the literary equivalent of an action movie. Johnson does not strive for ambiguity, subtlety, allusiveness or complexity in narration, tone, plot, character development or motivation.

[24] This question was posited, rhetorically, by Jewell Parker Rhodes in an interview conducted by Kevin Quashie (439).

Nor is the novel politically correct in matters of race and gender in any accepted sense of that term. In its sensibility and preoccupations it is unapologetically a man's book. Even its title is drawn from the protocols of bare-knuckle pugilism. In fact the characters—male and female alike—are so crudely drawn as to be often stereotypical. And the white characters? For the most part they are vulgarly, crudely and violently racist. In these pages murderers abound, murders teem and the politics always racially determined—an unambiguous discourse of brutal oppression and violently heroic resistance.

What then could possibly recommend so patently "unsophisticated" a work to our serious attention? Why, all of the above of course.

This is popular literature, urban literature, street literature, literature of the masses, a direct linear descendant of the pulp fiction of an earlier age. Its provenance is the oral tradition, the folklore, the blues ballad, urban poetry, and legend. Its importance to us, in short, lies in its wide, sweeping political generalizations; the mythic dimension, the prevalence of archetype – heroic as well as villainous—that is the broad outline of a people's collective memory as preserved in their oral traditions and folk and popular music. What might elements of that traditional memory rendered in fiction tell us about the lingering presence in the folk imagination of the autonomous black towns of the western plains? It is to a question such as this to which Johnson's novel might provide interesting insights.

As a contemporary text, Johnson's novel does not challenge traditional roles of gender so much as it challenges the traditional dichotomous myth of the frontier solely

inhabited by civilized (and civilizing) European Americans and savage (yet, sometimes noble) Native Americans. Johnson imagines black subjects in Oklahoma in the early decades of the twentieth century—a time when, historically, dozens of all-black towns dotted the newly formed state. According to Arlene Keizer, "black writers' theories of identity formation, which arise from the particularity and variety of black experience, re-imagined in fiction, force us to reconsider the conceptual bases of established theories of subjectivity" (2). In its depiction of first southern and then western landscapes, Johnson's novel forces us to reconsider how black masculinity is shaped by the geography.

In *Standing at the Scratch Line*, as in the blues tradition out of which the novel appears to have evolved, regional violence is a critical component in the formation of black masculinity and manhood. The violence is intergenerational. Male family members introduce recurring violence to the protagonist as an adolescent. He, in turn, introduces the males in his own branch of the family to violent acts. The novel's title alludes to the violence that saturates it. In the prologue, Johnson explains the "scratch line":

> "In the early 1900s, when bare-knuckle fights were still common, a line was scratched in the dirt or on the pavement and the two fighters were brought to stand on opposite sides. At a preordained signal the fight would begin, then the line could be crossed. In gambler's rules, if one of the fighters suffered a knockdown, there was a break in the action. The man who delivered the blow returned to the scratch line and waited. The fighter who suffered the knockdown had to get up and walk back to the scratch line if he wanted to continue. If he did not come to scratch within an agreed-upon time frame, the fight was stopped, and the man standing at the line declared the winner.

Johnson's protagonist at various times in the novel is the fighter delivering the knockdown blow and at times the fighter suffering the knockdown. Sometimes the blows

are physical as described above and sometimes they are metaphors for his successes and failures along his migratory quest to find a place where he can be free to head his own powerful dynasty.

Standing at the Scratch Line is as much about the present as it is about the past. The use of the longstanding literary trope of regeneration through violence is what Richard Slotkin argues, "links America's recent past to a long heritage" (5). Additionally, in *Black Subjects*, Keizer writes:

> That contemporary African American and Anglophone Caribbean writers have returned to the past in their attempts to both recognize and fabricate new black subjectivities may at first seem counterintuitive. Yet this study will demonstrate that the mediation on the past in the contemporary narrative of slavery is also an attempt to theorize and shape the future. For a number of contemporary African American and Afro-Caribbean writers, representing the broadest range of black subject positions under slavery enables the representation of the myriad black subjectivities of the present and the future" (15-16).

Keizer's perspective on contemporary narratives of slavery aligns closely with what I wish to assert about *Standing at the Scratch Line* and other contemporary narratives of the black frontier. The physical violence exhibited by male subjects in *Standing at the Scratch Line*, though not out of place on the frontier at the turn of the twentieth century, is more about the present. For example, there is a sense of nostalgia or contemporary yearning for the past in Johnson's prologue. Four years prior to the novel's publication, film director, Gary F. Gray, depicts this sense of nostalgia or yearning in the popular comedy movie "Friday" (1994). In a scene between father and son, the character, Mr. Johnson, chides his son, Craig (played by Ice Cube), for carrying a gun for protection in

their neighborhood. Mr. Johnson raises his fists and says, “This is what makes you a man. When I was growing up, this was all the protection we needed. You win some, you lose some. But you live. You live to fight another day.” The scene highlights the father’s nostalgia for a past, simpler time and laments a present when young black men seem all too quick to use guns as a means to settle any and all disputes with each other in their own communities. Johnson’s novel echoes this popular sentiment shared within black communities and depicted in various forms of popular culture in the 1990s.

Standing at the Scratch Line is a literary epic unabashedly anchored in the oral tradition of African American experience in the first half of the twentieth century. Elements of the blues idiom and sensibility, street rap, folk idiom, memory, popular myth, and legend all make appearances in the text. To that end, it is a thirty-year-long travelogue, told by a third-person omniscient narrator, of the protagonist’s multiple migrations to significant African American cultural sites. He travels from the Louisiana bayous as a teenager in 1916, to the frontlines of World War I in France, to Harlem during the height of the Jazz Age, back to Louisiana during Prohibition, then to an all-black settlement in Oklahoma, and finally further west to a progressive all-black community in Oakland in 1946. In each of the locales inhabited by the protagonist, he obtains and sustains the concepts of family, respect, and self-determination by violent means and underground economies.

The violence, which begins in the South, follows Johnson’s protagonist throughout his travels and development. The novel’s three major sections reveal different phases of his identity shaped by the violence in the aforementioned cultural sites. In the

first section, readers meet "LeRoi Bordeaux Tremain" who as a teenager from an infamous family is an active participant in a feud with a neighboring family. When white law men are caught in the crossfire, LeRoi migrates from his family's farm in the Louisiana bayou into the army where he serves as a soldier in a segregated unit. Wartime experiences on and off the battlefield further embroil him in acts of violence. He returns from Europe with a new name, "King" Tremain, which marks the honing of his killing skills. King temporarily settles in Harlem as a joint club owner with men from his regiment until an urban war with Italian mobsters leads to a reverse migration back to Louisiana. In the second major section, "The Saga of Serena and King Tremain," as an adult, the protagonist runs into old and new troubles in his childhood home. He battles nefarious characters of all sorts, including law enforcement and the Klan. He also meets and marries his wife in Louisiana. Together they migrate west to an all-black town, Bodie Wells, in Oklahoma in 1920 at the beginning of the Prohibition Era. The town is close enough for King to check periodically on his bootlegging business in Louisiana and to traffic merchandise into Oklahoma.[25] It is also a self-governing town with some modern conveniences. The last section, "The Loss of Family," begins with the remaining six of the seven years that King spends in Bodie Wells. In these years, readers see his family

[25] In *African American Organized Crime: A Social History* (1997) by Rufus Schatzberg and Robert J. Kelly, discuss the ascendency of criminal syndicates during the Prohibition Era from 1920-1934: "Throughout most African-American communities, white gangsters controlled establishments that operated on the edge of legality; they had the power to influence police and impose their will almost indiscriminately in communities that lacked political clout to oppose them. This process produced an immense suction of capital out of the communities. There were, of course, exceptions. In Detroit, African-American gangsters banded together and forced the white syndicates to come to terms with them. And because they were able to maintain some independence, agreements were reached that allowed them to retain internal autonomy and share in racket profits" (27). Illegal trafficking of alcohol and arms was a family business for the Tremains in the Louisiana bayou and King continues his involvement in trafficking with small circles of trusted friends throughout the novel.

and wealth increase through legitimate and "illegitimate" means. However, there are also significant losses as the section title suggests. As in Louisiana, King battles white law officers and their black agents as well as the Klan from a nearby all-white "sundown town."[26] King becomes increasing ambivalent about the future of his family and the town, which both seem to be on a path to total destruction. At the end of the novel, he decides to start anew by migrating further west to a thriving black community in northern California.

LeRoi "King" Tremain is the archetypal "bad man" of blues legend and street lore—"a permanent fixture in the collective black male character" according to Jerry Bryant's *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*—that is familiar to communities which partake in African American popular culture. However, bad men and the violence that surrounds them are reflections of social norms, history, and geography. As a teenager growing into a young man in the Jim Crow South, LeRoi witnesses and partakes in an inordinate amount of violence. His southern experiences are important to discuss at length because he is the only protagonist in this study to experience the South firsthand prior to westward migration and settlement.

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[26] In *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (2005), James Loewen explains, "Spurred by the ideological developments of the Nadir, towns with no black residents—including some with little prospects of attracting any—now passed ordinances or informally agreed that African Americans were not allowed after sundown. Where blacks did live, whites now forced them to flee from town after town, county after county, even entire regions—the Great Retreat. Threat of mob attack dangled over every black neighborhood in the nation as an ever-present menace. In short, an epidemic of sundown towns and counties swept America between 1890 and about 1940" (49-50). It is important to note that there is no evidence of comparable ordinances to exclude white people from black towns. In fact, some white people participated in the founding of black towns and lived among black majorities. The nation-wide phenomenon of sundown towns is still with us today—albeit minus the ordinances, which are no longer legal. Existing sundown towns are replenished by "white flight" to suburbia from increasingly multiracial urban neighborhoods.

The roots of the protagonist's "bad man" status begin with his family in the Louisiana bayou. For LeRoi, Louisiana is foremost a site of family forged by violence. Early in the novel, an extended network of relatives on the Tremain family compound surrounds him. In this family, the menfolk read like a band of "bad men" from African American folk ballads. According to Bryant:

> The ballad became one of the vehicles of the folk imagination…and the violent badman became the ballad's central actor. He pumped 'rockets' into a gambling adversary who annoyed him, or 'blew away' the woman who cheated on him, or gunned down a white sheriff who had broken the rules of engagement in the black quarter. He became a familiar figure in the turpentine and logging camps, among the river levee roustabouts, in gambling dens, brothels, pool halls. He represented all that the educated elite and church-going classes sought to leave behind them. (10)

This family of bad men frequently uses "blood" as a metaphor for murder. The Tremains are infamous for "spilling blood" while operating a smuggling ring. During LeRoi's first raid against the Tremain family's principal adversaries, the DuMonts, he became what his uncle called "blooded" because he killed his first man. On his next raid, he was blooded again, but he was given greater respect for pulling an injured cousin to safety while under fire" (9). Some of the Tremains are not so fortunate. LeRoi witnesses the murder of his father and two older brothers at the hands of the DuMonts. During his fifth raid on the rival family, a beloved Uncle Jake Tremain and LeRoi kill members of the DuMonts family and two local deputies, respectively. Also during that raid, a bullet hits Uncle Jake during the confrontation, and he dies, too. This incident further fuels the ongoing family feud and gives birth to LeRoi's strong sense of vengeance.

Ironically, the violence that once earned LeRoi respect in his family, results in his expulsion from the family. Fearing that the killing of the deputies, who were white men, will bring too much heat upon the Tremains, the family patriarch, Papa Henry, decides it is best for LeRoi to leave the state for a while. This is LeRoi's first migration out of the South as a "fugitive migrant." According to Lawrence Rodgers in *Canaan Bound: The African American Migration Novel*, "The primary motive behind the fugitive's migration is his desire for physical and spiritual freedom as a heroic response to violent white oppression" (98). Reluctantly, LeRoi yields to Papa Henry's decision and reluctantly removes himself from all that he has known—kinsmen, culture, and ties of loyalty—to avert an almost certain destruction of the family by white law enforcement.

Despite feeling a great sense of abandonment, LeRoi does not abandon the "clan mentality" developed during his formative years in the bayou. Instead he trades in his armed family of bad men in the South for a different kind of armed men and an almost Hemingwayesque code of valor, loyalty and the brotherhood of the ranks in the segregated 351st and 369th Battalions of the U.S. Army. When his unit ordered on a supposed suicide mission, one soldier privately suggests they intentionally delay reporting for duty. However, LeRoi responds: "I mean to be on that ridge at four-thirty sharp. . . . I ain't got no family now but my squad and my platoon and I ain't ever gon' let down family who's depending on me!" (23). Furthermore, the racial discrimination he experiences in the army and his growing friendship with a squad member who repeatedly quotes from W.E.B. Du Bois's *Crisis* magazines leads him to more progressive thoughts regarding racial identity. His clan mentality further extends to other colored troops

outside of his squad when he says, “They’re our people. They got our color skin or something close to it. We know a little about what they been through, ‘cause we been through it. They are family! The only family we got is the colored soldiers fightin’ next to us” (24). He quickly gains respect and builds strong social bonds, indeed kinship—like a family—with the men in his unit that lasts beyond their time in the army.

His penchant for violence takes him full-circle from overseas, to Harlem, then back to his southern roots. However, his return is not before he transitions from the boy tested in the bayous to a man tested on many battlefields. Following one of many bloody battles overseas, a Frenchman nicknames him “Le Roi du Mort” or the “King of Death,” because of his skillful annihilation of his enemies in the field. From that moment, he sheds his boyhood moniker and embraces the name “*King* Tremain.” When he returns from Europe, he migrates to Harlem during the height of the Jazz Age and purchases a nightclub with men from the 369th, but he has no reprieve from the violence. King finds him and his new “family” entangled in an urban war with Italian mobsters who extort “protection money” from club owners. After heavy casualties on both sides, a relatively wealthy King cuts his losses by “cashing out” and leaving New York. After suffering the “knockdown blow,” which led to his migration out of the South, King decides to return to a metaphorical scratch line—Louisiana—to exact revenge. In his words, “All I really care about is getting back home and settlin’ some debts. I owe some folks a seein’ to and I damn sho’ gon’ see that they get it!” (16). He returns to Louisiana, a familiar southern battlefield, as a more driven and skilled soldier and a conscious black militant.

To the returning native son, Louisiana is no longer simply a site of family; it is also a site of social injustice. Once a place where rogue families protected and avenged their own, King discovers it to be also a place where most law-abiding families are unable to protect themselves from corruption, intimidation and violence. From King's few years abroad and in the North, he has gained a more progressive racial identity that places him liminally between two types of literary "bad men"—both in response to the violent landscape of the South. According to Bryant:

> The 'moral hard man' was often a racial warrior with a political agenda. His type erupted especially in the late 1960s as a fomenter of the Black Power Movement. The simple 'hard man' scorned social action. He was a fierce individualist, a scourge in his own community, introducing disorder and arousing fear, disapproval, and alarm as well as a reluctant admiration. (3)

The bad man of King's past in Louisiana—the traits of the simple hard man—are evident in his acts of revenge. The bad man of King's present—the traits of the moral hard man—are evident in his acts of heroism. Often, he exhibits traits from both of these types as he reacquaints himself with his sworn enemies and the local black community exploited by those same enemies.

In *Who Set You Flowin'*, Farah Griffin writes, "The black body—be it lynched, raped, working in the fields, working in kitchens, or acting in resistance—is a site of struggle" (16). In Johnson's novel, the bodies of black women are especially vulnerable as they struggle against threats of sexual violence from men—both black and white. On a few occasions, King interrupts attempts of rape and torment with his own brand of justice.

For example, King rescues Journer Braithwaite as she dodges the DuMonts' henchmen sent to force her and her family to pay extortion. Prior to King's return, the DuMonts are able to terrorize the community without significant challenge because they are protected/tolerated by the sheriff to whom protection money is regularly paid. Journer knows that "if the men caught her, no one would intervene. She had seen numerous people, both men and women, beaten savagely on the street, and no one had ever stepped in on their behalf. The white police did not care what happened in Niggertown. Colored people were often killed and their murderers almost always went uncharged" (147). Journer's encounter with King's old enemies presents "an opportunity to begin his assault against the DuMonts" (148). King pistol whips one attacker and gives the second a message: "Tell the DuMonts that King Tremain is back!" (148). King hoists Journer onto his horse and rides her to the bank without further incident. For Journer, the traits of the bad man are palpable. When she recounts the story to her family, she tells them, "There's a hardness about him. There weren't no question in my mind that he would have killed both those men right there and they knew it too. He got some real ice in his veins" (152-153).

Serena Baddeaux has a similar encounter with the DuMonts. When two of the DuMont brothers corner Serena in an isolated area at a church carnival, King steps in to save Serena from sexual assault. First, King murders Eddy DuMont with his bare hands and then kills his brother, Chess, with the knife Eddy intended to use on King. Like Journer, Serena also takes note of King's hard man traits: "That was cold-blooded

murder! That was the coldest thing I've ever seen." She also exposes his motives of revenge:

> Serena protested. "The DuMonts are scum, but they aren't animals. They are still human beings."
>
> "If you was a virgin, you still one now, ain't you? Maybe I even saved your life. I wouldn't complain if I was you."
>
> "You didn't do that for me. You was planning to kill some DuMonts before you ever saw me." (188)

Though she openly shows disdain for the murders, she thinks to herself, "If anybody deserved to be killed it was Chess" (188). As the struggle against violence persists, women like Journer and Serena who have few other options for justice become increasingly more tolerant of King's hard man vigilantism.

Of course, King is not a hero to some. The DuMonts and the men associated with them have serious cause for alarm when they figure out who he is:

> Old Damon Shackleford pulled the tip of his lush white mustache. "It seems to me that the name of the boy who run off to the army after killin' them deputies in the bayou three, four years ago." Old Man Shackleford was a local historian. He knew most of the colored families of any consequence in and around New Orleans. "As I reckon it, the Tremains been due for a reincarnation of some of their bad blood. You know that every thirty, forty years they have a child that terrorizes the Territory. If they got one now, he's the one." There were gasps from men around the table. These were not men who feared other ordinary men, but they were well acquainted with the concept of bad blood and they feared meeting a man who had it running in his veins. (155)

This evokes legendary, atavistic images in the southern oral tradition of indomitable black resistance passed "in the blood" down generations of unbreakable Africans of

almost superhuman ferocity. King's "bad blood" (read murderous tendencies) is accepted popular lore in and around New Orleans. A hero to some, King is also an anti-hero because his history and his family reputation attend his presence and deeds in Louisiana. Local white leaders like the corrupt parish assessor, Frank Loebels, are also aware of this "bad blood." Loebels comments, "that Tremain family has bad blood. Every thirty or forty years, one of their brood turns out to be a real nasty piece of work. Before Bordeaux there was Saint Clare and before him there was Black Jack and now it looks like this grandson has got it" (263). Thus, the traits of the moral hard man and the simple hard man continue their contentious interaction within King.

After King finishes with the DuMonts, he battles against a much more formidable enemy—the South. Griffin asserts:

> in all cases [of migration narratives] the South is portrayed as an immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power. Southern power is exercised by people known to its victims—bosses, landlords, sheriffs, and in the case of black women, even family members. (4)

In *Standing at the Scratch Line*, individual white men, corrupt law officers, and the Klan embody and exercise the oppressive power of the South. In one scene, Serena travels to the house of a white doctor to seek medical care for her terminally ill mother. A woman, Patrice, warns her about Tom, the doctor's nephew: "He tries to get some from all the doctor's colored women patients. He don't care if'en you married or with child. He gon' get what he wants" (248). Tom is a particularly deranged expression of the southern white male prerogative to possess black women's bodies at will. He attempts to rape Patrice before King arrives to knock him unconscious. Later that same night, he attempts

to rape Serena as she travels back home with her ailing mother. Serena defends herself by slashing him across the face with a knife. When Tom pulls a gun and threatens to kill her, King kills him first. This time Serena does not protest. In fact, King compliments her on her defensive attack against her assailant. Her show of courage when faced with violence makes her a seemingly suitable match for a man like King for whom resistance in-kind to southern power and the violence it commands is a way of life.

Law officers in and around New Orleans display a willingness to overlook the black-on-black killings between King and the DuMonts until the killings directly involve them. When King purges the DuMonts from the community one-by-one, the sheriff takes note only of the missing "tribute" he routinely expects from the DuMonts. To re-establish his financial exploitation of the black community, the sheriff sends in his henchmen to "crack down" on black businesses:

> I've got an assignment for you and a couple of men, Johan. We haven't been getting our full quota of money out of Niggertown since somebody did them DuMont niggers. Some of those businesses haven't paid in months! We haven't had a hammer on them since Bull Gingrich got himself killed. I need somebody to put their foot down on these shiftless niggers. Because you were once assigned to collections, I want you to crack down on a few of the nigger operators that we know didn't pay and leave the message that we want our cut. I don't care how they get it done. I just want the money. I'm giving you this assignment because you know how to talk sense to niggers. Get me, I don't want anybody killed yet. Just a few broken bones should do. We'll save the killing for later if they act mule-headed. (217)

The speech is hardly a subtle or nuanced monologue but these are not conventions of folk mythology. It explicitly describes the extent—intimidation, assault and murder—to

which the sheriff was willing to go to protect his corrupt interests. The scene also foreshadows the corruption of power by white law enforcement officers beyond the Southern landscape. King eliminates the corrupt police officers just as he did with the DuMonts. However, this form of resistance allows for short-term advantages not long-term solutions to the racist oppression of the black community.

Oftentimes, the oppressive power of the law overlaps with that of the mob. When members of the black community realizes a Klan plot to terrorize black landowners in order to steal their land, King disguises himself in Klan garb and single-handedly executes a raid against the local Klan headquarters. He takes back the stolen deeds and kills eight men. Two of the men he killed were sheriff deputies. The sheriff forms a posse of deputized whites—many of whom are Klansmen—who then legally terrorize black communities in search of an unnamed black killer. The cycle of terrorism exercised openly by whites and secretly by King become the driving force for his westward migration.

Griffin explicates examples of blues lyrics that articulate the catalysts for migrating to urban centers in the North, but in her discussion of violence as a catalyst, she argues “most often, blues lyrics do not [overtly] mention lynching or the threat of violence as the cause of migration” (22). Similarly, in Charley Patton’s “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” (which includes the line: “I been to the Nation [i.e., Indian Nation], hmm Lord, but I couldn't stay there”), the fourth verse implicitly cites violence as a motive:

Every day seem like murder here
Every day seem like murder here
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bid my care[27]

These lines seem to reflect the numbers of bodies that are piling up around King and the frustration of trying to protect communities that have little recourse to formal authorities. The "you" in the last line could easily be the Tremain family. Oddly enough given the importance attributed to family there is no attempt—on either side—to repair the family ties severed earlier. Thus, his second departure is free from remorse.

King decides to leave where and what he knows in order to migrate and settle in unknown territory. In "Down in the Dirt Blues," Patton sings:

I'm goin' away to a world unknown
I'm goin' away to a world unknown
I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long[28]

As hordes of African Americans crowded into the familiar cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, settlements in Oklahoma were certainly "a world unknown." Ralph Ellison also discusses this migration experience when he refers to "geography as a symbol for the unknown." Ellison explains, "the unknown included not only places, but conditions relating to [the] racially defined status and the complex mystery of a society from which [African Americans had] been excluded."[29] The experience of exclusion from American democracy in the South, in the army fighting in a segregated unit, and in the

[27] See Lawrence Cohn's *Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians* (45).

[28] Ibid.

[29] See Ellison's *Going to the Territory*, 131.

urban landscape of Harlem piques King's curiosity about what it might be like to live in a self-governing, black town in Oklahoma.

There are significant differences between the southern and western landscapes. First, there are physical differences. As a familiar and versatile site in African American literature, song and legend, Louisiana is a setting for all of Ernest Gaines novels, including *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983); Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981); Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* (1995); and scenes in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992).[30] In Guy Johnson's novel, King receives his early training in "kill skills" in the swampy, dense terrain inhabited by families like the Tremains and the DuMonts. When he returns to New Orleans, he takes up residence in the city with its conveniences, like a bustling Market Square, hotels, and various modes of available transportation. King owns horses, a car, and even a "thirty-foot flat-bottomed river steamer used to carry small cargo between the port and various ships and barges that plied the local waters" (192). However, Oklahoma is mostly dry, flat prairie land and Bodie Wells is a frontier "boom town" of nearly nine hundred black townsfolk where the effect of potential economic exploitation is made explicit. What King describes as "good-quality bottomland" is in jeopardy because the town is caught between white men warring for water with dams and water redistribution projects. In addition, failed plans for a nearby railroad stop stunt the growth of the town. When King and his new bride, Serena, arrive in Bodie Wells, they have to adjust quickly to life away from the city and in the unfamiliar frontier terrain.

[30] Louisiana is also a place of familial roots for characters in *Magic City* and *Paradise*.

Second, there is also a significant difference in how the history of enslavement in each of the landscapes shapes the novel's characters. In Louisiana, King is of the second generation in his family born after Emancipation. He remembers his grandfather passing down memories of resistance in the bayou during enslavement: "My grandpappy used [to] talk about kidnappin' overseers and hidin' they bodies in the swamp!" (464). The shared memories influence King's individualistic acts of violence to combat the violence around him. However, in Oklahoma, King encounters men like Leon and Cyrus Thomas. The brothers are descendants of "a large family of sharecroppers who scratched out a living from the sullen earth west of town. They had lived on the same parcel for nearly a hundred years" (307). The mention of "sharecroppers" with a presence on the land for "nearly a hundred years" links the novel to the historical relationship between the Seminole Indians and their black laborers who lived autonomously and paid annual tributes. In addition to the implied black natives, there are also descendants of early black homesteaders and landowners living in Bodie Wells. As one residents states: "There's a lot [of] colored folks buried in the ground around here, folks that worked they heart out tillin' and plowin', folks that fought both Indian and white alike to keep this piece of earth theirs. They blood is flowin' in me and I can't turn my back on 'em" (466). Whereas the few landowning residents in the black enclaves of New Orleans are portrayed as potential victims who come to rely on King's vigilantism against Jim Crow, King finds that the landowners with history in Bodie Wells collectively and willingly work with him on matters of community self-defense.

The third significant difference between the southern and western landscapes in the novel is proximity between black and white characters. Physical distance between the frontier towns means the residents of Bodie Wells can own businesses without routine extortion and terrorism from white law officers in their midst as was the case in New Orleans. When the Tremains first arrive, they find thriving businesses, churches, and a bank. With aspirations to legitimacy, King purchases and runs a general store, barn and granary but without completely abandoning his underground enterprises. Serena also establishes her own dress shop on the property. King transports goods such as an icemaker he purchases in Louisiana to their store which rivals white-owned businesses in nearby Clairborne: "This here machine is what's gon' make Tremain Dry Goods the only place to get ice in the summer outside of Clairborne. It gon' make our business. We'll always have cold beer and sarsaparilla on hand for our customers and we won't be makin' no trips to Clairborne for ice. Everybody in Bodie Wells gon' be buyin' ice from us" (330). As business owners, the Tremains join the leadership of the town, which includes other business owners, clergy, the town marshal and the mayor. Together, these power brokers drive major decisions like incorporating the town thus underlining its autonomy.

The significant similarity between the South and the western frontier lies in the way in which powerful whites attempt by intimidation to control the growth and aspirations of black communities. Whites from Clairborne try in various ways to limit the authority of the marshal and other Bodie Wells leaders. First, black turncoats, like Leon Thomas, Cyrus Thomas and Oswald Simpson try to undermine the authorities in Bodie

Wells. These men take orders from Booker Little, a fellow resident, who, in turn, reports directly to Big Daddy Bolton, a white politician and power broker in Clairborne. Booker's orders include running successful business owners, like the Morgans, out of town. He is also the person who devises an unsuccessful plot to murder Clara Nesbitt, a resident who prints a newspaper that opposes Booker's political ambitions.

Bolton approves the plot warning Booker, "If you lose the election for mayor and we can't influence the appointment of a new marshal, our control over Bodie Wells will be lost" (321). Bolton's control over the ambitious Booker Little is similar to the control Sheriff Corliss Mack has over a man named Clarence Thomas, the head porter at the Lafayette Social Club in New Orleans. (Apparently, Guy Johnson routinely names his fictional "sellouts" after historical African Americans considered to be controversial accommodationists—Booker T. Washington and Clarence Thomas.)

The failed plot against Clara Nesbitt is one of a number of examples of whites using violence to try to control blacks in Bodie Wells. Similarly, whites regularly evoke past acts of terrorism to intimidate the town's residents. In one scene, Bolton and Clairborne's sheriff, Skip Dalton, travel to Bodie Wells to investigate the disappearance of Bolton's son. Dalton is certain that a past act of violence in the region will serve as a reminder for black people not to overstep the boundaries set by whites: "I'll bet the niggers are so scared that by the time we get there, it'll be a ghost town. They remember what happened in Johnsonville. Most of 'em are probably half the way to Atoka right now" (355). The details of "what happened in Johnsonville" are not disclosed. The town still exists, but clearly the sheriff is alluding to a prior act of terror against that

community. He expects the communal memory of violence directed against a particular community to have a continuing intimidating effect.

In Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature (1997), Samira Kawash writes:

> miscegenation and lynching are ideologically two sides of the same coin. Just as miscegenation is the crime in which all the anxieties and absurdities of white purity and the color line are embodied, lynching is the symbolic and bodily response to miscegenation's threat to whiteness and racial separation. (153)

In the novel, the town remembers the lynching of Romelus Boothe. Miscegenation (with a white woman) was his crime and the Klan was his executioner. Although he was just a child, Octavious Boothe remembers: "My father was lynched outside of Clairborne and they left his charred body hangin' on a tree about a mile from town. Old Josh Morgan, Tobias Dorsett, and Lightnin' Smith took a wagon one night and cut him down. I was maybe four or five years old at the time, but I helped to bury my father" (466). However, lynching as a response to miscegenation is entirely predicated on the race and gender of the parties involved. Thus, no one—black or white—punishes Big Daddy for his cross-racial indiscretions, in which he fathers two children with black women from Bodie Wells.

It is in Bodie Wells that the "bad man" who disrupted and evaded southern power in Louisiana becomes the "bad man" who complicates the white myth of the frontier in Oklahoma. In *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth*, Michael Johnson writes:

> As a much repeated ideological narrative in American culture, the frontier myth has most often served the interest of the dominant race, class, and gender, providing a mythic

> justification for the positions of power held by middle-class white males. The myth is based on a racial opposition between the "civilized" (white) and the "savage" (non-white, usually American Indian but often African American or even lower-class whites or white immigrants) and tells the story of the evolutionary inevitability of the triumph of civilization over savagery and the dominance of the white race over all other races. The frontier myth is the narrative of the civilized individual's journey westward into the savage American wilderness. (7)

Conversely, King journeys westward into the civil community founded by the residents of Bodie Wells. In his words, "it's a colored town, run by colored folks, and lived in by colored folks. I ain't ever lived anywhere where colored people made the rules without fear of the white man. I want to see what that's like and whether it will make any difference in the way I feel when I get up in the mornin'" (305-306). On Guy Johnson's frontier, the black residents of Bodie Wells are the civilized, frontier subjects and whites from Claiborne (and their black henchmen) are the savage frontier objects. In Bodie Wells, King, though still a rugged individualist and vigilante at his core, builds respectful relationships with many of the town's leaders and as a result becomes a semi-legitimate businessman.

The novel also challenges the myth in its depiction of black women on the frontier. Michael Johnson observes that in traditional frontier novels, the presence of women is either barely acknowledged or white women in need of protection serve as objects of exchange between men (57). Conversely, in this novel, black male characters protect their women, but the women in Bodie Wells, including King's wife, Serena, also protect themselves and their families. In one scene, Flo Nesbitt avenges the assault and attempted murder of her daughter by shooting Booker Little at point-blank range in front

of the marshal's office. In addition, when the town's leadership meet about whether or not and how to stand in defense of the town, a local restaurant owner, Ma Wrangel, is a vocal participant: "Me, my cast-iron stove, and my old, repeatin' Winchester, we stayin'!" (353). Lastly, when the New Orleans sheriff captures and tortures King during one of his business trips, Serena allows herself to be sexually violated by one of the sheriff's men to find out where King has been imprisoned. She then kills Captain LeGrande and frees her husband. Each of these women represents black frontier women who though self-reliant, also enjoy black male protection when necessary.

King enjoys the respect he experiences in Bodie Wells and he decides to begin his life as a family man in the frontier town. However, his impulse towards patriarchdom is frustrated. First, a curse threatens his family. A voodoo woman explains to Serena that her failure to "do right by" King's oldest son (by a Harlem woman) has resulted in her infertility. This curse has also rendered her siblings unable to conceive. Then, too, her own "illegitimate" child threatens the bond between the couple. King tries to raise the son Serena conceives under duress with Captain LeGrande in Louisiana. However, this son is sickly, weak, and shielded by Serena from King who fervently objects to her protectiveness: "You ain't preparin' him to be a man! You think this white world gon' treat him with a soft hand? A colored man got to be strong, 'cause if he ain't all this hate out here will make him turn on himself. You got to give him to me! Don't let him come runnin' to you!" (469). It is only with Jacques, the son they have together, that King is able to fully control his son's preparation for manhood as a Tremain. King's concept of manhood is represented by a frontier trope: a sense of mental and physical toughness as a

means of withstanding racial oppression and violence. Unable to prepare both boys in the manner he thinks necessary in a frontier town periodically threatened by the Klan, King concedes, “Maybe it’s time to move on” (468). King takes Jacques with him to California and Serena follows later with her son. Though King and Serena stay married, their relationship disintegrates and their sons continue to live under the shadow of the curse as doomed young men.

The Bodie Wells of Johnson’s novelistic imagination, as experienced by migrants from the American South during the 1920s and by descendants of earlier black migrants, delivers some important truths about the black frontier experience that are inaccessible in conventional histories. First, it depicts the importance of geography in shaping the novel’s black male protagonist and the communities he inhabits. In his reflections on the Territory, Ralph Ellison wrote: “In this country, where Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory of the frontier has been so influential in shaping our conception of American history, very little attention has been given to the role played by geography in shaping the fate of Afro-Americans” (198). In Guy Johnson’s novel, the South is a place where the protagonist experiences and participates in a cycle of violence that grants power to white men and weakens black communities. By responding violently, he garners some respect from the unprotected black community, but he flees from the South as a fugitive dreaming of family. Consonant with African American folklore and the blues tradition, the further west King moves the closer he gets to freedom and a place where he can begin to enjoy his family.

Second, the novel depicts a literary black nationalism based on collective African American folklore of the Territory. Wahneema Lubiano describes "black nationalism" as an articulation of desire—always unfillable—for complete representation of the past and a fantasy for a better future" (233). The freedom King experiences during his seven years in Bodie Wells is only partly a result of his own individual acts. His freedom is also a result of the legacy of self-determination that passes from early black migrants and settlers to their descendants. Though he leaves for California before a threatened ride from the Klan, the other residents stay to fight for the land, and just as Johnsonville survived the terrorism of whites on the frontier, it is implied that Bodie Wells also will survive.

Lastly, it makes a little known past available to popular audiences by using characters and themes that resonate with present social issues. Johnson's novel seems optimistic about the perpetuation of autonomous black communities and towns as safe spaces. Regarding daily operations of living, working, and governing, the setting of Bodie Wells demonstrates how residents of an all-black town are able to be self-sufficient and prosperous when unfettered by racism. At the same time, in its depiction of the heroic black vigilante, the novel seems pessimistic about non-violent solutions to racial inequality. Contemporary readers in the "Post-Civil Rights Era" may share Johnson's optimism and pessimism in the wake of present-day social issues represented in the novel such as "black-on-black crime," policing in black communities, and the racial self-segregation throughout the country. In fact, Johnson's protagonist joins a list of similar African American "bad men" in popular culture who use violence as a response to

violence in and against black communities. The list includes the "Seven Days" in *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison; "Fix Boutan" in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) by Ernest Gaines; "Mann" in the movie *Rosewood* (1997) directed by John Singleton; and "Blue Hamilton" in the novel *Some Things I Never Thought I'd Do* (2003) by Pearl Cleage.

On reflection, what is most interesting about the provenance and sources of *Standing at the Scratch Line* is the way it is informed by and to an extent recycles elements of the black oral tradition without those being evident in either the language or styles of the novel most of the time. That in effect it is anchored in and reflects very strongly the perspective and sensibility of those traditions, which is to say the popular collective memory of black people, without displaying the linguistic resources or distinctive styles of the tradition which preserves them such as sermons, prayers, and blues lyrics.

Rather it is a popular epic-come-adventure tale much in the manner of the very popular late Frank Yerby's *Foxes of Harrow* with the important difference of being primarily addressed to a black audience.[31] To that extent it is unapologetically informed by a shared almost mythic black perspective whose dominant theme is not masculinity in general, but specific codes of black manhood. Manliness in all its aspects—honor, courage, responsibility, competence, fatherhood, the loyalty of brotherhood, and above all, strength of character and person. This is what, in addition to their shared historical

[31] See Darwin T. Turner, 569.

perspectives, brings this novel into such tense and meaningful conversation with the other two novels and in particular Morrison's *Paradise* in its discourse on patriarchy.

CHAPTER III

"A LANDSCAPE BIG ENOUGH TO HOLD DREAMS": GREENWOOD BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE RIOT OF 1921 IN JEWELL PARKER RHODES'S *MAGIC CITY*[32]

In a 1995 interview in *African American Review*, Jewell Parker Rhodes discusses her first novel, *Voodoo Dreams*, with Allen Ramsey. Reluctantly, Rhodes characterizes the work as a historical novel, but also warns, "it should be underscored that it is a *novel*, an imaginative lie that tells a great deal about what it might have been like to be Marie Laveau in the nineteenth century, and this might be more authentic in some ways than so-called histories" (author's italics, 594). The same can be said of her second novel, *Magic City*, published two years later. It tells much about what it might have been like to be among three generations of black men who (e)migrated, settled and defended an all-black community that was known historically by many names: black Tulsa, Greenwood, Little Africa, a "Promised Land, and a "Magic City."

In *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, historian and Tulsa native, Scott Ellsworth chronicles the early history of Tulsa in the Territory and as a "boom town" in the early decades of statehood. During much of the nineteenth century, Tulsa was a settlement in the Creek Nation known as "Tulsey Town."[33] Creek Indians and enslaved black people, who became Creek Freedmen (and Freedwomen) after the Civil War, inhabited the settlement prior to the arrival of permanent white settlers and the

[32] See Quashie and Rhodes, 439.

[33] See also Tim Madigan's *The Burning*. Madigan writes that the name Tulsa comes from the Creek word, "*tullasi*" meaning "old town" (33).

railroad in the early 1880s (8). In the early part of the twentieth century, boosters promoted Tulsa as the "Oil Capital of the World" and as "Magic City," because Tulsa supplied oilmen from nearby oil well sites with rail transportation, equipment, financing, and amenities (10-11). Ironically, speculators never found oil within the Tulsa city limits. Nonetheless, as if by magic, Tulsa was able to attract the "financial dandies and oil barons from the East, many from the fading petroleum fields of Pennsylvania and Ohio," according to James S. Hirsch's *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy* (23). In just a few decades, the oil business had transformed Tulsa into a "white man's town" (38).

Additionally, according to Ellsworth and Hirsh, the growing community of black Tulsans in the annexed area of Greenwood was simultaneously becoming a "promised land" for black people. Black southern migrants and black Oklahomans from rural communities flocked to Greenwood resulting in an increase of black residents from 1,959 in 1910 to 8,873 in 1920—from 10.2 to 12.3 percent of Tulsa's total population (Hirsh 38). Hirsch writes, "The growth of Greenwood frightened Tulsa's whites" (38). White Tulsans responded to the growth with tactics such as legalized racial segregation, grandfather clauses, and increases in Klu Klux Klan memberships. However, black migrants were undeterred. Tulsa's thriving black business district, nationally known at the time as the "Black Wall Street," was a direct result of the self-determination of blacks within a racial hegemony enforced by white Tulsans.[34] According to Ellsworth, "in the

[34] See Hannibal B. Johnson's *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District* (1998). There were also more regionally known black business districts that were also given the name "Black (or Negro) Wall Street," such as the one located in Durham, NC.

early twentieth century, Tulsa became not one city, but two. Confined by law and by white racism, black Tulsa was a separate city, serving the needs of the black community. And as Tulsa boomed, black Tulsa did too" (14). Primarily located along Greenwood Avenue, the heart of the black business district was known as "Deep Greenwood" and included a dry goods store, two theaters, groceries, confectionaries, restaurants, billiard halls, rooming houses, and four hotels. Deep Greenwood was also a favorite place for the offices of Tulsa's unusually large number of black lawyers, doctors, and other professionals (16). The promise and accomplishment of Greenwood was to end with unprecedented violence and destruction of the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921.

The Tulsa Race Riot continues to be a significant site of memory for black Oklahomans. One of the lawyers with an office in Deep Greenwood was the father of the historian, John Hope Franklin. Franklin remembered, "I was only six years old, but the events in Tulsa in late May and early June were permanently etched in my mind." Franklin's father, B.C. Franklin, opened his law office in Tulsa in February 1921 and anticipated a summer migration of his family from the rural all-black town of Rentiesville, Oklahoma. Three months later, the pogrom against black Tulsa resulted in the death of dozens and maybe even hundreds of people and the deliberate destruction of 1,256 homes, businesses, civic institutions and social institutions in the Greenwood district.[35] It took the Franklin family days to find out that B.C. had survived the riot. It

[35] See Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 (2000) compiled by Danney Goble.

took four years for B.C. Franklin to fight ordinances designed to obstruct the rebuilding of Greenwood and to find a new home in which to reunite his family.[36]

What black families in Oklahoma remember about Greenwood, white Oklahomans rarely discussed, studied or taught prior to the release of Ellsworth's historical narrative written in 1982 from the perspective of Greenwood residents, which led to an article published in *Parade Magazine* in the following year. Then, in 1997, the state legislature formed the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. As an octogenarian, John Hope Franklin served as an advisor to the commission contributing both his personal memories of Tulsa in the 1920s and his training as a historian. In its assembly of oral histories, articles, photographs, and other historical documents, the commission is reported to have compiled "the most thoroughly documented moments ever to have occurred in Oklahoma." In accordance with the findings, the commissioners admitted, "What happened in Tulsa stays as important and remains as unresolved today as in 1921. What happened there still exerts its power over people who never lived in Tulsa at all" (4).

An example of the increased national awareness of what happened in Tulsa is the coverage of the commission's study of the riot in black newspapers during the last decade. Black papers such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Jacksonville Free Press*, and the *Sacramento Observer* gave extensive coverage. Mainstream papers such as the *New York Times* also reported the story. This recent press attention and the commission's collection of historical sources informed Rhodes's

[36] See John Hope Franklin's Foreword in Ellsworth's *Death in a Promised Land*. See also ibid.

fictional account which encompasses black migration to Tulsa, the construction of Greenwood, and its ultimate destruction at the hands of white rioters. According to Rhodes, her own interest and research began with a headline in *Parade Magazine*: "First U.S. City to be Bombed from the Air." The result was *Magic City*—the story of how the protagonist, who is the grandson of an emigrant and the son of a founder of Greenwood, survives the destruction of the city.

In *Magic City*, Rhodes depicts the collective memories of the territorial frontier and Greenwood through three generations of fathers and sons in a single black family. Rhodes's simple strategy is wonderfully effective in bringing into conversation the differing historical experiences of succeeding generations. It is this imaginative construction of an intergenerational conversation of black men that constitutes Rhodes's narrative strategy for the re-imagining of dimensions of black frontier history otherwise inaccessible to conventional historiography. In these characters' experiences, recollections, aspirations, hopes, and fears all the mythic elements informing the black tradition of the frontier can be brought into play. The need for refuge, the hope of autonomy, the search for manhood as well as the oppressive memories of southern slavery and racism are all evoked novelistically. However, in order to do this successfully, the novelist will need to evoke and utilize certain sites of memory preserved in and carried forward by the black oral tradition: Tyler's memories of southern slavery, secular and religious rituals as well as examples of the musical culture of black people.

The male line of the Samuels family experiences cultural, familial and community connections and losses that can be read to represent the collective experience of the black

frontier. Tyler, the grandfather, represents the generation directly connected to oral memory and culture from enslavement in the South and the land runs of the West. His son, Abraham Douglass (referred to in the novel as "Samuels") represents the generation of founders of black towns in the early years of statehood. Lastly, the grandson and novel's protagonist, Joe, represents the generation of young black men who came of age during and immediately following the First World War. The individual and collective experiences of three generations of males in the Samuels family give readers insight into the collective memory and trauma of Greenwood residents from the enslavement, Post-Reconstruction, migration, settlement, and Post-War periods.

Rhodes's narrative timeline spans from May 29, 1921 to June 1, 1921. However, as we have seen the novel introduces readers to this fictional founding family who play pivotal roles in Greenwood's past dating back to the 1880s, as well as its future. At the beginning of the novel, Joe, the grandson of Tyler, the emigrant, has been having nightmares about being lynched and seeing Greenwood set ablaze. The next day, Joe enters an elevator in the lobby of the Ambrose Building in downtown Tulsa, where he works as a shoeshine. The elevator operator, a white woman named Mary Keane, takes him up to the fourteenth floor where the "coloreds only" washrooms are located. During the ride back down to the lobby, Mary screams. Once the doors open, white men see Joe hovering over Mary who has fainted. Joe and Mary's lives intertwine around the false accusation of rape. Surrounded by people yelling racial epithets and threats, Joe narrowly escapes the crowd in the lobby, runs out of the building, and then runs out of Tulsa to Greenwood. The sheriff hunts Joe for arrest and Tulsans hunt Joe for lynching. Joe is

arrested. The black men of Greenwood, many of them war veterans, rescue him from jail. They stand with him against the mob. Violent clashes between the two communities result in losses of life on both sides. Tulsans call in the National Guard. With bombs dropped from planes, the Guard overpowers the defenders of Greenwood. As homes, businesses, churches, and schools burn, the guardsmen transport the remaining residents out of Greenwood and into captivity in the Tulsa Convention Center. Joe survives the attack on Greenwood and evades the roundup of blacks. At the end of the novel, Joe contemplates whether to escape further west to San Francisco or to stay and help rebuild the all-black town first settled by his family.

Greenwood is a site that symbolizes self-determination and dreams of freedom for its black residents. It marks a journey of racial progress from a Biblical-like nothingness of "dust" to the construction of a town with modern conveniences and its own school. Greenwood in 1921 is a place where war veterans return to fight for democracy at home, as they did abroad. Yet, Greenwood is not just a place. Greenwood is a powerful symbol rendered almost as a character. Personified, "Greenwood" rises out of the dust in the beginning of the novel, returns to dust after the destruction of its buildings, and yet, according to the novel's protagonist, continues to live: "Greenwood couldn't be dead, not unless every Negro was dead" (266).

Greenwood is also a site that symbolizes confinement. In an article, "Power of Place and Space," Robert Sack writes, "In or out of place refers to territorial control as constitutive of social relations and power" (328). In the years leading up to the riot, the territorial control of white Tulsans is ever-present. For example, the trains traveling

through Tulsa reinforce racial segregation by having a "converted boxcar for Negroes" (1). Additionally, the whistle of the nightly 9:45 train serves as a reminder of the ten o'clock curfew for blacks to be back in their place—Greenwood. When Greenwood residents, especially the males, step out of place, white Tulsans respond with threats and violent acts. In one scene, a group of Greenwood men discusses the various ways in which their community has always been a target of terrorism:

> "Hasn't it always been that way?" asked Lying Man. "Blink an eye and another colored man's been picked up. Run out of town."
>
> "They tarred Bobbie's boy," said Ernie.
>
> "Has anybody seen young Jim?" asked Clarence. "Every Christmas his momma cries. He's been missing for two years. Went out to chop a pine."
>
> "Killed my dog," said Tater, who rarely spoke. "Shot Dempsey. Said he was on Ambrose land. Shot him six times." Eyes wet, he went back to sweeping.
>
> "Burned a cross in front of my store," said Reye, "cause I didn't want to buy overpriced feed from Ailey. Now I buy anything Ailey wants to sell. (201)

For the residents of Greenwood, each day is a day where "knowing your place" is the difference between living and being lynched. Thus, when a young black man steps out of an elevator with a white woman in it—regardless of the circumstances—he steps out of place. By lynching the protagonist, Tulsans want to re-deliver the message of staying "in place" to all of Greenwood's residents.

Tyler, the grandfather, is the ancestor figure in the novel. In Toni Morrison's essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she argues that one way black literature can be evaluated is by examining the presence of an ancestor and what the writer does with that presence. She further explains, "ancestors are not just parents, they

are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343). Tyler's passes wisdom to his descendants using oral culture and memory. However, as Joyce Middleton notes in her article, "Orality, Literacy and Memory," there are oral/literate tensions that exist between the generations of formerly enslaved and their immediate offspring. The "memory and intimacy" that Middleton argues "are prerequisites for regaining . . . ancestral knowledge and personal wisdom" are lost to an ideology of racial uplift that seeks forgetfulness as well as distance from the history of enslavement in the South (65). As a result of this cultural tension, Tyler's son, the aspiring banker, thinks of him as only "an illiterate ex-slave still working the land" (27). Tyler's southern experience and ways of knowing are devalued by his son, which causes wounds in the familial and collective memory about (Tyler's) southern roots and (his) emigration from the South. These wounds to collective memory are what Paul Ricoeur refers to as "collective traumatisms" (78). Some of the questions left open and unanswered are significant: Where in the South was Tyler enslaved? What experiences did he have in the South after Emancipation that served as the catalyst for his emigration to the frontier? With whom, if anyone—family or friend—did Tyler emigrate to the Territory?

The wounds in the familial and collective memory also extend to Tyler's pre-Greenwood presence on the frontier. Readers know very little about his settlement experience as a freedman emigrating to what would become the state of Oklahoma. However, his frontier memories, too, are devalued and a source of shame. His daughter-in-law, Ruth Samuels, communicates her feelings of shame about Tyler's arrival as a

black "Sooner" to her children: "Ex-slaves coming to Tulsa. Every thief, every poor white man racing to stake a claim. 'Like rabbits . . . it was disgraceful to be running after God's land. Squatting on dirt . . . it wasn't respectable" (86). [37] This status-driven impulse towards respectability constitutes a denial of history.

Because of this ongoing cultural tension between generations, a silenced Tyler, attempts a visual preservation of history by passing on his memories of the frontier through paintings. In Tyler's room, his grandson notes, "The walls were covered with dozens of paintings of the same landscape—rows upon rows, acres of wheat captured at sunrise, sunset, high noon" (84). Tyler's landscapes are all that are left of a wounded memory of the two hundred acres he had once owned and lost. The trauma of losing of his land has weakened Tyler. A debilitating stroke severely limits his speech and arthritis restricts his mobility. In addition, his inability to use the oral tradition to instruct and to pass on wisdom marks the loss of his authority as the family patriarch as well as the collective loss of oral stories about the South and the frontier.

Despite Tyler's loss of the oral tradition and the resultant wounds to the collective memory, all is not lost. In *Who Set You Flowin'*, Farah Griffin explains: "The ancestor is present in ritual, religion, music, food, and performance. His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations like the oral tradition" (5). Thus, when an already weakened Tyler

[37] In *African Cherokees in Indian Territory* (2008), Celia E. Naylor explains the term "Sooner" refers to settlers who came "into Oklahoma *sooner* than anybody else, and because they would *sooner* be there than anywhere else…It also applied to the people who entered the Territory before the settlement date in the presidential proclamation" (191). Tyler was one of the Sooners who settled before the public opening of the land. Because the overwhelming majority of African American migration narratives are set in northern and northwestern urban cities like New York and Chicago, it is possible that the debut of the literary characterization of the "black Sooner" occurs in this novel by Rhodes.

is murdered as he tries to defend his family, his body dies, but his spirit is not gone. His granddaughter, Hildy, immediately starts to sing, "Go down, Moses, way down . . . In Egyptland. Tell Pharaoh . . . Let my people go" (146). The evocation of the African American spiritual of the Exodus, according to Eddie Glaude, "describes a progression, the transformation of people as they journey forward to a promised land" (5). Hildy's song ushers Tyler into his transformation from elder to ancestor and his quest for an earthy promised land to a spiritual one. Additionally, a group of Greenwood's church women—Zion's Sanctified Women—facilitates Tyler's transition with their oral performance during the ritual of washing Tyler's body:

> Nadine nodded to Hildy. Then, in turn, she looked at all the women, and her alto voice soared:
>
> *Lay down body, lay down*
> *Lay your burdens down.*
>
> Lilianne's soprano matched, melded with Nadine's alto. Martha started up the song again. Claire's voice was the sweetest: the vowels elongating—laaaayyy dooowwn booodeeee. Voices overlapped like a round. Gloria stomped her feet; Mrs. Jackson clapped staccato; Miss Wright tapped her cane. They all sang: "Lay your burdens down," their voices growing stronger. Hildy and Eugenia washed, humming, punctuating the song with "Jesus." "Praise be." They gently wiped Tyler's legs and toes as the sounds vibrated, rattled the walls:
>
> *Lay down body,*
> *Lay your burdens down.*
> *Lay down body,*
> *Lay your burdens down.*
>
> Nadine raised her hands toward the Holy Spirit. Leda clutched her sister's arm. Lilianne cried. The song quickened: "laydownbody, laydownyourburdens down, layyourbody down." The women rocked faster. They

> rocked and wailed and Mary felt love flowing in and layering, shouts counterpointing the melody, the spiritual rose in pitch. When the sound couldn't expand anymore, the women, in unison, stopped. (184-185)

In the extended passage above, Rhodes in describing the ritual, recapitulates certain central conventions of an elaborate oral/musical tradition. These include drawn out sounds to simulate a slowing delivery, removed spacing to simulate a faster delivery, and call-and-response "punctuating" the women's song. Additionally, Rhodes reminds her readers of the role played by the black church in remembering and perpetuating southern rituals and spirituals developed during slavery which continue to the present day.

The men of Greenwood with the blues as their medium also use the oral tradition to express and pass on cultural information. Rhodes' character Lyman, who "was nicknamed Lying Man because in fifty years, he'd never lied" and because "[h]e could tell hard truths better than any preacher" (53), uses his harmonica to play the blues:

> How long the train's been gone?
> Baby, how long? How long?

According to Griffin, Lying Man's migration blues "encompasses the psychological state of someone who is exploited, abused, dominated, and dispossessed." The train reference in the song and throughout the novel are symbols of freedom in the African-American oral tradition (19). Additionally, according to A. Yemisi Jimoh, "Blues illustrates the post-enslaved cultural expression of a people negotiating the modern world on terms that purport to be different from those encountered while enslaved, yet the terms are not substantially different" (23). Thus, for Tyler, the Territory was a symbol of freedom and

two generations later, a train headed further west would become a symbol of freedom for his grandson. Rhodes uses these symbols to demonstrate a semblance of intergenerational cultural continuity.

Lying Man is the resident blues man and his barbershop operates as a "blues community" within Greenwood. Jimoh defines blues communities as "sites that collect the experiences of people whose lives are shaped by a racialized dominant discourse that excludes them. As a result of having been enslaved and under post-emancipation segregation, black people forge life strategies that inform a group philosophy on ways to live in the paradox of being black in the United States" (26-27). The barbershop is a place where for men, talking is important, but so is listening. For example, the men in the shop dispense the kinds of strategies mentioned by Jimoh when they discuss the lynching of a white union organizer: "If he'd been a Negro, he would've been told, 'Don't be disrespectful . . . don't antagonize whites with money. Don't think you're better than anyone else. Certainly don't believe you're equal unless you're ready to die'" (54). This instruction is not just talk. It is a warning dispensed to Joe, Tyler's grandson, before he finds trouble in the elevator of the Ambrose Building. It is also in this gendered community that young men, like Joe, hear pivotal lesson of manhood: "A man should know his own worth. Otherwise, he's not a man. That's why I let you sit up in my window. Hoping you'd find it. Hear it in the echo of the men" (227). Listening and understanding the wisdom and advice dispensed in the barbershop can also be affirming. In the novel, though specific collective memories of the past are lost, the ancestors and

the oral culture in which they continue to exist remain present in the spiritual, the blues, and in the people who continue to use these mediums.

Tyler's son, Abraham Douglass Samuels (again, referred to as "Samuels" in the novel), a banker and the head of Greenwood's "first family" is disconnected from the spaces where the oral tradition is used to sustain people. For example, early in the novel, readers are told: "Church women testified how Greenwood had risen miraculously out of the dust, how ex-slaves had built a town of telephone poles, electric lights, and a Booker T. Washington High School" (2). However, as a principal investor in the town, Samuels tells a conflicting founding myth that casts himself as the central founder because of his status as the town's banker: "This is the Negroes' Wall Street. Industry. Progress. No other colored town has our resources. Me and my money. My bank built this street, this community" (237). Reminiscent of the tension between Jake (Macon Dead I) and his son, Macon Dead II in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Samuels believes the accumulation of "property, ownership, and material success" is a means to escape the shame of his father's past enslavement and illiteracy (Middleton 66). He goes so far as to take advantage of his father's illiteracy by stealing the deed to his father's land, selling the land (unwittingly at a fraction of its worth; it sits over oil) and using the proceeds to capitalize his bank in Greenwood. However, when whites from Tulsa terrorize and raze Greenwood, his materialistic approach leaves him with nothing. Ironically, Tyler dies a heroic death defending his family, while Samuels dies a meaningless death trying to defend deeds and money in his bank.

The memory of Samuels' role in the founding of Greenwood is also wounded by the tensions between him and the next generation. He believes that his deception of his father is for the benefit of his sons. He offers them a future that "most whites would envy. A business. A house. Education" (107). However, his first son, Henry, rejects the offer to work at his side as the "Son" in bank named "Samuels and Son." He loses Henry to the frontlines of the war in Europe without any reconciliation. Then Joe, his only remaining son, decides to drop out of high school and earn his own money working as a shoeshine in downtown Tulsa instead of at his father's bank in Greenwood. In Samuels' mind, he loses both sons. His legacy based on the privileging of money and literacy over other ways of empowerment begins and ends with himself.

Henry resents his father's theft of Tyler's land, but Joe, the novel's protagonist, values and reclaims bits of the oral tradition that Tyler represented. Tyler passed on if not memories of the South than at least an oblique reference to resistant to slavery to his grandson by singing a secular song popular among the formerly enslaved:

> Run, nigger, run.
> The paterrollers come.[38]

When Joe finds himself in trouble, he remembers that "[b]efore his stroke, Tyler would circle the garden singing: 'Run, nigger, run. The paterrollers come.' Generations of slaves had escaped from the white man. Running from patrols of men and dogs. Tyler had done it—run through cotton fields, swamps, just like Joe was running" (70). Through song,

[38] See *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives*. The editors note, "of all the secular songs about which informants in the Oklahoma Slave Narrative Project had memories, 'Run, Nigger, Run' (also known as 'The Patteroll Song') was the most frequently cited" (99, note 2).

Tyler imparts to his grandson, not his own experience of escaping, as Joe had originally thought, but the communal advice to those who did attempt to escape. Through the oral tradition, the southern landscape, for Joe, is a site of resistance.

In Ralph Ellison's migration novel, *Invisible Man*, the grandfather giving deathbed advice to the unnamed protagonist is an elaborate version of Tyler's teaching the song of resistance to Joe with a significant difference. In the prologue to Ellison's novel, the grandfather evokes the southern experience ("I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction") and counsels cunning, resistance by duplicity and deception ("undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction")—in short the wearing of the proverbial "mask".

> I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (16)

However, Ellison's protagonist fails to heed his grandfather's advice, which would have aided him in navigating the various episodes that confound him. Griffin writes, "Invisible Man mistakes distance from ancestors for critical intelligence. He does not realize that his 'education' is an empty one if it denies the importance and significance of the wisdom embodied in the text's ancestral figures" (130). Conversely, Joe embraces what he knows of Tyler's southern experience. He uses the words sung by Tyler as a strategy of resistance to successfully outrun the mob.

The southern experience of the past is also evoked when Joe recounts the escape to his grandfather. He sits on the bed of the now frail old man and reports, "I did good today. You would've been proud. I escaped the slave man" (85). But here, the reference to the "slave man" alludes to the informal policing of black people and communities before the Civil War. In other words, the white patroller or slave man of Tyler's southern past is also present on the western frontier. Both the South and the West are thus sites of terror indicating that the oppressive racism of the South had migrated westward by the 1920s.

Across the tracks from the "Magic City" (Tulsa), Joe becomes fascinated with magic—sleight-of-hand-tricks, simple illusions, and handcuff escapes using a lock pick—popularized in magazines of the day. He aspires to emulate the famous escape artist and illusionist, Harry Houdini. However, he soon concludes, "Houdini was a poor hero for a Negro" (150). When Joe begins to emulate Tyler, Lying Man and Gabe—the courageous men who resist and defend Greenwood—his magic matures into a form of spiritualism or conjuring rooted in the African American folk tradition. In *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, Yvonne P. Chireau writes of conjuring as a means of resistance and protection for African Americans that dates back to enslavement, but she also states, "Black Americans utilized conjuring traditions not only because they saw them as a valuable resource for resistance, but because they believed that the supernatural realm offered alternative possibilities for empowerment" (18).

When the sheriff arrests and jails Joe for allegedly assaulting the elevator operator, Joe conjures the spirit of his dead brother, Henry. Alone, inside of his cell, Joe talks with Henry and is able to recover repressed memories:

> *"Tyler won that land. He raced faster than hundreds of men—black skinned and white. He staked his claim. Staked out two hundred acres around Lena's River where the Ambrose fields are now."*
>
> "I remember," Joe murmured. When Tyler could still hold a brush, he painted the same landscape: plains of tall wheat. When a painting was finished, Tyler wept through the night.
>
> *"Father stole the land from Tyler."*
>
> "Sold it to Ambrose," said Joe, realizing he'd always known it. "But why, Henry? Why?
>
> *"Said a Negro man was allowed only so much power. He sold the land, started his bank, bought pieces of Greenwood. But that land—its oil, Joe, acres of it—fueled Ambrose's wealth. Built Tulsa." . . .*
>
> *"Father wanted to believe I was a little wild. Wanted to believe I'd settle down and become a banker. Just like him." His face contorted. "Then Tyler had his stroke. The war came; I was glad it came. I ran. I wasn't man enough to stay in Greenwood."* (110)

The recovery of Joe's memories links pieces of his grandfather's emigration and settlement story on the frontier to his father's founding story of Greenwood. It also explains the catalysts for past events such as Tyler's physical deterioration and Henry's enlistment into the Army. For Joe's present, the stories serve a significant purpose. He learns the difference between running *from* something (survival) and running *to* something (self-determination).

Tyler's quest for available land on the frontier, Samuels' development of an all-black Greenwood in the shadow of all-white Tulsa, and Joe's maturation in Greenwood as the surviving son in the town's founding family reveal much more than just one

family's story. It tells a collective story of the cultural, social and racial context of Tulsa and Greenwood leading up to, during, and immediately after the Tulsa Riot of 1921. True to the remembrances of actual Greenwood residents, Rhodes's novel demonstrates to contemporary readers that the race riot did not really begin on Monday, May 30, 1921 with accusations of a black man assaulting a white woman in an elevator. Nor does it end on June 1, 1921 after whites bombed and burned all of the buildings in Greenwood to the ground and the National Guard has imprisoned the surviving Greenwood residents. In the hopeful ending of the novel, Joe realizes that he is tired of running and tired of not being free. Instead of running from Tulsa, Joe decides to run to Greenwood. Unlike Tyler and his father, Joe is not running to Greenwood for land or the bank: "He'd use his father's money for wood, nails, and glass. He'd organize the men. Starting with the church—they'd work side by side hammering, sawing, building. One by one, they'd raise the school, homes, businesses" (268). The collective memory of Greenwood's past proves to be sustaining enough to fuel the desire to rebuild the town again for future generations.

In the epilogue to *Magic City*, Jewell Parker Rhodes refers to the historical record that prompted her interest in Tulsa:

> In a 1983 *Parade Magazine*, I read the following headline: "The Only U.S. City Bombed from the Air."
>
> A black-and-white-photo taken in 1921, showed a community burned to ash. The story, no more than a few paragraphs, cited these basic "facts": Dick Rowland, a shoeshine, was accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator. A riot ensued and the National Guard bombed Deep Greenwood, a thriving black community known as the Negro Wall Street. More than 4,000 blacks were interred in tents for nearly a year and given green cards. (269)

The article was a site of memory for Rhodes. However, she is quick to remind readers that her novel is “an imaginative rendering of the Tulsa Riot” (270). With this in mind, Rhodes does impart important truths about black migration and settlement in the racialized landscape of the Territory.

In 1997, when *Magic City* was published, Rhodes’s characterizations of the black frontier subjects in the Territory were rare in the African American novelistic tradition. The characters grapple with the loss of oral culture and tradition embodied in the Sooner who experienced slavery, emancipation and westward emigration. The characters have to construct their homes and their community from the ground up unlike their counterparts in the Great Migration to northern cities. Finally, young black men have to determine whether the psychic terrain constructed on the frontier by their fathers and grandfathers is sufficient to hold their dreams two generations removed from earlier motivations of emigration and settlement in the Territory. One year later, Johnson and Morrison would publish their novels providing a further glimpse of the infinite possibilities of the literary imagination working with black sites of memory in the reclamation of the lost histories of black frontier subjects and communities in the Territory. With this is mind it is the direction, focus, emphasis and quality of Rhodes imaginative reconstructions that become paramount and which brings this book into rewarding conversation with the next, Morrison’s monumental *Paradise*.

As we have seen Rhodes’s novelistic attention is initially directed to the hither fore long suppressed and shameful history of the forgotten city by a press report on its destruction at the hands of a mob. But what first piques and focuses her novelistic

imagination/exploration is the presumed cause of the pogrom which destroyed the fabled black metropolis, that hoary conundrum of southern racial violence: the imperative of protecting white womanhood from the aggressions of insatiable black male sexuality. This is accomplished by an ironic, creative re-imagining counterposing the stories of the two central actors in the fateful "black man/white woman" encounter as key characters in the novel. The two characters' stories unfold against a backdrop of the intergenerational tensions within the male line of the family Samuels and the status anxieties and social and economic provocations to white supremacist insecurities represented by the mere existence and accomplishment of the city of Greenwood. A reconstruction which is enabled and heavily indebted for credibility on the deployment of the resources of the black oral tradition and other sites of memory available to the novelist.

CHAPTER IV

"COME PREPARED OR NOT AT ALL": RACE, GENDER AND ISOLATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

I've been to the nation, round the territor, you hear me talking to you?
Got to reap what you sow.
I've been all through the nation and round the territor,
But I ain't found no heaven on earth, Lawd, nowhere I go

- Lyrics from "Lonesome Day Blues" by Jesse James[39]

In this study's previous chapters, I examine depictions of black frontier settlements using two little known novels published about the same time as the widely known and critically dissected, *Paradise* (1998) by Toni Morrison. *Paradise* is Morrison's seventh novel—whereas *Standing at the Scratch Line* is Johnson's first and *Magic City* Rhodes's second. *Paradise* was also the much-anticipated third installment of Morrison's migration trilogy, which began with *Beloved* (1987), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize in 1987. Five years later, in 1992, Morrison published *Jazz*. In the following year, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was the first African American recipient of that honor. Then, after a six-year pause between novels, *Paradise* completed the trilogy. In 1998, Oprah Winfrey named *Paradise* as one of "Oprah's Book Club" selections making it as much a popular read as an academic one. It was only to be expected that a novel from a prolific, canonical author of several best-

[39] See Steven C. Tracy's *Going to Cincinnati: A History of the Blues in the Queen City*, 76.

selling novels and Nobel Laureate would completely overshadow the novels by Johnson and Rhodes despite their treatment of similar themes.

Its popularity notwithstanding, *Paradise* is far from an easy read. According to "Resisting Paradise: Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and the Middlebrow Audience," by Michael Perry, "*Paradise* marks the first instance within Oprah's Book Club when a text selected by Winfrey meets considerable resistance" (119). Resistance to the novel can be the result of several factors. First, Morrison uses several post-modernist devices: multiple points of view to tell the story of Ruby, a fictional black town; non-linear remembrances of events spanning nearly one hundred years—from the 1880s; as well as multiple sites complicating the narrative flow of the novel. In addition, Morrison employs a narrator that is unreliable especially when it comes to dates. Lastly, the town is home to 360 people—most of whom are part of a complicated genealogy of fifteen interwoven families. When reading *Paradise*, readers must prepare themselves for a multi-voiced, multi-layered journey into complex themes rendered with deliberate ambiguity including (e)migration, self-determination, race, gender, and isolation. Moreover the ambitions for this novel are vast and intimidating. This story of the migration and founding of a community unfolds with clear Biblical resonances of a chosen people's escape from bondage to a promised land. The tone and the prose seem deliberately Old Testamental and the themes explored are nothing short of mythic and primordial.

Migration, a major theme in *Paradise*, is a frequent presence in Morrison's fiction. Her migration trilogy began with *Beloved*, which tells of Sethe's migration from enslavement on a Kentucky plantation to Ohio, a free state. *Jazz* tells of Joe and Violet

Trace's migration from Virginia to New York during the Great Migration. This demographic movement with its far-reaching cultural effects began in the late nineteenth century and crested in the early decades of the twentieth. In *Paradise*, Morrison tells the story of the "Old Fathers" who lead the Post-Reconstruction emigration of nine families from Mississippi and Louisiana to the Oklahoma Territory. Marni Gauthier notes, "As with *Beloved* and *Jazz* . . . Morrison's conception of the novel developed from kernels [of] 19th-century African American history that center on slaves or descendants of slaves fleeing the rampant, violent racism of the South" (397).[40]

When the emigrating families approached the black town of Fairly, Oklahoma, they were "thrown out and cast away," which resulted in a bond between the families based on their exclusion (188). The rejected party named the event the "Disallowing." The rejection also resulted in the Old Fathers founding their own all-black town, Haven. They commemorate the founding by building a communal oven in the town's center. The oven, a shared utility and a popular meeting place, becomes a vibrant symbol of unity and identity. Residents of the town refer to it as the Oven—always with a capital "O." When Haven goes bust (by 1948), the descendants of the Old Fathers dismantle the Oven, though it is no longer practical, and transport it for its historical symbolism to the new townsite.

The novel has at least two protagonists, the twin brothers, Deacon and Steward Morgan. The twins are the grandsons of a Post-Reconstruction black migrant who leaves the south for the western frontier. The twins also replicate the migrant experience for

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[40] See Gauthier's "The Other Side of 'Paradise': Toni Morrison's (Un)Making of Mythic History," *African American Review*, (Fall 2005).

themselves when they move from the first black town in Oklahoma to settle further west on another townsite in the same state. As human repositories for the early emigration and settlement stories because of their total recall, Deacon and Steward establish themselves as guardians of the town's "master narrative." They attempt to protect the narrative from the town's self-proclaimed historian and from the radically revisionist interpretations of the younger generation. The twins are central figures in the actions to defend of Ruby from threats—real and imagined. However, Rob Davidson argues:

> In *Paradise*, Morrison no longer concentrates on the individual process of reconstitution. While the individual process is still important-and intimately related to the communal-Morrison is more interested in assessing the role of narrative in the community as a whole. The protagonist of *Paradise* is, in fact, the community of Ruby, Oklahoma-including the rag-tag band of Convent women who live on its fringes. (355)

Nevertheless, Deacon Morgan, with his twin acting as his foil at the end of the novel, arguably embodies the frontier trope of regeneration through violence.

The sons and grandsons of the Old Fathers—referred to as the New Fathers—as an act of ancestral homage attempt to replicate the actions of their forefathers during the original migration. After returning from the war in 1949, they proclaim the rejection suffered by returning black soldiers at the hands of white Americans as the "Disallowing, Part Two." Then they migrate further west in the state and construct their own isolated, racially segregated community. During this second migration "deeper into Oklahoma" now of fifteen families the Morgan twins face another rejection. Whites who deny medical attention to their beloved sister, Ruby, cause her death. The residents of the second town memorialize her by naming their new home after her. The town of Ruby

seems to thrive in isolation until the late 1960s. The town is then threatened by a host of internal and external forces, which culminate in a murderous raid on a shelter for women (formerly a Convent) located just outside the town. The community of women in the Convent represents a direct challenge to the racial homogeneity and patriarchal leadership of Ruby. Determined to be on the controlling end of the next "Disallowing," a team of men, led by the Morgan twins, shoot the women in ultimate rejection of everything "out there" and everyone defined as other. For Gauthier, the novel "considers the way in which a fantasy of black nationhood, arising from a mythology and history that correspond to the evolution of the United States, devolves into a dystopia" (398).

The memories and stories of the first emigrants in Haven influence many of the protagonists' actions in Ruby. For example, Steward recalls the story told to him about the shame felt when the families with pregnant women among them were turned away from Fairly: "Steward remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told, and he had no trouble imagining the shame for himself….the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody" (95-96).[41] Andrew Read notes, "This passage expands our understanding of the Disallowing's traumatic effects, and demonstrates how these effects become transgenerational" (529).

Consequently, both Steward and Deacon take on the roles of protector, especially for the girls and women of the town. Ironically, they are not successful in saving their

[41] This passage both alludes to the raid in the opening scene and foreshadows the more detailed description of Steward's role in the raid des0cribed in the next to the last chapter.

sister, Ruby, "[t]hat sweet, modest girl whom he and Steward had protected all their lives" (113). Tragically, Deacon recalls,

> They drove her to Demby, then further to Middleton. No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them. She had lost control, then consciousness by the time they got to the second hospital. She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her. When the brothers learned that nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian, and they gathered their dead sister in their arms, their shoulders shook all the way home. (113)

According to J. Brooks Bouson in *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000), "In choosing to name the town after Ruby…they memorialize the potentially lethal consequences of being viewed as an object of contempt—indeed, as animallike—in a white-dominated society…" (201). Failing to save their sister with the trip to Demby, they keep the female residents of Ruby safe within the town limits. A woman could walk around safely at any hour of the night because "[n]othing for ninety miles around thought she was prey" (8). There was, however, an incident when white strangers drive into the town circling their cars around "three or four colored girls walk-dawdling along the side of the road." One of the passengers "opened the front of his trousers and hung himself out the window to scare the girls" (12-13). The men of Ruby came out of their houses and businesses armed and ready to respond to the strangers: "More men come out, and more. Their guns are not pointing at anything, just held slackly against their thighs. Twenty men; now twenty-five. Circling the circling cars. Ninety miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety miles

from the nearest badge.[42] If the day had been dry, the dust spuming behind the tires would have discolored them all" (13). In Ruby, much more so than in Haven, the protection of females is almost inseparable from control of females.[43] Thus, when women who are beyond the control of Ruby's men—hence outside male protection—move into the nearby former Convent, they ultimately become sufficiently threatening as to be destroyed.

The original rejection known as the Disallowing also influences the New Fathers to establish Ruby as a town more exclusive than Haven. The Old Fathers' journey begun with nine families totaling seventy-nine and almost doubled the membership along the way so that about one hundred and fifty-eight completed the journey. In Ruby, people not related to the founding families find leading residents like the Morgan twins less welcoming than the Old Fathers. Patricia's records mention women brought to Ruby by the men who loved them. The New Fathers see adulterated blackness in Menus Jury's "pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia" and Patricia's own mother, who "looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children." Bouson writes, "unlike [Morrison's] earlier novels, which depict the prejudice lighter-skinned blacks feel toward those with darker skin, in *Paradise* Morrison explores the troubling issue of internalized racism by describing how the dark-skinned families of Ruby construct light skin as a stain and view light-skinned blacks as impure and corrupted"(193). Similarly, in her

[42] Richard L. Schur, in the article, "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era," notes, "Unlike most stories about westward movement and the settling of the 'frontier,' no sheriff, deputy, or military personnel represent, in flesh and blood, law and order. Instead, the people of Haven and Ruby, who are running from that very legal order, bring it with them unconsciously as psychic scars and emotional wounds" (280).

[43] See also Read, p. 535.

chapter titled, “The Power of the Gaze in *Paradise*,” Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber concludes that the New Fathers “fail to see themselves in the gaze of women and those light-skinned blacks that they reject. Although they choose a black identity, they adopt the mold of dominant white values, foreclosing the empathy necessary for cultural change” (134-135). [44]

Lighter-skinned women are not the only targets of the isolationist view in Ruby. Richard Misner moves to Ruby to serve as the new Baptist minister. He asks Patricia Best, "…help me figure this place out. I know I'm an outsider, but I'm not an enemy." She replies, "No, you're not. But in this town those two words mean the same thing" (212). Elizabeth Kella discusses Misner's ideological separation from Ruby's founders:

> … Misner is expected to bolster the values of racial, sexual, and moral purity which shaped Ruby's communal identity. However, Misner's commitment to social change, his notion of masculinity, his role in forming a non-profit credit union for church members, and his encouragement of Ruby's young people to think of race in national, even Pan-African, terms makes him suspect to the Morgans and other townsmen. An outsider, Misner threatens the values and institutions that uphold and perpetuate Ruby's social hegemony. (231)

Nevertheless, Ruby’s founders tolerate Misner, unlike the female outsiders. In fact, near the end of the novel, when significant rifts arise between families, Deacon Morgan treats Misner as a confidante. Deacon shares portions of his family and personal history, which

[44] See Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s *Subversive Voices: Eroticizing the Other in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison* (2001).

suggest a budding acceptance of people and ideas different from those previously revered.

The story surrounding the words forged on the Oven is another example of how the Old Fathers influence the actions of the New Fathers. Symbolizing the desire to duplicate what the Old Fathers had accomplished in Haven, the second wave of migrants disassemble the Oven in the withered town and then transport and reassemble it in the new town. Unfortunately, the reassembly is incomplete because a plate of the forged letters is missing. The missing letters become the source of an intergenerational, ideological battle. The remaining words read, "…the Furrow of His Brow." The town founders believe the missing word is "Beware" as in Old Testament consternation. Lone DuPres and Dovey Morgan silently endorse the Old Testament reading. The town youth, however, believe the missing word is "Be" or maybe the words, "We are." Their interpretations reflect a more empowering, New Testament reading of the symbol. The battle represents the residents' "investment in the [town's] founding metaphor" (Gauthier 398). Schreiber writes, "Having transported the Oven and rebuilt it brick by brick, the elders in Ruby cannot abide its denigration. But the law of the fathers, the inscription on the Oven, suffers in transport, and thus opens the door for new interpretations. Because the founding fathers define themselves in the mold of their ancestors, they constantly seek to maintain their equilibrium by deriding new suggestions for signification" (136-137). Elizabeth Kella describes the battle as a "crisis of hegemony." Kella argues, "The disputes themselves call attention to the work of interpreting the past and the multiplicity of ways in which the past can be used to shape the present, for at stake in these arguments

is the future—the character of the town and its relation to the rest of the world…" (218). In Ruby, the Oven symbolizes the founders' obsession with repeating the past successes of the Old Fathers. Unfortunately, there are no symbols—save the reinterpretation of the Oven's message—that represent anything that is organically of Ruby and its residents.

Zechariah Morgan, Juvenal DuPres, and Drum Blackhorse are the leaders the Old Fathers, or the original emigrants. These men each had their own challenges growing up in the American South. The various and varied versions of these stories remind readers of the limitations of recovered historical narratives. According to Philip Page, "The repetition of the telling suggests that, from the authorial and narratorial perspectives, there is always more than one version, more than one authenticated rendition, and already therefore more than one interpretation of the event." Furthermore, Page writes, "Since no single text, version or interpretation is adequate, the novel opens up the actuality and the potentiality for multiple perspectives of author, characters, and Morrison assumes, readers" (640).[45] Gauthier similarly writes, "the definitive space [Morrison] carves out for truth in this novel is one in which truth is ascertained—for the reader as well as for some of the novel's characters—through wrestling with the discontinuities and competing interpretations with which the novel teems" (400).

In the novel, the "discontinuities and competing interpretations" common to the oral tradition emerge in the retelling of the Old Fathers' southern experiences. First, from the perspective of Patricia Best, Ruby's self-proclaimed historian and scholar, readers

[45] See Page's "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* (Winter 2001).

learn that these men were the descendants of people who lived and worked for generations in Louisiana and Mississippi. After the Civil War, they actively participated in the political reconstruction of the South, and then suffered disproportionately from the black disenfranchisement at the heart of southern "white redemption":

> Descendants of those whose worthiness was so endemic it got three of their children elected to rule in state legislatures and county offices: who, when thrown out of office without ceremony or proof of wrong doing, refused to believe what they guessed as the real reason that made it impossible for them to find other mental labor….they alone (Zechariah Morgan and Juvenal DuPres in Louisiana, Drum Blackhorse in Mississippi) were reduced to penury and/or field labor. Fifteen years of begging for sweatwork in cotton, lumber or rice after five glorious years remaking a country. (193)

According to Patricia, the "real reason" for this disenfranchisement and total debasement is "the one and only feature that distinguishes them from their Negro peers"—their coal-black skin.[46] The previously described "Disallowing" during the westward emigration reinforces her theory of racial purity as the basis of the exclusion. It begins with whites, then the Old Fathers choose to exclude others based on their earlier rejection, first by whites then by lighter-skinned blacks. Patricia refers to the nine founding families as "8-Rock ("the deep level in coal mines") to describe the "[b]lue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (193). Patricia's interpretation is based on the genealogical

[46] In her essay, "Figuring the Reader, Refiguring History," Lucille P. Fultz describes Patricia's role in "'telling,' 'reading,' 'writing,' and 'interpreting' the history of Ruby." Fultz cautions, "the reader, though guided by Patricia's example, is expected to keep a certain distance from her and maintain an awareness that encompasses and transcends Patricia's. If the reader wishes to achieve the most efficacious interpretation of *Paradise*, she/he can neither ignore nor place total reliance on Patricia's project, an embedded narrative about writing and reading" (80).

information she gathers from Ruby families as well as her own unique story. As Lucille Fultz puts it, Patricia "holds a dual position within the community: she is an insider, a member of the elite 8-rocks on her father's side; and an outsider, the offspring of 'tainted' blood on her mother's side" (80). Because she inherits lighter skin from her mother, Patricia experiences the angst of an outsider. Philip Page describes Patricia's role as "analogous both to the author and the reader." He further explains, "As compiler of charts and writer of notes, she parallels the author's production of a text about the novel's characters. At the same time, her efforts are attempts to decipher what has happened and is happening, and therefore resemble the reader's role" (640).

Whereas Patricia tries to collect "facts" from the residents who are reluctant to talk to her about their family lines, Lone DuPres utilizes other means towards knowing. As an infant, Lone was rescued, raised and then trained in the art of midwifery by Fairy DuPres, daughter of the Old Father, Juvenal. Lone is known as a healer and someone who "could read minds," a gift she believes everyone has but fails to use. This "gift," if real, would lend credibility to Lone's interpretations of the past (one can't lie successfully to someone who sees into your mind). Lone's version of Juvenal's southern experience takes into account an element absent from Patricia's: a fierce competition with white immigrant labor:

> Like the Morgans and Blackhorses, they were pleased to be descendants of men who had governed in statehouses, but unlike them, they were prouder of earlier generations: artisans, gunsmiths, seamstresses, lacemakers, cobblers, ironmongers, masons whose serious work was stolen from them by white immigrants. Their deeper reverence was for the generations that had seen their shops burned and their supplies thrown overboard. Because white immigrants

> could not trust or survive fair competition, their people had been arrested, threatened, purged and eliminated from skilled labor and craft. (283-284)

In Ruby, Lone proud of her abilities as a midwife and her connection to the DuPreses, grounds her version of the early emigration story in the strong work ethic that the family passed on to her. Juvenal's memories are political in nature: emphasizing economic deprivation, politically motivated violence, and hostile competition from white immigrant artisans.

On the other hand, Deacon Morgan reveals a previously unknown element of his grandfather's southern experience. Deacon's historical references consist of memories his grandfather, Zechariah, told and retold only to Deacon and his twin. According to Deacon, his grandfather's Post-Reconstruction woes stem from his being "subject to personal taunts as well as newspaper articles describing his malfeasance in office" (302). For Zechariah, the scandal resulted in the loss of community, employment and shelter. One final act of disgrace becomes the trigger for westward emigration. White men commanded Zechariah and his twin, who at that time went by the names Coffee and Tea, to dance for them. Deacon recalls this final public humiliation:

> Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren't brothers anymore. Coffee began to plan a new life elsewhere. He contacted other men, other former legislators who had the same misfortune as his—Juvenal DuPres and Drum Blackhorse. They were the three who formed the nucleus of the Old Fathers. Needless to say, Coffee didn't ask Tea to join them on their journey to Oklahoma. (302)

Deacon's grandfather abandons his twin and his old self in the South. With a new name and a new role helping to guide the nine families, Zechariah now one of the "Old Fathers" emigrates westward in search of a new home.

For the early emigrants, the Old Confederacy is a site of more than male-oriented oppression because black men were by no means the only targets of racial violence. Black women when in close quarters to white men were potential targets of sexual violence. Hence, Steward Morgan recalls his grandfather's pride:

> They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman's kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate. So they exchanged that danger for the relative safety of brutal work. (99)

When the emigrants settle in Haven, they institutionalize this protection of "their women" by building a functional "kitchen" in the center of the town. As Elizabeth Kella writes in *Beloved Communities*:

> The construction of the Oven is thus instrumental to the construction of public, communal space characterized by a historically specific notion of self-determination. To its builders, the oven signified their hard-won freedom from racial oppression—a freedom intimately connected to the achievement of family and of a closely-knit community. (215)

In *Paradise*, readers learn details of how black southerners came to build a town in the Oklahoma Territory from not much more than space and frontier materials. Originally, the families sought relocation into already established black towns, but black

town promoters sought for their settlements homesteaders with capital-in-hand.[47] The Morgan twins recall the impact of this class discrimination: "It stung them into confusion to learn they did not have enough money to satisfy the restrictions the 'self-supporting' Negroes required. In short, they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders" (14). After an extended period of wandering during which Zechariah is visited by a series of Biblical-like visions, the families find their place. (This evocation of the wandering Hebrew children in Exodus is by no means accidental.) They negotiate with and labor for the "family of State Indians" to whom the land belongs. More than a year later, they are able to take full ownership. For the Old Fathers the lesson learned in the South and the Territory is the importance of isolation and the ownership of land.[48] Haven has no immediate neighbors—black or white—to reject or threaten their "destined" authority:

> Coming from lush vegetation to extravagant space could have made them feel small when they saw more sky than earth, grass to their hips. To the Old Fathers it signaled luxury—an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders and without deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. Here freedom was not entertainment, like a carnival or a hoedown that you can count on once a year. Nor was it the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a

[47] In the novel, Morrison refers to "[t]he headline of a feature in the *Herald*, 'Come Prepared or Not at All.' In the introduction to this study, I mention this actual headline from the *Langston City Herald* cited in Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier*.

[48] The desire for isolation distinguishes Morrison's novel from the previous two novels in this study. Morrison's characters survive without municipal services, water access, and railroad access usually shared with and controlled by neighboring white communities. It most cases, the availability of these resources were essentials for the previous fictional towns as well as actual black towns. As in both *Standing at the Scratch Line* and *Magic City*, a relationship dependant on such resources could weaken a town's ability to be self-determining.

> man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king. (99)

Thus, Haven represents for the Old Fathers' an opportunity to construct their own definition of freedom—not one imposed on them based on previous condition, race or class. It is also a reward for surviving and overcoming adversity. Addressing this reality, Andrew Read writes,

> In Haven the Old Fathers are finally free to become typical American men, who realize their masculinity through controlling and shaping their environment. They no longer rely on recognition of their manhood from a hostile society; instead, by conquering nature and shaping it to their will, they can construct them-selves as "king[s]." The almost super-human level of effort that the Old Fathers put in and the hardships they endure to establish a totally self-sufficient town demonstrate their enthusiasm for this concept. (531) [49]

The geographic isolation of Haven and the ideological fundamentalism of the founders do not mean that they have no interest in or interaction with other black towns. Deacon remembers periodic family visits, which they call Grand Tours. The description of the First Grand Tour in 1910 reveals the favorable impression that the Haven residents had of the similarly situated, autonomous black communities:

> Big Daddy drove his brother Pryor and his firstborn son, Elder, all over the state and beyond to examine, review and judge other Colored towns. They planned to visit two outside Oklahoma and five within: Boley, Langston City, Rentiesville, Taft, Clearview, Mound Bayou, Nicodemus.[50] In the end, they made it to only four. Big Daddy, Uncle

[49] See Read's "As If Word Magic Had Anything to Do with the Courage It Took to be a Man:" Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, *African American Review* (Winter 2005).

[50] In this scene, Morrison uses the names of historical black towns that still exist. The first five towns are in Oklahoma, the fourth town is in Mississippi, and the fifth is in Kansas.

> Pryor and Elder spoke endlessly of that trip, how they matched wits with and debated preachers, pharmacists, dry-goods store owners, doctors, newspaper publishers, schoolteachers, bankers. (108)

The residents of Haven, like those in towns on the tour, build a thriving town that is self-sufficient and self-determining. Nevertheless, Deacon also remembers, "[e]leven years later Tulsa was bombed, and several of the towns Big Daddy, Pryor and Elder had visited were gone" (108). The Second (and Last) Grand Tour in 1932 confirms the demise of other black towns. The Morgans, remembering the Dissallowing of 1890, "simply remarked on the mystery of God's justice" (109). The retelling of the other town's fates reaffirms the Morgans's sense of moral superiority.

The twins return from the war in Europe anticipating the isolation that Haven provides. They find outside forces, "the Depression, the tax man and the railroad," threatening to destroy their idyllic homesite. This is sharply ironic because for many small towns access to a railroad had represented the difference between "boom" or "bust." But as the soon-to-be founders of Ruby decided, uncontrollable access to "Out There" could be fatal:

> The twins stared at their dwindling postwar future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old Fathers had done in 1890. Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose—behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being

> alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven—headed not for Muskogee or California as some had, or Saint Louis, Houston, Langston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made. (16)

Driven by fears of racially motivated terrorism, the twins abandon Haven. Then they set out to vindicate the Old Fathers' emigration and settlement experience by duplicating it. Gauthier argues that racism is not the only motivation for the second migration: "A better explanation … for the desertion is gleaned from the 'contaminating grovel' that the twins escape, which comes from the railroad that threatens Haven's isolation and hence its racial and sexual purity, allowing for the corruption of the twins' memorialized vision of Haven" (402). The textual support for this view occurs much later in the novel. Patricia's memory of her father, Roger Best, bringing her and her mother to Haven includes an outburst from Steward, "He's bringing along the dung we leaving behind" (201).

Many of the close family ties—characteristic of contemporary black frontier narratives—begin with the male-centered leadership represented by the Old Fathers. Nicknames reinforce the tendency towards patriarchy; for example, Zechariah Morgan becomes "Big Papa;" his son and Deacon and Steward's father, Rector Morgan, becomes "Big Daddy;" and the "New Fathers" revere the old. According to Andrew Read:

> African American patrimony has often been the transmission of an internalized, dehumanizing racist gaze that splits and traumatizes filial subjectivity. Initially, the

> men in Paradise appear to have escaped this inheritance by establishing an autonomous, all-black community, one free from the dominating social influences of white racism. They possess a proud cultural heritage that they transmit through the generations as a central element of their children's upbringing. (528)

The successful migration allows the Old Fathers to shape a quasi-heroic narrative that redeems southern and western traumas. This narrative relies heavily on a shared, familial and communal identity. Nevertheless, as Read argues, the narrative is incomplete because: "the men of Ruby actually pass on an unresolved trauma, an experience of dehumanizing shame that their stories of heroic achievement deny rather than work through and overcome" (528).

An example of this denial can be seen in the self-proclaimed role and identity of Zechariah Morgan. Family is especially important to Zechariah whom Patricia suggests is like his Biblical namesake, the Old Testament prophet who had visions predicting the scattering of God's chosen people as "punishment for not showing mercy or compassion" (192). Patricia continues:

> The scattering would have frightened him. The breakup of the group or tribe or consortium of families or, in Coffee's case, the splitting up of a contingent of families who had lived with or near each other since before Bunker Hill. He would not have had trouble imagining the scariness of having everybody he knew thrown apart, thrown into different places in a foreign land and becoming alien to each other. He would have been frightened of not knowing a jawline that signified one family, a cast of eye or a walk that identified another. Of not being able to see yourself re-formed in a third- or fourth-generation grandchild. Of not knowing where the generations before him were buried or how to get in touch with them if you didn't know. That

> would be the Zechariah Coffee would have chosen for himself. (192)

Near the end of the novel we learn that Zechariah, known as Coffee in Mississippi, left behind his own twin brother, Tea, when he emigrated. According to Deacon, Zechariah "never said another word to him and wouldn't allow anybody else to call his name" (303). This separation results from the "public humiliation" mentioned earlier. Ironically, Zechariah was shamed so by the public incident that the scattering (the dispersal of kinsmen) actually begins with this estrangement from his twin.[51]

During the last chapter, history appears to repeat itself. Deacon suffers an incident of shame with his own twin, Steward. It is at that point, Deacon understands that his grandfather left his twin in Mississippi "[n]ot because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again" (303). Thus, as Susan Neal Mayberry suggests, "The sins of the Fathers in *Paradise* are certainly visited on their sons" (246).[52] Morrison leaves the incident between Deacon and Steward open. Readers are left wondering if Deacon will change the family trend of projecting shame as a consequence of his new insight concerning the Coffee/Tea incident. Read suggests the likelihood of such a change when he writes, "Deacon will not reject his twin brother in the manner of his grandfather…instead he will accept the shame within himself" (539). Critic Philip Page also discusses this "unsettling" as an opportunity for inclusion. He writes, "The near-oneness of Deacon and Steward,

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[51] See also Read, p.529.

[52] See Susan Neal Mayberry's *Can't I Love What I Criticize?: The Masculine and Morrison* (2007).

like the tight harmony of the town, had once been useful but had become too binding. Deacon's need to grow on his own beyond his bond with Steward symbolizes the town's need to grow beyond its confining bond with its own legend" (645).

The scattering of Zechariah's descendants first begins when his grandsons—Elder and the twins—enlisted for the Great War. Upon the veterans' return Elder experiences a racial "Disallowing" when assaulted by whites in New York City. Following his burial years later, in the uniform that bore the marks of the assault, Elder's six children leave Haven permanently. Patricia understands, "Zechariah would have hated that. Moving would have been 'scattering' to him. And he was right, for sure enough, from then on the fertility shriveled, even while the bounty multiplied" (193). During the war in Vietnam, both of Deacon sons, Easter and Scout, enlist and return home in coffins. Steward and his wife Dovey suffer through serial miscarriages leaving no surviving children. Thus, according to Deacon, the "charge to multiply," rests solely with their nephew, Coffee Smith (known as "K.D."), the son of Ruby with an "army buddy of her brothers" who died during the previous war (191). For the Morgan twins, the survival and integrity of the community—really a traditional African clan or "extended lineage"—requires offspring and allegiance to Zechariah's compulsive desire to keep the family together in the black town created for that purpose.

One predictable if unintended consequence of the misanthropy and impulse towards racial purity of the founding families is the sexual intermingling of blood relatives. Katrine Dalsgård writes that Morrison gives: "strong hints that incest is the overarching determinant of her small and isolated community's culture. Bear in mind, for

instance, the fact that two of the community's leading elders, the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, are married to a pair of sisters, Soane and Dovey" (242).[53] Furthermore, Patricia tells readers, "…there were many others that practiced what Fairy DuPres called 'takeovers.' A young widow might take over a single man's house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects" (196). Patricia tries to follow the takeovers in her genealogical records of the two towns. She also tries to unravel the bloodlines because her husband, Billy Cato, is the product of a takeover, that of Fawn Blackhorse by August Cato. This could mean that Patricia and Billy's daughter, Billie Delia, is involved with two of her cousins. Occasionally, "coupling outside marriage or takeovers was not only frowned upon, it could get you ostracized." Nevertheless, a family might grant permission as in the case of Billy's father, if the reputations involved were sound. According to Elizabeth Kella, the takeovers regulate sexuality and bloodlines by pairing off widows, widowers, and unmarried people in a socially sanctioned way (217-218). This apparently applied only to the community. Outsiders were not given the same considerations.

A non-traditional takeover occurs at the Convent just outside Ruby. Consolata (known as Connie), who in 1925 was kidnapped from South America and brought to the "Christ the King School for Native Girls" in Oklahoma by Sister Mary Magna, is like the widows of Ruby. After more than forty years of living in the Convent with Mary Magna, Connie would have been alone there had it not been for four women who come seeking

[53] See Katrine Dalsgård's "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, (Summer 2001).

shelter. The women "takeover" both the Convent and Connie, which irrevocably alters her relationship with the residents of Ruby. At first tolerant of the "strange Catholic women with no male mission to control them," the men of Ruby become increasingly intolerant of these new strangers having neither obvious religious ties nor male guidance (233). Lone DuPres overhears some of the men blaming the ills of the town on the takeover at the Convent: "Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in a church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either. They don't need men and they don't need God" (276). The lengths to which the town goes to establish and maintain traditional families increases the intolerance expressed towards the "family" of women at the Convent.

Ironically, the female-centered family at the Convent offers strangers the kind of acceptance sought and not found by the Old Fathers during their emigration. Even more ironic, the town's patriarchs are so obsessed with resisting "them" that they fail to see similar manifestations of female independence within their own households. Kella observes another element of this irony: "all kinds of visitors from the town, both men and women, come to the Convent for respite from the oppressiveness of Ruby's strict regulations of sexuality. Functioning as a shelter for the socially abused, the Convent as place is constructed along lines of inclusiveness and a freedom from restraint that borders on anarchy" (220).

An example of "freedom from restraint" is the freedom of movement enjoyed by the Convent "family" as opposed to Zechariah's fear of family "scatterings." Mavis

Albright is first to arrive at the Covent. She leaves and returns several times during the six years of her residency at the Convent. According to Evelyn Schreber, "Under the gaze of Connie's "unjudgmental," "tidy," "ample," and "forever" eyes, Mavis finds hope. Mavis stays at the Convent and grows into an independent, nurturing person" (145). Pallas Truelove, the last character to arrive there, loses has lost her voice after some boys forced her car off the road and raped her. When she meets Connie she recovers her voice because "Connie was magic" (173). For Pallas, the Convent becomes a safe space: "The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too" (177). Pallas does leave the Convent and tries to return home. "But the humiliation wore her down" (254). Five months later, she returns "prettier, fatter, pretending she had just stopped by for a visit. In a limousine, no less. With three suitcases" (261). When Connie emerged from her period of mourning Mary Magna, she also emerged as a priestess prepared to offer a healing and unjudgemental acceptance to displaced and emotionally isolated women. She advises them, "If you have a place…that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me." Women who decide to stay do so because the Convent is "the one place they were free to leave" (262).

Paradise certainly differs from the previous novels discussed in this study in terms of identified threats to Haven and Ruby. Both sets of founding fathers settle on sites that do not have any bordering white towns with residents that threaten lynchings, Klan rides, and mass destruction. Nevertheless, the incidents of racial violence that the Old Fathers experience in the South and the residents of Haven experience in Oklahoma

keep them vigilant and suspicious of whites in or near Ruby. The setup of the town is inhospitable towards "lost or aimless strangers" because there is "nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital" (12). When a white couple with a sick baby gets lost and drives into Ruby, Reverend Misner purchases aspirin and cough medicine from the nondescript pharmacy that "looks like a regular house." Then Misner gives the husband directions to get back to the highway. This brief encounter quickly draws the attention of Steward Morgan who approaches the travelers and suggests they find lodging as soon as they get to the highway to ride out a blizzard that is on the way. In Ruby, there is no offered or available lodging to shelter them from the storm.

The one white woman who takes up residence in the Convent, becomes the symbol or scapegoat for all of the absent whites. In fact, the first line of the novel reads, "They shoot the white girl first" (3), yet Morrison does not reveal the racial identities of any of the women.[54] According to Bouson's chapter on "Intergenerational Transmission of Racial Shame and Trauma," "By beginning her novel with the abrupt and jarring statement…and then deliberately suppressing information about which character is white as she describes the Convent women, Morrison's intent is to compel her readers to look beyond the category of race in responding to her characters: Consolata and the four castaway women who join her—Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas."[55] Bouson goes on to

[54] Morrison also uses this strategy of engaging readers in her short story, "Recitatif," which was published in the anthology, *Confirmation* (1983) edited by Amiri Baraka.

[55] See J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000).

point out, "But Morrison also shows the deadly impact of race . . . of the lives of these characters: stigmatized outsiders who are marked as different by the people of Ruby and viewed through the distorting lens of culturally inherited racist and sexist stereotypes" (194). Richard L. Schur asks "why shoot the white girl first?" and answers:

> It is not just a body that is being demolished, but whiteness idealized. The men of Ruby seek to destroy whiteness by eradicating the presence of a body onto which they have mapped whiteness. In a conventional sense, there may be no 'white girl' at the Convent. The whiteness may only exist in the imaginations of the men of Ruby, and thus her actual identity is irrelevant. (294)

Kella argues that the first victim is a threat to racial purity when she writes, "Haunted by the specter of 'miscegenation,' the townsmen implicitly define women in terms of their sexuality and reproductive capacities" (214). If miscegenation is the issue, this means that Connie, with her Native American heritage, represents a threat to racial purity. The chapter from Lone DuPres's perspective gives some insight into Steward Morgan's motive in the raid as being drive by an affair Deacon had with Connie some years earlier. He broods over:

> how close his brother came to breaking up his marriage to Soane. How off the course Deek slid when he was looking in those poison and poisoning eyes. For months the two of them had met secretly, for months Deek was distracted, making mistakes and just suppose the hussy had gotten pregnant? Had a mixed-up child? Steward seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they owned and promised the Old Fathers. (279)[56]

[56] See Richard L. Shur's article, "'Paradise' in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory," (Summer 2004).

For Steward, the threat of miscegenation does not wane over time. Though Connie is beyond childbearing age when the men decide to strike, she is in as great of danger as is the other Convent women.

The aversion to the possibility of "mixed-up" children is not reserved solely for the Convent women. Delia Best, the mother of Patricia, was the first pale-skinned victim of the townsmen's hardscrabbling intolerance. From her earliest days in Ruby, Delia's light (almost white) skin set her apart from all of the other Ruby residents: "Remember how they needed you, used you to go into a store to get supplies or a can of milk while they parked around the corner? That was the only thing your skin was good for. Otherwise it bothered them. Reminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place." Even Delia's husband has to adjust to some of the social realities regarding race and racism when it came to his wife and daughter. Patricia remembers, "When we drove through a town, or when a sheriff's car was near, Daddy told us to get down, to lie on the floor of the car, because it would have been no use telling a stranger that you were colored and worse to say you were his wife" (200).[57] When Delia had trouble birthing her second child, the town's wives and midwives try to help, "[b]ut none of them could drive then." The men all claimed to be too busy (197). Patricia remembers: "Finally they got Senior Pulliam to agree. But by the time he got his shoes tied it was too late" (198). Delia and the baby died from the townsmen's negligence.

[57] Juda Bennett, in her article, "Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative," writes: "Perhaps [Delia] Best, the traditional passing figure, should be viewed as a counterpoint for the more prominent metafictional play that centers on the unnamed white woman, or nontraditional passing figure, in the first line of the novel. While the former strategy might be characterized as a decentering of the passing narrative, the latter defamiliarizes an old story. In the play between these two strategies, Morrison does the impossible—she passes on (i.e., both rejects and accepts) the traditional passing narrative" (213).

Ironically, even as Patricia records her unique perspective as a victim of Ruby's internalized racism, she victimizes her own daughter, Billie Delia, whom she describes as "my lightish but not whiteish baby" (199). Years later, Patricia confronts her now adult daughter with unfounded charges of promiscuity. Believing Billie Delia's denial to be a lie, Patricia strikes her with an iron. Billie Delia describes the event as "a quarrel with her mother turned ugly. Her mother fought her like a man that day" (152). Patricia's reflection on her attitudes and behavior towards her daughter is revealing:

> Trying to understand how she could have picked up that pressing iron, Pat realized that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like. Was it that business of pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three then. Pat knew that had her daughter been [a full-blooded] 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was—only an innocent child would have done that, surely? But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still? (204)

In Patricia's obsession with her "8-rock theory," she begins to exhibit and internalized self-hatred, which leads to physical abuse of her daughter.

There is at least one additional collective fear from the men of Ruby that leads them to orchestrate the massacre of the women. Sarah Appleton Aguiar speculates,

> Although the men fear racial impurity and social change, they fear death most of all. Thus, more than misogyny and racial intolerance, what drives them to murder the Convent

> women is the desire to rid Ruby of the abomination of blatant death. (517)[58]

Death is something that does not often occur in Ruby. Patricia considers her mother's (and stillborn sister's) death to be the only deaths that have actually occurred "in Ruby." Other residents such as Ace Flood and Ruby Morgan died overseas in wars or in the hospital in not-so-nearby Demby. Patricia speculates, "Was death blocked from entering Ruby?" (199). At the end of her chapter, Patricia has a revelation about the founding families:

> What do you know? It was clear as water. The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too….That was the deal Zechariah had made during his humming prayer….But the bargain must have been broken or changed…By whom? The Morgans, probably. They ran everything. They ran everything, controlled everything. What new bargain had the twins struck? Did they really believe that no one died in Ruby? Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. Unadulturated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe That was their deal. For Immortality.
>
> Pat's smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women. (217)

The deal for immortality, proposed by Patricia, suggests more than longevity for the town's elders. It is worthy of consideration in the case of Sweetie and Jeff Fleetwood's children. For six years, Sweetie has kept watch over four sick children—described by many of the town's residents as "defective." The narrator tells readers that Sweetie never

[58] See Sarah Appleton Aguiar's article, "'Passing on' Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise,'" (Autumn 2004).

heard crying from her own babies—"All of her babies were silent" (130). In these four children confined to their beds and existing somewhere between life and death, readers might see the grosser implications of immortality.

Initially, Jeff Fleetwood's Vietnam experience (Agent Orange?) gets the blame for the four sick children. Other events that seem to challenge the town's founders have their own individual causes. Bouson adds, "Richard Misner…detects evidence of the town's 'unraveling' in the 'glacial wariness' between the townspeople, in the community discord over the Oven, and in the troubled behavior of some of Ruby's young people, like Menus, who has become the town drunk, and Billie Delia, who runs away" (161). As time passes, and the wayward women settle into the Convent, the residents of Ruby start to look outward for causes of their ills. In true Morrison fashion, a series of omens point to the need for action against some common danger:

> It was a secret meeting, but the rumors had been whispered for more than a year. Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. So when nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flashlights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all those catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women. (11)

The women collectively and individually are scapegoats. In the chapters named for the Convent women, we discover the secrets known to them about the Ruby men who conduct the raid. According to Bouson, "Even though the 8-rock people once saw their Convent neighbors as strange but harmless—indeed, even as helpful—over time, as the Convent becomes the repository of the scandalous secrets of the respectable 8-rocks, the people of Ruby come to perceive the Convent women as objects of shame and as potentially dangerous" (203).[59] They are sexual temptations for the men and subversive examples to the women.

Over the years, Lone has observed that Ruby women "dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent" and so did the men, she learns (270). The Ruby women sought produce, medicines, abortions, and solace. The men sought detoxification, love, and adultery. Bouson summarizes:

> For Menus, the town drunk who spent some weeks at the Convent drying out, the Convent women—who cleaned up Menus's shit and vomit when he had the d.t.'s and listened to his sobs and curses—serve as a painful reminder of his own shame and dirtiness. K.D., who suffers from his memory of the humiliating love he had for Gigi, projects his own sense of shame onto the Convent women. Like K.D., Deacon Morgan, one of the New Fathers who views the Convent as the entrance to hell, once had a passionate affair with a Convent woman: the green-eyed, golden-skinned Consolata. (203-204)

[59] Clearly, Bouson finds Patricia's 8-rock theory convincing. So does Andrew Read and Marni Gauthier. Katrine Dalsgård, however, reminds readers: "Open-ended, fragmented, and multivoiced, it works in the service of subjective and collective memory and against the notion of a totalizing master narrative" (238). Since Paradise has multiple narrators and perspectives, I try to present some context for who is speaking, remembering, or telling stories to readers at any given time in the novel. See also Michael Wood's assertion that Patricia "is not a neutral observer" in his essay, "Sensations of Loss" located in Marc C. Conner's *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* (2000).

Plainly stated the raid is an expression of guilt and hypocrisy. The men fear that revelation of their scandalous secrets will destroy the reputations of the founding families. As Read notes, "They have developed relationships with these women because of illicit desires, traumatic memories, and shameful experiences that are incompatible with their self-images yet cannot be entirely mastered and repressed. Killing the women thus eliminates intolerable internal shame" (537).

In the novel's first chapter, an omniscient narrator informs us that nine men raided the Convent "obliged to stampede or kill" equipped with "rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns" (3). In essence, as Read observes, "the men form a conventional white lynch mob" (538). In the next to the last chapter, Lone overhears the plotting of the raid and identifies all of the men involved. Steward and Deacon Morgan lead the raid of the Convent. Sargeant Person, Wisdom Poole, Arnold and Jeff Fleetwood, Menus and Harper Jury, and K.D. Smith join the twins. The men raid the Convent and shoot the women. Despite an attempted intervention by Lone, the men leave the Convent believing all five of the women to be dead.

Lone offers to stay with the bodies until Roger Best can arrive with his hearse. He arrives to find there is no work for him to do. There are no bodies and the car of one of the victims is missing. Just as there are many stories about the people of Ruby, there are almost as many about what happened at the Convent. Nevertheless, the raid makes redemption possible for at least one of Ruby's founders—Deacon.

Critics such as Blake Allmendinger, author of *Imagining the African American West* (2005), see Morrison as a writer who has "documented the regional historical

struggles of racial minorities" (116).[60] Similarly, Holly Flint, in "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire," writes, "I read *Paradise* as both a history and a critique of history" (585).[61] Interestingly, Gauthier observes, [*Paradise*] "explores not only a particular historical moment, but also a particular national ideal—and the way that national history becomes inscribed in our collective imagination as *mythic history*" (author's italics, 396). Gauthier defines the term "mythic history" as:

> that narrative of national identity that partially represents experience and gains particular currency in the popular imagination. Formulated as much from myth as from historical occurrences, mythic history both produces and reflects collective historical imagination….Specifically, Paradise explores the ways that truths are constituted, maintained, and subjugated in the process of mythologizing history, a process Morrison suggests is endemic to national community. (396)

Morrison, as a narrative strategy, merges elements of the familiar Biblical story of the Israelites—oppression, the exodus, wandering, and entry into the promise land—with sites of history and memory from the frontier story of the Old Fathers, which include disenfranchisement, emigration, the Disallowing and the establishment of their own black

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[60] In the chapter titled "Women Rewriting History," Allmendinger discusses Pearl Cleage's *Flying West*, Morrison's *Paradise*, Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Magic City*, and two novels set in California, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

[61] Flint's reading makes several references to the Kansas Exoduster Movement of the 1870s and no mention of the All-Black Town Movement in the Oklahoma Territory. The former was solely a homesteading movement that yielded one black town, Nicodemus. The latter was much more akin to Morrison's self-proclaimed source (an Oklahoman newspaper headline that read "Come Prepared or Don't Come at All") and the novel's textual references to other all-black towns in Oklahoma. More accurately, Gauthier refers to the dozens of all-black towns that were established in Oklahoma. Nevertheless, she describes these all-black towns as being "founded by descendants of southern blacks who were effectively re-enslaved during the post-Reconstruction era." There is no mention of the black towns established by the descendants of earlier black migrants from the 1830s.

town. Initially, Haven, a safe space for the original nine families and fragments of other families that join them along their westward migration, unlike other black towns, thrives until the Great War. When Deacon and Steward assume leadership of the first town they attempt to use the Old Fathers' story as a blueprint to recreate a second migration and the founding of Ruby. Morrison uses the multiple voices and perspectives of Ruby and Convent residents to make a larger statement about the reliability of the oral tradition and conventional historiography.

The twins' "total recall" enables them to transform the Old Fathers' oral stories into a rigid, exclusive "master narrative," which confines the town and defines town outsiders as dangerous "others." The master narrative is patriarchal and lacks the perspective of women except as objects of male protection. Patricia's meticulous documentation of genealogies and town stories suggests the kind of objectivity purported by historians. However, her attempts at objectivity are compromised by her memories of the bias/prejudice her mother, daughter, and she experience because of their light skin. Lastly, in the chapters that bear their names, women in Ruby and women residing in the Convent tell their stories as counternarratives to the "histories" that preoccupy the twins and Patricia. Instead of privileging one kind of storytelling over the others, Morrison places the master narrative, historical narrative, and counternarratives in contention with each other exposing the vulnerabilities of each.

However these conversations, "this competitive give and take" between subjective narratives is not capricious, not one of the gratuitous tour de force of literary sleight of hand for which in some circles the author is sometimes taken to task. They are necessary,

functional and purposefully disciplined in service to the novel's vast and serious ambitions. Morrison uses these counternarratives to interrogate the processes of history and national myth formation in spreading concentric circles outward from its initial site within the memories of the small black migrating community of freed blacks on the western plain. From there it ventures outward and back to the primal myth of migration-to-nationhood in the Judeo-Christian tradition—that of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus which is constantly evoked by the language, vision, themes and imagery which suffuses the meta-narrative of the community's founding fathers which is constantly challenged by the other versions. From there it is no great leap (indeed more like a short and obvious step) to the next outward circle—the evocation and interrogation of the foundation narratives and myths of this nation and its Founding Fathers. Here the story of migration-to-nationhood-self-identity-and-religious-autonomy with the associated themes of escape from oppression, promised lands, chosen people self-actualization with its attendant dangers of misanthropy and (a particularly Morrisonian preoccupation) a fiercely patriarchal misogyny can be interrogated as not merely a failing of the black emigrant leadership but as a foundational element of the national character. This enables the organic introduction of one of Morrison's major themes that of gender and the western encounter with the female principle in history. In the earlier novels gender plays a role but in very different ways: in *Magic City* we found the classic southern American motif of lynching in defense of white womanhood. In *Standing at the Scratch Line* we had almost the polar opposite avenue of Morrison's approach to gender concerns—that of the codes of honor attendant to a mythic representation of black manhood.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the opening of *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Philip Page connects the concept of the frontier to the themes of migration toward self-determination and the reaffirmation of peoplehood and identity:

> At the heart of the American dream, the concept of the frontier embodies the freedom to leave behind a personally unfulfilling or unsatisfactory place in the expectation of a better one. Moving on to a better place also creates a new time, substituting a projected new future for a no-longer desired past. For the dream of the frontier to function, movement must be free, readily available, and perceived as advantageous. (1)

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on the themes of African American (e)migration, self-determination, and identity formation on the western frontier, which had been largely ignored by novelists until the end of the twentieth century. According to Cornel West, "the fundamental frontier myth of North America rings false for New World Africans." However, West concedes that the "gallant struggle to make Oklahoma an all-black . . . state bears witness to this homebound quest for space" (xiv).

Despite a longtime scholarly interest in literary Black Nationalism I did not have any awareness of black frontier towns in Oklahoma until after my first reading of Morrison's *Paradise* in 2001. I certainly was not aware of a movement to "Africanize the Territory." Fortunately, a statewide milestone and scholarly attention in recent decades provided the much needed historical, political and social background and contexts of the

black frontier which informs my literary examination of novels set in black towns in Oklahoma.

The year 2007 marked the centennial anniversary of statehood for Oklahomans and yet people of African descent—black Seminoles, Freedmen, Sooners, and other black emigrants begun, even if eventually unsuccessful, to "Africanized the Territory" by constructing autonomous, self-determining settlements, communities and towns throughout most of the century prior to 1907. Drawing on their experiences with enslavement, emancipation, and failed reconstruction in the South and the unique possibilities of maroonage, land ownership, and self-government on the territorial frontier, more black towns were established in the region than anywhere else in the United States.

The history of the "All-Black Town Movement"—seen by some territorial leaders as a chance to make Oklahoma an All-Black Territory—was recorded in conventional sources such as newspapers of the period and articles, book chapters, and monographs published in the 40 years since the institutionalization of Black Studies in the academy. And yet, what we have here is a historical event out of the black experience largely forgotten and conventionally regarded as so "minor," even insignificant in the grand scheme of historical things as to be omitted from conventional written histories of the American mainstream, which is by no means an unprecedented situation in the black experience. What is somewhat unusual is its emergence after many years from historical obscurity by means of three interestingly different novels.

Immediately—with the juxtaposition of these two basic elements—a "real" historical event's fate in "written" history and through the agency of the "literary imagination, its reemergence in literature proper (three novels)," the disciplines of history and literature are brought together in an academically unnatural relationship—but hardly forced or artificial, a multidisciplinary exercise purely for the sake of current fashion. This is precisely the original project embraced by African American Studies at its inception: a necessary, purposeful, restorative interdisciplinary approach to our people's presence and effect in the social and cultural experience of the nation.

The need to escape the constraints of a mono-disciplinary approach into a wider ranging inquiry in search of information, insights and approaches—from whatever discipline—that would enhance and deepen our understanding of the meaning and dimensions of the phenomenon being examined, which is to say in the largest sense our people's experience in all its full human dimensions. Which is why this study is an exercise not exclusively in either literary theory or criticism or in historiographical methodology but a necessary, purposeful, organic and, hopefully productive merging of the modalities and resources of both disciplines.

In this case—using the conventional criteria of the profession—a very minor "historical" event indeed. Quantitatively it is not major because the westward migration to the Territory involving a mere one hundred thousand souls pales into insignificance against the million or more of our ancestors who journeyed northward in the momentum of the "Great Migration."

And qualitatively the same: because it did not leave any enduring historical monuments to its passage, no independent black state, great cities or even counties it must be accounted 'minor.' As in effect since it did not, as the "Great Migration" is said to have done, visibly and demonstrably change the popular culture of the nation or the demography and social history of major cities. Hence, by the yardstick of traditional historical measurement, a phenomenon of a very little moment was well forgotten.

But, as we know very well, that is hardly the whole or indeed the "real" or "true" story. There are at least two missing elements. First, how was the phenomenon perceived by contemporary society? What if any resonance did its presence have on the national consciousness at the time? And second, for me as or more important: how was it perceived in the African American community of the day and how did the participants experience it? What precisely did it mean to them? What did they daily do and achieve? Most important what were they doing and what did they (not to mention their fellow black Americans) see themselves to be doing? In short what combination of confidence, hope and/or desperation drove or inspired them to so long, arduous and hazardous a journey into the unknown?

We do get—from the white media of the time at least a glimmering of an answer, however liminal, to the first question—that of mainstream national perceptions of the phenomenon. To what end did the racist caricaturing of the Currier and Ives series and *Harper's* magazine ridicule and disparage black towns? An answer, of sorts is suggested by the *New York Times* headline decrying the greatly to be feared "Africanization of the Territory" threatened by the mere *idea* of an "independent" black state, with the attendant

and dire predictions of bloodshed on the plains. Both *Harper's* and Currier and Ives were highly respected agencies of elite white American opinion and taste during the latter part of the nineteenth century so one cannot help but wonder at the quality and tone of the coverage of the phenomenon in the vulgar, unprogressive press of the day.

For answers to the second and far more interesting and important category of question, we must resort to other less traditional sources—as outlined in Nora's sites of memory:

> Where memory crystallizes and secretes itself . . . at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (Nora 7)

How would, how could this intellectual notion translate into a black American cultural and historical context? Does it have more than passing applicability to our concerns and intentions? Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally strongly believe so and quite obviously so do I:

> For us African Americanists perhaps the most significant aspect of the idea of *lieux de mémoire* was its capacity to suggest new categories of sources for the historian: new sets of sometimes very difficult readings. We considered, for example, how to read certain dances, paintings, buildings, journals, and oral forms of expression. More than ever, we saw novels, poems, slave narratives, autobiographies, and oral testimonies as crucial parts of the historical record. These varied repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory. (9)

It is how the novelists availed themselves of this assortment of historical/cultural resources and the literary uses to which they applied them—admittedly with varying degrees of success—that is the central focus of this study. How, in the Afro-American tradition, the techniques of the novelist along with the formal possibilities and flexibility represented by that form can be productively deployed to the reclamation of our people's otherwise inaccessible historical experiences.

Re-imagining black frontier settlers and settlements in contemporary novels reveals the interdisciplinary links between African American history, memory and imagination and the far too often unacknowledged place of black frontier settlers and settlements in African American and American narratives. The western frontier was recorded, remembered and re-imagined as a place where black (e)migrants traveled during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century after experiencing racial oppression, violence and disenfranchisement in the South. The physical journeys made by the (e)migrants between the 1880s and the 1920s characterize the Post-Reconstruction mobility of African Americans to a western landscape transformed into a symbol of freedom in the African American collective memory. The landscape also allowed black (e)migrants to pursue the founding of and settlement in black towns. These towns had at least two primary functions. First, they functioned as a safe place to define and be free for (e)migrants, their families and their communities. Second, the towns functioned as a way to insulate, albeit temporarily, entire communities from racism. Black (e)migrants believed that the frontier gave them a chance to leave the past behind and start anew. However, the frontier presented its own set of problems for generations of black settlers

and settlements including, but not limited to, terrorism for neighboring white towns and internalized racism from within. Johnson, Rhodes and Morrison bring to the African American novelistic tradition the unique history and memory of the black presence in Oklahoma.

The three contemporary novels discussed in the preceding chapters to varying degrees use elements of the oral tradition and culture to convey that history and memory for very difference audiences. In Standing at the Scratch Line, Johnson renders the story of his male protagonist using simple archetypes and forms of the oral tradition. Despite being the son of Maya Angelou, Johnson's novel failed to capture attention or interest from the scholarly community. However, it seems fitting that as something much like but rather more than "a street" novel, recommendations to read the novel would be communicated by word "on the street" (which is how I found out about it) and on the information superhighway—on websites developed by and targeting both face-to-face and virtual book clubs, and online African American literary discussion threads. Many of the clubs and discussion groups primarily consist of and target African American women, however, the posted reader reviews divulge female readers across the country who celebrate Johnson's heroic badman and urge their brothers, fathers, and in some cases, all the men in their families to read the book. On Amazon.com, one reader commented, "Never, in all my fifty seven years of being a black man have I read a book that truly captured the rage and anger I have always felt. King Tremain could have easily been me and lots of other black men I've known. I've insisted that all five of my sons read this novel and imagine being this man." Comments about crude characterizations,

stereotypes, and gratuitous violence are rare and completely overshadowed by the rave reviews of the masses. This is perhaps because *Standing at the Scratch Line*, without apology or undue difference to political correctness, empowers its protagonist with a black male perspective and the novel with an historical perspective coming out of the collective memory of the black masses.

As both a writer and an academic, Rhodes's novels are read by a more diverse audience with greater literary expectations, which includes various book clubs, but also students in conjunction with campus visits and individual readers interested in historical fiction. Like Johnson, Rhodes also uses the oral tradition in *Magic City* to show the cultural connections and tensions between three generations of black men of the same family—grandfather, father and son in the founding family of Greenwood before, during and after the Tulsa Riot. With fuller characterizations and a compelling story, Rhodes's novel depicts the consequences of rejecting the oral tradition—and its collective ancestral wisdom—and the successful resistance of the protagonist and the community when it is retained in secular and spiritual songs, rituals and conjuring. *Magic City* is rarely mentioned in scholarly texts—save interviews with the author in *Callaloo* and *African American Review* and *in* Allmendinger's book—but according to reviews on Amazon.com and aalbc.com, Rhodes's retelling of Greenwood and its destruction has sparked interest in reading historical monographs about the riot.

As a canonical writer and academic, Morrison's novel is by far more challenging literarily and intellectually than the previous two. In fact, it is only as a consequence of this study that I have come to grasp the full complexity and purposefulness of the novel's

vast ambition. Similar to my first reading of the novel, early reviews of *Paradise* were mixed. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Michiko Kakutani described the novel as "contrived" and "formulaic." A week later, in the *New Yorker*, Louis Menard characterized it as "the strangest and most original novel Morrison has written." In the twelve years since these early reviews, scholars and literary critics have examined and dissected *Paradise's* compressed and overlapping themes and devices in numerous articles, essays and books (see Appendix).

In *Paradise*, Morrison uses post-modern literary strategies such as multiple narrators to test the continuity and gaps of the oral tradition. The stories and memories of (e)migration and settlement result in isolation, oppression and destruction when rigidly used to fuel the founders' fundamentalist vision of freedom. However, the counternarratives told by the women inside and outside of the town, though incomplete by themselves, fill in the communal gaps and introduce alternative ways to be free. Simply completing the novel can feel like an intellectual exercise, but for interested readers who have the patience to re-read this dense novel several times, rich, multi-layered discussions of allegory, historiography, black nationalism, and American exceptionalism are possible.

At various times during my research, questions about migration and settlement surfaced that may be shaped into topics for future research such as: How do fictional characterizations of black servicemen returning to black towns following the first and second World Wars compare to their historical roles? What are the memories and stories of families (like Zora Neale Hurston's family) who following emancipation migrated to

black towns and settlements in the South? In North Carolina, Princeville, Hayti and Sedalia are three of possibly seven black towns that were established. What about in other southern states? What other black migration and settlement stories have been overshadowed by the Great Migration? (And on a more personal note, what would my life be like had my maternal and paternal ancestors from Georgia and Alabama, respectively, instead of migrating to racially segregated neighborhoods in Philadelphia to work on docks and in factories (e)migrated to the Territory to homestead or to found a black town? Had they heard stories, or songs, or seen pamphlets from black town promoters and decide to migrate north anyway?)

Re-imagining the stories of black migration generally, and black frontier folk in Oklahoma specifically, is not simply about reclaiming a collective past. Issues of reconciliation and reparations have present-day political ramifications. As mentioned in Chapter 3, newspapers serving African American communities provided coverage of the Oklahoma Commission's findings, their recommendations for reparations, and their disappointment at the state's refusal to reconcile with the Greenwood survivors. In 2008, a documentary, "Before They Die," chronicled the unsuccessful Supreme Court case and call for a congressional hearing. The remaining survivors are still waiting for justice and reparations for the murders of up to 300 people, and the bombing and destruction of their town. Conversely, in 1995, 100 miles to the west of Tulsa, a second bombing occurred. The investigation of the attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the 168 related murders resulted in the nationally televised execution of the convicted bomber, a memorial site, and annual observances.

The destruction of Greenwood in 1921 was not unique. Ellis Cose discusses Greenwood and the similar history of destruction it shares with Rosewood, Florida. However, Florida legislators used their historical study to pass an act to compensate survivors. Cose explains why studies and reparations of past injustices are still relevant:

> That it took some sixty years before Oklahoma and Florida could even acknowledge that pogroms had occurred in their states, that the episodes were denied a place in history books, that most Americans to this day have no idea that such things occurred, says something profound about how difficult it is to own up to racial sins. For many, it's easier to pretend they never happened. And yet for the same reason that thoughtful people reject Holocaust denial, many blacks reject that form of denial; for it is a way of saying that the losses and the suffering of our ancestors don't matter, which is uncomfortably close to saying that we don't matter. (165)

Denial is also an issue for the descendants of the Cherokee freedman. In 2008, members of the Congressional Black Caucus opposed the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Reauthorization Act of 2007 because of the Cherokee Nation's failure to recognize "all Cherokee Freedmen and their descendants as tribal citizens." Caucus member, Diane Watson, D-Calif., introduced HR 2824, a bill that would have resulted in loss of federal funding and casino operation rights until the Cherokee Nation complies with the 1866 Treaty, which was supposed to grant citizenship to the freedmen. However, the bill never became law. Moreover, in 2009, "a small group of powerful House Democrats" asked the Justice Department to investigate claims of "modern-day racial segregation" against the descendants of freedmen from each of the Five Nations (Reznet).

This study has broadened my appreciation and knowledge of African American oral culture, myth and traditions—expressions of a people's collective consciousness—which inform character development, narrative techniques, and degrees of storytelling in fiction. Additionally, *Standing at the Scratch Line*, *Magic City* and *Paradise*, rooted in the culture, memory and history of the black South and the western frontier, contribute to Ellison's challenge regarding collective identity:

> . . . our unwritten history is always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition has worked in the past. Perhaps if we learn more of what has happened and *why* it happened, we'll learn more about who we really are. And perhaps if we learn more about our unwritten history, we won't be so vulnerable to the capriciousness of events as we are today. (author's italics, Going 144)

Reading and examining the literary, historical, political, and cultural sources for this study has heightened my awareness of how the past—even a widely unknown past lurking half-hidden in collective folk-memory can quite literally be given new life and presence in popular consciousness through the agency of the novelists' craft and the freedom of the literary imagination to remain relevant to the present.

APPENDIX

ARTICLES, ESSAYS AND BOOKS ON *PARADISE*

Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. "'Passing on' Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 513-519.

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