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Separation anxieties: representations of separatist communities in late twentieth century fiction and film

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SEPARATION ANXIETIES: REPRESENTATIONS
OF SEPARATIST COMMUNITIES IN LATE
TWENTIETH CENTURY FICTION AND FILM

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This project is dedicated to

Kalene, Shauna, Brendan, and Maya.

The world would be gray without you.

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ABSTRACT

In the late 20th century and beyond, American social movements advocating equality have increased national attention to issues of exclusion, inclusion, and multiculturalism within communities. As a result, studying the nature of communities—how the term "community" might be defined, who belongs to a given group or social structure, who does not belong, and why—has become increasingly important. American artists have responded by exploring these sites of social, political, and personal change in their works. *Separation Anxieties: Representations of Separatist Communities in Late Twentieth Century Fiction and Film* analyzes seven fictional works in which some group is philosophically and/or geographically isolated— sometimes by choice, sometimes not—from mainstream America. Each chapter in this study focuses on works that represent and explore a different separatist iteration.

Each work utilizes a different representation of America's dominant community. Their respective separatist characters distance themselves from dominant American society and create a new community defined by a limited set of characteristics—gender and sexuality, religious beliefs, experience, race. Yet the complexities of American life continually creep into their separatist spheres, complicating the characters' attempts to belong; these complications often lead to conflicts within, or even to the dissolution of, the separatist communities. In these works, accepting complexities and individual voices is represented as more conducive to communal survival than suppressing alternate ideas and/or dissent. Studying these texts leads to a reconsideration of traditional American myth—the "Union," equality, inalienable rights, the various freedoms that America is supposed to embody—and to a reexamination of why those myths might be rejected, of what kinds of communities might be formed, and of how those communities might succeed and fail. *Separation Anxieties* is an attempt to engage with and

understand narrative constructions and, through them, the real-life ideals, communities, and

people recognizable in the representation.

INTRODUCTION

> Borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as
> they acknowledge connection . . . Borders between individuals,
> genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls
> between identities. Identity is in fact unthinkable without some sort
> of imagined or literal boundary. But borders also specify the
> liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction,
> interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence,
> miscommunication, misrecognition. They also invite transgression,
> dissolution, reconciliation, and mixing. Borders protect, but they
> also confine.—Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings*

The study of communities is increasingly important in the late 20th century and beyond. Historical and social movements in the United States advocating equality have increased national attention to issues of exclusion, inclusion, and negotiation with the nation's multicultural makeup. Concurrently, dramatic leaps in communications and travel technologies—as well as increasingly complex international business relationships—have contributed to globalization. Three consequences of globalization are the destabilization of international borders, the creation of new communities, and increased attention to relationships among different groups. These changes have raised increasingly complicated questions about the nature of nations, of communities, of individuals' places in these kinds of social structures, and of how different aspects of identity relate to issues of belonging. American artists have responded by representing these changes and exploring such questions in their works. Critical examinations of these artistic representations are crucial to understanding global and cultural changes, as well as these new iterations of American culture and art. Such a critical examination of literary and filmic art is the purpose of this project.

To begin, I should examine the key terms of this project's focus. The word "community" traditionally refers to a group of people who share a geographic space and some aspect of identity that is often related to that geography. For instance, an American may also classify

him- or herself as a Texan or New Yorker, citizen of Chicago or New Orleans, resident of a certain neighborhood or building. Though communal identity may be defined in terms of other characteristics, particularly at the level of the neighborhood wherein economic standing may help determine the limits of a community, the main marker remains a shared geographic space. Benedict Anderson revises traditional conceptions of community in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Anderson argues that even nations are in some respects imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). He applies this idea in other, more abstract ways, arguing, for instance, that speakers of a common language form an imagined community regardless of their national origins or identity politics. Due to the increasing ubiquity of the term "community"—applied in diverse ways, including to online discussion boards and to widespread identity-based groups—critics studying different iterations of community in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries should find Anderson's idea useful.

Keeping in mind both traditional definitions and Anderson's extensions of the terms, I should begin with a description of how this study adapts and revises these ideas. The term "dominant community" has a slightly different meaning for each of the texts I examine herein. In general, the "dominant communities" represented in these texts reflect bell hooks's concept of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." hooks's term accounts for racial, gendered, and economic facets of dominance and oppression, though some works I consider also focus on other aspects, such as sexuality and uncommon experiences, specifically combat experience in the Vietnam war. When I use the term "dominant community" in the chapters that follow, I am

discussing what a particular work represents as the central and oppressive power structure in its version of America.

Likewise, the terms "separatism," "separatist," and "separatist community" will herein refer to some fictional community or its members, who are isolated—often geographically, at least philosophically—from that work's dominant community. Each chapter examines certain kinds of dominance as they are represented by an American artist or artists, what kind of separatist community these writers and filmmakers imagine as responses to a given form of dominance, and when and how these communities succeed and fail. Through this study, I hope to demonstrate how some American writers and filmmakers reveal the increasing complexities of traditionally simple concepts. By doing so, I hope to enhance existing scholarship on fictional communities, on these particular works, and on the general concept of separatism. Examining fictional conceptions of these real-world concerns is an important step in understanding the changes sweeping through American literary and filmic art in the late 20th century and beyond. This task is important because these texts could function as attempts to understand certain kinds of communities, to celebrate alternative forms of empowerment, and to explore the difficulties inherent in achieving and maintaining new power structures.

Several projects in various academic and scientific fields have focused on different kinds of communities, either actual or literary. Many of the ideas disseminated in these works are useful when studying fictional separatist communities. One might wonder, for instance, why artists might be interested in representing separatist communities in the first place. One possible answer is that they are interested in the sweeping and global changes referenced above. Another possibility is suggested by the make-up of the United States itself—a single country consisting of individual states, with each state broken down into counties or parishes, cities, towns, and

neighborhoods. In this sense, the nature of America is the sub-national group. Therefore, it makes sense that group dynamics would be an area of interest for our political scientists, social scientists, and artists; groups are what we live.

Some critics believe that forming smaller groups is a necessary part of American life. In her article "Purity is Danger: An Argument for Divisible Identities," Anna Simons argues that "because the United States is a democracy, people *have* to group. Otherwise, their voices are drowned out as soon as those with whom they are in disagreement (or competition) begin to cluster" (178). This political necessity would seem even more crucial for peoples that, historically, have been institutionally and socially marginalized. Given the possibilities that spring from this situation, separatist communities might seem a particularly interesting and important variation, as their nature is to reject America's rhetoric of unity; they form in order to make a new space in which theirs is the lone voice to be heard. Paradoxically, this describes another form of unity rhetoric. Yet Simons's work also hints at a more ominous fate for separatist communities in America, one that reflects the government's handling of militant separatists like the Branch Davidians. She notes that "the government projects (and may well have to project) a very different attitude toward self-segregating, *non*-Indian societies" (184). Simons points out that, in spite of the term "separatist" having acquired negative and militant connotations, "not all are separatist in the same ways" (184). She distinguishes between non-confrontational societies and those that resort to violence and other aggressive means of resistance: "A democratic government may be able to accommodate dissociative individuals—in fact, it may have little choice—but not separable societies" (Simons 185). In the works that I study, we will see that separatist societies, on the other hand, cannot tolerate even dissociative *individuals*. Whether because of or in spite of such contradictions, the artists that I study herein

all seem interested in why separatist communities form, how well these revisionist structures

might work under different circumstances, and how and why they might break down.

For instance, in his work *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*, Scott Romine

examines communities as represented in works of southern literature. Reflecting Susan Stanford

Friedman's ideas in the epigraph above, Romine says

> I mean to suggest that community is enabled by practices of avoidance, deferral,
> and evasion; in a certain sense, as [Allen] Tate implies, community relies not on
> what is there so much as what is, by tacit agreement, not there. Hence a new
> definition of community: a social group that, lacking a commonly held view of
> reality, coheres by means of norms, codes, and manners that produce a simulated,
> or at least symbolically constituted, social reality. (3)

Romine goes on to say that the works he studies are representative in that "they demonstrate how

a hegemonic social order in a given place and time attempted to resolve its internal conflicts and

legitimate its hegemony" (4). The borders constructed in each text, he argues, represent "not

merely an already ordered social space, but a space inside of which order can and must be

actively maintained" (Romine 6). This argument reflects a truism about the communities that I

study in this project: the borders between separatist communities and mainstream America

reflect an attempt at social differentiation; however, they also act as the line of demarcation

between two remarkably similar sets of conflicts based on gender, racial, economic, sexual,

religious, and experiential issues. Furthermore, though Romine is examining textual

representations of specifically southern communities, a focus I do not share, his conceptions of

the general term "community" informs my own. In each of the texts that I will study herein, a

community defines itself according to what its members are and what, by contrast, members of

the dominant society are not.[1] These groups seek a resolution to internal conflicts, a legitimation,

and "ordered social spaces" distinct from America proper.

Critics like Romine, and theorists like Antonio Gramsci, help destabilize traditional definitions of community as geographically defined and ideologically cohesive. But other writers deal more specifically with the concepts of separation and separatism, as well as the role that texts and discourse play in disseminating the importance of such ideas. One recent example is Craig S. Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999), a work combining Womack's essays on Creek authors and culture with fictional dialogues that comment on the essays in Creek dialect.[2] Womack's project is itself a separatist document in some respects; in his introduction, he argues that Native American texts represent a separate canon and that Native writers should "Let Americanists struggle for *their* place in the canon," because "*our* American canon . . . predates *their* American canon" (Womack 7, original emphasis). Womack's pronouns underscore his separation from mainstream critics, mainstream literature, and mainstream society. He feels that his work as a critic of Native American literary separatism is an important step toward re-establishing Native American voices.

Womack's work helps establish the importance of separatist thought, of fiction about separatism, and of studies that attempt to understand both. In fact, Womack argues that separatist fiction and criticism are interrelated and of similar import, as long as separatist writings are authored by separatists: "Finally, as Native writers, our own resistance to forming a substantive body of critical discussion surrounding our own literature and our willingness to turn the task over to outsiders, to 'those who write criticism,' or 'those who do theory,' may indicate the degree to which we have internalized colonization" (9). Womack suggests that writing imaginative literature and criticism can be a way of rejecting oppression; in this specific case, he is calling Native writers to examine their own culture and history, rather than allowing "outsider" critics to re-write Native life and texts. He goes on to say that "Native literature, and Native

literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images. Tribes recognizing their own extant literatures, writing new ones, and asserting the right to explicate them constitute a move toward nationhood" (14). In Womack's terms, when a member of an oppressed group writes a literary text, or a critical text, it is an overtly political, perhaps even nationalistic, act.

Yet the texts that I will study herein are not always written by members of oppressed groups. Womack might consider these authors to be colonizers whose work represents the appropriation of minority cultures; at the very least, their decision to write about or from the perspective of oppressed peoples might be seen as co-opting the publishing market of minority writers and thereby reducing the chances that the oppressed can speak for themselves. While I understand the sentiment, this viewpoint seems unnecessarily reductive, perhaps even unfair to the artists. Writers and filmmakers could well be using their work to explore, interrogate, and perhaps even deconstruct hegemonic power structures and their own possible complicity in them. In any case, and without dismissing Womack's passionate arguments, I shall not be taking up the question of who has the right, or the obligation, or the responsibility, to write about whom. I include a discussion of Womack's theories here to establish the existence of another branch of literary separatist thought and to build on his idea that texts by and about separatists—even fictional texts, and, in my case, works by authors from the dominant culture—are increasingly important to the global embrace of multiple and multicultural voices.

Critics like Romine and Womack help to demonstrate recent critical interest in studies of fictional communities and separatism, as well as to establish what terms like "community" and "separatism" might mean to different people(s). Other critics demonstrate that America's rhetoric of unity—both problematized and mimicked in separatist communities—has perhaps always

been more mythological and discursive than practical. For instance, in *Legacy of Hate: A Short History of Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Prejudice in America*, Philip Perlmutter argues that

> Although rightfully hailed as a land of opportunity, freedom, equality, and justice, America has also been criticized as a nation born, bred, and nurtured in interracial, interethnic, and interreligious rivalries and conflicts, wherein one group's well-being was often achieved at another's expense . . . From the time of America's discovery to the nineteenth century, Old and New World conflicts were replicated and magnified. (3)

Perlmutter's text supports my assertions that America often fails to reject the prejudices and oppressions that were/are perpetuated in other locales. The fictional separatist communities I study are often represented as failing their citizens in similar ways; the texts' creators, whether consciously or not, explore the causes and effects of this cycle, including potential problems caused by repeating the mistakes of the past.

Other critics have helped shape my study in more specific ways. Considering that I plan to examine gender roles as they are constructed within certain fictional texts, and given that said texts are all concerned with manifestations of community and belonging, Susan Stanford Friedman's text *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* is useful in helping me clarify some initial concepts. The epigraph of this introduction helps reveal why a study of textual communities is important and more complex than it might initially seem. Friedman's work helps identify and legitimate other key concepts as well. Friedman outlines "six related but distinct discourses of identity within this new geography of positionality" that, she claims, "have seriously undermined or complicated the projects of gynocriticism and gynesis as they were originally formulated" (20). Put in simpler terms, Friedman claims that binary ways of thinking about identity and identity formation—such as certain forms of gynocriticism that focus on gender to the exclusion of anything else—are too limited. To summarize, Friedman's discourses of identity take into account that not all women are the same (20); that identity is

composed of more than gender (21), and that no one aspect of identity necessarily saves one from all forms of oppression (21); that "One axis of identity, such as gender, must be understood in relation to other axes, such as sexuality and race" (22); that identity "resists fixity" and "shifts fluidly from setting to setting" (23); and that identity can be hybridized through "the cultural grafting that is the production of geographical migration" (24).

Through this description, Friedman accounts for how and why our identities change and how complicated they are. Particularly useful for my study are the ideas that critics must take into account multiple "axes of identity," that these axes often intersect with varied and sometimes contradictory results, and that identity can change when one changes locations and/or situations. In the study that follows, I will use these concepts as the basis for much of my own specific analysis. As will be seen below, I have organized my chapters around texts that utilize representations of a certain kind of separatist community. This would seem, at first glance, an overly reductive theoretical approach on my part, given what Friedman argues. And in the chapters I do sometimes use the principles of one branch of literary theory more than others—for instance, feminist theories in the chapter on representations of lesbian feminist communities. Generally speaking, though, I use such theories as a starting point for analysis, not as an exclusive means of reading the texts. Part of what I will do, in fact, is build on Friedman's theories of identity by exploring how they are connected to concepts of place and particular political situations represented within the confines of specific fictional texts.

I am particularly indebted to critics like Friedman, whose concepts are so broadly applicable, because relatively little attention has been devoted to exploring representations of separatist communities in American literature and film. However, some critical works provide a historical/theoretical guideline for analyzing representations of a particular kind of separatism.

Because I utilize specific concepts from some of these works in the chapters themselves, it seems redundant to discuss them here. What I would like to do at this point, however, is mention a few works of criticism and theory that focus on issues related to those that I will be examining. These works are less useful for my specific focus, but they do provide the reader with an idea of what work has been done on the kinds of communities that appear in my primary fictional texts.

For instance, some historical scholarship has focused on American religious communities, from colonial times to the present day; other works, in whole or in part, have examined iterations of religious separatism occurring in other parts of the world. The latter seems inapplicable here, especially since I am not producing a sociological study. As for existing scholarship on American religious communities, little has been written about artistic representations. Nevertheless, some of the material in these works provides a good basis for thinking about religious communities in general. For instance, a source that provides a good overview of how religion has tended to fit into America's secular social institutions is Mark A. Noll's *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*; certain essays in this collection help demonstrate key ideas that I use in chapter two. In addition, possibly the best source on the Amish community is Donald Kraybill's *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, which is referenced more specifically below. Kraybill also refers to the Amish as separatists, and his work with the actual Amish provides the basis for my readings of how this group is represented in the film *Witness*, one of the primary texts that I discuss below.

Yet the sociological and historical works that seem most applicable to my project are works about nationalism. In particular, studies of Black Nationalism in America seem useful to this project, in part because Black Nationalist movements are generally considered separatist. Often, journalists and critics seem to conflate "radical nationalists" and "separatists," who may

or may not be radical, violent, or nationalist. We must therefore remember that nationalists are

by definition separatists, but not all those we might term separatists seem to have nationalist

aspirations.[3] Nevertheless, the example of Black Nationalism clarifies that nationalist and

separatist groups share many of the same goals and methods. Black Nationalists are primarily

concerned with combating racism, and only one work that I study is overtly about constructions

of race. However, all of them explore different kinds of power and the ways in which certain

peoples seize and maintain it over others. Therefore, studying Black Nationalism provides a

basis for analyzing separatist philosophy and action in general.

As a way of approaching this rather large body of work, I will begin with a critic who,

under Friedman's terms, often remains too much in the realm of binary thinking. Evandro

Camara—author of *The Cultural One or the Racial Many: Religion, Culture, and the Interethnic*

Experience—writes that

> U.S. society has historically upheld a cultural framework based on separatism, a
> pattern that may be evidenced, among other things, in the thematic preponderance
> of the idea of ethnicity itself, in the public and official discourse of the society. At
> root, this separatism is linked to the dualistic cultural relation (derived from the
> racially bipolar administration of social life in general) between the core culture—
> which is perceived as the exclusive "property" of all those ethnic contingents that
> have been fully absorbed into the dominant *social race* on the basis of their
> classification as white—and all other cultural communities that have from the
> outset been classified as biologically unassimilable. (58-59)

Camara's contention that the United States is based on separatism is admittedly tempting to a

critic studying separatist representations; in these terms, separatism would actually be considered

the original dominant paradigm. Other critics, like Friedman, highlight the problems with

depending upon a white/black paradigm to explain all social relations in the country.

Given what I have said about the increasing complexity of American society and art, I

read Camara's argument as one good point among many, rather than a successful holistic theory.

Furthermore, though such may not be Camara's intention, a binary black/white paradigm might be read as lumping all white people and all black people together in two distinct, well-identified, homogenized groups. I also find the formula "black=separatist" too simple; surely some black citizens, and some black fictional characters, exist happily in the mainstream community. Thus, while admitting that Camara's point about the privileging of whiteness is certainly well-taken, I choose here to expand my focus beyond racial bifurcation, particularly since I am studying fictional communities based on "axes of identity" other than race.

A better source for my particular focus is Sandra Hollin Flowers's *African American Nationalist Literature of the 1960s: Pens of Fire*. This work helps clarify the history of African-American nationalism and ends with a reading of texts that, Flowers believes, fit the definition of nationalist literature. Beginning with a summation of Raymond Hall's work, Flowers posits that Black Nationalism requires certain specific elements "to assure accurate and predictable representation of the vision of its adherents: cultural nationalism, religious nationalism,[4] economic nationalism, bourgeois reformism, revolutionary black nationalism, and territorial separatism" (9). In these terms, separatism is always a component of nationalism. This description provides a good starting point for understanding nationalist methodology and for determining the differences between nationalist and separatist groups. As I argue above, however, nationalism is not always the end goal of separatism. Some actual separatist communities and the fictional representatives that I study in this project seem perfectly content with separating themselves from mainstream society in smaller groups. Though most of the groups in the texts I study meet most of the aforementioned qualifications for their own communities, none of them attempt to connect with other peoples who share their "axes of identity"; furthermore, the only way that any of them seek the overthrow of dominant institutions

(the general definition of revolutionary nationalism's aims) is through the creation of their own self-sufficient communities.

Other critics who trace the complicated early history and methodology of Black Nationalisms in America include Dexter B. Gordon.[5] His book *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth Century Black Nationalism* is invaluable to scholars interested in this series of movements, particularly because of his insights into nationalist methods and tropes. For instance, Gordon discusses how texts by black nationalists attempted to unify black peoples in America through "rhetorical myth" (83). In each chapter that follows, one aspect of the fictional communities that I discuss is their dependence on narrative in maintaining their communal ties; these characters attempt to maintain separatist spaces through community-specific narrative histories. Gordon also raises the question of whether or not groups seeking autonomy can succeed without aid from and contact with the dominant community (104); Gordon here touches on one trope of the texts that I study herein—how a community attempts to separate while still operating within the confines of the United States' borders.

Another important concept that Gordon traces in his work is, in a term he attributes to Kwame Anthony Appiah, the "rhetoric of descent" (qtd. in Gordon 116). According to Gordon, "ancestry is proffered as the connection linking Africans, blacks, and the collectivity presented in the discourse [championing Black Nationalism]. This claim problematically assumes that shared African ancestry somehow links African Americans in unique ways, fostering, for example, common political aims" (116-17). Gordon is describing how the term was used by nineteenth century black nationalists, but many of the fictional communities that I am examining employ a similar rhetoric and/or make comparable assumptions. This device may be particularly prevalent in geographically centralized communities; the purely imagined ones represented in my primary

texts seem less concerned with origin myths, perhaps because they have no clearly-defined space

and agenda to defend. However, for the texts that do employ some version of the rhetoric of

descent, the origin myth becomes an important means of keeping the community together.

Gordon also discusses Henry Highland Garnet's assertion of "black alienation as the basis for

black action" (137); Garnet reminds us that nationalists feel isolated from the dominant society

before they attempt to leave it or overthrow it.

Moreover, Gordon's analysis supports the idea that a nationalist or separatist group

defines itself, in some respects, negatively. He points out that leading black nationalists in the

nineteenth century like David Walker and Martin Robinson Delany addressed Black Nationalism

as a response to "base and aggressive" or "evil and devilish" whites (142).[6] As I analyze how

certain artists construct representations of separatist communities, I build on this idea of negative

definition; in every fictional community that I study, the characters define themselves in

opposition to the dominant community of the given text—men, rich people, worldly sinners,

civilians, white people. Gordon later points out that this can actually be dangerous: "there is no

avoiding that separatism faces the danger of what critics such as McPhail point out is its inherent

invitation to the 'other' to defend against it and, as such, its complicity in a never-ending cycle of

negative difference" (156). In the works that I study, "negative difference" functions as both a

defining point of pride in the community and as what makes maintaining separate status and

separate space so difficult.

The above works trace Black Nationalist thought in the nineteenth century, but Black

Nationalism continued to find supporters in the mid-twentieth century. Anthony Dawahare's

book *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New*

Pandora's Box discusses nationalist thought and its applications in black literature in the period

between the two World Wars. Dawahare writes, "While nationalism proper . . . is not a major issue for most black writers in the interwar period, the desire to establish a black national identity and culture that coexists, however tenuously, with an American identity and culture, is of crucial importance" (xv) because "to be sure, nationalism has appeared to many as the best way to defeat racism" (xvii). To reiterate, these same nationalist principles could apply to separatist communities on a much smaller scale. For example, using a much smaller sense of scope, the artists studied herein—no matter the kind of community that they are constructing—explore how separatist group dynamics can help (or fail to help) an individual resist various forms of oppression. Dawahare also refers to how the "collective memory" of nationalists is disseminated through mythical narrative (5), which reinforces what other critics have said about origin myths. Finally, Dawahare also helps justify projects that examine phenomena like nationalism and separatism; he states that "Only by historicizing subjectivity can we demonstrate how our racialized/nationalized selves are politically *forced*, as Richard Wright argues, and not simply the result of an individual decision bearing little or no relationship to the dominant discourses and institutions of power" (138, original emphasis). I posit that projects examining artistic representations of these phenomena are equally important and have equal potential to reveal truth.

Another work on Black Nationalism contributes heavily to my own conception of how separatism might be generally defined and ways that it might work—Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. Like Gordon's work, Dubey's focuses specifically on Black Nationalism; unlike Gordon's purely historical approach, Dubey examines how black women writers might fit in with Black Nationalism.[7] This critic's discussion of how Black Nationalism initially devalued black women also can be applied to my readings of the

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fictional separatist communities' failure to account for the "axes of identity" of all their citizens. In fact, these ideas seem applicable to any kind of community that fails its members in such a way, even if the key terms change.

Moreover, Dubey points out that a philosophy's failure to account for citizens' needs affects the community as well: "The outstanding thematic concern of black women's fiction in [the 1970s] is the sexual division between black men and women that can potentially disrupt the racial unity projected in Black Nationalist discourse" (20). What is being described here is a real-life instance of a racial community's imperiling itself through ignoring problems with sexism. This issue, and others like it, is represented in the fictional separatist communities that I study herein. Works like Dubey's support the idea that a nationalist—or, I contend, a separatist—community defines itself too narrowly at the risk of its own dissolution. Dubey also points out that black nationalists decried mainstream systems even as many of their words and actions demonstrated their "strong, often unacknowledged investment in this system" (22). These kinds of contradictions in real-life communities are often represented in the texts that I study; Dubey's work therefore provides a basis for analyzing these fictional communities' relationships to the societies that they are trying to leave behind.

Critics like those discussed above help demonstrate the timeliness and importance of my project. While other studies have focused on a particular kind of separatist issue—for instance, lesbian communities;[8] Native American fiction, as in Craig Womack's book; and sociological studies of phenomena like alienation[9]—no other has attempted a cross-cultural focus such as I am proposing here, nor have any focused on the particular texts I intend to examine. Also, no other studies have focused on such a time-specific cross section of texts about separatism, texts created by a multicultural set of artists from diverse backgrounds. This project is therefore

potentially both timely and important. I hope that it can serve as a starting point for studies of separatist representations in American fiction.

As for structure, each chapter herein will examine texts that focus on a different kind of separatist community. Chapter one will focus on lesbian feminist community; chapter two will examine two versions of religious separatism; chapter three will examine constructions of what I term experiential separatism; and chapter four will examine a work in which black communities are the primary focus. This project attempts to cover a large cross-section of identity "axes" and different artistic representations of dominant American culture. This examination will hopefully illuminate further the increasing multiculturalism of millennial America, its artists' concern with conceptions of difference and belonging, and some of the ways in which differences intersect.

Here I should admit the possibility that none of these artists have consciously constructed representations of separatism and separatist philosophies per se; however, each narrative depends on the conflicts between representatives of mainstream American society and a group that removes itself from that society, geographically and/or philosophically, for political and personal reasons. In constructing and exploring these characters, the groups they form, the spaces they create, and the philosophies by which they try to live, each of these artists represents separatism as an attempt to question dominant American society and myths by creating new social structures; one major challenge of such attempts is eschewing old prejudices in the new community. In order to examine the texts' different ideas for how these social questions and revisions might work, I use the following questions as starting points. 1) In what specific ways do these artists revise or adhere to the general definition of dominant culture that I begin with above? 2) What problems does each text construct as implicit in the characters' attempts to alter the dominant paradigm?[10] 3) How is the individual represented in relation to the separatist

community? 4) How do these artists construct the types of and reasons for their respective

separatist communities' successes and failures?

In deciding how to order these chapters, I have eschewed the most obvious organizational

choice, chronological order. All of the works studied herein were created within a short time

period; the earliest, the film *The Deer Hunter*, was made in 1978, and the latest, *Paradise*, was

published in 1997. Such a short time span makes a traditional chronological order seem

perfunctory. Instead, I use as my organizing principle the differing definitions of "separatism"

and "community," as well as how violent resistance operates in the process of defining such

terms. I begin with a study of the works about lesbian feminist separatists. In the first chapter, I

explore how, by focusing on female gangs, two texts—Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Foxfire:*

Confessions of a Girl Gang (1993) and F. Gary Gray's film *Set It Off* (1996)—reconfigure the

white supremacist capitalist patriarchal paradigm of American community; the characters

attempt to rewrite social constructs in terms of a feminist, more-or-less-consciously lesbian

sisterhood. These sisterhoods resist not only patriarchal capitalism but also what Adrienne Rich

has termed "The bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is

perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible" (205). The

models of community disseminated in these texts also highlight how the United States' capitalist

economy and emphasis on material possessions as signs of fulfilling the American Dream can

create a lower class of impoverished "losers." The characters representing this lower class are the

most radical and violent that I study; their methods most closely resemble the aggressive and

violent image usually associated with the word "separatist." Oates and Gray construct their

textual communities as experiments in lesbian feminist—and increasingly violent—resistance to

patriarchy and capitalism, as well as examinations of the possible consequences of such resistance.

In chapter two, I examine works focusing on representations of religious separatism. The characters and philosophies in these texts are subtler, more insular, and less violent than those studied in chapter one. These new iterations of separatists and separatism thereby expand traditional definitions of the terms; though these characters choose to separate themselves from mainstream America, they reject violence. Their isolation is an important focus for examining issues of domination and oppression, of belonging, and of American myths. In one text that I study in this chapter, Peter Weir's film *Witness*, a young Amish boy is the only eyewitness to a murder; the policeman who wishes to protect the boy must enter the Amish community and pretend to be one of them. The resulting clash of cultures and ideologies is a major issue in the film and illustrates how differences between dominant and separatist communities can negatively affect individual members of both, in terms of their interpersonal relationships and how they function in their respective societies. Yet Weir explores these issues through the lens of the main "English" character, an outsider who has more in common with the film's audience than with the Amish characters that he encounters.

Witness's separatist community is based on a very specific, real-life group; on the other hand, in her novel *The Rapture of Canaan* Sheri Reynolds constructs a fictional separatist community that is an offshoot of modern-day mainstream Protestantism.[11] The Fire and Brimstone community is a mixture of Baptist somberness, Pentecostal eagerness, and Puritan simplicity and severity. This community's hybridization of other groups' dogmas ensures that the Fire and Brimstone characters are as different as possible—in terms of physical appearance, thought, and belief—from those characters who represent the mainstream community. These

differences have practical functions: maintaining the borders of the Fire and Brimstone compound and codifying the separation of its people from anyone who lives outside those borders, including members of other religious communities.

Both texts trope difference as religiously just and desirable. Other ways that these texts connect include how the artists construct their communities and how these constructions relate to characterization. The strict, even stifling, nature of Fire and Brimstone—a patriarchal, Old Testament-tough community with its own laws and its own punishments—is, like the Amish community in *Witness*, often at odds with the growth of its individual members. These two texts therefore illustrate potential problems an individual might encounter within a strict religious separatist community, including issues catalyzed by the collision of gender, sexual, and spiritual concerns.

The first two chapters of this study focus on representations of women's separatist communities in patriarchal society or women characters in patriarchal separatist communities. In chapter three, I further expand my working definition of the terms "separatism" and "community" by examining two works about the male-centered imagined community of Vietnam veterans and what I term the characters' separatism based on experiential difference. I use this term to suggest types of thought and action that can be read paradoxically as both passive/segregated and active/separatist. Specifically, I will claim that the characters in these works are separatists, consciously or perceptually, and that they form a nationwide imagined community, even though they never claim a geographical common space. In these texts, violence is at the core of the separatist experience, even though no character in these works uses violence to declare or defend a separatist philosophy or space. This paradigm seems to represent a third iteration in how separatists and violence do or do not connect.

In order to explore how artists represent this paradigm and how it might change, I examine works that focus on the entire Vietnam experience—a pre-war period, combat and/or rear-echelon work, and the return to America. These texts are Tim O'Brien's novel/collection *The Things They Carried* and Michael Cimino's mythic film *The Deer Hunter*. *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* depend upon a progression of internal and external conflicts, which lead the characters to alienation, segregation, and separatism. Though I believe that the characterizations in these works are in some respects typical of Vietnam War literature, I make no claims that my arguments can or should be applied to every text that uses the War as a narrative device. I also make no claims that *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* are somehow better or more accurate representations of Vietnam veterans' experiences than other texts. Obviously, these works are imaginary; as I will argue in chapter three, *The Deer Hunter* in particular seems ahistorical and unrealistic. What I do claim is that studying these two works together can help illuminate the function of separatism—as a conscious political act or as a perception—in the lives of these characters, and that such representations can thereby demonstrate the problematic nature of our relationship with Vietnam soldiers. In terms of my project, this chapter extends definitions of the terms "separatism" and "community" to male-centered, largely populated, and imagined communities; it also shows how O'Brien's and Cimino's communities endure conflicts similar to those discussed in previous chapters, even though the causes and consequences of these problems may be quite different. Through studying these two works, I hope to reveal the paradoxes of perceived separatism.[12] Doing so should help illuminate partially the ambiguity of the Vietnam conflict, America's historical reactions to it, and the art that has been produced about it.

I will finish my study with a reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*, a text that incorporates concerns similar to those I will study in earlier chapters, even as it represents race as another axis of identity. In this novel, the central characters create two separatist spaces: one based mainly on their conception of racial purity, and one based on both gender and shared trauma. In this work, violence is both a major catalyst for separating and the final trauma that nearly destroys each community. This idea echoes representations of violence in chapter one's texts, thereby helping create a sense of continuity in this study even as the focus on race as the major separatist signifier expands this project's scope. Because of this text's particular complexities and its usefulness in illustrating the aforementioned subjects, I have chosen to study it alone, rather than pairing it with a similarly-themed film. I have not made this decision because I was unable to find a film complex enough to stand beside Morrison's work. Rather, I choose to give *Paradise* its own chapter because Morrison constructs within it two equally complex separatist spaces; both are loci for gender, religious, racial, and economic concerns. Examining these two communities and how Morrison constructs their interactions provides enough material for the chapter; studying another work would make this section unnecessarily unwieldy and might unbalance the whole study.

Individually, these four chapters examine several distinct yet related iterations of separatism, community, and questions of who belongs to a given society. These issues have become increasingly important in America and in the world, considering that we can now create and delete imagined communities with a few computer keystrokes and travel across national borders in hours. But this project is not a study of nationalisms, nor is it concerned with the aforementioned technologies. Instead, it deals with representations of how these ideas and changes might affect both communities and individuals. Some of these evolving ideas include

the general conceptions of what it means to be an American, of why some people might choose

not to be traditionally American, and what kind of spaces they create in order to belong. Given

the limited nature of my textual focus and the constantly changing nature of the concepts under

consideration, this study is only meant to be the beginning of what could well be a much larger

project on separatist communities in fiction and film. As such, I hope that it is a valuable step in

our continued understanding of our nation and its art.

END NOTES

[1] I will read many of the communities in my texts as functionally hegemonic. Often, these communities form because a group refuses to conform to unspoken requirements—"norms, codes, manners"—for membership in mainstream society; in Gramsci's (and Romine's) terms, the dominant society attempts to coerce their conformity, and they separate themselves in order to resist. Yet, as I will argue, the characters who form these separatist communities often become hegemonically coercive by predicating membership in their community on strict conformity to a new set of norms, codes, and manners. Though "hegemony" is ultimately Gramsci's term, I am indebted to Romine for helping legitimize the connection between "coercion" and "conformity" in community studies.

[2] Several anthologies of Native American fiction also exist, including John Purdy's *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature* (2000), but these tend to be more concerned with collecting primary texts than with arguing for or critically examining separatism and separatist texts.

[3] The following discussion refers to some major black separatist thinkers of the nineteenth century, but I would be remiss if I did not mention one of the most prominent African-American political figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, W.E.B. Du Bois. In the article "The 'Eighth o' Style': Black Nationalism, the New Deal, and *The Emperor Jones*," Anna Siomopoulos writes, "Du Bois merged political protest and economic self-help by promoting a nationalistic politics of self-segregation focused less on proving black worth than on disregarding whites altogether in attempts to form, as the title of one of his essays suggests, 'a Negro nation within the nation'" (69). Though the scope of Du Bois's philosophy does mark him as more of a nationalist than a separatist, his ideas could be appropriated by a separatist community just as easily.

[4] A useful work on "black religious nationalism" is R. Drew Smith's "Black Religious Nationalism and the Politics of Transcendence." In this article Smith explores how African-American forms of religion fit into the framework of Black Nationalism. He asserts that "by the late eighteenth century, into the early nineteenth century, increasing numbers of African-Americans had concluded that there was a virtual religious devotion to racial injustice in America and that, consequently, what was needed was black social space independent of white

institutional and ideological control" (534). He also points out that both black and white religious leaders "had conceded years earlier that black social progress lay in the direction of separation from whites" (535). In this light, the two preachers in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* take on even more importance in the construction and maintenance of Ruby.

[5] Gordon suggests that black nationalism began with anti-slavery documents like *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together With a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* and Robert Alexander Young's *The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defense of the Black Man's Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom* (78-80). Walker argues that "it was blacks, and not whites, whose blood and sweat built the United States" (93), which certainly indicates a nationalist mindset. None of the characters I study think in these terms; they are more concerned with creating their own smaller spaces. Gordon also mentions that Reverend Lewis Woodson, a nineteenth century black separatist, specifically referenced the Declaration of Independence as a major separatist document justifying contemporary separatist thought and action; this supports other scholarship such as Peter Widdowson's (discussed below), as well as my own assertion that the history of the U.S. is in some respects a history of separatist communities.

[6] Gordon's research and analysis also note that these tropes are still prevalent in the twenty-first century, disseminated by black separatists like Elijah Muhammad (142).

[7] Another work concerned with nationalist writings by black women is "Black Separatism in the Periodical Writings of Mrs. A.E. (Amelia) Johnson" by Wendy Wagner. Johnson was a nineteenth century writer who "directly confronts racial issues by calling attention to her identity as a black woman and espousing her belief in the institutional separation of the races as a solution to the problems of racial discrimination" (Wagner 93). Like other nationalists mentioned in this discussion, "Johnson adeptly makes a case for black nationalism by linking the causes of blacks in America to that of other groups that have formed nations," in this case the Saxons and the colonists of the American Revolution (Wagner 101). This article further confirms the comprehensive historical nature of African American separation philosophies.

[8] Some of these include Sarah Lucia-Hoagland and Julia Penelope's *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* (1988), a cultural study of identity politics by lesbian writers; Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope's *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* (1993), a separatist anthology of essays on lesbian identity formation; and Ellen Lewin's (ed.) *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, an anthropological study of lesbianism containing essays on community formation.

[9] Richard Schmitt and Thomas E. Moody's *Alienation and Social Criticism* is a collection of essays that explores different manifestations of alienation. This topic is related to separatism, but the book's focus on actual situations and its use of technical social theory make it only marginally useful for my project on fictional texts. The same holds true for Felix Geyer and Walter R. Heinz's collection entitled *Alienation, Society, and the Individual: Continuity and Change in Theory and Research*. Either text would be a good starting point for a sociologist working with real-life separatist communities. Another text that would be useful to sociologists or political scientists is *Groups and Group Rights*, edited by Christine Sistare, Larry May, and

Leslie Francis. But much like the aforementioned works, this book's focus and its source material limit its use for this project. Such existing scholarship on alienation tends to cover either very general theoretical questions or very specific real-life situations, none of which seems as applicable to my particular project as works like Romine's and Womack's, which explore specific aspects of community and separatism through the lens of fictional textuality.

[10] One such issue might be the motivation for separating in the first place; but, as Bertrand M. Roehner and Leonard J. Rahilly point out in their book *Separatism and Integration: A Study in Analytical History*, "Separatist forms of action can be described more objectively than motivations" (23). I should note, though, that this work discusses actual separatism, rather than fictional representations, and defines "separatist action" much more narrowly than I do: "By definition, a separatist action is directed against the central government and its local representatives: police, army, tax officials, judges" (Roehner and Rahilly 161). In a strictly sociopolitical sense, this definition might be accurate; however, I find it too limiting. It seems to conflate "radical nationalists" with "separatists."

[11] In her article "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion in American Pentecostalism," R. Marie Griffith defines Pentecostal home spaces and families in a larger sense than actual blood relations: "'Home' also suggested relationships beyond the immediate family—whole communities bound by ties of affection, compassion, and common belief" (191). This definition supports the idea of the imagined community.

[12] Other critics have noticed similar tendencies, occurring both in actual, historical veterans' lives and in artistic representations of veterans' experiences. In his book *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, for instance, Philip Beidler writes, "[Readjusting to life in The World] was a problem of 'vision' in its largest sense—of having undergone an experience so peculiar unto itself and its own insane dynamic as to make nothing in life ever look altogether sane again—and subsequently (and here would be their real point of difference from other veterans of other American wars), of being sentenced, by unspoken national consent, to solitary confinement with the memory of it, urged to tell no tales, please, on the grounds that even were the experience of Vietnam to prove susceptible eventually to certain methods of explanation, there would be virtually no one in the entire country who would care to hear about it" (9). I read "unspoken national consent" as an act of segregation, and I suggest that veterans often thought of as separatist have indeed only been segregated.

CHAPTER 1
GIRL GANGS, FEMALE OUTLAWS, LESBIAN SUBTEXTS

> Says Lana, "You get the feeling They're afraid of us?" licking her
> lips 'cause it's such a nice feeling, and Goldie smiles saying,
> "Huh! They better be," and Legs says, smiling but serious too,
> "'First comes fear, then respect' as Father Theriault says. 'The
> oppressed of the Earth, rising, make their own law.'"—Joyce Carol
> Oates, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*

> As constructed texts, confessions reveal only as much as the author
> wishes, and for those purposes with which the author sets out to
> write in the first place. And, of course, the author of a confession
> or memoir is no more in control of the discourses shaping her
> thoughts and memories than is any other author. –Bonnie
> Zimmerman, "'Confessions' of a Lesbian Feminist"

> It is debilitating to [be] any woman in a society where women are
> warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be
> monsters.—Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Infection in the
> Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship"

Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Foxfire* focuses on a gang of young, mostly white girls who live in upstate New York during the 1950s; F. Gary Gray's film *Set It Off* centers on a group of African-American women in 1990s Los Angeles. But, in spite of the differences in setting and characters, these two works are strikingly similar in many ways. The gang in *Foxfire* forms in response to capitalist patriarchal oppression; the gang members in *Set It Off*, though they have always been friends, become separatist outlaws in response to racial and economic injustices, most of which are committed by men. Both artists use similar narrative devices—the clandestine formation of an all-female separatist gang; aggressive acts committed against figures who represent the dominant culture; the deepening problems of operating a separatist community inside the dominant culture, while attempting to reject that culture's ideology, its rules, and many of its values; the climactic moment in which the gang's aggression becomes its undoing; and a denouement in which the gang is simultaneously mourned, romanticized, and criticized. The

female gangs' appropriation of traditionally masculine, capitalist methodology critiques the seductive but problematic choice to use the dominant culture's oppressive methods as a means of resistance. This approach reveals to the reader the patriarchal power structures of this fictional society and redistributes some of that power to the female characters, but it also inverts those original paradigms without actually revising the key problem of oppression. Both Oates and Gray therefore represent aggressive lesbian feminist separatism as a hopeful, sympathetic, but ultimately unstable system of resistance.

Before discussing Oates's and Gray's specific representations of lesbian feminist separatism, I should first establish the theoretical framework that informs my reading. In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon identifies three types of feminist resistance to patriarchy:

> Liberal feminism aims to achieve full equality of opportunity in all spheres of life without radically transforming the present social and political system. The realization of its aims, however, will mean the transformation of the sexual division of labour and of contemporary norms of femininity and masculinity . . . Radical feminism envisages a new social order in which women will not be subordinated to men, and femininity and femaleness will not be debased and devalued . . . For socialist feminists, patriarchy, as a social system, is integrally tied in with class and racial oppressions and can only be abolished through a full transformation of the social system. Socialist feminism does not envisage a true and natural femaleness, but sees gender as socially produced and historically changing. (4)

Weedon goes on to discuss the concept of poststructuralist feminism, a type of feminist thought and discourse that embraces the inherent contradictions in concepts such as "femininity" and "feminism." Poststructuralist feminism does not depend on labels such as "radical" and "socialist" but sees such concepts as always in flux, always in negotiation. On one level, these texts are negotiations in feminist thought and praxis in which the tenets of feminist separatism are first explored and then critically interrogated.

Foxfire and *Set It Off* represent feminist separatism, based to some extent on lesbian relationships, as one alternative to women's traditional choices within patriarchal society. Neither artist characterizes these separatist groups as seeking a liberal feminist "full equality of opportunity" within dominant society, though these groups do seem to seek a "transformation of the sexual division of labour and of contemporary norms of femininity and masculinity," at least within the boundaries of their separate space. Yet, because of the eventual destruction of the communities, both texts can also be read as cautionary tales against the appropriation of violence, one of the means that men have traditionally used to maintain power. Oates and Gray construct their female gangs as sympathetic, noble attempts at feminist resistance and as critiques of existing oppressive institutions. The characters in these texts seek to leave the "present social and political systems" while remaining, geographically, within American borders. However, as Oates's and Gray's characters move beyond acts of liberal or socialist resistance—i.e., their initial separations from other antisocial groups within representative dominant institutions—and toward aggressive separatism, both artists represent their characters' actions as increasingly less sympathetic. This sympathetic tonal change might demonstrate the desirability of less violent and aggressive resistance.

A major concern for critics studying these works is how the artists historically situate their narratives. Oates sets *Foxfire* in a time period predating the nationwide, organized forms of feminism that are often termed the second wave, embodied in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s.[1] Her main characters consist of isolated females who are both proactive and reactive, and who in many ways represent women's struggle for empowerment, both in its contemporary form and in ways that foreshadow the future nationwide political movement. Racism is occasionally a concern in *Foxfire*, primarily when the characters use racial

slurs. However, racism receives comparatively little overt attention in Oates's novel. Only a few passages discuss Foxfire's exclusively white membership.[2] Oates's treatment of gender, sexual, and economic oppression are much more evident. Oates's comparative silence in terms of racial assumptions contrasts markedly with *Set It Off*, a contrast I shall examine more deeply below.

To explain more fully why I see Oates's and Gray's works as representations of lesbian feminist separatism, I should discuss exactly what that term means—both its historical definition and the ways that I am altering historical meaning for this study. In her book *Sep-a-ra-tism and Women's Community*, Dana Shugar argues that lesbian feminist separatism evolved from, and is therefore always connected with, radical feminism, a movement that defines sexism as the "primary contradiction" and therefore calls for separation from all men. Lesbian feminism grew out of similar discontent, this time with the compulsory heterosexuality that saturated even the women's movement. Shugar writes that

> because of their heavy involvement in the newly emerging gay/lesbian rights movement as well as the feminist movement . . . lesbians began to develop politicized definitions of lesbianism simultaneous to and in concert with the development of radical feminism. The oppression experienced by lesbians as women and as members of a sexual minority, however, gave many lesbians an affinity to radical feminism even long before radical feminism openly addressed the issue of lesbianism. Both the compelling ideologies they found within radical feminism and the hostility many experienced from heterosexual feminists urged lesbians to forge the creation of lesbian feminism and . . . lesbian separatism. (24)

This passage suggests that radical feminism and lesbian feminism are related but not necessarily synonymous; it also establishes the historical basis for Oates's construction of female characters who reject, and are rejected by, the novel's other oppressed women and at least the most aggressive representatives of its heterosexual community.[3]

Shugar further argues that both radical and lesbian feminisms depend upon female community; therefore, members of either affiliation would likely have some kind of separatist

leanings. For radical feminists, "The value of separatism . . . comes in the united community of women it could create: a safe community that would lead to the only viable feminist 'freedom'" (15). At the same time, "radical-feminist uneasiness over issues of sexuality in general . . . made even these groups less than hospitable for many lesbians" (16). While both radical and lesbian feminists repudiate relationships with men, these groups disagreed over just what women's communities should be. Lesbian separatism, then, historically rejects compulsory heterosexuality, even to the point of shunning heterosexual feminists.[4]

Neither *Foxfire* nor *Set It Off* focuses on communities that meet stringent historical definitions of radical feminism, lesbian feminism, or radical separatism. So one question for critics of these texts is how to describe Oates's and Gray's textual communities. Both artists do construct texts in which women come together in order to resist oppression. For the gang in *Foxfire*, sexism is the "primary contradiction," yet the members also represent lived lesbian experience, in the sense that "lesbian" means "woman-centered," a term based on the ideas that Adrienne Rich discusses in her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich writes that

> *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range . . . of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of *lesbianism*. (217, original emphasis)

Except for the one scene of lesbian sexuality that I will discuss later in this chapter, this less "clinical" definition applies to *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*.

In contrast, the gang in *Set It Off* does not meet Rich's definitions of a lesbianism predicated on sexual acts, nor do they specifically name men as their primary enemies. But, both gangs are representative of women's communities formed in response to patriarchy, as well as its inherent domination of sexuality, economy, and—in the case of the *Set It Off* gang—race. Further, they separate themselves not only from obvious dominant (and mostly male) figures but also from other oppressed women. These gangs, then, could be read in terms of Rich's liberal definition of lesbianism and my working definition of separatism. In Oates's and Gray's narratives, the problems, evolution, and destruction of the gangs begin with and depend upon colliding gender, sexual, and economic concerns; these collisions, and how Oates and Gray imagine such characters would cope with them, help reveal possible definitions and revisions of separatism and community.

In order to discuss what forms of resistance Oates is exploring and how they succeed and fail, I should first examine *Foxfire*'s representation of the dominant community. In *Foxfire*, the dominant community is a capitalist heterosexual patriarchy. Oates constructs the community of Hammond, New York as oppressive to characters whose identities place them outside of the dominant institutions and groups. She presents a conscious, organized feminist separatism as one possible alternative to oppression; her female characters attempt to use their difference as a tool of empowerment. They resist patriarchy's attempt to force them into certain culturally or biologically determined roles. The author, therefore, seems initially sympathetic to the ideals of feminist separatism and unsympathetic to deterministic, dominant structures. However, the choices that the characters make, choices that conflict with the strictures of the dominant culture, ultimately lead to their group's destruction. Oates constructs this kind of resistance to patriarchy

as an understandable but ultimately flawed attempt at feminist praxis, suggesting authorial pessimism regarding this type of resistance's long-term viability.

One important characteristic of the dominant community in *Foxfire* is its patriarchal values. Though later in the novel the characters' concern for clear gender lines is subsumed in broader separatist issues, the early sections of the narrative are clearly grounded in terms of male/female dichotomies. Oates distinguishes Foxfire from the other gangs in Hammond by delineating the gender line, writing, through the narrator Maddy Wirtz, that "there were gangs in Hammond in Lowertown in the Fairfax neighborhood but they were all boys or young men in their late teens, early twenties, there were no girl gangs nor were there stories of or memories of 'girl gangs' Oh Jesus the very sound 'girl gang' had the power to send the blood racing!" (35). Here Oates's characters mimic male organizational models to achieve their own empowerment. This positive representation of gender role reversals, described in terms of excitement and discovery, connotes sympathy for feminist organization and demonstrates one way that such groups can affect individuals positively.

Oates often invokes sisterhood. In chapter six, Maddy says, "Ours was *a true sisterhood not a mere mirror of the boys* whom Legs [Sadovsky, Foxfire's leader] urged us to mistrust beyond even the degree of mistrust we naturally felt for them, or for most of them" (Oates 44, emphasis mine). This passage is revealing in several ways. First, it indicates that the girls of Foxfire have an inner sense of separation from males, a "mistrust" that is "naturally felt."[5] Oates critiques this "natural mistrust" later in the novel. Second, it helps establish Legs's power as the leader—or even as the matriarch—of the gang, in that Maddy admits to allowing Legs's beliefs to determine and strengthen her own.

Although this passage reveals the gang's preoccupation with gender differences, it also challenges such dichotomies. In the italicized portion, Maddy reveals that the gang strives for a structure based on their own ideas and concepts, one not modeled on common and dominant male paradigms. Such a new model could reflect Oates's sympathy with socialist feminism; however, because of the all-female structure of the gang, it might also imply sympathy for separatism. Additionally, Maddy calls Foxfire a "true sisterhood," thereby implying the existence of *false* sisterhoods. This part of the passage—"a true sisterhood not a mere mirror of the boys"—indicates that this falsity could be structural; their conscious choice to mirror existing male paradigms, rather than to create their own structure and value system, is marked as less valid. This urge for structural originality in their new community, when coupled with the characters' valuation of sisterhood, suggests a separatist gender ideology; in other words, they move from a liberal or socialist feminism to a more radical sort. At this point in the narrative, when such a sisterhood remains an abstract concept, Oates seems sympathetic to the possibility. As the novel progresses, however, and the gang members become more and more militant, the practicality of their particular separatism becomes suspect. Their increasing militancy, violence, and aggression echo traditionally male methodology; Oates, therefore, represents as less sympathetic a separatism that fails to be very different from the oppressive dominant structure.

To show this progression, Oates juxtaposes her characters' increasingly separatist gender politics with her representation of Hammond's patriarchal social structure—its maleness, its compulsory heterosexuality, its economic superiority. One character who represents the privileges and abuses of patriarchal power with which the gang must contend is Legs's father, Ab. Because Legs is running away from her grandmother's house and, possibly, the police, the authority to which Legs refuses to surrender is both familial and societal. This general rejection

of authority quickly takes on more specific characteristics when Maddy imagines Legs's

rejection of Ab.

> Legs won't think of him . . . she's too smart to be going right home . . . catching
> hell from the old man who'd thought he'd gotten rid of her for a while but mainly
> why risk being picked up again by the Welfare Services people and this time, who
> knows, dumped at Juvenile Hall where she'd been once before and wanted to die,
> the county shelter for children they'll have to drag her to in handcuffs and beaten
> comatose with cops' nightsticks *she is not going not ever again* . . . (Oates 12-13,
> original emphasis)

Maddy believes all authority figures are linked systematically. Escape from the state-imposed

exile of her grandmother's house leads Legs not to Ab's home, a place that Legs associates with

the more rigid and violent authority of the state, but to Maddy's house, to a sisterhood where that

rigidity and violence can be resisted. Oates here shows that the separatist community in this

novel will be based not on institutional or familial blood ties but on a chosen sisterhood with

common enemies—both males and other women who choose not to resist patriarchy.

Oates also writes institutional patriarchy as an economic force, and, through characters

like Uncle Wimpy Wirtz, she seems to represent the problems with compulsory heterosexuality

that Rich discusses. Wimpy is idle and lascivious. Although Wimpy and Maddy are related, he

intends to exercise his dominant male privilege over her.

> If he happened to be lounging in the doorway of his store smoking a cigar,
> chatting with another man, as she passed by he'd whistle thinly through his teeth,
> not recognizing her apparently, as he'd whistle at other girls and young women in
> the neighborhood: not jeering exactly, in fact rather softly, but not in a way to
> make you feel proud. Maddy guessed that, at such times, Uncle Wimpy didn't see
> *her*—she was just something female to him, bare-legged in summer, bare-armed,
> young. But if she was in the company of her FOXFIRE sisters, especially Lana, or
> Legs, or even Rita, Wimpy Wirtz wouldn't waste time looking at her, in any case.
> (Oates 63)

This passage reveals that Wimpy, representative of Hammond's patriarchal social structure, sees

women and girls—even his own relatives—as faceless objects of his male gaze. He extends his

privilege over them simply by looking and whistling, activities over which they have no control

and from which they have no defense except in numbers—in sisterhood—and, later, in their

reconstruction of their appearances. In one respect, these characters create for themselves a more

masculine appearance to challenge men's expectations; their refusal to "look feminine,"

especially *en masse*, rejects the power of the male gaze.[6] In the early parts of the novel, their

refusal to meet men's expectations of their vulnerability is perhaps best exemplified when

Wimpy attempts to rape Maddy. When the members of Foxfire save Maddy and physically

punish Wimpy, their intoxicating sense of collective empowerment again demonstrates a

practical aspect of communal feminism—strength in numbers. Through Wimpy, Oates represents

the actual dangers of patriarchy by constructing the Hammond men as incestuous power brokers

who wield their masculinity like a scepter. She further represents sisterhood as one response, as a

choice that may in fact be a necessity for female safety and survival.

Other abuses of male power in Hammond further exemplify compulsory heterosexuality,

including the actions of Rita's antagonists, the male gangs and the teacher Lloyd Buttinger. The

character of Buttinger functions as a site of collision between male sexual desire, patriarchal

domination of political power, and the use of language as a tool of oppression. He also becomes

a symbol for Foxfire's sisterhood. As a teacher, Buttinger is in a position of power and trust. His

unchecked abuse of this power and trust reflects the dominant community's ability to bend its

own rules.[7] The girls' destruction of Lloyd Buttinger as a professional and as an authority figure

is, therefore, an aggressive step in their rewriting of the dominant community's paradigm.

Oates first introduces Buttinger in Chapter Four of Part One, entitled "FOXFIRE: First

Victory!" The chapter focuses on Buttinger's abuse of Elizabeth O'Hagen, the Foxfire member

who is nicknamed "Rita," "Red," and "Fireball." Oates writes Rita as a long-term victim of male

power: from her brothers to the boys of the neighborhood, who violate her in thinly-disguised sexual encounters such as ripping off her panties or draping a garter snake around her neck, to Buttinger himself. Rita is characterized as "plumply cute," with "strawberry-blond curls" and "soft fist-sized breasts" (Oates 23). That Rita's body is less hard and boy-like than Maddy's or Legs's is indicative of her status as victim; Oates creates in Rita a more traditionally feminine, and therefore allegedly more vulnerable, version of Maddy and Legs.

Rita's problems also exemplify how other women fail the Foxfire girls. When Rita is raped by members of the male gang the Viscounts, an encounter to which she is lead by her own brothers, "her mother screamed at her and slapped her and did not then, or subsequently, inquire of her what had happened that afternoon—whether anything had happened at all" (Oates 25). Her mother's complicity makes Rita the perfect prey in a male-dominated society. This passage exemplifies how failing to resist patriarchal abuses can lead to even worse problems for other women. In Chapter Four, Buttinger notices Rita's vulnerability and isolation. He chooses to exacerbate her victim status by humiliating her in front of the class; he forces her to do math problems that he is fully aware she does not understand until, "sending her back to her seat with flurried waves of his hands as you might drive along a dog or a sheep, shaking his head, smiling, winking out at the class, [he says] 'That's enough Rita—*you've exposed yourself enough*'" (Oates 26-27, emphasis mine). Buttinger humiliates Rita intellectually, thus reinforcing the image of his superior knowledge and the political power that knowledge represents; simultaneously, he employs the language of sexual domination, thereby reinforcing his patriarchal sexual superiority. In this one passage, then, Rita is constructed as a double victim.

Buttinger does not stop at the level of publicly proving his superiority over Rita, however. He keeps her after school to do math problems, sitting "uncomfortably close beside her

so she could hear his breathing and she could smell the slightly sweetish-stale odor of his body"
(Oates 29). This invasion of personal space is another patriarchal violation, yet Buttinger goes
even further. Whenever Rita does a problem incorrectly, Buttinger "might advance upon her
nudging against her even sometimes drawing his thick beefy hands against her breasts quickly
and seemingly accidentally so she didn't know what was happening or how she might be to
blame for it happening if it was" (Oates 29). Oates attributes to Buttinger not only the power to
violate but also the ability to transfer responsibility for his behavior to the object of his
dominance.

These scenes reveal much about how Oates constructs the world of Hammond and her
main characters' later decision to separate themselves from that world. Male authority figures are
constructed as ignorant and/or abusive. Female authority figures are passive and/or complicit in
the dissemination of male dominance. Even the family is not a refuge from the political structure
of the dominant community, as parents and male siblings are constructed as disinterested and
abusive. Therefore, as Oates charts the progression of the Foxfire gang, we see the girls rejecting
their families as havens or models, followed by their outright attack on Buttinger as
representative of the dominant system. This narrative situation seems to suggest that women's
unequal stature in mainstream society, exemplified here through working-class lesbian
characters, might justify the formation of a separatist community.[8]

The action taken against Buttinger suggests that such pervasive oppression may be met
not only with rejection of dominant ideals but also with organized, physical resistance to
dominant institutions. Foxfire spraypaints descriptions of Buttinger's crimes on his car, which he
subsequently and unknowingly drives through Hammond; the members of the community then
reject Buttinger and he disappears from the narrative. This course of events suggests that one

way of resisting dominance is through aggressive appropriation of language. Other kinds of dominance are being critiqued here as well. In her work *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, Brenda Daly discusses how "The violence engendered by such presumably 'neutral' institutional discourse has a direct bearing upon the lives of poor teenage girls" (206). In this section, Oates explores one method of resisting such institutionally sanctioned oppression and violence—through the subjective and subversive use of language by "poor teenage girls."

Yet the scene has implications for the dominant community besides its double-edged language. As Oates constructs it, Hammond, represented as a typical American town, is very much complicit in patriarchal politics. However, once the Foxfire girls call attention to Buttinger's use of patriarchal power, that same community—itself based on male dominance and its binary, female oppression—repudiates Buttinger. These events construct the dominant community as hypocritical and hegemonic; it rewards male power and inhibits female individuation, *unless* that paradigm is highlighted in public. Then the offending member is removed from the community, although the core assumptions and institutions of the community itself remain unchanged. This cosmetic change is one possible danger of blind acceptance of dominant norms and another possible reason why Oates represents separatism as a potential alternative. In *Foxfire*, the girls call their destruction of Buttinger their "first victory," yet they do not question why he is so easily removed or what else they have managed to change. Their lack of foresight is part of what leads to Foxfire's downfall. This outcome might suggest that the dominant institution, not just a given dominant individual, must be resisted. At this point, the group's resistance, though aggressive, is nevertheless comparatively nonviolent, which is perhaps why Oates writes both characters and their actions sympathetically.

The passages above also show that Ab attempts to "get rid of" Legs, to divest himself of

his responsibility as a father, by sending Legs to live with her grandmother. Ab, in other words,

represents the dominant community's privilege of simply maintaining its own centeredness, of

insulating itself in its own authority while leaving marginalized groups adrift and on their own.

In one sense, Oates may have constructed the character of Ab Sadovsky—who is largely an

absent presence in the text, mainly appearing in flashback or in Maddy's narrative reconstruction

of Legs's verbalized history—to represent this male prerogative of *not* exercising authority.

Legs's decision to avoid her father upon returning to Hammond represents a conscious decision

to separate from the potential use of his authority. In choosing Maddy's house over her father's,

Legs regains her agency. The choice is no longer in Ab's hands. The patriarchal characters—Ab,

Wimpy, Buttinger, the male gangs—represent two equally oppressive variations on male power

structures, the privileges of using or choosing *not* to use power; but Legs's agency indicates that

women have choices as well.

Wimpy, Buttinger, and the male gangs, on the other hand, represent a more aggressive

version of male authority. They all use the power of the objectifying male gaze and/or physical

violence to mark the girls of the neighborhood as less powerful and to mark themselves as

dominant heterosexual men. Wimpy, the typical Lowertown businessman, represents dominant

capitalism; Buttinger and the male gang members represent other, varying levels of male

socioeconomic existence, respect, and power. Yet in all these cases, Oates hints that, while

stopping the male gaze and patriarchal oppression altogether may be impossible, the formation of

a cohesive, recognizable sisterhood may redirect that gaze and deflect that abuse. Because

Wimpy "wouldn't waste time looking" at the Foxfire gang as a whole, the girls have even more

proof that their secret society has the power to alter, in ways both overt and subtle, existing

values and traditions. The gang's social victory over Buttinger and their physical domination of Wimpy allow them to do collectively what they could not do individually—redirect, and thereby partially control, the male gaze and retake some agency in their lives. Oates therefore seems sympathetic to the alternative possibilities represented by lesbian feminist separatist communities. This particular representation is, initially, what Weedon would call a socialist feminist group, but it becomes increasingly separatist as the narrative develops.

As mentioned above, Oates's shifting authorial sympathies suggest that she sees lesbian feminist separatism as most viable when such communities are not based on patriarchal models. The characters in Oates's girl gang consider themselves a true sisterhood not only because they have formed a female gang but also because they intend to create a new sort of group, one based not on the high visibility and bravado of the male gangs but on secrecy and tightly-knit relationships. Their rejection of patriarchal values is, in these early sections, represented as an understandable choice; their actions lead the individual members of the gang to a sense of empowerment and independence. Likewise, the men whom Foxfire destroys are unapologetic sexists. Therefore, the reader can conclude that feminist resistance is both desirable and necessary. Oates demonstrates, however, that such a sisterhood is not all-inclusive. Her adult female characters are unwilling or unable to improve their own lives and provide the Foxfire girls with models of feminist praxis. Oates uses the mother—absent from the text sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally[9]—to represent this complicity. Such an indictment of women's roles in their own cultural, social, and economic subordination—combined with the dearth of choices for resisting such oppression—makes the girls' initial attempts to create a different paradigm even more sympathetic, and their subsequent failure to harness their own power all the more tragic.

Mrs. Sadovsky is literally absent from her daughter's life and seems mysterious to Maddy because Legs will not speak of her. In discussing the crucifix Legs uses in the gang's sacral initiation ceremony—a passage that I will examine later in this chapter—Maddy says that it

> was the inexpensive object forgotten in the Sadovsky household like certain plaques and grubby little monuments in Lowertown at which no one ever consciously looked any longer, now merely decorative, or not even decorative but simply . . . *there*? nailed up on the hallway hall between Ab Sadovsky's bedroom and Legs' bedroom by the woman who'd been Legs' mother who had died of whatever illness or accident Legs refused to say nor would she so much as speak of her lost mother even to confirm grudgingly yes she'd *had* a mother, once.
> Shit. That's ancient history. (Oates 37)

Legs's mother, then, is not a person (either to the characters or to the readers of Oates's novel) but a shadow seen only through the objects she has left behind. Maddy's comparison of her to objects "simply . . . *there*" suggests Mrs. Sadovsky's lack of material substance in the novel and her failure as a model for the girls. Because the fact of her existence is so easily *not* seen, because Legs calls her mother "ancient history" and refuses to speak of her, we can intuit that Legs has rejected both her mother and the idea of using death as an escape from Hammond. In this way, Oates represents the value of women's voices and some possible problems inherent in a limited sisterhood.

If Mrs. Sadovsky lacks immediacy in the text because of her absence in both the narrative and in Legs's formation of subjectivity, Maddy's mother manages to remain emotionally absent in spite of her occasional physical presence. When she does appear, she symbolizes the kind of woman that Maddy and the gang hope *not* to become. The crucial scene illustrating Mrs. Wirtz's failure as feminist model is the text of Part One, Chapter Two, entitled "Black Eye." This scene takes place, chronologically, after the Foxfire members tattoo themselves in their sacral rite of sisterhood. Maddy's use of her body as text contrasts with how men use her mother's body to symbolize their power over her; this contrast relates to the literal and figurative silences that

separate these two characters. The tattoos that mark the girls as members of Foxfire also serve as symbols of their control over their own bodies. The Foxfire tattoo consists of "red-stippled dots defining themselves into the shape of a tall erect flame" (Oates 41). After the ceremony in which the lesbian sisterhood of Foxfire is formed, Maddy goes "into a zombie trance staring at that lovely bloodburst flameburst" (Oates 57). Here is a form of beauty that the girls have created and chosen for themselves. The tattoo therefore functions as a symbol of sisterhood, as an emblem of their rejecting both the male gaze and other women.

Maddy contrasts the tattoo's beauty with the rest of her developing body and the ways in which her emerging femininity will mark her socially. She describes how she "was astonished and mortified to be growing tough little muscle-breasts that shamed me as I believe Legs' shamed her," as well as the feeling that her and Legs's "lean hard boy-bodies were one sure measure of superiority over Rita, Goldie, Lana and numerous others" (Oates 57). In these passages, the traditional female body is written as less resistant to patriarchy; Maddy and Legs are ashamed of their breasts because they represent traditional femininity, which, in the harsh streets of Hammond, equals weakness and passivity. The passage also reveals Maddy's belief that a boy-like body is superior. In *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*, Joanne Hollows argues that "many [radical] feminists saw the rejection of feminine identities as crucial in producing a feminist identity and consciousness" (10). Maddy and Legs do attempt to create androgynous bodies, regardless of whether we read this action as consciously and radically political. In this same short chapter, Maddy stands contemplating her bare breasts, and her mother bursts into the room, also partially naked. As these two characters confront each other across the space of a small apartment bathroom, Oates herself seems to be confronting central questions about using the female body as text: who is marking, and who is being marked?

On the one hand, Oates constructs Maddy's self-image as increasingly powerful and positive; Maddy feels that the tattoo "at least partway redeemed [her] monkey-ugliness" (58). Because Oates establishes the symbolic nature of the tattoo, the reader senses that the beauty Maddy sees is not just aesthetic but also political; the tattoo is symbolic of her newfound power to step outside existing social structures, to participate in the formation of a new system, and to use her own body as text, as a voice for her newfound agency. Momma's body, on the other hand, is a site of domination, on which a powerful and presumably masculine hand has written the evidence of its physical superiority. Maddy immediately notices "Momma's big purplish-orangish black eye as if a giant's fist had walloped her good on the right side of her face so the eye was swollen almost shut and her nose, her nose that was fine-boned and thin now had a pink-poached look to it and the right half of her mouth looked like a sponge soaked in blood" (Oates 58). These physical contrasts mirror the social and political differences that each character might represent.

A close examination of this passage reveals at least two readings of these differences. First, if Maddy's tattoo is a thing of physical beauty, Momma's face has been "rewritten" as an example of beauty's destruction, or at least its vulnerability to male power and desire. A second concept, interrelated with the first, is the body's relationship to female power and desire. If Maddy's tattoo is a constant reminder of the retaking of agency, as well as the physical desire and openness displayed in the sacral rite of passage, Momma's face is an *instant* reminder of the possibilities inherent in unquestioning acceptance of patriarchy.[10] So are Maddy's own breasts; she hates them and prays that they do not grow so that her body can remain boylike. Maddy rewrites her own body and its symbolic power; Momma's body is violently rewritten, presumably by a man. Maddy redefines female beauty for herself; Momma's traditional feminine

beauty is transmogrified into a site of physical male dominance. This contrast exemplifies the key battle between female subjectivity and masculine oppression, a battle at the heart of actual feminisms, a battle that is a key motivation for feminist separatism in Oates's novel.

It is therefore unsurprising that the two characters have nothing to say to each other. Through their silence, Oates constructs a collision of two very different attitudes about the female voice. Maddy, our narrator and the character with some modicum of agency, has all the lines; the only conversation between the two, and thus the only chance for the reader to hear Momma's voice, is described as follows: "oh Momma I squinted at you, I shrank seeing and not seeing just as you saw my FOXFIRE birthmark and didn't see shrinking away too fumbling with the doorknob murmuring something vague, apologetic, inaudible and slipping away. The two of us. By instinct" (Oates 58). The "seeing" and "not seeing" is critical here, as both characters confront the possibility that they have respectively rejected. Such an encounter could initiate dialogue or even change. Instead, Momma runs away and Maddy lets her go. The silence in this passage is indicative of Foxfire's increasingly separatist outlook. Because neither Maddy nor any of the other gang members can find a strong female example in their own lives, they turn increasingly to each other. This situation represents lesbian feminist separatism's potential exclusivity, its possible rejection of some women.

Our next question might be how Oates distinguishes between constructive feminist resistances and destructive, counterproductive, and/or overly exclusive responses. Returning to the idea of feminist re-appropriation of language, Daly argues that "Maddy's style of communal narration, her attempt to create an 'I' that can speak nonviolently for a 'we,' is born out of her recognition that violence, whether linguistic or physical, arises from a desire for stability, certainty, and control" (207). Oates's use of Maddy as the singular voice for a multifaceted gang

reveals that the gang's lingual agency exists in tension with—and acts against—the physical and social violence of patriarchy. In the early sections, and the representations of feminist praxis contained therein, the gang shares a goal—to form an independent gang under Legs's leadership—that every individual works in her own distinct way to enact. Legs's desire for change and her vision of female solidarity resonate in the other gang members, and, possibly, with the sympathetic reader as well. As the novel progresses, however, this singular vision fragments, as Maddy and Rita begin to distrust the decisions and methodology of their matriarch, whereas other, newer members of the gang continue to follow Legs blindly. The destruction of the gang and the deaths of its principal members imply that Oates sees their more militant separatist acts as a destructive response to patriarchy; simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, Maddy's continued romanticization of Legs allows for different, even conflicting, audience responses.

How does Oates construct and explore these complexities? One of the characters' responses is their rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. Although Oates constructs only one scene of overt lesbian sexuality (discussed below), Foxfire, under Rich's "liberal" definition of lesbianism, is nevertheless a homoerotic organization; the group's very existence challenges compulsory heterosexuality. To represent Foxfire as overtly, though "liberally," lesbian is to bestow upon the gang an even greater separatist connotation. Thus the gang's lesbianism, even in its non-sexual manifestations, reinforces the novel's sense of change and resistance.

Although she herself defines and argues for more inclusive and liberal definitions of lesbianism, Rich states that lesbian sexual eroticism is both "central to lesbian existence" (220-221) and that "which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience" (221). Thus, when their gang initiation takes on sexual overtones, they rewrite on their bodies

that which has been erased—their sisterhood and their sexual agency. The long passage on pages 42-43 detail the wild, Dionysian ritual in which the girls engage. First comes the removal of clothing: "then Goldie seized Legs in a bear hug tugging Legs' black shirt completely off both her shoulders . . . so her small pale breasts were exposed . . ." (Oates 42). Because this scene takes place after their tattooing, the girls are bleeding; in fact, they have already "pressed together eagerly" their bleeding flesh "to mingle their blood their separate bloods . . . so that from that hour onward they were blood-sisters" (Oates 41). This commingling of blood symbolically eliminates their individual separateness even as it (also symbolically) codifies their shared separatism. Later, the girls engage in sexual acts. At one point, "Goldie dragged [Lana] in Goldie gave her a jungle-cat bite of a kiss the two of them careening back against a bureau" (Oates 42). Soon after, Rita presses "her grapefruit-sized bare breasts against Goldie's smaller taut breasts and someone dribbled whiskey on Rita's breasts and licked it off, whiskey and blood" (Oates 42). The sexual manifestation of their sisterhood brings the girls ever closer to each other and to traditional definitions of lesbianism.[11]

Yet most of the novel is not concerned with sex itself; instead, the majority of the narrative traces the formation of a same-sex but nonsexual community. These shifting definitions of lesbianism—from what Rich calls the reductive "clinical" definition based on sexual activity to the more liberal definitions based on a feminine companionship or sense of community— create a narrative space with room for multiple reader responses; the extent to which Foxfire is a lesbian group is never completely clear. What is clear is that the members of Oates's female community become increasingly insular. They shun men sexually and socially; they also reject women who fail to resist patriarchy. Later they reject even their own less aggressive members.

By the time this last stage of separation begins, Foxfire's communal focus is less sociological or sexual than economic.

The shift in authorial sympathy occurs when economic greed supplants lesbian feminist idealism in Foxfire's new community. *Foxfire* is set in a capitalist society, although its main characters ostensibly reject the tenets of capitalism. In order to make their ideological break from the dominant community a physical one as well, the members of Foxfire rent a house on the outskirts of Hammond. Oates locates this house "in a semirural area, three miles south of Hammond and approximately a mile from the county fairgrounds" (205). This location reflects the gang's separatist philosophy; its placement outside of the urban area and away from the fairgrounds, a typical location for communal celebration, physically marginalizes the gang. Here the gang also attempts to gain financial independence. Their methodology, however—"hooking," or con artistry—seems problematic in terms of their allegedly proletarian philosophy. Because they are underage and uneducated, yet smart enough to realize that they must have money to survive, the gang chooses an alternative means of "employment" that, in the tradition of Robin Hood, redistributes wealth. Further, as the characters begin to shop for themselves, they become fascinated with the "treasure-trove of goods, a world of *things*" (Oates 212, original emphasis)— an understandable temptation, given how few material possessions these girls have previously had. The question for these characters becomes not "How can we reject the society that oppresses us?" but "How can we best society at its own game?"

Oates presents this section sympathetically, for the most part; Maddy's language reflects the giddiness of young women on their own for the first time, as well as their pride in providing for themselves. The dangers inherent in hooking, however, and the uncertain nature of their possible financial gain illustrates that this kind of "employment" could be ultimately unprofitable

or even destructive. The type of separatism that Oates constructs in *Foxfire* is therefore an immature version (appropriately commensurate with the characters who attempt the separation) that is more ideological than practical. Yet, in spite of their idealism, these characters fail to question their own oppressive, potentially self-destructive methods. Read in these respects, the novel seems to critique a feminist separatism unencumbered by, and therefore unsupported by, an honest and generative self-criticism.[12] The self-destructive results of the group's more violent acts, such as when they later kidnap a rich man in order to ransom him, might imply that militant feminist separatism (though not necessarily feminism or separatism in general) could be inextricably linked with patriarchal forms of oppression, a paradox that, at the heart of *Foxfire*, would explain the pessimistic ending of the novel.

In terms of Oates's sympathetic portrayal of Foxfire's separatism, the turning point—for Maddy, for Oates, for the reader—is the "Chick Mallick" episode, in which Maddy's attempt to "hook" a random man at a bus terminal goes horribly wrong. This scene both underscores the girls' positions as potential victims of patriarchal excess and demonstrates the dangers of their chosen path of resistance. Yet the chapter also functions as a transition. Oates certainly characterizes Mallick as a male perfectly at ease with his patriarchal power; he calls Maddy a "runaway" and a "bad girl," though he has no proof that she is either (245). This exemplifies his patriarchal belief that any female "runaway" is "bad" and therefore in need of punishment, some action that will overcome her individual choice and re-victimize her. That Mallick calls Maddy both "bad little girl" (Oates 245)—a paternalistic term that places him in the role of disciplining father figure—and "fucky little girl" (Oates 245)—thus marking her as an object of his sexual desire—demonstrates his conflation of male privilege and female victimization.

These passages reveal Mallick's progression from ideological objectification (verbal abuse) to physical domination (attempted rape). Yet this scene also indicates that Foxfire's newfound capitalist materialism might bring new iterations of their old problems. One of the few items that the girls of Foxfire have purchased to help them "hook" men—the fur coat—serves as a straightjacket during Mallick's rape attempt. I do not read the above passage as blaming Maddy or Foxfire for Mallick's actions. Oates characterizes Chick Mallick as precisely the kind of man that Foxfire justifiably hates and resists, and nothing in the novel indicates that she supports the patriarchal "blame the victim" mentality. I would argue, however, that she uses this passage to demonstrate that Foxfire's use of oppressive methodology, even for good reasons, is both unethical and dangerous, since the men most likely to respond to hooking are also most likely to abuse or even kill them.

Though "hooking"—which, as the Foxfire girls use the term, does not refer to prostitution or sex of any kind—is variously described as "unpredictable" and "dangerous," the girls also feel it is "justified" because "MEN ARE THE ENEMY!" and because "we perceived ourselves in a state of UNDECLARED WAR" (Oates 246). Foxfire believes that "men" are their enemies, not "some men" or "certain men." While this language seems to echo the characters' earlier feelings about men in general, Maddy senses a change. If the characters have matured in body and in terms of their long-range goals, their political outlook still seems overly simplistic and unrealistic. Further, while this section also proves hooking to be "dangerous" and "unpredictable," Maddy also states, "Yes we quickly came to love it. *Most of us, I mean*" (Oates 246, emphasis mine). This passage indicates the seductions of aggressive separatist resistance, but it also shows that some of Foxfire's members have begun to question or even resist their own militant, dangerous, economically motivated acts.

Oates uses Maddy's voice to question the group's increasing violence. Legs saves Maddy from the rape by bashing Mallick over the head with "skull-fracturing precision" (Oates 246) in a scene that reflects Foxfire's earlier rescue of Maddy from Wimpy Wirtz. But a careful comparison of those two passages reveals differences in authorial tone and sympathy. In the first rescue scene, the entire gang, then made up of only a few members, attacks Wimpy. Their physical assault, while aggressive, is also not meant to be lethal. The gang assaults Wimpy with their fists and feet, leaving him unconscious and bleeding; Legs says that "It's wrong to keep after somebody once he's fallen. Y'know—once he's *out*" (Oates 78, original emphasis). But in the Chick Mallick episode, Legs's assault goes beyond these self-imposed boundaries. Her initial attack renders Mallick unconscious, but we later learn that the gang has not stopped there. Maddy later reflects that

> *I was afraid of you [Legs] I guess. You saved my life but I was afraid of you having seen you hit him the way you did.*
> *And the others. My sisters. So wild, frenzied. Striking with fists, boots. Slamming him with lengths of iron pipe, anything they could snatch up from the ground.*
> *Like Uncle Wimpy, years ago. Except this time it's serious.*
> *A fierce gleeful FIRE rippling through you, my sisters, but not through me.*
> (Oates 253-54)

Thus, even though Oates characterizes Mallick as a patriarchal male who deserves retribution, she also characterizes Foxfire's response as overly aggressive and violent. While I do not argue that Maddy always functions as Oates's mouthpiece, Maddy's decreasing sympathy with Foxfire is a possible reflection of Oates's own distaste for even well-intentioned violence.[13]

The formation of the kidnap plot marks the point in the narrative where sympathy for Foxfire as community, if not for Legs as romantic outlaw, is finally and completely destroyed— for Maddy, for Oates, and probably for many readers. Legs sees Whitney Kellogg as the epitome of what Foxfire resists—the rich males who control the lives of others, especially women and the

poor. Legs hatches a plan to kidnap and ransom Kellogg, calling this plan "FOXFIRE's 'final solution'" (Oates 259). Though it is likely no accident that Oates has Legs name the plot after one of history's most insidious and cold-blooded acts of white male aggression and dominance, Legs's motivation is nevertheless a sympathetic one; she merely wishes to make enough quick money to purchase the Foxfire house outright, so that "nobody can make us leave. We can live here *forever*" (Oates 259, original emphasis). In other words, Legs creates the kidnapping plot in order to solidify Foxfire's physical separation and to ensure their survival. Oates constructs this plot as an aggressive means to a feminist end, as an understandable but nevertheless suspect capitalist venture motivated by the dearth of positive choices for underclass women.

In the novel's next chapter, however, Legs is characterized less sympathetically, although even here Oates's narrative choices create varying degrees and forms of audience sympathy for Legs's and Foxfire's feelings and actions. This chapter tells of Legs's time with the Kelloggs. It is figured partly as Maddy's reconstruction of Legs's narrative and partly as Maddy's recreating the story in her own imagination. The narrative uncertainty leaves the audience questioning what to believe and where to extend or withhold our sympathy. Oates characterizes the Kelloggs as well-meaning but ultimately paternalistic, patronizing upper-class people. Legs chooses to exploit Mr. Kellogg's gender assumptions by introducing him to Violet, a particularly beautiful member of Foxfire, who takes the name of Veronica Mason. Legs's purpose is to use Kellogg's maleness against him; she plans to use herself and Violet as bait to isolate and kidnap him. The plan works; Kellogg suggests a drive to the Morganstown Inn, an out-of-the-way establishment. His purpose is clear; he intends to have sex with Legs or Violet or both. Foxfire uses this opportunity to kidnap him. This plot, then, could be read as just another instance of Foxfire's attempts at feminist justice.

However, Oates constructs this kidnapping plot, ostensibly a more ambitious form of hooking, as less sympathetic in two ways. One is that Legs and Violet, and by association the whole of Foxfire, use Kellogg in spite of the effects on Kellogg's wife and their daughter Marianne. While Legs sees these women as either unwitting or consciously complicit tools of patriarchy, Maddy begins to suspect that these concepts are not as simple as Legs believes. Thus her uncritical attack on not just Kellogg but the whole family is suspect; Legs believes that any woman not a member of Foxfire is equally a target, a stance that seems reductive and, from most feminist and ethical perspectives, questionable. Under such guidelines, almost any act against any target could be justified. Secondly, Legs approves the purchase of guns for this plot. Though Legs declares that they will only need the guns for a show of force, the guns' presence represents a different, more potentially violent resistance. Part of what Oates seems to be interrogating through the introduction of different levels of violence is how to recognize when resistance has gone too far. At least one possible answer she provides is that resistance fails when it embraces aggression and violence beyond acts of self-defense, since Foxfire's use of guns directly leads to their disbanding and to Kellogg's near-death.

This novel also seems to question violent separatist actions through Oates's construction of Legs's and Foxfire's behavior during the actual kidnapping scenes. At one point, Kellogg pleads to be let go. The response, by an unidentified member of the gang, is "Man shut your mouth. Or I'll blow it off" (Oates 297). This threat echoes the words of Chick Mallick as he threatens to "tear [Maddy's] cunt open" (Oates 246) earlier in the novel. Further, Foxfire's binding of Kellogg and their holding him against his will reflects Mallick's treatment of Maddy in the attempted rape scene. Perhaps this is why Daly sees Maddy's refusal to participate in the plot as when "the novel makes its ethical point: when women take power, they must not simply

identify with it but redefine it. Maddy's refusal to write the ransom note constitutes a betrayal of

FOXFIRE, but it also marks her rejection of violence as a tactic" (217). How does Maddy realize

that this refusal is necessary? Daly writes that after Maddy is rescued from Mallick, "she rejects,

finally, the very American—and very male—role of romantic outlaw. Here, I believe, Maddy

speaks for her author" (217). If Daly is right, Maddy's rejection marks the definitive point at

which authorial sympathy for Foxfire disappears. Because their actions mimic patriarchal abuses,

the group has failed its own revisionist ideal. In rejecting Foxfire and their uncritical

appropriation of traditional male roles—an act that Legs and the others read as a betrayal—

Maddy actually remains true to Foxfire's original philosophy. Her rejection of the female

separatist community therefore becomes, perhaps paradoxically, a feminist act.

Oates's construction of these events illustrates the difficulties inherent in resisting

institutionalized capitalist patriarchy. Because she constructs Mr. Kellogg's assumptions about

men's power to objectify women in negative terms, Oates seems to reject paternalism and

traditional gender roles. Oates also seems to implicate some women's complicity in gender

oppression when Violet and Legs argue over whether Mrs. Kellogg and Marianne deserve to be

punished along with Mr. Kellogg. Violet says

> I just don't know if I can go through with it, I know it's justified like you say but
> . . . I mean I guess I like them, even him, I know he's evil 'cause of he's rich and
> a capitalist and exploiting and all that I know that Legs but I'm so sad I'm so
> worried not that we're gonna get caught but I sort of like them Marianne and Mrs.
> Kellogg they were so nice to me like almost I was their equal Legs y'know?
> y'know what I mean? and Legs said, Shut up. (Oates 287)

This passage reinforces the reader's conception of the Kelloggs as condescending and how, for

some characters, certain levels of inequality might be acceptable; for others, as Legs recognizes,

"almost equal" is not good enough. Maddy's response to, and her increasingly unsympathetic

reconstruction of, the kidnapping and ransoming imply, however, that militant separatist action could be dangerous and ultimately destructive.

Because the break in authorial sympathy comes before the actual kidnapping, Maddy must reconstruct the events for herself and the reader. Maddy recognizes the dangers of moving from separatism based mostly nonviolent resistance and acts of self-defense to unprovoked aggression; therefore, she refuses to take part in the kidnapping. Legs then exiles her from Foxfire. Later, Rita is similarly exiled because she falls in love with a boy. With the removal of two of the most sympathetic members from the gang, Oates increasingly characterizes Foxfire as a harder, more militant group; they attempt to use Whitney Kellogg's body as a means of exchange, echoing capitalist patriarchy's commodification of women. Thus, Oates seems to posit that mimicking dominant violence and oppression is also ultimately destructive, both to the individual and to the community that is meant to be a safe, separate space devoid of, at the very least, the same old problems.

Further proof of Oates's apparent sympathy for nonviolent feminist resistance and her caution regarding aggressive responses lies in the tragic yet romanticized ending of the novel. The primary members of the Foxfire gang die in a car chase with the police. This chase is necessitated when V.V., a newer and more aggressive member of Foxfire, shoots Kellogg. This use of potentially lethal force is a violent act that even Legs cannot condone. She therefore disbands Foxfire and tries to escape, the resulting pursuit leading to the fatal crash. Thus Oates maintains her sympathy for Legs's idealism but condemns what the community itself has become. Maddy reconstructs the story of the wreck from the point of view of the pursuing officer, thus appropriating his male voice to historicize the destruction of a female separatist community that has become patriarchal. This is, perhaps, Maddy's way of both acknowledging

dominant society's traditional power to control history and of subverting that power by telling the story herself. The characters' deaths—a more defiant rejection of mainstream society and its laws than the kind of death Legs rejects as a solution earlier in the novel—are, in a way, their final rejection of patriarchal control.

Because *Foxfire* is a "confession" of the character Maddy Wirtz, however, the novel does not end with the car crash. As Maddy's confession returns to the present day, we learn that she has returned to visit Hammond and that she accidentally meets Rita, Foxfire's other surviving member. Both Maddy and Rita, far from their feminist separatist origins, have become quite domestic. Maddy has married and become an astronomer; Rita has also married. The surviving Foxfire members simply disappear, into traditional roles like Rita's or at least more generally accepted gender roles like Maddy fulfils. If Legs survives, she disappears into narrative silence. These silences and reintegrations imply that the rejection of their separatist sympathies allows them to exist harmoniously; as long as their divided sympathies do not lead to separatist action, they are safe.

Equally telling is the fate of Legs Sadovsky, founder and matriarch of Foxfire. In the final chapter of the book, Maddy and Rita discuss whether Legs does indeed die in the climactic car crash. Rita shows Maddy a photograph of Fidel Castro in Cuba; in the background is a woman who is apparently Legs Sadovsky, "Or someone resembling her closely as a twin" (Oates 324). Maddy is unconvinced; when Rita presses her to confirm that the woman is indeed Legs, Maddy says "I just don't *know*" (Oates 325, original emphasis). This uncertainty endows Legs with a legendary status, although even this sort of "victory" for Legs implies that she cannot be victorious within the institutionally patriarchal United States. In terms of feminist separatism, her

silence in the wake of Foxfire's destruction further suggests a lack of authorial sympathy for violent separatist empowerment.

However, the romantic notion that Legs might have survived the deadly crash suggests sympathy for her original feminist ideal. This uncertainty represents hope, a possibility that a film like *Thelma and Louise* does not allow. In *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film*, Shameem Kabir writes, "[Thelma and Louise] find themselves to lose their lives, they locate their identities at the point they must be wasted, and this tragedy is a serious reminder to women of our disenfranchisement under the symbolic order as it currently stands" (220). [14] While Oates constructs similar events in *Foxfire*, Maddy's commitment to the history of their feminist separatist community and Legs's possible survival provide a similar warning but more hope than the fates that Kabir reads in *Thelma and Louise*. How does a novel in which most of the principal characters die demonstrate feminist hope? One answer is that Oates's text represents both destructive and positive aspects of feminist community formation in order to suggest a less fatalistic outlook. In *Foxfire*, the patriarchal community severely limits women's choices, leading young lower-class women to form a radical separatist community. However, the dominant community's desire to maintain its own power and the self-destructive choices of the characters destroy the separatist community. Oates might therefore be suggesting that feminist separatism is doomed to failure by forces both within and without. However, the early sections of the novel demonstrate how nonviolent feminist alliances and even non-militant feminist aggression are potentially positive responses to patriarchy. If Oates's novel is not necessarily hopeful, it certainly is not hopeless.

Foxfire is, though, a text marked by narrative uncertainty. As Daly writes, "Even though Maddy's authority is already unstable because of her gender and class, she reveals her

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uncertainties as a narrator: she is striving to avoid representational violence by acknowledging that, even as she attempts to tell the 'Truth,' she doubts that it is possible to do so" (207). As stated in the Zimmerman passage that is one epigraph of this chapter, such uncertainty is characteristic of confessions. As Oates's narrator, Maddy admits that much of her purpose in writing down the forbidden history of Foxfire is to rescue a different kind of truth from patriarchal accounts of their actions. Yet she realizes that representation can itself be an act of violent domination, one that might obscure different levels or forms of truth.

Similarly, perhaps *Foxfire* is Oates's exploration of the possibilities, the seductions, and the dangers of lesbian feminist separatism, an exploration that seeks to avoid representational domination by resisting the temptation of assigning fixed meanings and narrative certainty. If the final sections of the novel seem to indict the most violent responses to patriarchy, the earlier sections explore different possibilities for why aggressive resistance might be necessary, how it might succeed, and how it could fail. Oates suggests here that cultural prescriptions—i.e., the *de facto* separation, or "othering," that all women undergo to some extent, and the prevailing definitions of what women should be and do—and radical individual choices often collide in ways that make this separatism a problematic, even destructive means of feminist resistance. Yet Oates's early, more sympathetic treatment of her characters' *less* violent actions suggests a belief that feminist thought and organization can be a positive influence in the lives of individual women, especially when established models of 1950s femininity seem to present only two untenable choices—to give up all power to men or to use men's methods to attain power over other women. Since this thesis is based on contradictions and qualified claims, rather than absolutist dogma, *Foxfire* seems, in the final analysis, a text that seeks to avoid representational violence by confessing its own constructedness.

In *Set It Off*, the confession—if one can be said to occur—does not originate with a single character, yet the film's representations of feminist separatism and white male domination echo Oates's vision in *Foxfire*. The main difference is that *Set It Off* focuses on four twentysomething urban black women who live in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s. Another difference is that the gang in *Foxfire* attempts an actual geographical separation from the dominant community of Hammond, whereas the gang in *Set It Off* is an imagined community. In this case, their imagined community is based on their history as friends and their commonly-experienced oppression at the hands of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[15] These characters could also be read as representative of similarly-disenfranchised poor black women in inner-city America, meaning that they could represent a much larger imagined community. Though both *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* explore many of the same feminist concepts and paradoxes through representational separatist communities, *Set It Off* also explicitly interrogates institutionalized racial prejudices, though race is only one of many elements contributing to these characters' problems. This element makes Gray's representation of separatism an even more complex project than Oates's, in that *Set It Off* also examines feminist racial representations, or the lack thereof. My calling Gray's representation "more complex" should not imply that his is necessarily the better or more valuable work. What I do suggest is that Gray's construction of a separatist gang of 1990s-era black women interrogates not only dominant culture but also the possible failures of feminism itself.

Because *Foxfire* is set in the 1950s—historically speaking, before second-wave feminism became an organized national movement—the novel retroactively foreshadows the movement's failure to represent women of color and lesbians. *Foxfire* represents the racial segregation of the pre-Civil Rights Movement 1950s but interrogates racism only through a brief critique of the

gang's racial/ethnic makeup. None of Oates's characters are African-American, and the gang seems to accept unquestioningly the exclusion of black girls. Though Oates does provide one scene in which Legs is disturbed because the members vote not to admit an African-American girl, the fact that only one such nomination is made—coupled with the gang's earlier and uncritical use of racial epithets—reveals that Legs and her sisters are not overly concerned with racial issues. That Oates de-emphasizes such issues for most of the novel might be an oversight on her part; on the other hand, Oates might have made a conscious decision to avoid exploring racism in this particular novel in order to examine gender issues more clearly.

In contrast, *Set It Off* constantly and overtly examines representations of racism. The film's timeline historically situates the action as concurrent with third wave feminism; but Gray's construction of the dominant community and of women who have achieved some measure of power within it suggests a belief that feminism itself still marginalizes some women. In order to resist these oppressions and take a more proactive stance in their own futures, these characters form an exclusive sisterhood of four; their pre-existing friendship, geographical proximity, and similar experiences with racism form the basis for their imagined community. In some ways, these characters reject bonding with other women; in other cases, other female characters reject them. This pattern of rejection is linked historically with feminist community formation, including the assumption of second-wave feminists—mostly white, middle-class women—that they represented universal feminine experience. It might further echo problems of feminist discourses and practices wherein economic oppression and insufficient education go unchallenged, a situation that would lead to an exclusionary feminism with which some women, such as the characters in *Set It Off* represent, would hardly relate. Further, the setting of Los Angeles, site of some of the worst racial injustices of the last forty years, lends the film a level of

topicality that not even *Foxfire* enjoys. In both texts, marginalized women remain separate even from those who could have been their sisters. Thus, while both film and novel do indeed construct a model of separatism based on sisterhood and/or lesbianism, *Set It Off* ties separatist issues to gender, economy, *and* race.

Gray's film defines the dominant community in ways similar to *Foxfire*, though *Set It Off* tweaks Oates's definition. For instance, one of the dominant community's characteristics is, as in *Foxfire*, maleness. Most powerful figures in the film are white, middle-to-upper class men. A few female characters do hold some semblance of power and authority, but these characters maintain their positions through complicity with the male power structure and are mostly relegated to lesser roles. In this way, Gray represents American society as a hegemonic patriarchy, calling more overt attention to whiteness as emblematic of privilege than Oates chooses to do in her novel.

Another contrast between the two texts' definitions of dominance lies in their interrogations of compulsory heterosexuality. Whereas Oates marks her representative separatist community as lesbian, most of Gray's characters engage in no overt acts of lesbian sexuality. One of the main characters is indeed lesbian, but Gray constructs the gang as homoerotic only in its exclusively female membership and in their sharing of what Rich calls lesbian experience, referring to female-centered experiences exclusive of sexual acts. Gray does explore issues of sexual orientation and its effects, but this exploration is less overt than in *Foxfire*. Gray is more concerned with race than with sexuality, while Oates's novel explores different kinds of lesbianisms without interrogating deeply any racial issues.

Gray represents the dominant community as white, middle-to-upper class, and male, through both characterization and shot composition. A detailed analysis of the film's opening

sequence—labeled on the DVD version of the film as "211 in Progress," a title that I will use

here for the sake of consistency—reveals how Gray constructs images of white male privilege

and black (especially, but not exclusively, female) subordination. The sequence takes place in the

bank where Frankie (Vivica A. Fox) works. Frankie is an African-American female; her

colleagues in this scene are also female, which is significant because these women are tellers, or

lower-level employees. Most of the customers in the bank seem to be middle to upper class

whites. The one customer who stands out is an African-American man. He is noticeable not only

because of his race but because his clothing marks him as of a lower economic status than the

rest of the customers. While they are dressed in slacks and button down shirts or dresses—

business attire—this man wears a dark pullover sweatshirt with a hood and a dark skullcap.

These markers of privilege or its lack visually codify the film's conception of *de facto* racial and

economic difference. Further, his posture marks him as different from the other customers; while

the white customers stand up straight and maintain eye contact with each other, this man hunches

over slightly and will only glance briefly at Frankie. This body language implies an inner

conflict—about the prevailing images of race and economy, about what he plans to do in the

bank, or both. These opening images mark African-Americans as other; in a representative

institution of economic power, they are outnumbered, literally out-classed, all but outcast.

But Gray's film, like *Foxfire*, repudiates the notion of a generalized and harmonious

community, even among those who have been similarly oppressed.[16] The next part of this scene

eliminates any sense of connection or community between Frankie and this man. As he

approaches the counter, we learn that Frankie does indeed know him. Her facial expression

denotes a concerned puzzlement, while the man's body language implies that he is nervous; he

glances from side to side, as if expecting to be accosted. Frankie attempts to connect with him;

she smiles at him and says, "Hey, Darnell, I didn't know you had an account here." As she continues her friendly attempt at conversation, Darnell (WC)[17] pulls out a handgun and whispers, "Shut the fuck up." Obviously, this statement and action dramatically alter the tone of the exchange. Darnell's aggressive action and violent language unnerve Frankie. He instructs her to empty her cash drawer. This part of the scene indicates that *Set It Off* will not construct aggression and violence as phenomena exclusive to white or rich characters. This lower-class African-American male uses the threat of violence to dominate Frankie and to take from the bank the means to change his economic status. Thus, although he too is barred from higher realms of power, he marks himself as higher than Frankie because of his traditionally masculine willingness to act aggressively and violently.

Frankie's first act of resistance is actually motivated by fear; she refuses to comply with Darnell's demands. Her fear of being associated with Darnell overcomes her survival instincts. Darnell's demands and Frankie's resistance disrupt any sense of kinship, racial or otherwise, that the characterization of Frankie and Darnell might have implied or that the audience might have assumed. As she tells him that she wants "nothin' to do with this," Darnell looks to his right. The camera pans with his gaze; we see another African-American man near the front window. The camera next pans to Darnell's left, and we see a third African-American man pretending to fill out a slip at a nearby counter. The implication is clear. Violence is about to erupt, and Darnell wants Frankie to know that her compliance might have prevented it. We know that Darnell is not simply warning Frankie of what may come if she does not comply, because he does not give her any further chances to cooperate. This scene is therefore representative of another abuse of patriarchal power—the "blame the victim" mentality and how male actions often leave women

no choices at all. This scene also echoes Lloyd Buttinger's subtle molestation of Rita in *Foxfire* and the ways that he deflects blame for his actions onto his victim.

As the scene continues, the other two men pull their guns. While one of them holds the guard at bay, Darnell and his other compatriot train their guns on Frankie, continuing to demand money. The significance of this action is clear; while the guns they hold signal their situational dominance over everyone in the bank, their singling out Frankie suggests their taking issue with her act of defiance. Frankie's sharing their racial identity does not outweigh their desire for economic gain, nor does it master their learned notion that men can and should dominate women. Frankie, however, still refuses to comply. Darnell then grabs a nearby customer—tellingly, another woman, although this one is white—and shoots her in the head. The woman's blood spatters onto Frankie's face, a symbol for how both Darnell—and, later, white bank authorities— deflect blame for the incident onto Frankie; this white female's blood is literally on her head, even though someone else pulls the trigger. After Darnell, one of his partners, and a white security guard are all killed, the initial conflict ends with a shot of Frankie under the counter, covered in blood.

The scene goes further than this, however, to establish the film's initial definition of the dominant community. Frankie's interview with the police demonstrates how this dominant community views lower-class African-Americans and how these communal views may be disseminated. It also further establishes the ironic and contradictory manner in which male privilege crosses racial and economic boundaries. The camera enters the door to an office, where Frankie is seated, still covered in blood. Two police detectives, one a white man and the other an African-American woman, stand to the left; a white man in an expensive suit, the bank manager, leans against the desk; a smartly-dressed white woman stands near the wall in the background.

Frankie's literal position, seated lower than anyone else, reflects her figurative otherness; her centrality in the frame belies her social standing. Detective Strode (John C. McGinley) establishes that Frankie has failed to follow robbery procedure when she refused to comply with Darnell's demands; he implies that she is responsible for the deaths that followed. Strode deflects blame for anti-social male actions to a female who is, for whatever reason, actually refusing to participate in such misdeeds. Darnell and Strode—men of two different races—both blame Frankie for the consequences of Darnell's actions. These similar strategies reveal that the dominant community is patriarchal, but they fail to question this community's institutional racism, which is represented in the following scenes.

The white bank manager fires Frankie; his logic is that she knew the assailant and could therefore have been in collusion with him. Frankie's defense is to proclaim that "I haven't done anything wrong! I can't help who I know!" The manager answers her protests by saying, "What happens the next time *one of your friends* robs the bank?" (emphasis mine). This dialogue illustrates the problematic assumption that all African-Americans know each other and are inherently criminal. Frankie questions this logic not on racial grounds but on economic terms; she points out that one day prior to the robbery she counted $240,000 by hand and did not steal anything. She feels that she has proven her trustworthiness and that the bank manager has revealed that her firing is based on her race, not her performance. Though Frankie has indeed failed to follow procedure, the manager focuses on the possibility that she knows other criminals, a racist assumption.

Gray also represents fragmented feminism in this scene. Upon leaving the room, Frankie stops to speak to the African-American detective, who is drinking a beverage, saying "You didn't even bother to ask me if I was thirsty, sister." This use of the word "sister" is especially

charged with meaning; Frankie's sarcastic use of the term puts the lie to notions of both a universal feminist sisterhood and of African-American females. This marks *Set It Off* as even more critical of feminism's failures than *Foxfire*'s representation of a pre-second wave community. The female officer's failure to offer a blood-spattered and frightened woman a drink, and to say anything at all, represents one way that women can fail each other—by choosing to remain silent. This silence, concurrent with male victimization and racial oppression, leads Frankie—and, later, the other members of her gang—further toward separatism.

Though Gray's text explicitly questions sexism and racism, it does little to critique compulsory heterosexuality. The third scene of the film, entitled "The Four of Us Could Take a Bank," introduces the viewer to the rest of Frankie's soon-to-be sisterhood. The camera focuses on all four women—Frankie, Cleo (Queen Latifah), Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith), and Tisean (Kimberly Elise)—as they lounge on Cleo's car. They remain in the foreground, clearly defined, while other people pass by in the background, out of focus. The cinematography here directs the viewer's gaze to these women and marks them as separate from the rest of the *mise-en-scene*. When two males appear in a car beside Cleo's, they never get out, illustrating visually the separation that these four women feel from even their neighborhood's inhabitants. This scene is also important for other reasons. First, we learn that this community of four is a lesbian alliance only in the more liberal sense of the term. As Cleo is marked as a lesbian—her sometime girlfriend Ursula (Samantha MacLachlan) appears in the scene; they kiss, and the other three women turn away, groaning—the frame becomes divided, with Cleo and Ursula on one side and Cleo's separatist sisters on the other. Unlike Oates's more overtly lesbian sisterhood, *Set It Off*'s separatist group actually reinforces heterosexual dominance by demonstrating at best a grudging acceptance of Cleo's lesbianism. This shot illustrates how compulsory heterosexuality infiltrates

even this separatist community. Moreover, it suggests that Gray either understands the nature of heterosexual domination and is representing it accordingly or is (unconsciously?) complicit in the construction of compulsorily heterosexual texts and images.

Another key component in this film is white society's economic dominance and the group's means of resistance. In this same scene, Cleo suggests that they rob banks as a means to eradicate their economic troubles, reasoning that if thick-witted and drug-addicted males like Darnell can do it, so could they. This kind of off-hand and half-serious suggestion of meeting social oppression with physical force echoes Foxfire's giddiness at their early "victories" over patriarchal males. Frankie goes so far as to suggest simply blowing up the bank, another half-serious proposal that masks her very real anger at the bank's management and their assumptions about her. This scene illustrates the women's anger and discontent with the system and foreshadows the violent methodology that they will employ to change their lives. Their language—cased in terms that are anti-white supremacist capitalist patriarchy—and group pride also foreshadow their future ideological separation from the laws and institutions of dominant society. Their methodology—a mix of ideological anger and physical violence, targeting males and other females alike—and their all-female membership represent the same sort of community Oates constructs in *Foxfire*, a community I have described as liberal lesbian, feminist, and separatist.

Stony's and Tisean's motivations to separate from the dominant community are even more personal and traumatic than Frankie's experiences with racism or Cleo's economic and sexual marginalization. In the early scenes, Gray constructs Stony as a responsible adult who is desperate to send her younger brother Stevie (Chaz Lamar Shepherd), a recent high school graduate, to college and away from the projects. She is Stevie's sole caretaker because their

parents are both dead. We learn that Stevie's college application has been rejected, though nothing in the film indicates for certain why this failure occurs. Stevie's only comment is that he is, perhaps, not cut out for such a life, a statement that perhaps reflects his internal resignation to life in the projects and his oppressed status. Stevie's failure, however, also affects Stony, as her whole identity as provider and mother figure depends on his success. Unable to tell Stony that he has not been accepted, he decides to lie, only saying that he has failed to get a scholarship and therefore cannot afford tuition. This lie, meant both to spare Stony's feelings and to save Stevie from a lecture, has dire consequences for Stony. Thinking that the problem is merely a financial one, she grudgingly makes an arrangement with a local car dealer who offers her a job and an advance on her salary on the condition that she have sex with him. She thereby prostitutes herself for the sake of her brother's (false) future. The lie and its consequences drive Stony and Stevie apart; simultaneously, the trauma of prostitution, her objectification as sex object, pushes Stony further away from the black males in her geographical community. Gray, then, represents Stony's eventual separatism as a response to the betrayals, abandonments, and oppression she suffers from everyone in the film except her "sisters."

Tisean is similarly constructed. Though not as outspoken as her friends, Tisean dotes on her young son Jajuan (Vincent and Van Baum) and works hard to provide him a good living. Tellingly, Jajuan's father is absent from the film and is in fact never mentioned. This literal absence in Tisean's life, emblematic of how men have failed these women through death or abandonment, echoes not only the film's earlier images of female oppression to male whims but also Oates's construction of Ab Sadovsky and Maddy's father as patriarchal figures. Both Tisean and Stony have experienced oppression and/or objectification at the hands of patriarchal black males; nevertheless, Stony and Tisean seek ways of coexisting with institutional male privilege

because their relationships to their sons (for Stevie is a son figure to Stony) cause them to assume traditional maternal roles.

Ironically, however, the dominant system destroys the illusion of permanence in such roles. Stevie is killed by the police, who mistake him for one of the men who robbed Frankie's bank; this situation is worsened because Detective Strode is one of the officers in charge of the raid in which Stevie is shot. Gray and his screenwriters construct Strode as saddened by the mistake; he does not draw his gun and in fact tries to prevent the other officers from shooting. He even reaches out to Stony as she grieves. This scene marks a change in Strode's characterization. Before Stevie's death, he is quick to assume that Frankie is part of Darnell's gang and shows little empathy with her plight. But his reaction to Stevie's death and Stony's grief illustrate that he does, indeed, sympathize with the more obvious victims of the system's indifference. However, Strode's failure to prevent Stevie's death epitomizes the problems of individual resistance to a dominant force. This failure and Stevie's death push Stony further toward the margins of dominant society. The rupturing of her link to traditional structures—her mother-son relationship with Stevie—breaks her ties with and belief in America as a land of opportunity for her and others like her.

Tisean's link to dominant society is broken through the paternalistic child welfare system; her employment experiences, meanwhile, help push her away from other African-Americans. A single mother, Tisean has arranged for her boss Luther (Thom Byrd) to pay her "under the table" in order to avoid taxes. He breaks this agreement and tells her that she can quit if she has a problem with his management, thereby asserting his economic dominance. Simultaneously, he blames his action on the representative of dominant economic privilege, the IRS. Gray represents here how some black males might dominate women who have been

abandoned by other black males, through invocation of or economic collusion with the dominant community's institutions. As she confronts Luther about her tax situation, Tisean is hesitant and meek; Luther easily dismisses her and her concerns. This rejection of the female voice and circumstances created by patriarchal excess reflects Strode's earlier dismissal of Frankie's explanations for her behavior during the robbery. Similarly, the car dealer reduces Stony to sexual object; he cares little for her situation or for her as a person. These characters represent how both white and black males hold sociopolitical, economic, and sexual dominance over women in the film.

Other female characters are used to deconstruct any hope for gender or racial solidarity. When Tisean is forced to bring Jajuan to work, he is poisoned by drinking from bottles of cleaning products. Afterward, a black female child welfare worker takes custody of Jajuan. Although the social worker represents a higher level of power and economic stability than the women in the gang, her unquestioning acceptance of dominant assumptions about poor black women exemplifies *Set It Off*'s representations of racial and gender fragmentation. Stony and Tisean represent women who have suffered greatly—mostly because of men, but also because of other women, sometimes even other black women. Their suffering ranges from emotional scars to gender-based social oppression to physical violence, all of which leads these women to positions of weakness and objectification. Gray constructs male dominance as an institutionalized phenomenon; women, therefore, already represent a *de facto* difference from the dominant community. And if that dominant community is also white supremacist, compulsorily heterosexual, and capitalist, then a poor, black, liberal lesbian group would be marginalized on perhaps even more levels than other oppressed peoples. These characters' decision to form a secret gang represents a form of resistance, a determination to use their status as other to regain

some sense of subjectivity. Their friendship, formerly a choice, becomes a separatist community of necessity.

These conditions mirror Oates's construction of community in *Foxfire*. Just as Oates's characters represent the contradictions in second-wave feminist notions of universal sisterhood, Gray represents a fragmented racial community in which the dominant structure's gender assumptions remain fixed. Gray's film, then, interrogates many of the same issues as Oates's novel, along with the complexities of racial issues. But *Set It Off* also echoes *Foxfire* in terms of the characters' responses to *de facto* separatism. The characters in *Set It Off* seldom, if ever, define their separatism in terms of gender; theirs is a community based more on racial and economic issues. But because men oppress them more often than not, theirs is a resistant feminist community by default. And their responses to those issues of oppression—armed robbery— mirror Foxfire's appropriation of male violence and the gang's decision to commit a terrible crime in the name of economic independence. Both representations therefore explore possible reasons for and consequences of a marginalized group's use of violent resistance.

One difference in the texts is that, if Oates privileges gender issues and only seldom critiques racism, Gray inverts this approach; race is always one of the film's primary concerns, including the scenes focusing on the increasingly sympathetic, at-times-admirable white character of Detective Strode. Though he is initially characterized as racist and sexist to some degree, Strode is often the character most sympathetic to the gang's plight and motivations. On the other hand, other black characters seem to have little sympathy for or interest in these women. Strode's power, his whiteness, and his early characterization make his increasing sympathy for Stony and Frankie even more remarkable. Though he has no intention of letting these women continue to rob banks, his concern for their safety and his emotional reactions to

their personal losses make Strode a more human character, not just a representation of white patriarchal authority. By contrasting the dynamic characterization of Strode with the static, secondary black characters like Luther and the car salesman, Gray demonstrates that selfishness, abuses of power, and even anti-black racism are not exclusively white phenomena.

Another difference in the texts is the speed with which each group comes to its respective decision to embrace violence. In *Foxfire*, Oates places this final choice near the end of the novel, suggesting that violence can, perhaps even should, be a last resort of separatist groups. The gang in *Set It Off*, however, embraces violence much faster; their initial bank robbery occurs in the first third of the film. This structural choice might simply be the result of cinematic urgency. Gray, as director, could be more eager to explore the reasons for and consequences of his characters' increasing desperation than with documenting any lesser attempts at separate existence. For that matter, he might simply be more interested in making an action film than in producing social commentary. Another possibility is that the gang is forced to commit violent acts because of their triply disempowered identities. As poor black women, these characters represent a group that is even further removed from the societal center than the poor white girls of *Foxfire*; thus, their speedier decision to take their subjectivity by force becomes necessary.

Gray's film, in any case, represents the dominant culture as severely limiting to the choices of women. If the gang in *Foxfire* forms because the characters see little chance for any future female empowerment within existing institutions and structures, the gang in *Set It Off* forms because they have first-hand experience with those structures' failures for women. Gray represents his gang's separatism as a practical response to untenable living conditions in which women are devalued, objectified, and silenced. In fact, the problem with labeling the gang in *Set It Off* as a feminist separatist community in the tradition of Foxfire lies in their continuing

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relationships with men. As stated above, Cleo is the only lesbian in the gang, at least in the literal, sexual sense of the word; Stony, in fact, maintains a relationship with Keith (Blair Underwood), a black male in middle management at a major bank. This relationship is both ironic and telling. The irony lies in the fact that Keith is employed by an institution of the dominant economy. For Stony, Keith represents a better socioeconomic standing and the possibility of romance. He is a member of the black community who has achieved some sense of economic stability. Although quite well off when compared to Stony and her gang, Keith's power is still limited; almost all of the major authority figures in the film are white. Therefore, in some ways Keith actually shares the experience of oppression; his maleness and education imbue him with a certain amount of power, but such qualities can only take him so far. Nevertheless, because of his gender and his job in a dominant economic institution, the other three members see only his oppressive potential. For them, he represents collusion with dominant power, like the black female social worker who paternalistically takes Jajuan from his mother.

The women's formation of such a community seems to be their only real chance. Gray represents many of his separatist group's most desperate, violent acts as justifiable responses to institutional patriarchy and to individual acts of male aggression. For instance, like Foxfire's plan to ransom one rich white male for the good of the separatist community, the gang in *Set It Off* only plan to rob enough banks to fund their escape from the Los Angeles projects. However, when Luther finds their money and steals it for himself, the women are forced to further acts of violent desperation. First, they find Luther and hold him at gunpoint, attempting to discover where he has hidden their money. This level of violence is in keeping with their past actions, such as holding bank customers at bay with loaded guns. However, when Luther pulls a gun of his own and points it at Cleo, Tisean kills him. It is unclear whether Luther intends to shoot; but

the fact that Tisean, the gentlest of the four gang members, shoots first is indicative of their deep-seeded distrust of male aggression.

The result of this scene is that the gang continues to solidify its feminist separatist philosophy. Detective Strode is convinced that Cleo is Luther's killer, mainly because she is the only member with a prior police record; this assumption, which happens to be wrong, illustrates institutional stereotyping and pushes Cleo further toward an aggressive response. Similarly, her threats against the woman who witnesses Luther's murder serve both to keep Tisean out of jail and to deconstruct further the possibility of a more inclusive sisterhood. Cleo is perfectly willing to threaten another victimized woman in order to protect her sisters. Gray represents her attitude as both admirably loyal and frighteningly, recklessly angry. Cleo's gradual loss of control mirrors the gang's increasingly desperate actions.

This discussion leads me back to the question of sympathy. Unlike Oates, Gray does not imply a decreasing level of sympathy with his constructed community. However, each main character represents a different level of militancy and aggression, as well as a different level of directorial and audience sympathy. Tisean is meek and generally accepts her powerlessness, only going along with the robberies out of her desperate desire to keep her son. In contrast, Stony initially joins in the heists as an aggressive response to the injustice of Stevie's death; she feels that the system owes her something and that the only way she will get what she deserves is to take it by force. However, she is always one of the more cautious members of the gang; she sometimes wonders what other options they might have missed. In the end, she takes part in the final robbery more out of loyalty to her sisters than from a desire for revenge on the system.

If Stony represents a modulated desire for revenge—a belief that a certain measure of justice might be enough—Frankie represents irrational anger. Her initial suggestion that they

should just "blow [the bank] the fuck up" is perhaps indicative of her understandable rage over being fired from the bank and stereotyped by the representatives of white patriarchal power. However, she is the member who makes sure that the first bank robbery actually occurs; when the others hesitate and suggest devising a better plan, Frankie simply walks into the bank and pulls her gun, prompting the others to react. Frankie is therefore the member who solidifies the gang's separatist leanings by providing an aggressive response to oppression. But in spite of Frankie's actions, Cleo is the most militant of the group. Her initial reasoning for robbing banks is simply because she believes that they can get away with it, and her careless and public spending of stolen money angers even the other gang members. Interestingly, the most militant member is also the only practicing lesbian in the gang; perhaps this representation marks Gray as a male filmmaker who sees lesbian feminism as the most violent, and therefore dangerous, separatist form.

In any case, these characterizations elicit different levels of viewer sympathy. Tisean is the most sympathetic character, because she is the least prone to appropriating male violence, even though she is also the one with the most understandable reason for an immediate, aggressive response—the reclamation of her son. Similarly, Stony's loss of her brother (and figurative son) prompts a very understandable aggressive reaction based on her grief and desire for justice. The opening scenes generate a comparable measure of sympathy for Frankie, although her reasons for responding aggressively seem disproportional to the more immediate losses that Stony and Tisean suffer. In contrast, Cleo is characterized as mean, reckless, and greedy. While the viewer can imagine the oppression of individuals like Cleo, these forms of oppression are themselves seldom represented in *Set It Off*. The worst that happens to Cleo in the

film is that Luther bosses her around and calls her a "gentleman," an insult based on her sexuality.

Because of the slippery nature of the artists' characterizations of resistance, *Set It Off* reads much like *Foxfire* in its representation of feminist separatism. In Gray's text the lack of subjective choices for women, coupled with the utter failure of the system to provide inclusive feminist models, leads to these varying degrees of aggression and militancy in the feminist separatist community. This fact allows both Gray and the viewer to maintain varying levels of sympathy with the characters and the paths they take. That Cleo, Frankie, and Tisean die implies that Gray, like Oates, sees violence as an untenable response to patriarchy and racism. But Stony's survival and subsequent economic independence suggests that Gray also sees feminist communities as potentially positive. Stony's ability to survive the deaths of her brother and friends, her exile, and the end of her relationship with Keith implies a strength partially born of her shared separatist experience; her survival under these terms resembles how Maddy survives the destruction of Foxfire and the ways that she becomes stronger for having experienced life as a separatist.

However, while Oates writes Legs in the ultimately romantic terms of a possible survivor—with an uncertain existence on which Maddy (and the reader) can write her own hopes for continued resistance—Gray constructs Stony more realistically, by visually affirming her post-separatist community existence. Though she has money, her life, and her freedom, Stony is exiled; she cannot return to the United States, and her memories of the gang's sisterhood are bittersweet. Perhaps Gray is suggesting that America has no place for a strong black woman who is unwilling to be controlled and unable to be reassimilated; perhaps it implies that separatist acts ultimately lead to banishment, to alienation, or to some other form of separation without regard

to individual choice. In any case, Gray represents visually an individual separatist's survival as lonely and melancholy, while Oates represents such a fate in uncertain but hopeful terms. Both endings, then, seem pessimistic toward the idea of separatism as political end. But both texts also seem optimistic about a feminist community's possible effects on the individual member's opportunities to escape, to reject, or—in Maddy's case—to learn and grow in spite of dominant societal constraints.

Thus, in representing the political (in)efficacy of separatist feminism, Oates and Gray simultaneously interrogate possible rewards and dangers for the individual. Both *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* employ representations of small all-female communities in which *de facto* marginalization is reclaimed as separatist identity. Oates's more romantic ending, her denial of the kind of realistic closure that Gray employs in *Set It Off*, is true to her characters; Maddy Wirtz's love for Legs Sadovsky influences her confession, even in the narrative's most self-critical moments. In this way, Oates leaves space for alternate readings of Legs's story and character. Legs's possible survival and continued dedication to her cause offset Maddy's return to patriarchal society, even as the uncertainty and violence of Legs's life and death create sympathy for Maddy's easier, more traditional choices. Gray's film, on the other hand, represents its community as too violent almost from the start. Their violent responses to the problems in their lives are represented as seductive, intoxicating, and ultimately self-destructive.

In *Set It Off* and *Foxfire*, the danger posed by separatist ideas, coupled with the characters' violent methods of resistance, catalyzes in the dominant community a self-preservative and equally violent response. In contrast to how the gang as a whole is written, Gray's construction of Stony's survival—rich but alone, exiled, melancholy—elicits a sympathetic viewer response. Stony's fate both rejects the notion of inevitable, immutable

oppression and represents the price that the individual might pay for resistance. In the final

analysis, both artists seem suspicious of these kinds of separatism as practical feminist end, even

as they explore other choices that such a politics might provide the individual. This conflict

between representations—of community and individual, sympathy and critique, power and

resistance—creates narrative spaces in which not only feminist separatism but also race, gender,

economy, and sexuality can be interrogated and revised.

END NOTES

[1] For a good discussion on the history of feminist movements and definitions of second-wave feminism beyond what I provide here, see also Ruth Rosen's *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. Rosen defines "First Wave Feminism" as the nationwide effort to achieve women's suffrage, a "wave" that fragmented into various women's groups with different agendas once suffrage was won (27-28). "Second Wave Feminism" refers to the various national organizations that came together in the 1960s and 70s under the larger banner of the Women's Liberation Movement. Most of these groups rejected patriarchal notions of femininity and gender roles that had been disseminated as natural. Rosen argues that, by the late 70s-early 80s and with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, Second Wave Feminism was considered finished. By the early 90s, "Third Wave Feminism" was born, a movement that embraced the contradictions of terms like "femininity" and "feminism." Such contradictions presumably include both women's increasing social, political, and sexual possibilities and the desire of some women to raise families and remain in the home. Foxfire's brand of feminism reflects Second Wave philosophies. Even though the setting predates the actual organized movement, the gang is reminiscent of some of the grassroots organizations that, through their proliferation, helped form the Women's Liberation Movement. The book is set in post-First Wave times; their cause is not women's suffrage but a more holistic female empowerment; and the characters reject their mothers' more domestic and patriarchally determined roles in favor of a proactive, politicized lifestyle.

[2] This problem also represents contradictions in historical feminism. Histories of the women's movement, such as Rosen's and Dana Shugar's studies, document how second wave feminism began as a middle-class, white, heterosexual phenomenon, one that was soon appropriated by women of color and lesbians. The essentialist notion of a universal women's experience is one factor that fragmented the women's movement; the denial of universality and the celebration of difference is one marker of feminism's third wave.

[3] Of course, even this discussion is necessarily oversimplified. Like the word "feminism," the terms "radical feminist" and "lesbian feminist" refer to various groups that differed in terms of politics, level of radicalism, organization, and so on. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to know that radical and lesbian feminisms existed separately.

[4] In the article "The Politics of Separatism and Lesbian Utopian Fiction," Sonya Andermahr goes so far as to state that "The politicisation of lesbianism coincided with the emergence of feminist separatism" (133). This statement illustrates the almost simultaneous formation of radical, lesbian, and separatist feminisms. Couple this fact with everything else the three have in common, and it is easy to see why the terms are often conflated, and why the forms did indeed merge in some communities, as I argue they do in Oates's and Gray's works. Andermahr also names two "models" of lesbian separatism: the political, which "sees separatism primarily as a means of undermining male power," and the utopian, which "sees separatism not only as a strategy but as a final solution to the problem of women's oppression in male-dominated society" (134). I would posit that *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* fall somewhere in the middle. These characters resist a *particular* patriarchy responsible for their own oppression, but they seem to have few illusions regarding the undermining of all male power.

[5] Shugar points out that this kind of essentialism was common in the feminist separatist communities of the 70s and 80s; many of these groups believed that all women were their sisters and all men were the enemy, but each group's singular vision for what a feminist community— or, for that matter, a feminist—should be soon dispelled any notions of universal sisterhood. As in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, separatists' experiences with women who did not conform to their ideas of resistance resulted in wider rifts between the separatists and everyone else.

[6] The key text in studies of art, female objectification, and the male gaze is Laura Mulvey's seminal psychoanalytic study, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey argues that narrative film objectifies, and even fragments, the female body for the scopophilic male gaze, in terms of both the males in the films (who watch the sexualized female characters) and male viewers (who both watch the female character and watch her being watched). While Mulvey's article focuses on the particularly visual medium of film, similar concepts can apply to literature or any other art form produced under patriarchal conditions. In Oates's text, the Foxfire girls' refusal to look traditionally erotic denies the authority of the heterosexual male gaze and, in fact, helps the girls appropriate the power of looking. They take pleasure in looking at each other, while denying that pleasure to men. It is interesting to note, though, that Mulvey's article fails to consider in any substantive way the *lesbian* gaze.

[7] In her work *The Difference: Growing up Female in America*, Judy Mann discusses sexism and gender role stratification in the public school system, indicting both learned gender roles and teachers who allow "harmless" acts of sexual harassment on the grounds that such acts have always occurred. Her ideas regarding how young women's self-images may be shattered, or at least altered, forever because of their sexual objectification seem to echo throughout the Buttinger passages of *Foxfire*. Works such as Mann's prove that Oates's representation of institutional patriarchy has historical roots.

[8] The history of homosexuality in twentieth century America is even more problematic than this suggests. In the 1950s, homosexuality was only beginning to escape stigmatization as physical sickness, moral decadence, and/or pathology, pejorative descriptions based on such diverse theoretical and philosophical bases as the Christian Bible and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. Pulled in varying directions by forces such as anti-homosexual legislation, the homophobic rantings of figures such as Joseph McCarthy, and pro-gay institutions like The

Mattachine Society, single-gender nonconformist groups such as Oates constructs in *Foxfire* automatically faced marginalization, whether they sought it or not. Difference, both gendered and sexual, therefore becomes even more a question of political agency. I am indebted to John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* for his discussions of homophobia and homosexuality in the 1950s.

[9] This discussion is meant to explore how these artists represent traditional gender roles, in order to demonstrate what the girls refute when reclaiming their subjectivities. It is not meant as an indictment of the texts' representations of single-parent and other nontraditional families.

[10] Daly makes a similar point about the body as text. She writes, "the gang radically reverses the positions of women: FOXFIRE claims collective agency through acts of violent inscription, thereby rejecting the role of mute body, often violently inscribed by men" (210). Maddy's mother's body, for instance, is "violently inscribed by men."

[11] Daly interprets this scene as a "parody of ceremonies—those rituals in which language is an action conferring power . . . not a pale imitation, but an aggressive recontextualization, a carnivalization of language by which the FOXFIRE gang appropriates linguistic power for itself" (210). I also argue that Foxfire's members have already recontextualized and appropriated language in their destruction of Buttinger and that this scene, while possibly continuing their retaking of language for themselves, also moves to solidify their sense of female community.

[12] Shugar argues that this is exactly what happens to actual feminist separatist communities in most cases; a large part of her study concerns histories and journals of failed separatist collectives.

[13] In her body of work, Oates has a complex relationship with violence; though she often seems to find it distasteful, her work reveals that she can also find it fascinating and even beautiful. These contradictory feelings about violence have been well documented by both critics and Oates herself. For a more thorough discussion of these issues, see Greg Johnson's *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates*.

[14] Kabir's discussion of lesbian desire in *Thelma and Louise*, her indictment of our justice system's handling of rape cases, and her claim that cinema is inherently patriarchal are well-taken. However, some of her other ideas seem less viable. In calling for a less realistic end to the film in which Geena Davis, Susan Sarandon, and Ridley Scott engage in debate, Kabir seems to devalue the film as a cultural talking point for discussions of feminism, patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and rape—an odd choice, considering this is precisely one of the uses to which she herself puts the film. This sort of debate would also seem overly reductive, as neither Davis nor Sarandon are lesbians, and, in any case, neither they nor Scott could be asked to represent fully the views and values of an entire section of society. Her other suggestion—that Scott should end the film with their car's "explosive disappearance"—seems related to what happens in *Foxfire*. But her purpose—to prove that "realism in cinema [is] a fabrication" (219)—seems redundant, since even realistic cinema (or theater, or television, or literature) is always a construction, a representative reality. I have trouble envisioning an audience who truly believes

that Thelma and Louise are real. Nevertheless, Kabir's discussion of a lesbian community of two and their resistance to patriarchy is applicable here.

[15] Anderson's idea of the imagined community is an example of how terms like "community" can take on nontraditional meanings. In this project, one of my central aims is to examine how these artists define such terms. Therefore, I argue that calling the gang in *Set It Off* a "community" of four does not stretch the definition of the term too far, since the definition itself is always potentially part of what is being revised.

[16] This sort of disconnection between members of the same group—in this case, a racial group—reflects the previously discussed fragmentation of the women's movement. Moreover, it denies what J. Harvie Wilkinson, III terms the "Inaccessible Racial Experience." In his book *One Nation Indivisible: How Ethnic Separatism Threatens America*, Wilkinson points out that the concept of an experience particular to only one group not only stratifies perceived differences but also essentializes members of that group by implying that all members are alike. Though Wilkinson sometimes seems to conflate ethnic pride, segregation, and separatism, this particular point is well-taken. Oates and Gray both construct communities that separate from other individuals of like race and/or gender; furthermore, they seem to represent diversity of individual experience, meaning that they avoid the problem with separatist communities that Wilkinson foresees.

[17] In the credits to the film, the actor who plays Darnell is listed only as "WC."

CHAPTER 2
RELGIOUS SEPARATIST COMMUNITIES, THE INVADING OTHER, AND THE SEXUAL SELF

> It made me crazy how James went back and forth between
> believing what he'd been taught and believing his own instincts. I
> knew I did the same thing, but James did it worse. He was like oil
> and vinegar poured into the same bottle, one minute shaken
> together and the next minute separated. Cloudy, then clear, then
> cloudy again.—Sheri Reynolds, *The Rapture of Canaan*

> And having seen, you become one of them. Don't you understand?
> What you take into your hands, you take into your heart.
> "Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate,
> sayeth the Lord. And touch not the unclean thing."—Eli Lapp (Jan
> Rubes), *Witness*

In a sense, parts of the United States began as religious separatist communities. The

"New World" was in many respects necessitated by the desire to separate from the Old World's

pervasive religious oppressions.[1] Ironically, these settlers often formed religious communities

just as exclusive and oppressive as Europe's. John M. Murrin's essay "Religion and Politics in

America from the First Settlements to the Civil War" supports this assertion. Murrin says that

"One of the most enduring American myths . . . remains the belief that this country was peopled

largely by settlers fleeing religious persecution and yearning for the opportunity to worship

openly and without fear. It was never that simple" (19). Murrin's essay traces religious

community formation in the settlements and implies that, under restrictive leadership, "religious

freedom" became something of a contradiction in terms (20-21). He also demonstrates that the

mid-Atlantic region was often a hotbed of dissent and tolerance (Murrin 21-22); it is worth

noting that the Amish, a fictional representation of whom will be studied in this chapter, settled

largely in Pennsylvania. Fragmentation within religions continues to occur in contemporary

times, perhaps most famously exemplified through separatist groups. This chapter will examine

two texts that focus on representations of American religious separatist community—Sheri Reynolds's novel *The Rapture of Canaan* and Peter Weir's film *Witness.*

As before, I should begin with a discussion of basic terminology. In his article "The Individual and the Collectivity in Christianity," John Langan defines "a Christian church (that is, any Christian church) as a group of persons forming a distinctive and exclusive religious community guiding itself by the Scriptures and taking Jesus as central in its understanding of morality and history and looking forward to his second coming and the full manifestation of God's justice" (158). His assertion, that what applies generally ("a Christian church") also applies in every case ("any Christian church"), is only pertinent because of the generality of the definition itself; obviously, this broad description allows for the legitimization of many different iterations within the overall framework of Christianity. The communities in *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* illustrate the truth of Langan's definition. They share certain characteristics with fundamentalist Christianity, with the communities that they wish to separate from, and with each other, even as they define themselves through their conscious attempts to be different. Langan goes on to say that "The [Christian religious] community . . . is extensive in its concern for the way of life of its members, even though it does not generally aspire to form a closed society or a total institution" (156). Perhaps not, but the communities represented in *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* certainly do. As in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, Reynolds's and Weir's texts represent sympathetically the reasons for forming separatist communities. But, whereas Joyce Carol Oates's and F. Gary Gray's communities form reactively because of patriarchal abuses of power, the religious communities in Reynolds's and Weir's texts both resist and participate in religious oppression.

The Rapture of Canaan and *Witness* do lend themselves to feminist readings, but their representations of gender issues differ from Oates's and Gray's. Reynolds's novel has a female protagonist, Ninah Huff, and one of Weir's main characters is Rachel Lapp, an Amish woman. Ninah and Rachel are pigeonholed into stultifying, traditional gender roles, and although they attempt to resist through sexual agency, the communities' responses reflect how fundamentalist religious communities might use female subjectivity to cement patriarchal power. Moreover, because patriarchal values are intertwined with their conceptions of spiritual salvation, Ninah and Rachel have more difficulty resisting male dominance than do the characters in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*. This additional concern helps demonstrate the differences in these kinds of communities and what is at stake for their members. Yet these characters do question, however briefly, their communal patriarchs, as well as the religious laws and dogma that codify male privilege. Therefore, although these characters resist patriarchy without forming all-female separatist communities and without gaining the sanction of the society that they live in, their individual actions could certainly be read as attempts at feminist praxis.[2]

These representations differ from the gender-based communities of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* in other ways: motivation for community formation, membership requirements, and level of devotion to a particular separatist philosophy. This last aspect is perhaps the biggest difference between these texts' representations of gendered communities and religious societies. For these characters, secular materialism represents sins such as vanity and idolatry—methods of replacing God.[3] These separatist characters all view dominant society as a hindrance to their growth and to the development of their communities. But, whereas the lesbian feminist characters seem most concerned with gaining secular power and equality, the religious characters believe that maintaining their separatist communities is a crucial part of their service to God and their quest

for eternal life. However, although the communities in these texts function as spaces wherein the characters can shut out sin as much as possible, neither Reynolds nor Weir constructs a purely utopian community. Both Fire and Brimstone and Weir's version of the Amish world exhibit problems that threaten the efficacy, perhaps even the stability, of each society. Therefore, like *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* are more-or-less realistic texts, in which separatism has both positive and negative results despite the characters' mostly constructive motivations.

Because this chapter examines fictional religious communities, my study has therefore moved from one figurative familial structure—the "sisterhood" of lesbian separatists—to another, the religious "family" of God the Father. Both the Amish community of *Witness* and the Baptist/Pentecostal hybrid in *The Rapture of Canaan* consist of extended, insular families; the texts themselves are in one sense examinations of how religion and family interact and how they affect the individual. Both the Amish in *Witness* and the Fire and Brimstoners strengthen family bonds through isolation and extend families through intermarriage of non-immediate kin; their versions of "family values" ensure the communities' short-term survival and isolation, even as inbreeding—much like what happens in Ruby in Morrison's novel *Paradise*—threatens their long-term stability, at least in the readers' minds. These representations of family help extend our insight into how separation, along with and in spite of an invasive mainstream society, can affect an individual and his/her community.

The representations in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* depend in large part on their being set in specific, volatile cultural moments. Furthermore, both explore violence as one possible result of patriarchal oppression and women's resistance. At first glance, the time period seems less critical in Reynolds's and Weir's works. Yet relatively recent real-life events in religious separatist

communities such as Jonestown, the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, and the Heaven's Gate house in California exemplify an equally volatile, if marginally connected, series of moments. Reynolds and Weir do not construct texts in which millennial extremists commit acts of violence and mass suicide; they do, however, focus their texts on separatist religious groups that other characters, and readers, might otherwise conflate with high-profile, violent/suicidal fringe groups. These decisions help the artists both retain the subject matter's topicality. They also help to differentiate the religious characters from the more extreme images that readers might encounter in the media and, in my reading, from other fictional separatists. *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* focus on non-violent, familial separatist communities that reject a secular materialist lifestyle.

The separatists' common conception of spirituality facilitates their exclusion of nonbelievers. While this idea may apply in some ways to any church or religious group, even greater geographical and philosophical differences are represented in these works. These characters' separation is defined and maintained by their chosen or inherited sense of difference in a particular and well-defined geographical space. This is different from Oates's and Gray's constructions, in which an oppressed group is still in the process of creating a space for themselves; in other words, Reynolds's and Weir's characters have had time to connect their community history to a certain specific place. In *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness*, the characters remain in their respective spaces as much as possible, actively avoiding conflict and contact with the dominant society. The sense of isolation in these texts seems even more pronounced than in Oates's and Gray's works, even though Reynolds and Weir also construct total separation as impossible.

This isolation becomes more pronounced as the characters begin to question morally absolute, communally sanctioned religious laws, due in part to their contact with outsiders. In these texts, one important concern is thus how isolation might affect the individual and what eventual consequences such effects might have in the community. Ninah's isolation borders on alienation, particularly during her period of solitary confinement following her lover James's suicide. Similarly, Rachel's growing love of and desire for the "English" man, John Book, leads to a certain level of estrangement from her friends and relatives. Yet both texts also construct some elements of religious separatism positively, including the aforementioned emphases on family and close-knit communal bonds. An examination of how religious separatism is represented in these works must observe the ways in which these positive and negative aspects intersect, merge, and help reveal each other.

Also important are the ways in which each artist constructs the communities' other successes and failures. In chapter one, I argue that the feminist communities of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* are represented as successful in eliciting a temporary and communal feminist agency, though they fail to catalyze either permanent individual growth or group resistance. In *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness*, the communities' successes and failures also seem temporary in these respects. Though many aspects of religious separatist life are represented positively, the texts also suggest that an overly strict adherence to religious law may hinder an individual's growth and happiness. In part because both texts represent pre-existing communities whose laws and dogmas are rooted in historical American religion, these works seem less concerned with the creation of a separate space than with how an extant religious separatism is seductive, how it can be problematic, and how late twentieth century life can complicate the attempt to maintain a separatist ideology and community. Indeed, some aspects of both texts can be read as rejecting

the insularity and elitism inherent in religious separatism. While this point may seem related to the isolation discussed above, this latter concern transcends the individual character. Both Reynolds and Weir represent and examine the seeming inevitability of contact and conflict between separatist and dominant communities without idealizing or vilifying either society. How Reynolds and Weir attain this balance is another question that this chapter attempts to answer.

How does *The Rapture of Canaan* represent and interrogate these various foci? Reynolds establishes that Fire and Brimstone is not only a religious community but also a separatist society; she does so by showing that Grandpa Herman has created "his [own] brand of Christianity" (13) and how he defines everything beyond the boundaries of Fire and Brimstone as corrupt and potentially evil.[4] He creates his own church when the older church to which he belongs splits into three parts, one of which becomes Fire and Brimstone. Herman builds his church in one of his own tobacco fields, thus privatizing the physical location. Herman also creates a new patchwork dogma; Ninah says that "He used the Bible . . . but only the parts he liked" (Reynolds 14). She states that he also uses certain elements of Baptist and Pentecostal doctrine. In this way, Herman recreates religion in a space that he controls.[5]

On the surface, this act seems patriarchal; and, to be sure, Herman *is* a patriarch who exemplifies fundamentalist versions of Christianity. However, unlike the patriarchs in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, Herman's motivations seem sympathetic. Nanna explains that Herman returned from World War II "ruined through and through . . . [what he saw in the war] Made him want to hold onto ever thing he had with a grip so hard it could strangle a person if he weren't careful" (Reynolds 110). She also states that "He did it out of love, Ninah. Love and need. He prayed about it and promised God if he'd give him a place where he didn't have to know fear and didn't have to remember and keep living with the things he'd seen, he'd run it just the way he thinks

God runs Heaven" (Reynolds 111). Though Herman's patriarchal acts stem from his belief in male authority, the belief itself is encouraged by and rooted in his religion. He forms a separatist community in which he is the central authority, but he does so to protect his family, not out of mere desire to hold personal power.

Creation of a separatist community because of familial concern is represented as an understandable choice. However, Herman's conflation of his own people with God's larger, metaphorical family causes problems for the community's individual members. Herman is the lawmaker and judge within the community; his attempts to exercise absolute control over the physical and spiritual lives of his extended family often hinder their individuality and Herman's own vision for them as living people, not just abstract souls. In other words, Herman becomes more obsessed with upholding the letter of his laws than with the reasons why the laws were originally created—the well-being of the community and its members. As the book's main representative of individualism and free thought, Ninah calls attention to this problem several times in the novel. For instance, when Herman sentences Ben Harback to sleep in a grave—a metaphorical death meant to remind Ben of the wages of sin—Ninah suggests that "maybe Grandpa Herman was more worried about keeping the rest of his community under his thumb than about Ben's soul" (Reynolds 115). Ben's sins—drinking alcohol and consorting with people outside of Fire and Brimstone—are examples of secularism, the general transgression that concerns Herman the most.

By constructing Fire and Brimstone as an anti-materialist community, Reynolds creates in the novel a resonance with historical and literary communities that also shunned materialism—the Puritan communities of early America and of works like *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as the Amish community represented in *Witness*. As in those actual and fictional

communities, ornament and material goods symbolize sin and idolatry to the members of Fire and Brimstone. Reynolds, however, seems to question the need to repudiate so completely these and other aspects of secular life. Ninah tells us that the women make all the community members' clothes, and that even practical possessions such as dentures are outlawed because "If the Lord willed that [a member would] lose his teeth, he should live without them" (Reynolds 26). Herman's making the rule in the first place illustrates his desire for the community to separate from the outside world and to depend on God as much as possible. Yet Herman himself secretly breaks this rule; this act makes him seem more human and illustrates that even he sometimes finds his rules too restrictive. This dedication to eradicating all traces of secular society reveals the fear at the heart of Fire and Brimstone—fear of God's wrath, fear of sin, fear of one's own weaknesses, and fear that religious principles and faith may not be enough to sustain the community. One way that Reynolds imagines religious separatism, therefore, is as a communal attempt to defy the body's desires for the sake of the soul.

Herman's belief that mainstream America is irrevocably materialist leads to his insistence on geographical and ideological separatism. He limits his congregation's contact with the outside world, even excluding non-separatist family members. Reynolds conveys the elitist extent of Fire and Brimstone's separatism in one memorable passage involving Ninah's parents Liston and Maree, her brother Everett, and Everett's wife Wanda.

> "Honey," Daddy said to Wanda. "It's just going to take some getting used to."
> "But I miss them so bad, though," Wanda stammered . . . "I just don't understand why I can't go see them."
> "Nobody's saying you can't see them," Mamma interjected. "Go if you want to. But you know that the minute you step foot in their house, you'll be breathing the air of their sinfulness." (59)

The "them" in this passage refers to Wanda's family, who are not part of Fire and Brimstone or any other church. Though Liston and Maree's intention is to comfort Wanda, Maree's statement

reveals that Fire and Brimstoners consider the compound to be pure. But the image of contamination at the heart of Maree's words further reveals how Herman's fears are also institutionally disseminated; one interpretation of her words is that communal purity and the strength of their individual convictions are easily weakened when confronted with difference.

This fear of contamination necessitates complete separation; yet the characters find such separation impossible in light of the intricacies of modern life, such as the need for income after planting season and the laws requiring children to go to school. Because these issues force the characters to interact with the outside world, Herman uses his sermons to deconstruct conflicting ideas and any potential bonds with outsiders. Similarly, he uses his personal relationships with the members to weaken any bonds they might form with outsiders. He reacts with distaste when he considers that Ninah's step-nephew and future lover James might "'go weak-kneed over some little Baptist in his class. Some little *Baptist*.' He smiled and made a motion to his chest like all Baptist girls got bigger breasts, and the men laughed" (Reynolds 80). Other religious denominations are subject to ridicule; Herman thinly veils his scorn with humor. In another passage, Herman assures Ninah that Ajita Patel, a Hindu girl in Ninah's class, "is headed for Hell if she doesn't know Jesus Christ as her Personal Savior and Lord" (Reynolds 86). His aforementioned contempt for other doctrines suggests that he also condones only one way to know Christ—his own. Read in this sense, Herman's kind of separatism seems spiritually vain, philosophically narrow, and fearful of difference. Herman believes that dominant society has nothing to offer Fire and Brimstone except temporary jobs. Yet Ninah, as the central figure of the novel, questions the exclusive morality of separatist elitism; this allows readers to view the novel as, on one level, an examination of the problems with absolutism.

The novel also portrays some of the potential effects that an exclusionary dogma might have on the individual, which seem intricately related to separatist isolation, a concept that *The Rapture of Canaan* takes even further than the previously discussed texts. In one passage, Ninah says, "When I was a child, I saw our community as a special place where God's special children could be safe from the influence of the wicked world. Later, when I was older, I saw our community differently. I saw us like an island. Like an island sinking from the weight of fearful hearts" (Reynolds 17). In this passage, a childhood haven from sin becomes "an island sinking from the weight of fearful hearts," which is an image of a doomed place, its populace sure to drown. Herman's condemnation of Ajita Patel exemplifies the problems with this kind of separatism. Ninah's desire to interact with people outside of Fire and Brimstone—people whom Herman calls sinful, though Ninah believes that they are good—is part of what eventually breaks down absolutism. She is unable to believe that Ajita Patel is going to hell; and if Herman is wrong about Ajita, it follows that he could be wrong about other issues as well. Ninah privileges human contact and experience over Herman's abstract moral certainty; she does not, however, condemn religion itself in blanket terms. This indicates that Reynolds is exploring issues in this specific kind of separatist religion, not condemning either religion or separatism in general.

Demonstrating how Reynolds constructs and examines different definitions of morality— secular materialism, dogmatic moral absolutes, and the middle ground that Ninah represents— requires an examination of the problems and rewards stemming from Fire and Brimstone's value system. First, Reynolds delves into some practical problems of fundamentalist dogma. One such problem concerns the human body itself—the contradictions of its literal existence and its symbolic value as God's temple. Reynolds uses Ninah's menstruation to explore this issue. Ninah is so ashamed of her first cycle that she cannot bring herself to tell anyone. This shame

reflects her growing awareness of her own body and her memories of Herman's many sermons and rules against sins of the flesh. Menstruation, in fundamentalist Christian mythology, is symbolic of Eve's sin and the flowering of one's sexual womanhood. Ninah therefore suffers from an exaggerated awareness of her body's potential for sin. Because the people of Fire and Brimstone take so many precautions against sin even within the compound, the characters are aware that the sermons and laws are even more applicable to their contact with the "sinful" outside world and how they use their own bodies there. Thus the primary result of Ninah's physical and emotional maturations is her growing fear for her soul and the lack of any place wherein she can feel safe. In this way, Reynolds represents the often-destructive influence of dogmatic morality on the human individual, who must always fall short of the ideal.

Another problem in *The Rapture of Canaan* is how separatists fit within the state-sanctioned educational system. Both Herman and Nanna believe in education, but Herman is less receptive to sending the community children to the public schools, particularly because of health regulations. Fire and Brimstoners "didn't believe in doctors . . . [because] they took the healing power of Christ into their own hands and used it to perpetuate the sinfulness of humanity" (Reynolds 16). Thus, when the school requires that the Fire and Brimstone children be immunized, "the church began teaching their children themselves until the state intervened and Grandpa Herman had to make the exception for vaccinations against measles and diphtheria" (Reynolds 16). This passage demonstrates the mutability of Herman's allegedly absolute separatist rules and his willingness to sacrifice formal education when it conflicts with his vision. Yet the fact that the church teaches its children at home for a time reinforces the value of education itself. These events suggest that Reynolds sees a conflict between this sort of fundamentalist, separatist religion and dominant conceptions of education and progress;

Herman's "exceptions" represent the triumph of dominant culture in practical matters and the endurance of religious beliefs.

Reynolds also represents problems that the children of separatist religions may encounter in school. Several times in the novel, Ninah is ridiculed because of her appearance and the perception that Fire and Brimstone creates in the mainstream populace. Ninah states that "My friends were my own cousins" (Reynolds 16). These young people, already outsiders, are also forced to conform to their elders' rejection of ornament; Ninah discusses how the Fire and Brimstone children "wore dark dresses made for us by our mammas and nannas" (Reynolds 16). These homemade clothes are a physical marker of their ideological difference. This mode of dress further serves to diminish feelings of individuality. Ninah claims that "At Fire and Brimstone, we all looked alike, and that made me lonely too" (Reynolds 37). Their uniformity actually exacerbates Ninah's sense of isolation, even within the compound, thus demonstrating how communal uniformity often comes at the expense of the individual.

Just as the uniform dress code of Fire and Brimstone discourages individuality, it also encourages children in the mainstream populace to reject and stereotype the members of the community. For instance, Herman's edict that women not cut their hair causes Ninah practical problems. Her hair was "so heavy that it hurt my neck to carry it" (Reynolds 35). Further, the other girls in the public schools see her hair as another oddity marking Ninah as different. One girl says that "Her head stinks . . . Why doesn't she wash it?", after which Ninah would "turn around to see them waving their hands in front of their noses and smiling conspiratorially, but not at me" (Reynolds 35). Herman's outmoded belief regarding women's appearances causes the individual woman to be physically uncomfortable and socially ostracized. These sections demonstrate that Herman's strict rules have isolated Ninah both socially and emotionally.

Furthermore, given the consequences of Ninah's later resistance to Herman's various edicts, these examples also suggest that a leader's failure to account for the needs of his or her followers could lead to fragmentation within the community.

Perhaps Reynolds's novel, though, could most easily be read as a critique of how fundamentalist separatism can obscure positive ways of thinking about and dealing with sexual awakening. Because the children are discouraged from even talking to outsiders, their choices for romantic partners are severely limited to other members of the community. She first discovers her chemistry with James—her step-nephew, a relationship that presents its own problems—as they ride a horse together.

> When I shifted back, I was closer than I'd ever been to sitting in his lap . . . I kind of liked the new sensation of his nearness. I tried to tell myself that it was no different from sitting next to him in church, but it *was* different . . . I was too busy trying to memorize the way James's legs felt around my backside, hanging on, the way his arms felt buckled around my middle. (Reynolds 46)

This is the first real indication of Ninah's blooming sexuality; and partially because of the exclusive nature of the separatist community, her desires and curiosity fixate on a relative. This situation could be indicative of separatist communities' often incestuous natures; they define themselves as insular, self-sufficient, and self-propagating. This incest, both metaphorical and actual, reveals a key irony at the core of religious separatism; groups that separate from the dominant community to avoid sins of the world often create equally problematic situations.

Reynolds again problematizes absolutist morality in physical terms when she parallels stories of Herman and Nanna's rebellious courtship and Ninah's and James's own secret fondling of each other,[6] which Ninah narrates in imagistic terms.

> And then James reached up again, almost too high, just barely escaping the edge of my underpants, and his hand there felt like a thousand ladybugs crawling. For a second, I thought I might lift right off the bed, zip up into the air, and float across

the room. I felt like a pine tree in spring. I knew if I opened my mouth again, there was a chance I'd speak in tongues. (Reynolds 71)

Because Fire and Brimstoners discuss sex indirectly through complex metaphors that reference God and nature, Ninah conflates her natural physical awakening to a religious epiphany.[7] Her desire for James manifests while they are in church, a place from which sin is allegedly banished. These conflicting ideas and situations lead James and Ninah to conflate sex with "knowing Jesus." Therefore, Reynolds has in this case constructed a situation in which the pedagogical methods of the separatist community actually undermine its religious ideals.

But one lesson that Ninah and James do learn is that sin must be punished. Punishments are varied: Ninah sleeps on nettles and walks with pecan shells in her shoes when she feels lust for James; James sleeps on nettles and thorns because he orgasms in his sleep, and he wraps himself in barbed wire after having sex with Ninah; and Ben Harback is locked in a cellar for weeks after he "sins" with Corinthian. Yet none of these punishments eradicate the history of the sinful acts or the characters' guilt. Further, Ninah and James's attempts to deny their physical urges actually dilute their understanding of religion. Because she has come to associate sex with sin, Ninah cannot believe that her acts with James were anything but religious ceremony; sin is supposed to be unpleasant, and what she and James do is pleasurable. She further reasons that if she and James were not having sex but were instead knowing Jesus through each other, then the child in her womb must be Jesus's, not James's. Herman views this assertion as blasphemy and punishes Ninah accordingly, but his insistence on moral absolutism is what has created this confusion in her. She believes that all good things must come from God. Moreover, Herman's separatist view of the mainstream culture leaves her reticent to seek advice outside the borders of Fire and Brimstone. Reynolds constructs, in these ways, Ninah's natural confusion and experimentation as an understandable response both to Herman's mixed messages and to her

own burgeoning sexuality; she explores these conflicts in the only way she can, given that her community only allows her to interact with other members of Fire and Brimstone.

Yet these readings of the novel also demonstrate how being a part of such a group might be rewarding. One reward for the individuals in her religious community is a sense of belonging. Although the novel seems to be critiquing the suppression of individuality, it also carefully represents this sense of community. In one passage, Ninah says that "All I had to do was stand on the doorsteps, and I could yell out to anyone at all" (Reynolds 36). Given the size of the Fire and Brimstone community—from other descriptions, one gets the impression that several dozen people live within the compound—this statement may be hyperbole. However, it indicates Ninah's perception of the borders of Fire and Brimstone, providing the reader with an impression of her sense of enclosure.

This sense is not represented as completely negative, however. One early passage describes the celebration that occurs after the community's tobacco crops have been harvested. The children's joy in jumping from the second floor of the pack house onto the soft bags of tobacco balances their shared hardships; the community's rigid rules and tough work ethic make relaxation a treasured event in which everyone participates. Another positive aspect to the enclosed geography and familial structure of Fire and Brimstone is how the whole community supports its needy members; they build houses together, eat together, and do chores together. This sharing of burdens and joys makes the workload seem lighter. Reynolds constructs Fire and Brimstone as a place where the sense of community seeps into every aspect of life. In these ways, collectivity is represented positively. The sharing of physical burdens, spiritual beliefs, and celebrations creates a sense of belonging that the members have denied themselves in, or have been denied by, the mainstream community.

The merging of religion and family also has positive aspects. Ninah's most positive

relationship is with Nanna, her grandmother; the small geography of the Fire and Brimstone

compound allows them many chances to bond. The dogma of Fire and Brimstone also brings

Nanna and Ninah closer together. Because Herman bases many sermons on Nanna's alleged sins

of the past, the whole community knows a portion of her history.[8] Ninah and Nanna have little

patience for these well-known and embarrassing personal narratives. They sit together in church,

secretly sharing forbidden candy and expressions of annoyance. This concealment, established

early in the book, prepares the characters and the reader for greater secrets that the two women

share later—Ninah's pregnancy and the truth of Grandpa Herman's secular past. Reynolds's

emphasis on Fire and Brimstone's familial structure underscores the bond between these two

women—who face a similar public disgrace, a similar isolation—and the reader's probable

frustration with Herman. This paradigm reflects Ann-Janine Morey's idea—disseminated in her

book *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature*—that "Men have religious experience, [sic]

women (female bodies) have religious significance" (27). Though males like Herman hold both

lingual and political power, this construction of connections between women represents a

potentially positive aspect of religious separatism.[9]

Another aspect of Fire and Brimstone that Reynolds represents as both positive and

negative is its setting. The girl gang in *Set It Off* observes no fixed borders, though the film

constructs a certain "turf" for its community. Reynolds's novel is more comparable to Oates's

Foxfire in these respects; the groups in these novels have a space to call their own. But, whereas

Foxfire purchases a house on the outskirts of town, Reynolds's separatist community maintains

its own mini-town on Herman's property. This setting cements their separation from the

mainstream community and therefore highlights their difference. However, the geographical gulf

between Fire and Brimstone and mainstream America also limits the physical space between individuals living inside the compound. Although the emphasis on uniformity often deconstructs their individuality, their shared philosophy and personal space strengthen communal bonds. This complex representation of separatism is often demonstrated through Ninah's ambiguous reactions to her environment. She says that "It didn't matter that we were always together or that when I leaned out my bedroom window, I could see inside the other houses . . . It wasn't enough to make up for the lonely" (Reynolds 36-7). This passage demonstrates that the individual can experience alienation even in a community of like-minded, physically similar relatives.

Even this explanation, however, does not fully characterize the complexities of Reynolds's construction. *The Rapture of Canaan* is also a novel about love and its various manifestations, including the love inherent in the characters' family ties. Yet Herman himself, the patriarch and rule-maker of the community, also represents a kind of love, even if his methods are suspect. For instance, when Ninah stays home from school, Nanna makes her eat several bowls of prunes, this action functioning as both her cure-all and her punishment for faking sickness. When Herman sees his granddaughter taking this common "cure," he eats as many prunes as he can from Ninah's bowl. When he leaves, Nanna says, "You see . . . That's love" (Reynolds 112). A character capable of such small acts of kindness *and* such monumental close-mindedness is indicative of the complexities Reynolds represents as inherent in religious separatism. Nanna's earlier discussion of Herman's history and motivations suggests that love and fear can co-exist at the heart of such movements; the fact that Ninah repudiates much of the dogma but never the family suggests Reynolds's sympathy lies with the less oppressive elements of religion.

However, Ninah's harsh view of Herman's overall methodology—in a community in which members often punish themselves by sleeping on nettles, Ninah once refers to Herman as "the biggest nettle of all. One great big irritation in the bed with Nanna" (Reynolds 32)—also implies a lack of sympathy with the dogmatic, unrelenting aspects of this kind of religion. One less sympathetic aspect is the tendency to apply a general law to specific cases without regard to circumstances. For instance, Herman's literal interpretation of the Biblical homily "the wages of sin is death" leads to the first hint of fragmentation within Fire and Brimstone. In his sermon for David and Laura's stillborn child, Herman implies that some unconfessed sin of the parents led to the death of the child and that its death represents God's just punishment. Liston, Ninah and David's father, shouts, "Don't you ever say a thing like that again . . . That's not what God meant!" (Reynolds 42). Ninah internalizes this conflation of death and punishment, even though Liston and other members of the community later question Herman's judgment in far more confrontational ways. But this early disagreement with a literal interpretation of the Bible, and Ninah's extrapolation of Herman's position onto her own situation, reveals that doctrine has actually split the community in some ways.

Similarly, Herman's decision to give Ninah's child Canaan to David and Laura weighs heavily on the community. Because Herman declares Canaan the New Messiah, Laura, his new caretaker, develops a contemptuous attitude toward Ninah; this development further fragments the Huff family. Another issue that helps splinter the family is that neither Liston nor Nanna approves of Herman's decision, nor do they believe his declaration that Canaan is divine. James's suicide earlier in the novel also divides these characters and emotionally traumatizes some of them; some of these characters would be aware that Herman's constant warnings about sin, punishment, and hell contributed to James's fragile state of mind, reminding him of his own

alleged baseness.[10] All of these examples illustrate human problems with unforgiving and

abstract doctrines, with literal interpretations of the Bible, and with reading alleged signs from

God; this seems to indicate that Reynolds has little sympathy with the more fanatical aspects of

religious separatism.

The aspect of moral absolutism that Reynolds represents as most problematic is the

doctrine of complete bodily denial, the belief that physical desire and pleasure are nearly always

sinful. Reynolds represents other physical activities, like work, more ambivalently; Ninah enjoys

some of her chores and her sense of closeness with the other women, even as she wishes for a

better relationship with certain town girls, such as Ajita Patel. Because Ninah's greatest

"transgressions" are her sexual indulgences, the body becomes the site of conflict between

physical sensations and the state of the soul. Ninah questions the efficacy of Herman's insistence

on constantly austere physicality.[11] These aspects of fundamentalist religious life are portrayed

as oppressive, even moreso because Reynolds constructs their representation within a separatist

community, wherein the characters have no other models to help them explore or explain their

physical states.

After her sexuality begins to awaken, catalyzed by her physical closeness to James,

Ninah begins to think about other kinds of rapturous feelings that she has seen or experienced:

"And sometimes, I'd hear Mamma and Daddy crying out and panting, and I'd wonder if they

were really praying at all. That secret blushing that goes on inside your skin would fill me up, fill

me red and sweet, like exotic fruit from India, and I'd grip James's hand tighter, hoping he'd feel

it too. But he didn't" (Reynolds 90). This passage reveals that Ninah has mistaken religious

ecstasy for the sexual act. It further reveals that Herman's teachings have given sex a mysterious

aura for the community as a whole. On the other hand, the town children do not share this sense

of mystery. Reynolds constructs Ninah as operating from a position of weakness and ignorance because, when interacting with a society full of sexually aware people, Ninah only knows about sex through metaphor. This problem suggests that understanding practical worldly matters through religious terminology and lenses is often difficult, particularly in a separatist society wherein the members seem equally uninformed and/or afraid to discuss such matters.

Regardless of her comparative ignorance, Ninah's use of sexualized language—of being "filled up"—and her immediate grasping for James suggests that her sexual awakening is accelerating; furthermore, the fact that even adults cannot talk about sex except through metaphor and euphemism renders Ninah ignorant regarding what is happening to her and what to do about it. If Morey is correct in positing that "Metaphor *is* the way we think" (32, original emphasis), then Ninah's conflation of sex and spirituality is even more understandable. Furthermore, her and James's fear of punishment—from Grandpa Herman, from their parents, and from God—ensures their secrecy and silence; they have no one to confide in because they have learned that the community is quicker to judge than to understand. Reynolds implies in these sections that this sort of religious teaching regarding sex and the body can be both confusing and dangerous; she further suggests that such dangers are worse for separatists, who have only one model, one source of information, one set of beliefs to consult. Morey argues that "distinguishing between 'religion' and 'sexuality' makes sense only if we are thinking about traditional, male-authored fiction that is invested in the absolute meaningfulness of the boundaries between domains of experience" (238). While I do not subscribe to the idea that religion and sexuality are always the same, I do find that Ninah's experiences with James, as Reynolds constructs them, suggest that the two concepts are often connected. In these terms, the orgasmic prayer that Ninah learns from Corinthian—"Whee, Jesus . . . a prayer praising

freedom" (Reynolds 316)—is indeed a celebration of God's presence in everyday things. In these respects, Reynolds seems to be criticizing narrow definitions of spirituality and the possibilities for manifestations of God's love and grace.

The novel also seems to be criticizing patriarchal authority in religion. Just as the early portions of the novel establish both Herman's ascendancy in the compound and certain members' resistance to his literal interpretations of scripture, so does the rest of the novel trace the gradual fragmentation of his community. After enduring Herman's harsh, medieval punishments, Ben Harback publicly repudiates Herman and the entire Fire and Brimstone philosophy.[12] Herman responds by exiling Ben from the community.[13] Herman's strategy of isolating or outright exiling dissenters, which echoes Legs's dismissal of Maddy in *Foxfire*, seems to be typical separatist strategy. But in this religious community, wherein the majority of members are somehow related and the main concern is the state of their souls, this strategy is not always applied. For instance, after James's death and Ninah's solitary confinement, Olin, Liston, and Mustard refuse to attend church. These breaks in communal solidarity and outright denials of Herman's authority represent another stage in the community's fragmentation. They also reflect an idea that Jodi Schorb discusses in the article "Uncleanliness is Next to Godliness: Sexuality, Salvation, and the Early American Woman's Execution Narrative": "The spectacle of execution [or, in these cases, cruel punishments] also opens up the possibility of revolt, as ministers compete with the powerful presence of the condemned [or punished] to maintain control of the event" (81). Fire and Brimstoners struggle with watching the application of their laws, particularly the most inhumane incidents like Ninah's dunking. These struggles represent the conflict between dogma and praxis; in other words, they emblematize the ways that general religious rules often cause problems when practically applied to individuals.

Because he refuses to acknowledge the validity of these struggles, Herman's obstinate determination to enforce his laws continues to corrode Fire and Brimstone's solidarity. The community's fragmentation climaxes after Herman's stroke. In a fit of confusion, Herman removes his clothes and wanders off alone. The Fire and Brimstoners find only his clothes and believe that he has been raptured, because he has taught them for years that those going to Heaven would leave their clothes behind. At that point, in spite of how a few members try to maintain a sense of order and logic, "Fire and Brimstone had turned into a mob. I thought they might all be insane" (Reynolds 311). This "insanity" stems from their literal interpretation of symbolic events, an interpretation that Herman has encouraged for decades. Ironically, his absence catalyzes the community's hysterical response to a situation that he has prophesied for years. And because he has near-absolute authority, some characters cannot think for themselves in his absence, even when logic suggests that Herman's teachings have been questionable. The community fragments along loyalist lines; those who refuse to believe that Herman has been raptured are among those who have been resisting the universal truth of his teachings. This scene reveals, then, how dogmatic absolutism fragments the community that this same philosophy is meant to unify.

The tone of this scene is, initially, frightening uncertainty. However, it becomes more absurd than frightening when Herman returns, very much alive: "But then Grandpa Herman walked up to the door, looked in at us like we were all crazy. He stood there naked as the day he was born, puzzled and muddy" (Reynolds 311). Fire and Brimstone learns that Herman has not been to Heaven, only "to get [Nanna] a moon pie" (Reynolds 312). This tonal change makes the characters' fundamentalism seem absurd. Yet it also hints that an awareness of this absurdity may not change anything in a fundamentalist community. Many Fire and Brimstoners fail to

learn from their experience; David declares his desire to be the new leader, citing the false rapture as a sign of their spiritual failure. Liston argues this point, but nothing is resolved. The novel remains ultimately ambivalent about the efficacy and logic of fundamentalist religious separatism and the fates of these characters.

The passage that best exemplifies Reynolds's ambiguous treatment of religious separatism is the one in which Ninah splits apart Canaan's hands, which have been attached to each other by a thin piece of skin since his birth. Because his bound hands make Canaan appear to be praying, Herman and the more fanatical Fire and Brimstoners interpret them as a sign of Canaan's divinity. Other, increasingly practical members of the community—Ninah, Nanna, Liston, Olin—see them as an accident of birth. Yet the symbolic importance that Herman instills in the hands, coupled with the community's distrust of mainstream doctors, prevents anyone from separating the baby's palms.[14] When Ninah finally does separate his hands, she sees both joy and pain in his reaction to freedom: "He cried out so loudly that I knew I couldn't hurt him any worse. He screamed and buried himself in my lap, his hollering mouth at the center of Nanna's dress, between my breasts, so deafening that I knew it was killing the kudzu in there and his little hands shaking on both sides, free and moving, spilling bits of blood all around us, flicking them onto my wet face" (Reynolds 315). This passage describes the concept of separation as necessary, joyful, and dangerous; that Canaan's hands both "kill the kudzu" in Ninah's heart and spill "bits of blood all around us" suggest that separation can simultaneously heal and harm. This passage also reflects Reynolds's earlier representation of Fire and Brimstone's ideological separatism. Their separation allows the characters to enjoy greater family unity, greater intimacy between individuals, and a powerful sense of structure. Yet the

emotional and physical pains that sometimes accompany these separations indicate that such a choice can have negative consequences for the individual.

Nevertheless, Reynolds seems more sympathetic to the community in her work than is Oates in *Foxfire*; Fire and Brimstone is still an active community at novel's end, and some characters continue to see positive aspects of their chosen way of life. This representation differs markedly with the destruction of the Foxfire gang and the *Set It Off* crew. However, Reynolds, Oates, and Gray all represent positively certain motivations for separatist community formation, and each author provides hope that the individual, if not the community, can benefit from a separatist experience. Reynolds implies that Ninah does not completely accept Herman's separatist doctrine; but Ninah's strong belief in God and her desire to live a good life with her family connote sympathy with these aspects of the religion and religious community. Thus, while Herman might define "the unclean thing" as anything representing the body or the secular world outside of Fire and Brimstone, Ninah—and, through her, Reynolds—seems more concerned with maintaining love and acceptance, not exclusion. Reynolds also seems suspicious of a dogma or a social structure that values abstractions over individuals. Though it focuses on a community in which choices are severely limited, *The Rapture of Canaan* is ultimately a novel about possibilities—for the individual, for religious separatism, for religion itself.

Peter Weir's film *Witness* does not, perhaps, make any ultimately definable statement on the transcendence of love or the dangers of absolutist dogma. In one sense, the film is merely a good suspense thriller in which a secular detective hides in an Amish community in order to save his own life and to protect a witness to a murder. On other levels, however, *Witness* is a complex exploration of another kind of religious separatism, of Amish contact with the outside world, and of what happens when secular values and laws clash with religious belief. Weir's film does not

portray the Amish as backward or laughable, nor does it condemn their separatism as unfeasible. *Witness* explores the possibilities for crossing cultural borders, in terms of both community values and individual relationships.[15] To do so, Weir represents the Amish as self-sufficient people living in a geographically separate space; these characters are highly distrustful of mainstream culture, contemptuous of secular law, and socially insular. Their separation is based on the belief that secular society is too corrupt to support Amish values. In these terms, and much like Reynolds's Fire and Brimstone community, this representation suggests a certain spiritual elitism in the Amish characters. Also like Fire and Brimstone, the Amish in *Witness* are motivated by a sincere concern for individual members juxtaposed with a strict adherence to their religious laws, as well as by negative experiences with secular culture. Unlike Fire and Brimstone, the Amish community in this film is based on an actual society. The viewer must not forget that this film represents only one way of reading Amish society; the reader must also remember that my connecting Fire and Brimstone and the Amish is a decision based on the representations in the film, which sometimes vary from the facts of actual Amish life.

One way that the two fictional communities are represented similarly is in their valuation of the family. Herman forms Fire and Brimstone in an attempt to keep his family safe and close at hand; the Amish community of *Witness* places similar importance on physically and emotionally close familial relations. One of the film's opening sequences, the funeral of Rachel's husband, demonstrates this value. In this sequence, the community comforts Rachel Lapp (Kelly McGillis) and her son Samuel (Lukas Haas). After an initial series of establishing shots, all of which show members of this Amish community walking or riding to the Lapp home, the camera cuts to scenes set inside the house. The first of these shots shows dozens of people quietly mourning together. When the camera pulls back behind the coffin, it reveals even more people,

packed into every visible space. Weir then cuts to a shot of women setting a table. This image

demonstrates the domestic cohesion of the community in times of crisis. Because these shots

occur inside the Lapp home, the *mise-en-scene* is cluttered and intimate; the tight frame—filled

with personal effects, family, and friends—exemplifies the close-knit nature of the Amish

community. Such scenes provide one link to Reynolds's representation of a religious separatist

community. Because they have chosen to separate from mainstream society and live a simple life

together in a closed geographical space, the Amish are better able to help each other when need

arises.

Like Reynolds, Weir also juxtaposes these scenes representing close-knit community

with the more faceless mainstream. In *The Rapture of Canaan*, we meet characters such as Ajita

Patel and Corinthian, but we learn little about their families and their lives within the dominant

culture. All we see is their outer differences from the main characters. But in *Witness*, Weir goes

one step further. He takes the viewer inside the life of John Book (Harrison Ford), the policeman

who tries to save Samuel. Book's characterization, the most sympathetic representative of

dominant culture in the film, exemplifies mainstream society's potential failure to encourage

substantive connections between its members. Book is unmarried and has no children of his own.

Although the viewer meets Book's sister Elaine (Patti LuPone), the first scene between the two

implies that they are not very close. After Samuel witnesses the crooked cops' murder of the

undercover officer, Book initially brings Rachel and Samuel to stay with Elaine. Though Elaine

is friendly enough to the Lapps, her first question to Book is, "How could you do this to me

tonight?" Elaine seems less concerned with Rachel and Samuel's fate than with the interruption

of her personal schedule; for his part, Book seems unconcerned with the imposition. On the one

hand, his obvious trust in Elaine implies that they are close on some level; on the other, his

insensitivity suggests that their relationship is more distant than the affinity between the Amish characters in the opening scenes.

Weir's juxtaposition of the two communities does not completely privilege the Amish; their sobriety in the opening scenes could also be read as emotional frigidity. The odd relationship between Elaine and John is also represented both positively and negatively. This ambiguity is similar to Reynolds's in *The Rapture of Canaan*; neither text constructs any community as purely functional or thoroughly corrupt. In *Witness*, the main difference between the dominant and separatist communities, at least in terms of familial ties, is that the Amish community seems more close-knit, more aware of the individual member's problems and needs. The silence of the opening scenes, compared to the bickering that characterizes the meeting between Elaine and John, implies that the Amish are more willing to help without complaining, yet less able to express their problems and feelings.

Weir's Amish community also rejects secular materialism. In *Witness*, the viewer observes the characteristic plainness of the Amish—their rejection of ornamental clothing; their refusal to use electric lights and motor cars, preferring instead lanterns and horse-drawn buggies; their unconcern with material possessions. One of the finest compliments the Amish pay John Book as he hides among them is how "plain" he looks in his borrowed Amish clothes; Kraybill says that "Dress speaks. It communicates membership, commitment, and social status" (57). Book's winning praise for his appearance therefore suggests that he is performing Amish-ness well. Though they too value plain clothing, Reynolds's Fire and Brimstoners do not reject mainstream goods and services to this extent. While Ninah does comment several times on how Fire and Brimstoners renounce ornament—her sewing bright outfits for her unborn baby is represented as a minor rebellious act—they have little moral objection to using technology that is

useful on a farm, such as vehicles and tractors. The Amish in *Witness* reject mainstream society

as much as possible. Although the two groups' commitment to their separatist values is

represented similarly, the Amish are here constructed as the stricter anti-materialist society.[16]

The communities' use of firearms, or the lack thereof, exemplifies another difference in

how these texts represent religious separatism. For the Fire and Brimstoners, joining all-male

hunting parties on Saturdays is a privileged—and exclusively male—aspect of communal

fellowship. Firearms are used to procure food and to symbolize this male right of passage, but

never for aggression or defense. In *Witness*, on the other hand, the separatist characters consider

firearms, especially handguns, symbolic of mainstream society's sin. In the following exchange,

Eli teaches Samuel that using guns is wrong.

> Eli: This gun of the hand is for the taking of human life. We believe it is wrong
> to take life. That is only for God. Many times wars have come, and people have
> said to us, "You must fight. You must kill. It is the only way to preserve the
> good." But Samuel . . . there is never only one way. Remember that. Would *you*
> kill another man?
> Samuel: I would only kill a bad man.
> Eli: Only the bad man, I see. And you know this bad man by sight? You are
> able to look into their hearts and see this badness?
> Samuel: I can see what they do. I *have* seen it.

Eli is speaking particularly of using handguns in violent acts of aggression against other people,

which is different from how the characters in *The Rapture of Canaan* use their hunting weapons.

What is at stake here is Samuel's learning that guns can bestow on human beings both the power

and the temptation to judge others and commit violent acts in response; Reynolds's text

represents and examines other kinds of power, so these sorts of concerns are never raised.

Witness, though, is a film that is very much concerned with how mainstream gun violence

might function in a pacifist and separatist society; this scene therefore deserves further

consideration, since Eli and Samuel are discussing more than just handguns. Using firearms as a

focal point, Eli and Samuel are really discussing the nature of good and evil, as well as how violence fits within each framework. For Samuel, who has witnessed the kind of violent act that Eli fears, the gun symbolizes self-defense. For Eli, it represents evil and temptation; Eli does not believe that a human being can ever judge when another person deserves to be the victim of deadly force. Their difference of opinion centers on the ways that Eli's absolutist philosophy conflicts with Samuel's more practical, yet more naïve, outlook. The idea of witnessing is therefore crucial to understanding the different philosophies that the film is exploring in this scene.

In Christian terminology, to "witness" is to tell conversion stories and set examples of how to live good lives. Yet "witness" can also mean "to see." For Eli, the violence in mainstream America has the potential to corrupt Samuel because the dominant community has "witnessed" its violence to the boy. Having seen, he cannot un-see. In order to stem this potential corruption, Eli quotes the scriptural passage, "'Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate, sayeth the Lord. And touch not the unclean thing.'" In this case, the gun is "the unclean thing," but Eli's speech suggests that "thing" could refer to objects of temptation in general.

In *Witness*, secularism and materialism are almost interchangeable terms. The Amish consider almost any object or element from mainstream culture as a sign of corruption and sin. Though their pacifist stance is represented sympathetically, it is also characterized as impractical, given the violent and intrusive representatives of dominant culture. When the crooked cops find Book and the Lapps, they bring guns; the Lapps are at their mercy, and Book has little with which to defend himself save his own ingenuity. Even though Book's resourcefulness is sufficient, one subtextual message of the film seems to be that, when dealing with the unscrupulous, force is sometimes necessary to preserve life. The Amish in *Witness* believe that

God's will always prevails, even if what God wants is for human life to be taken; however, part of what the final scenes of the film interrogate is the difference between aggression and self-defense. The rejection of violence as means to an end is represented as admirable; the decision not to defend oneself is constructed as less understandable.

These various complexities mark *Witness* as a text that both celebrates and questions Amish separatism.[17] Like *The Rapture of Canaan*, *Witness* asks how successfully any group can separate from the dominant culture while remaining within the geographical borders of the United States. Even though the Amish are insular, they must live and travel among outsiders, and outsiders sometimes visit them; total separation from dominant society is therefore impossible. With this in mind, it is possible to read the invasion of the crooked policeman—and, for that matter, of John Book himself—as examples of how Amish pacifism might actually encourage, and certainly does nothing to deter, aggression from outsiders. The community's theology requires them to be defenseless.

In these two works, religious separatist communities face different but equally insidious threats from mainstream society, and each community responds in ways that are both problematic in terms of what happens to the individual and effective in keeping the community itself strong. Reynolds's characters respond to increasing dissatisfaction with their Spartan, often medieval laws by fragmenting into two distinct sects that still manage to live together, sharing roughly similar religious ideals. The Amish in *Witness* do not fragment or adopt secular ideas when their ways of life are challenged or cause problems for individual members. But they also do not change in positive ways comparable to the personal growth that Ninah and some of her family experience. In these respects, Weir represents Amish religious separatism in both positive

and negative terms; he seems sympathetic to Amish stability and pacifism but less empathetic with Amish stasis and defenselessness.

Both artists' are ambiguous in other, more specific ways. One is the limited choices of romantic partners in the separatist communities and how these limitations are both advantageous and problematic. Just as Ninah must choose a romantic partner from her more distant cousins in the Fire and Brimstone compound, Rachel Lapp must choose someone from her relatively small Amish community. The opening funeral scenes foreshadow that the Lapps' neighbor Daniel Hochleitner (Alexander Godunov) will court Rachel. This situation illustrates both the close-knit nature of the Amish community and that community's philosophical difference. Rachel's first suitor is geographically close and philosophically similar, providing the prospective couple with common ground for a relationship. No one in this sequence, or in any subsequent scene, reads Rachel's or Daniel's actions as disrespectful or inappropriate. The connection between these individuals reflects Reynolds's representation of romantic love in *The Rapture of Canaan*. Though their choice of partners is severely limited, the characters' pre-existing relationships and mutual beliefs provide a strong foundation. This representation of relationships is neither completely positive nor utterly negative.

Another characteristic of these communities that might generate ambiguous readings is the representation of the characters' dependence, or lack thereof, on modern technology. Weir constructs his Amish characters as even more technophobic than Reynolds's fictional Protestant community. Whereas Grandpa Herman's people use devices such as motor vehicles, the Amish eschew even the most common sorts of modern conveniences. Several scenes show the Amish characters riding in their horse-drawn carriages, on which the only modern elements are the taillights and blinkers required by traffic laws. This concession to dominant law is comparable to

Herman's allowing the Fire and Brimstone children to be immunized; the separatists seem to realize that breaking this relatively minor law could be more problematic than making a small exception to their own rules. But Weir seems more interested in representing his characters' own technology. In one scene, Samuel demonstrates for Book the old-fashioned, yet ingenious and fully functional, plumbing system that brings running water into the Lapp home. This scene suggests a community-wide understanding of simple mechanics and engineering. Their distrust of dominant materials and devices, their privileging of tradition, and their valuation of self-reliance dictate their modes of living. Both Weir and Reynolds represent their characters' modes of living as comparatively Spartan, yet utilitarian and sufficient.[18]

The previously discussed representations of Amish pacifism are also represented ambiguously. On the one hand, *Witness* constructs Amish pacifism as non-judgmental and egalitarian. Eli's lessons to Samuel—that only God knows a person's true nature and that violence is never an answer—are admirable. On the other hand, both Samuel's experience with violence and the film's ending suggest that pacifism fails when confronted with unrestrained violence. When the crooked policemen locate Book at the Lapp's farm and arrive bearing guns, Eli and Rachel are taken prisoner; the only way that they can help Samuel—who is, along with Book, the true target of the hitmen—is to send him away. Telling Samuel to leave contradicts their philosophy of self-reliance, as does depending on outsiders to save him. This contradiction suggests a practical flaw in their philosophy and their methods of engaging the "English." Yet the threat comes from outside the community and the Amish remain true to their principles, so the viewer is always aware that these characters' problems are not of their own making. While their stubborn commitment to pacifism at any cost is at times frustrating, it is also commendable. On the other hand, the characters from mainstream society—even Book—quickly resort to

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violence; juxtaposed with the Amish's respect for all life, these characters are generally represented more negatively than positively.

Since Book is the principle mainstream character in the film, a more specific discussion of his characterization is necessary. Book is unable to emulate Amish pacifism. When dressed in his Amish clothes, he takes part in a confrontation with some belligerent townspeople. While the Amish characters sit passively, allowing the townspeople to ridicule and even physically assault them, Book defends Daniel by beating the most vociferous of the townsmen. Book's prior confrontation with Eli illustrates their differing philosophies; Book explains that violence and retaliation is his "way," while Eli insists that this "way" is not acceptable, regardless of circumstances. Book wins the fight, but the resulting brouhaha draws the attention of the local police, who eventually contact the crooked cops in Philadelphia. Book's actions therefore lead the villains to the Lapp farm. This sequence of events seems to support the Amish belief that violence begets violence. Yet the final scenes demonstrate that, when confronted with an outside menace, this religious community is helpless. Book, an outsider, combats the threat of other outsiders; both problem and solution come from the dominant community. In this way, *Witness* suggests that pacifism is admirable and understandable as long as it does not lead to helplessness, as it might do when or if mainstream society meddles in Amish life. Certainly, in this film, Weir constructs the religious separatist community as a passive landscape in which dominant figures struggle with each other, even as he portrays the Amish themselves positively.

Weir, like Reynolds, represents separation and moral absolutism as potentially both constructive and debilitating. These artists also portray moral absolutism as problematic within individual relationships. When Rachel's and Book's mutual feelings become apparent, Eli attempts to sway Rachel from any "impure" intentions she might have.

Eli: Rachel—what is it with you? Is this the Order?
Rachel: I have done nothing against the rule of the Order!
Eli: Nothing? You bring this man to our house, with his gun of the hand; you bring fear to this house. Fear of English, with guns coming after.
Rachel: I've committed no sin.
Eli: Maybe. Maybe not yet. But Rachel—it does not look. You know there has been talk. Talk about going to the Bishop and having you shunned.
Rachel: It is idle talk.
Eli: Do not take it lightly. [She begins to walk away.] Rachel! They can do it. They can do it just like that. You know what it means, shunning? I cannot sit at table with you. I cannot take anything from your hand. I cannot go to worship with you. Child—do not go so far.
Rachel: I am not a child.
Eli: But you are acting like one!
Rachel: I'll be the judge of that!
Eli: No! They will be the judge of that. And so will I—if you shame me.
Rachel: You shame yourself.

This conversation reveals much about *Witness*'s Amish community. The first lines, mentioning an "Order," refer to a strict set of rules that apply generally to all community members. Yet Rachel's interpretation of those rules is obviously different than Eli's; he feels that she is very close to breaking the rules, while she feels that she has done nothing wrong. For Eli, a minor representative of the male power structure within this separatist community, her desire is sin enough; for Rachel, only commission of the act constitutes sin. These different interpretations of general community rules are comparable to the conflicts within Fire and Brimstone; both conflicts exemplify the difficulties of applying abstract moral laws to complex individual cases.

Eli's second line again reinforces the boundaries between communities. To Eli, Book and his gun represent the outside world's violence that the Amish reject, even though neither Book nor the gun has committed violence yet. This exchange also reveals that the Amish who break the rules of the "Order" may be "shunned," a condition described as a type of exile. This harsh punishment for alleged violations of fundamentalist laws reflects Herman's penalties in *The Rapture of Canaan*; neither community brooks rebellion or nonconformist thought. Weir's

representation seems particularly realistic; Donald Kraybill writes that "The expulsion of detractors is the ultimate strategy for the preservation of Amish culture" (25), a statement that might well describe separatist strategies in general. Further, though Eli reveals that he is not one of the "They" who would shun Rachel, he proves that he is loyal to the Amish community over an individual member of his family when he says that "They will be the judge of that. And so will I—if you shame me."[19] Rachel's discursive strategy is to turn that shame back upon Eli, an attempt to force him toward a similar interrogation of the general rules. As the scene ends with Eli standing in the yard and Rachel in the house, little seems to be solved. This ambiguity is emblematic of the film as a whole; *Witness*, as a text, is more about raising issues than solving them.

Interestingly enough, though, the film does hint at the possibility of a more positive border crossing. At the end of the film, as Book prepares to leave both Rachel and the Amish community, Eli tells him to "be careful among the English." This farewell is the same one used in the beginning of the film when Rachel and Samuel begin their own journey. Eli's words suggest a difference between Book and the other "English," a difference that Eli fails to see in the rest of the film. He only expresses appreciation for Book when he sees that Book intends to leave. Yet the positive tone of Eli's farewell suggests that borders can be crossed constructively and that separatists and outsiders can interact positively. The timing of Eli's revelatory farewell suggests his discomfort with the presence of any outsider in the Amish community, even one who obviously means his people no harm. However, the fact that the film ends on this somewhat hopeful note demonstrates that connections between individuals are possible, even when those individuals come from vastly different and ultimately separated societies.

Therefore, *Witness*, like *The Rapture of Canaan*, represents religious separatism in terms both suspicious and hopeful. Weir represents sympathetically familial and community ties, their nonviolence, and their structure and social stability. At the same time, he questions their blanket rejection of modernity, their helplessness in the face of outside threats, their strategy of physical self-denial, and their communal refusal to evolve. Also, like in Reynolds's novel, *Witness* implies that a separatist community's many positive elements can be obscured if dogma is valued more than the growth and happiness of the individual. Both of these texts represent the potential efficacy of religious belief and moral rectitude, yet both also represent the impossibility of complete isolation from the dominant community. Reynolds and Weir construct religious separatist communities that are influenced by dominant, secular culture—sometimes to the benefit of the group and its members, sometimes to their detriment. Yet both texts also celebrate the characters' desires for integrity and the close ties that religious separatist communities can create between individual members. These similarities suggest that Weir and Reynolds both find religious separatism to be a fascinating, if flawed, iteration of American society.

All four works that I have considered thus far suggest consequences for the individual when a community's doctrine becomes sacrosanct; all four also suggest that individual, nonconformist thought is discouraged in separatist communities. Yet all four celebrate the attempt to create a new way of life in which marginalized peoples can thrive, whether that marginalization is *de facto* and based on identity, as in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*; whether it is a chosen consequence of ideological difference, as in *The Rapture of Canaan*; or whether it is both historical and ideological, as in *Witness*. Yet none of these texts reflect unquestioning sympathy with separatism. Just as Oates and Gray seem less sympathetic with violent acts, Reynolds and Weir seem less sympathetic with narrow and rigid dogmas, at least when communal adherence to

such dogma negatively affects the individual. These representations suggest that separatisms are necessary alternatives to mainstream American society; yet they also suggest that absolute separation from mainstream American society is likely impossible and often undesirable. The patriarchal domination in *The Rapture of Canaan* and the lack of sympathy with Rachel's and Book's feelings in *Witness* imply that religious separatist groups can oppress, as well as liberate. These complexities, of both the texts and the types of communities that they represent, demonstrate the increasing plurality of America, as well as the joys and tragedies experienced during the exploration of these new possibilities.

END NOTES

[1] In his book *Protestantism in America: A Narrative History*, Jerald C. Brauer refers to the Pilgrims as religious separatists (15, 19), as opposed to the Puritans, who "did not want to separate from the Anglican Church . . . The Puritan aim was not to cut themselves off but to change the Church by remaining in it" (21). He also details how early American Baptists swelled their ranks with separatists (55). Brauer later discusses the real-life religious separatist experiments at Oneida, New York (157) and Brook Farm (159). That both of these communities failed is likely not lost on artists constructing representations of religious communities.

[2] In her article "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion in American Pentecostalism," R. Marie Griffith points out that women's religious communities have historically existed in American Protestantism. Discussing accounts of "prayers divinely answered, sufferings alleviated, and lives restored" in "Denominational magazines and newspapers published in the first half of the twentieth century," Griffith says that "The practices around prayer described in such accounts . . . enabled formation of a Pentecostal community, composed predominantly of women, that transcended the ordinary bounds of geography and social location and imparted comfort, benevolence, and recognition to the suffering hopeful across the land" (187). Though neither the novel nor the film represents this kind of large-scale community of women, both do provide images of smaller women's groups within a religious separatist community. These groups' actions mostly demonstrate the female characters' acceptance of their separatist community's traditional gender roles and therefore do not seem comparable to the Foxfire gang or the women in *Set It Off*, at least in the terms that I am interested in here. The most likely exception is the relationship between Ninah and Nanna; these women help each other resist and subvert many of the community's questionable rules and paradigms. Griffith demonstrates how some Protestant women have historically taken a proactive role in their religion and in their communities. *Witness*'s Amish and, especially, Fire and Brimstone discourage women's voices, suggesting that these communities are represented as even more patriarchal than many historical denominations; this provides a point of comparison between these communities and those I previously examined, as well as a point of contrast between what the various characters value.

[3] Kraybill reveals that the Amish are descended from the Anabaptists, a persecuted sect, and that the issue causing fragmentation among the Anabaptists was a kind of separation—the shunning of excommunicated members in daily life (7-8). He also states, "The Amish are suspicious that beneath the glitter of modernity lurks a divisive force that in time might fragment and obliterate their close-knit community. The fear that modernization might pull their community apart is not an idle one. Indeed, some analysts argue that social separation has been a major consequence of industrialization" (19).

[4] In some ways, Fire and Brimstone is constructed to resemble early American religious communities. For instance, in the article "Religion and Ideological Change in the American Revolution," Ruth R. Bloch discusses the Calvinist communities of colonial New England: "By the 1760s both the conflicts of the Great Awakening and the anti-Catholic crusade of the French and Indian War had reinforced the inclination of American Calvinists to see themselves engaged in a cosmic battle with Satan." Bloch argues that political rhetoric of the time further encouraged this belief in a "connection between American resistance and the legions of God," as well as the conflation of British Roman Catholic domination and the Antichrist (49). In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Herman constructs a similar paradigm; according to him, Fire and Brimstone's separation from the world of sin offers the best chance for a sinner to reach Heaven, and everything related to the outside world is a potential contamination, including other religious denominations and other religious separatists.

[5] Reynolds's constructed community resembles the community founded by George Rapp and located in western Pennsylvania. Jerald C. Brauer describes the Rappites' "communityism" thusly: "All the people pooled their labor and resources to work for the common good. No longer was there private property or private welfare. In place of self-seeking and selfishness there was instituted the 'community of equality' . . . Furthermore, these strange Germans submitted absolutely to the control of Father Rapp. His sermons and advice controlled the group. Nobody could join except with his consent. All members confessed their faults to him. But under his leadership the group flourished and prospered" (154). With some possible exceptions in the arena of private property, this description applies to Herman's Fire and Brimstone. The Brownists—described by Marilyn J. Westerkamp in *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* as "radical, separatist Puritans who judged the established church irredeemably corrupt" (12)—are another possible historical model for Reynolds's community, given that Herman breaks off from an established church to form his own, stricter denomination.

[6] In his article "'Remember Me': The Wonders of an Invisible World—Sex, Patriarchy, and Paranoia in Early America," Boris Vejdovsky posits that Cotton Mather's text *Wonders of the Invisible World* "also illustrates how the desire for privileged access to knowledge—sexual and logocentric—is precisely what secures patriarchy's cultural dominance" (66). Vejdovsky is discussing Puritan societies in colonial America, but the similarities in philosophy make this idea applicable to *The Rapture of Canaan* as well. This idea of sex and language combining to create privilege perhaps illustrates one reason why Nanna's storytelling becomes so dangerous to the community. In one respect, Reynolds's novel illustrates Vedjoksky's idea that men have "the

urge and the desire to *know*" (67), which, in patriarchal societies such as Fire and Brimstone, would by corollary imply their urge and desire for women *not* to know.

[7] Ann-Janine Morey points out that, at least as far back as the days of Jonathan Edwards, "sexual passion may [have been] mistaken for a religious experience. This, Edwards notes, may be particularly a problem for impressionable 'young people of both sexes,' who have a tendency to 'go to such meetings chiefly for the sake of such an opportunity for company keeping'" (25). Though Edwards is discussing Revivals, the same description could apply to the passages wherein Ninah and James conflate sex and religious fervor. Moreover, Marilyn J. Westerkamp writes of Puritan women's conceiving of God's love in terms of a marriage (23, 33) and of the poet Anne Bradstreet writing in these terms (33), phenomena that seem similar to Ninah's belief that Christ manifests in James during sex. She also points out that this kind of idea, "with God as male and the believer as female, raised the possibility that women's female nature opened them more quickly to the workings of the Spirit," even though "the inexpressible joy and power to be found in Puritan mysticism was not always in line with submission to male husbands, ministers, and governors" (34). These issues seem similar to how Ninah, in the latter parts of the novel, can be revered as the mother of the new messiah without attaining a much greater position within the community than she had in the first place; it also supports my assertion that Fire and Brimstone is very much a patriarchy, and one with some basis in historical religious communities.

[8] Jodi Schorb claims that patriarchal ministers used even these death narratives to reinforce their own male power. Schorb writes that "Ministers tried to use [prevailing beliefs that women's bodies were sites of sin] to their rhetorical advantage, first arguing that the 'unclean' state of the woman's body functioned as a clear, knowable sign of an unregenerate spirit, and then using her example to prompt the audience to examine their own unregenerate behaviors. Yet the ministers could never fully control what the audience 'saw' during the ritual" (73). Though his using Nanna's life as text is not the same as using her death as a moral lesson, Herman nevertheless marks her as a site of sin, a fate that he conveniently does not share. Ninah's comments about his sermons reveal this very inconsistency, supporting Schorb's hypothesis that the minister cannot always control audience perception. Schorb also points out that confinement for adultery was common in Puritan societies, a situation represented in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Rapture of Canaan*; Ninah's punishments, like Hester's, result from both "sin" itself and from her refusal to acknowledge patriarchal religious authority.

[9] In her article "Losing Their Religion: Women, the State, and the Ascension of Secular Discourse, 1890-1930," Maureen Fitzgerald says that "For historians of women, the existence of the public/private distinction is made endlessly complicated by our understanding that the dichotomy has been constructed and used to limit women's collective participation in the public, however 'public' may be defined historically and across cultures" (282). The communities constructed in *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* represent perpetuations of this dichotomy. Both communities are patriarchal; the female characters perform traditional, domestic gender roles and have little say in public life. Fitzgerald later describes how Protestant women argued for greater inclusion in public spheres so that they could help counteract societal problems (284). Neither text I study here represents such an inclusion, or even an argument for a more active female community, although Ninah does overtly reject Fire and Brimstone's more dogmatic

philosophies; this indicates that these texts raise questions about these issues without providing any final answer.

[10] Westerkamp describes the Puritan conversion process as "experiential": "In the early stages, the struggling soul, mortified by his or her own sins, was terrified by the specter of eternal punishment that awaited. The believer would grow desperate in the knowledge that the penalty was deserved and become humiliated by the inability to follow God's law. During the middle, climactic, stages the saint acknowledged complete dependence upon God, opened the self up to divine grace, came to hope in Christ's atonement, and realized the assurance of salvation. In the final phase, the saint's thoughts and actions were sanctified, and, while ongoing doubts might have remained, divine grace continued to reassure" (19). Westerkamp could well be describing James's struggles with sin and salvation in *The Rapture of Canaan*, although, perhaps because of Herman's emphasizing damnation and the penalties for sin, James never reaches these last stages that even the strict Puritan paradigms allowed. James's struggle with abstract ideas like sin reveals the weaknesses in Herman's teachings and the problems inherent in emphasizing general dogma over individual spiritual growth.

[11] Her other major sin is the "blasphemous" claim to be the mother of Jesus's son, for which Herman sentences her to the dunking. Ninah can be read as a corrupted Mary figure. In her book *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction*, Barbara Hill Rigney points out that such literary characters are paradoxical because of "a basic confusion of purity and eroticism" (36). Rigney goes on to say that "the paradox of Mary lies in her concurrent virginity and motherhood, a state impossible to emulate and therefore punitive in its function as a model for women" (37). Reynolds constructs Ninah as a young woman confused because of her religion's euphemistic portrayal of sexuality and religion. Her "understanding of metaphors," of which she speaks early in the novel, seems incomplete until she is able to admit that Canaan is probably not a Messiah. When Herman interprets Canaan's fused hands as a sign of divinity, the confusion that she initially suffers is transferred to the community. Ironically, this community-wide adoption of her idea is what leads Ninah to realize its falsity; yet she takes advantage of her newfound power and independence to begin breaking with community tradition. Ninah is perhaps less "punitive in [her] function as a model for women," since her status as new Mary and her "immaculate conception" are constructed as products of confusion, not "purity" or "concurrent virginity and motherhood."

[12] This further supports the idea that Fire and Brimstone echoes, in many ways, the early American Puritan communities. Writing of the Pilgrims' social/religious paradigms, Jerald C. Brauer says that they "stood secure in their understanding of God's Word, and it was offered to all on their terms. Any who did not like the Pilgrim practices were free to depart" (20). The freedom to leave also implies that dissenters were not encouraged or allowed to stay, revealing that these early American religious communities were intolerant of differing philosophies. This description seems similar to how Reynolds characterizes Fire and Brimstone—a community that offers its "understanding" only to those predisposed to agree.

[13] Here, Reynolds constructs Herman's philosophy in Puritanical terms; John W. Murrin, when discussing how seventeenth-century Puritans dealt with individuals espousing non-Puritan doctrines, writes that, in Puritan New England, "[The Puritans] preferred to cope with dissent by

shunning the dissenters" (20). Though Ben does not suggest an alternate doctrine, he is exiled because he disagrees with an oppressive religious authority. Murrin further states that "Advocates of severe repression always spoke in the name of a larger religious unity, but serious efforts to implement their program ended by dividing the community, not uniting it" (20). Likewise, Ben's exile is only one of the events that illustrate Herman's dictatorial attitudes, which eventually divide Fire and Brimstone.

[14] Reading Canaan's birth, his hands, and the community's reactions to both in terms of Westerkamp's discussion of Puritan reactions to "monstrous births" and motherhood in general reveal one way that Reynolds's characters are constructed as different from historical models like the Puritans. Westerkamp writes that physical anomalies in babies were read as proof of the mother's sin (56); in contrast, Ninah's standing in the community actually increases, because Herman reads Canaan's hands as proof that he is the new messiah.

[15] Donald B. Kraybill points out that "although the Amish advocate separation from the world, they do not live in a social vacuum" (2). *Witness* represents the Amish as social in terms of their intermingling amongst themselves and in the dominant, "English" community, even though their society is separatist; according to studies like Kraybill's, this representation is accurate. Kraybill also explains that separation is a "cornerstone" of Amish beliefs (22), which suggests that separation is not merely "advocated" but insisted upon. Contact between the Amish and the "English" seems a necessary evil. Kraybill describes the Amish's relationship with the outside world as one in constant negotiation: "When the negotiable items are values, ideas, beliefs, and ways of thinking—cultural phenomena—we can call the process *cultural bargaining*. When patterns of social organization are on the negotiating table, the exchange involves *structural bargaining*" (23). He also argues that such negotiations are part of a larger process that has seen both sides make concessions for the other (24). These sorts of compromises are represented in all four of the texts that I have considered so far, which further suggests that full separation from the outside world is problematic, perhaps even impossible, for a community located within the borders of the dominant society.

[16] As I will discuss below, this representation of the Amish as technophobic is only partially accurate, according to Kraybill's study. Moreover, the film may also overemphasize Amish "plainness": "Within limits, creative self-expression flourishes—from quilting patterns to stickers on lunch pails, from gardening to hobbies, from farming to crafts" (34).

[17] Again, though, we should remember that the film also misrepresents or oversimplifies Amish separatism in some cases, possibly out of ignorance or for simple narrative convenience.

[18] Kraybill points out that the Amish use "the latest feed supplements, vitamins, fertilizers, insecticides, artificial insemination, and state-of-the-art veterinarian practices" in their dairy farms, while their homes might have "up-to-date bathroom facilities, a modern kitchen with lovely wood cabinets, and the latest gas refrigerator and stove." Yet they use no electricity or electronic appliances (18). The film glosses over these contradictions, perhaps in order to focus on the characters' interpersonal relationships and general social differences between the Amish and the "English." Such differences, after all, provide the conflicts in the narrative. This decision does, however, open the film to charges of using stereotypical representations of the Amish.

[19] Kraybill writes that "One of the striking aspects of Amish society is the absence of bureaucracy. The organizational structure is loose and fuzzy" (98). This suggests that Eli might, in actuality, have trouble defining who "they" are and what "they" would think and do. Eli's certainty that "they" would judge Rachel harshly seems to indicate that Weir and his screenwriters are overgeneralizing, perhaps even stereotyping, Amish beliefs and practices. However, scholarship like Kraybill's certainly indicates that the Amish would frown upon a relationship between a member and an outsider and that certain general penalties might be assumed as possibilities.

CHAPTER 3
THE SEPARATISM OF VIETNAM VETERANS: REALITY VS. REPRESENTATION, NARRATIVE VS. MEMORY, HISTORY VS. MYTH, AND THE RETURN TO 'THE WORLD'

> For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.
>   In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.--Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story"

> I feel a lot of distance . . . I feel far away.--Michael (Robert De Niro), *The Deer Hunter*

In the first of the above passages, the narrator of Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried* describes war as an "overwhelming ambiguity." I contend that—in terms of history, of art, and of O'Brien's own *oeuvre*—this description particularly applies to the Vietnam War. In this chapter, I will examine how *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* represent, explore, problematize, and attempt to resolve this ambiguity. To do so, I will examine how these texts represent both the dominant community and the imagined, segregated/separatist veterans' community; how such an imagined community is constructed as a necessary response to war experience and civilian attitudes; language's failure to convey veterans' experience, and how that failure helps create a sense of separation; the manners in which these texts blur the lines between fact and fiction, narrative and memory, history and myth in order to represent experiential borders and, paradoxically, to help bridge those experiential gaps; and how both works prove this re-integration is a flawed and/or incomplete project of which narrative is an important part. This complex, admittedly self-contradictory approach is meant to reflect prevailing attitudes about the

conflict and the art that has appeared in response; yet, by calling attention to the ambiguities and paradoxes of Vietnam War art, this chapter will hopefully help promote better understanding of these complexities.

In his book *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, Philip D. Beidler writes that "[Vietnam authors'] sense of profound experiential authority . . . allows them to make their largest meanings through the bold embrace of new strategies of imaginative invention" (2). My purpose in this chapter is not to claim that authors who were also soldiers are more capable of "authentic" writings about the experience of Vietnam. Instead, I want to explore "strategies of imaginative invention" and how they are used to represent both Vietnam experiences and perceptions of veterans' separatist natures. I posit that this kind of separatism in these texts, which I term perceived, derives from the combat experience of the returning veteran, as well as from the phenomenon of social displacement that often occurs between him and the civilian population. This displacement is rooted in mutual awareness that the veteran has experienced situations—i.e., combat, battle fatigue, first-hand knowledge of death—that the civilian has never (and likely will never) encountered.[1]

This experiential gulf between combat veteran and civilian is common and is often represented in art about war; see, for instance, works such as Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home." However, the gap is often represented as even more pronounced in the case of the Vietnam War. Its veterans returned to America carrying not only first-hand experience with death and human depravity but also the knowledge that many Americans disapproved of their war and of the soldiers themselves.[2] Accounts abound of Vietnam veterans returning home to empty airports and train stations—sometimes welcomed by families and friends, sometimes leaving the station as alone as they arrived. Historically, the sense of difference that combat

experience generally creates between combat veteran and civilian seemed to be widened during the Vietnam war—by the anti-war sentiment of the country; by media coverage that often stressed atrocities such as the My Lai massacre; by disillusionment with the military's decision to determine its success through kill ratios and attrition rates, rather than on the more traditional goal-oriented warfare involving the taking of capitols and victory in major battles. Accounts of the war and the American public's reactions to it reveal that the Vietnam conflict is one of our history's great ambiguities.

Supplementing historical accounts are artistic representations of the Vietnam experience. Such constructions include literature and film by and about Vietnam veterans. Literary accounts include memoir/fiction hybrids, such as Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*; traditional memoirs such as Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*;[3] journalistic memoirs, such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*;[4] and fiction such as O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, and Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*. Films about Vietnam include the sensationalistic, xenophobic, and stereotypical *Rambo* trilogy; Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now,*[5] a film about the effect of long-term combat on the human psyche; Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, about a Vietnam veteran's war against the societal ills that he sees every night; and Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, itself based on Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, both texts that represent the separate spheres of boot camp and combat.

Some of these accounts support my reading of soldiers and veterans as perceived separatists. In *A Rumor of War*, for instance, Caputo argues that the military as a whole is "clannish" and "cliquish" (32), in part because the men feel more loyalty to their squad or platoon than to the military as a whole, a more abstract entity. If individual units can harbor

elitist—and/or separatist—feelings within the military, how much deeper must be the feelings of separation from civilians? This experience-based gap could be variously labeled as segregation, separation, or alienation. The experience of combat often segregates veterans from mainstream communities. Veterans know that they are different from civilians; concurrently, the civilians sense this difference and may unconsciously avoid the veterans or treat them differently. Acknowledgement of experiential gaps emphasizes and exacerbates differences between civilian and veteran.

On the other hand, some veterans may feel alienated because of that self-same experiential distance. Given veterans' shared sense of distance from the civilian population, one natural reaction would be to seek out other veterans—in formal groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars or Vietnam Veterans against the War, in Veterans' Administration hospitals, or in informal gatherings—in order to create a space wherein their common experiential separation actually encourages, though hardly assures, bonding. This coming together in separate spaces solidifies, if only temporarily, a heretofore imagined community. Separatist ideals may therefore exist in some veterans and/or in the minds of civilians, who may well read veterans' needs for experiential sympathy as a politically separatist act. This latter reading might be termed perceived separatism, because it is written onto a group through the mainstream community's assumptions. Thus, even those veterans who do not join a formal organization might be considered separatists, even if they do not think of themselves in such terms. Their shared experiences—combat, isolation from their former communities—link them in an imagined community that may be segregated, separatist, or both.

So far, I have been discussing issues that apply to the experience of actual combat veterans; furthermore, I have been trying to argue that those experiences often seem ambiguous

and paradoxical. I do so to establish a way of reading *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter*. O'Brien and Cimino construct representations of America, the war, and veterans in order to accomplish any of several possible goals beyond the obvious desire to tell a good story. One might be to acknowledge some causes and effects of experiential distance by representing both pre-war and post-war periods, with the war itself as the middle ground that catalyzes change. Another, more proactive goal might be to help bridge the gap between veteran and civilian—or narrative and history, or separation and understanding, or all of the above—by creating a mass-marketed and popular representation of a heretofore unpopular and misunderstood conflict. In order to explore these possibilities, I have created the aforementioned term "perceived separatism." The term's inherent ambiguity is intentional, as it reflects the paradoxical and self-contradictory nature not only of the historical Vietnam War but also of the art that attempts to represent the conflict and our reactions to it.

The media, and particularly mass-marketed artifacts of high and/or popular culture such as literature and film, is a major cause and chronicle of experiential separatism. The Vietnam War film often represents in-country experience as a confusing jumble of sensory images in which most characters lose their basic sense of humanity before either finding redemption or dying. For instance, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, following the basic plot of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,[6] charts an assassin's journeying down a river in Vietnam toward Cambodia; his purpose is to assassinate a rogue Colonel who has "gone mad" and is slaughtering many of his followers. This film, itself a sort of dark inversion of *Huck Finn*, concentrates its imagery on the unknowable nature of the jungle, the uncertainty of the chain of command, and the various levels of depravity and madness that infest the men. However, this film is more a

richly symbolic examination of Kurtz and Willard's internal struggles with moral ambiguity than a study of veterans' relationships with mainstream America.

Films that do represent returning veterans' experiences tend to concentrate on dysfunction. Works such as *First Blood* and its sequels, *Rambo: First Blood II* and *Rambo III*, sensationalize the dysfunctional veteran and post-traumatic stress disorder; in these movies— more accurately, in the two sequels—Rambo is little more than a mindless killing machine, out for revenge against both the Viet Cong and the government that "would not allow" him to win the war. Other movies, such as the *Missing in Action* series, operate on and commercialize the possibility that American prisoners of war remain in Vietnam, suffering from torture and mental anguish. In these films, Braddock (Chuck Norris), another one-man killing machine, rescues emaciated but stalwart American prisoners. Movies like these can function as propaganda, suggesting that the American soldier is worth not just ten but a whole division of the enemy and that the war could have been won if only such soldiers were released unfettered. These films romanticize solitude and vengeance as particularly noble, hyper-masculine, and American; these films portray naked aggression as a cleansing, healing act, one that makes the veteran whole and that has the potential to heal similar scars on the American psyche.

These images of the veteran—mentally unstable, homeless, anarchic, and/or bitter—are obviously based on certain realities. However, the preponderance of these films might create a dangerous and reductive image in the national consciousness. These works tend to focus on veterans whose inability to cope with post-war life leads to their segregation from mainstream society (as in the *First Blood* films) or whose feelings of alienation are made manifest through an isolated, tortured existence. An example of this latter construction is Travis Bickle, the anti-hero of *Taxi Driver*. These characters are separated from mainstream society, yet in neither of these

films is the separation a communally separatist act; instead, both focus on the alienation of a single veteran. John Rambo longs for re-integration into society, while Bickle imagines himself as corrupt civilization's savior, an outsider whose actions will heal both his own wounds and that of society's. These films project complex images of returned veterans who long for a role in America in spite of their disenfranchisement and alienation. The characters' actions sometimes lead other personages in the films—and perhaps members of the audiences—to interpret the characters as consciously separatist. Cursory readings of films about Vietnam could therefore exacerbate the ambiguities in American consciousness.

Too-hasty readings of Vietnam War literature can have a similar effect. Writers of Vietnam War literature—Herr, Caputo, O'Brien himself—tend to discuss the war as inherently different from other conflicts in American history, much as I have been doing thus far. The Vietnam War was the United States' first experience with long-term jungle warfare (as distinguished from comparatively short campaigns in areas such as Guadalcanal) fought largely against guerrillas; this experience followed a long history of trench warfare and battles in cities, on beaches, and in the typically less-dense forests of America and Europe. Another much-discussed difference in the Vietnam War was that, for the first time, Americans could watch the war on television. Though the imagery that made its way into American homes was carefully controlled, a surprisingly large body of war correspondents, including Michael Herr, created a more comprehensive, if no less subjective, record of the conflict.

Yet, as critics such as Philip K. Jason have pointed out, atrocities like those committed in Vietnam were not uncommon to other wars. In his book *Acts and Shadows: The Vietnam War in American Literary Culture*, Jason, discussing Don Ringnalda's study of Vietnam War texts, writes that "Many, if not all, of the narratives, poems, and plays that he has profiled explode the

myth of uniqueness. If read with alertness and imagination, they portray *the horrific normality* of America's involvement in Vietnam" (27, emphasis mine). This perhaps overgeneralized assumption that the Vietnam veteran was more blood-thirsty than past soldiers—an assumption fed by the preponderance of first-hand accounts of such actions—prefigures the stereotype of the inherently dysfunctional and dangerous Vietnam veteran. Cornelius A. Cronin argues in "Line of Departure: The Atrocity in Vietnam War Literature" that "many [atrocities in Vietnam] were of the kind that occur in all wars"; however, he goes on to say that "What is different about the representations of personal experience in this war is not so much the nature and number of the atrocities but rather the self-awareness of those writing about them" (201). These sometimes contradictory critical stances on the nature of the Vietnam War are together another indication of this war's ambiguous place in our national consciousness.[7]

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien, whether intentionally or not, constructs a slippery, constantly shifting version of separatism. One way that he does so is by blurring the distinction between reality and fiction, the real and the represented, the writer's self and the narrator. The "Tim O'Brien" whom I refer to as appearing in the novel is a fictional character, based on but obviously distinct from O'Brien the writer. In his article "Tim O'Brien and the Art of the True War Story: 'Night March' and 'Speaking of Courage,'" John H. Timmerman points out that "O'Brien [the author] aims for nothing less than resolving this dialectic [of the war story] into an integrated whole, often by means of a metafictional discourse in which his characters and narrators engage in the dialectic themselves" (101). This "metafictional discourse" is the text itself—"discourse" implying "argument." This book argues with itself, which problematizes the reader's attempt to find meaning, to understand, to stabilize.

Another point that must be made before continuing is that *The Things They Carried* is variously referred to as a novel and as a "collection" of thematically related but distinct stories. For the sake of simplicity, I will apply the term "sections," an expression that other critics have used when writing about this book. This label suggests that each portion of the text is complete in and of itself, while avoiding clear categorizations of the book as a novel or collection. One of my core arguments is that *The Things They Carried*, as well as the cultural and historical forces that both helped shape and necessitated the book, is paradoxical and ambiguous. Therefore, it seems fitting to avoid easy categorizations, even if they would simplify my own terminology.

The fictional O'Brien discusses his hometown of Worthington, Minnesota in the section "On the Rainy River." O'Brien describes Worthington as a small town of traditional values—patriotism, bravery, duty. This section establishes the centrality of and then questions these values and their possible meanings. O'Brien the narrator mentions "Main Street," a "courthouse," and "the Ben Franklin store," staples of small town Americana (47); these typically American points of reference locate O'Brien's town in the nation's collective experience. O'Brien further describes this setting as "conservative," "a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised" (48). This description of Worthington is perhaps a comforting image, especially in a novel about an uncertain and morally ambiguous conflict like the Vietnam War. O'Brien differs philosophically from other townspeople; he admits that he had spoken out in opposition to the war, while also confessing that his early opposition was "Nothing radical, no hothead stuff, just ringing a few doorbells for Gene McCarthy, composing a few tedious, uninspired editorials for the campus newspaper . . . it was almost entirely an intellectual

activity" (44-45). His anti-war stance exemplifies his own early sense of difference; the arrival of his draft notice immediately separates him in more immediate ways.

As the notice arrives "on June 17, 1968," O'Brien's intellectual contempt for the war quickly gives way to a more visceral reaction: "I remember a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking, just a silent howl . . . If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age hawk? Or some dumb jingo in his hard hat and Bomb Hanoi button, or one of LBJ's pretty daughters, or Westmoreland's whole handsome family" (45). O'Brien's intellectual opposition gives way to physical revulsion and a harsh condemnation of his hometown's—and America's—ideas about war and heroism. Tradition and conservatism has become "back-to-the-stone-age" jingoism. This sense of alienation from both the tradition and the conservatism of small-town America is also reflected in O'Brien's activities of that summer, two of which dominate his time. One is working in a meat-packing plant, washing blood clots from the necks of dead pigs that hang on assembly-line hooks, perhaps a metaphor for the "manufactured" nature of the war and General Westmoreland's policy of attrition and its emphasis on body counts. The second is driving "aimlessly around town, feeling sorry for myself, thinking about the war and the pig factory and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter" (O'Brien 47). This character's bloody, repellent job;[8] the images of the dead pigs, their blood raining down in a constant "red mist" (O'Brien 46); and his hopeless wandering mark him as different from the other townspeople, who engage in everyday activities like drinking coffee in the Café or eating breakfast at the kitchen table.

These images of a conservative and traditional dominant community conflict with post-war sections of this book, and with other Vietnam War texts, that represent America's comparatively chilly reception of returning Vietnam veterans. In "On the Rainy River," O'Brien

is a conflicted character who longs to prove his courage even though he is afraid of dying, especially in a war he hates. This character is perhaps meant to represent the bifurcated American response to Vietnam: the traditional support of military action juxtaposed with serious uncertainty regarding the motivations for the War and both sides' reported human rights violations. O'Brien feels alienated from his hometown when the war becomes an immediate reality for him, not just a topic for intellectual, moral, and/or patriotic rhetoric.

Of all the characters who appear in the section, O'Brien is the only future soldier; the character's separation is therefore closer to alienation than separatism, which connotes a collective movement or process. Nevertheless, this section is useful for describing *The Things They Carried*'s definition of dominance and the imagined community of soldiers, or, in this case, future soldiers. This character's pre-war alienation foreshadows the perceived separatism that the text represents as one common characteristic of Vietnam veterans. Nowhere is this alienation clearer than the long passage in which O'Brien fishes on the Rainy River itself, the border between Minnesota and Canada. As he contemplates his future, knowing that he could go back to America and the war or to Canada and an uncertain future, O'Brien has a vision of America and his own heroic illusions, his parents and representative townspeople, historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, contemporary politicians, figures from American art such as Huck Finn, and characters from popular culture. The river physically separates O'Brien from this parade of American imagery, yet the persuasive power of those images and his own fear of censure persuade him to abandon his principles.[9] This decision leads to the section's final line, one that illustrates the text's ambiguous representation of the Vietnam War and O'Brien the character's separation from traditional values: "I was a coward. I went to the war" (63).

As suggested above, the separatist community in this text is constructed as an imagined community of similarly-alienated people. In some Vietnam War texts, this alienation elicits a politicized response; the characters (or, in the cases of memoirs, representations of real people) often form communities or groups in which their status as veterans is empowering and inclusive. In *The Things They Carried*, such groups are not represented, but the experiences of the various soldiers in the pre-war sections suggests a common sense of alienation and a shared hope for bridging the gap between veteran and civilian population. This ambiguity helps blur the lines between separatism and alienation as surely as the Vietnam experience has blurred other experiential, political, and artistic borders.

To establish the nature of this imagined community, I will examine the post-war sections of the book, in order to demonstrate how the characters share not a common geography but a similar sense of distance. One parallel that O'Brien the author constructs in the post-war lives of the characters is their inability to communicate their experiences through language. In the section entitled "Speaking of Courage," the character Norman Bowker returns to his hometown after his tour of duty. The section begins with the following line: "The war was over and there was no place in particular to go" (O'Brien 157). Bowker's aimless wandering, represented in his circling of the town lake in his father's car, echoes the title section's descriptions of how the soldiers march from village to village, never sure of what they are looking for or what they are supposed to do. Bowker wanders the perimeter of the lake because he is used to movement, even if there is no real purpose in moving. John H. Timmerman, in fact, compares Bowker (as well as *Going after Cacciato*'s main character, Paul Berlin) with "men on plastic ponies at the carousel," who "hang suspended, bouncing up and down between reality and fantasy" (102). At the end of the section, Bowker has completed twelve circuits around the lake, perhaps reflecting his

twelve-month tour of duty in Vietnam; still, he has no place to go. In contrast, every person he

passes seems to have a place in the civilian world.[10]

Bowker's need to move, to seek his place in "the world" or run from the knowledge that

he has no place, reflects similar post-war journeys of the O'Brien character. The section called

"Field Trip" relates his return to Vietnam and, specifically, to the shit field in which his friend

Kiowa is killed during a particularly horrific night battle. Bowker's journey has no specified

starting point and no distinctive terminus; O'Brien's is linear, from the America of his present to

the Vietnam of his past. Yet both journeys reflect a need to reconcile movement with meaning, a

need that Bowker fails to satisfy. In the end, he can only reflect on his failure to save Kiowa and

imagine a conversation with his father that, we assume, never takes place. Bowker finally

immerses himself in the water of the lake "without undressing . . . He put his head under. He

opened his lips, very slightly, for the taste, then he stood up and folded his arms and watched the

fireworks [of the July 4th celebration]. For a small town, he decided, it was a pretty good show"

(O'Brien 173). Bowker's symbolic baptism in the town lake on the 4th of July—an act that

figuratively ties him to Ron Kovic, who, according to his memoir, actually was born on the 4th of

July—represents his desire to change, to leave his past behind and move on. However, as this

baptism takes place at the end of the section, no textual evidence demonstrates whether or not his

attempt succeeds. In fact, according to "Notes," Bowker hangs himself three years after O'Brien

writes "Speaking of Courage," having first expressed his dissatisfaction with that text's retelling

of the events.

Norman Bowker represents the alienated veteran who cannot adjust to civilian life.[11] He

longs for O'Brien the character—who, like our author, is a writer—to tell the tale of how he

failed to rescue Kiowa from the shit field because, as "Speaking of Courage" reveals, he cannot

find an audience for his war stories in his own hometown. He tells O'Brien that "I'd write it myself but I can't ever find any words . . . You were there—you can tell it" (O'Brien 179). His belief that language can indeed convey, and therefore help absolve him of, his experience is clear; yet his reaction to "Speaking of Courage" is "short and somewhat bitter," as he only says, "It's not terrible . . . but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?" (O'Brien 181). Furthermore, Bowker leaves "no suicide note, no message of any kind" (O'Brien 181). Perhaps this is because "Speaking of Courage" functions as a kind of suicide note, one that reveals his pain, dislocation, and silence.

In "Notes," the O'Brien character says that "Now, a decade after his death, I'm hoping that 'Speaking of Courage' makes good on Norman Bowker's silence" (181). Yet, in "Field Trip," O'Brien experiences a similar failure to communicate with his civilian daughter. This failure suggests that veterans' silence may be a characteristic of their experiential difference and, therefore, of their imagined community. However, a previous section, "In the Field," tells the story of the day after Kiowa's death. If this book is read as either a novel or a collection of related tales, "Field Trip" absolves Bowker for Kiowa's death by suggesting that the entire battle was caused by the thoughtless actions of a nameless soldier, perhaps Tim O'Brien. Read in this (metatextual?) light, "Field Trip" follows the confessional "In the Field" and completes O'Brien's penitential journey. Whereas Bowker has only the local lake, thousands of miles removed from the Vietnamese river that was the site of his alleged failure, O'Brien returns to the actual spot where Kiowa dies. The O'Brien character says that "The place was at peace . . . Things were quiet" (207). Whether we consider his journey to be linear, in that he moves from his life in America toward a definite terminus in Vietnam, or as circular as Bowker's because the

terminus is the same point from which his guilt originated,[12] O'Brien the character moves toward

meaning, resolution, and absolution.

This absolution is the main difference between the two veterans represented in "Speaking

of Courage" and "Field Trip." Bowker is alone, stuck in the world, baptizing himself in a

peaceful lake. O'Brien, traveling with two companions and witnessed by others, also

symbolically enters water: "I eased myself down, squatting at first, then sitting. There was again

that sense of recognition . . . Right here, I thought" (212). O'Brien physically and emotionally

reconnects with his past; yet he also does so in order to bury the memory of Kiowa and the

attendant guilt that has haunted him for years. He says that "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under

with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out" (O'Brien 212). He

achieves absolution not only by immersion in the waters of his past but also by relinquishing his

last remaining physical tie to Kiowa, the moccasins that Kiowa used in Vietnam and that

O'Brien has apparently kept ever since. When he lets go of the moccasins, he also lets go of his

guilt. Norman Bowker does not have this option. Like O'Brien, he values motion; like O'Brien,

one of the things he carries is guilt and the knowledge that his experience separates him from the

civilian world. But Bowker cannot confront his past directly, and O'Brien's failure to write the

right kind of story symbolizes for Bowker his own alienation from civilians and even the

imagined community of veterans, as well as language's failure to convey his experience to either

group.

This lingual failure is represented several times in "Speaking of Courage" and is related

to the experiential gulf between combat veteran and civilian. Bowker cannot connect with, or

even speak to, the people he sees. In the section called "Spin," Bowker says to O'Brien that "If I

could have one wish, anything, I'd wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it's okay if I

don't win any medals. That's all my old man talks about, nothing else. How he can't wait to see my goddamn medals" (39). Bowker's father has reduced the experience of war to a blind valuation of traditional heroism. Read in this context, "Speaking of Courage" is even more tragic because Bowker now has another wish—to explain to his father that he failed to win the Silver Star.

> There was nothing to say.
> He could not talk about it and never would. The evening was smooth and warm. If it had been possible, which it wasn't, he would have explained how his friend Kiowa slipped away that night beneath the dark swampy field. He was folded in with the war; he was part of the waste.
> . . .
> [Bowker] wished he could have explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. (O'Brien 172)

This passage reveals Bowker's surety that his father could never understand his story. Another passage, in which Bowker almost tells his story to a faceless voice on a fast-food restaurant's drive-through speaker, reveals his desire to tell someone, anyone. But the experiential and lingual gulfs separate Bowker from his community and his family. These gulfs suggest that experiential difference and the failure of language to convey meaning can alienate the individual veteran.

O'Brien's similar failure to convey his experience through language in "Field Trip" suggests, however, that individual alienation is a defining element in the veterans' imagined separatist community. In this section, O'Brien's daughter Kathleen fails to comprehend her father's symbolic acts or the significance of the geographical location. As O'Brien says, "For the most part she'd held up well . . . At the same time, however, she'd seemed a bit puzzled. The war was as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs" (208). Though her age contributes to her

misunderstanding, O'Brien the character's failure to convey his actions' meaning widens the gap.

> Kathleen sighed. "Well, I don't get it. I mean, how come you were even here in the first place?"
> "I don't know," I said. "Because I had to be."
> "But *why?*"
> I tried to find something to tell her, but finally I shrugged and said, "It's a mystery, I guess. I don't know." (O'Brien 209)

Whether O'Brien truly does not know or simply cannot find the words to tell her is unclear. But in any case, he and Bowker are united in an imagined community wherein their experience alienates them from civilians and language fails to bridge their experiential gulf. O'Brien manages to go further than Bowker; he does, at least, attempt to tell the story. Kathleen reduces his trip (and, by extension, O'Brien the author's entire body of work) to "some dumb thing [that] happens a long time ago and you can't ever forget it," which is, in her opinion, "weird" (O'Brien 209). But if verbal language fails to convey experience, what is left for the veteran, the writer, the teller of the war tale? Norman Bowker, in "Notes," implies that written language—and, more specifically, narrative—may be the answer. Below, I shall discuss further the role of language in both the separation of the veterans' imagined community and the potential desegregation of these communities. For now, I want to establish comparisons between this imagined community of veterans in *The Things They Carried* and the communities studied in previous chapters, as well as how this particular representation is predicated on shared combat experience, a sense of dislocation, and how that dislocation comes to be defined as perceived separatism.

First, the imagined community of veterans in *The Things They Carried* is comparable to the lesbian feminist communities of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* in several ways. The differences in these representations are, for the most part, obvious. The separatist characters in Joyce Carol

Oates's and F. Gary Gray's works are women; the veterans of *The Things They Carried* are exclusively men, with the exception of Mary Anne, the woman in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," who enters the war as a civilian and becomes part of the landscape of Vietnam. Further, Oates's and Gray's texts explore the nature of sexual, as well as gendered, separation; *The Things They Carried* does not, though any same-sex group sharing an intimate experience is to some degree homoerotic. What is more important for this study is that any such homoeroticism in O'Brien's novel is not the focus of the characters' separatist identities.[13] Nevertheless, O'Brien's veterans echo Oates' and Gray's lesbian feminists in several ways. For instance, both the women of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* and the men of *The Things They Carried* form geographical or imagined communities in response to the mainstream society's segregationist acts. As established in chapter one, Oates's and Gray's lesbian separatist characters are segregated, marginalized, and silenced. Similarly, O'Brien's veterans, though sometimes part of the dominant community in the pre-war sections, are marked as different and marginal once the war becomes part of their identity, through service or even simply receiving a draft notice, as seen in "On the Rainy River."

These texts are also similar in terms of how the artists choose to have their segregated characters respond to this marginalization. Oates's and Gray's characters form separatist groups based on their marginalized identities and then use their collective strengths to strike back at their oppressors. O'Brien's characters are marginalized because of their experiential difference and their participation in an unpopular war; their response to their shared sense of alienation prompts them to seek each other out. The veterans of *The Things They Carried* lack connection to post-war society: Norman Bowker, his lakeside wanderings, and his imaginary conversations with his silent father; Jimmy Cross and his unrequited love; O'Brien the narrator, who cannot

explain to his daughter the nature of the Vietnam War and whose journey to the site of his greatest failure is the only means of exorcising the ghosts of the past. These images of alienated veterans' common desires to have their stories told signify their attempt to retake agency through rejecting the failure of language to convey their experiences. In other words, when these characters embrace their identities as alienated soldiers—which they can only seem to do when occupying the same geographical or a similar narrative space—they use their experiential marginalization, the core of their perceived separatism, to reject their alienation from the dominant community and from each other.

The retelling of these stories parallels how Oates's and Gray's characters embrace their lesbian feminist identities in order to find a sense of place and autonomy. O'Brien the author uses the act of narration, the retelling of the same stories in several different ways and from several points of view, as a means of immersing himself and his audience in the community of the combat veteran as perceived separatist. In "Good Form," O'Brien the character says, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203). His retelling similar stories from different points of view and this desire for an understanding, empathetic audience suggest that this character, whether intentionally or not, is plunging himself in the narrative of his past not to chronicle it as it happened but to illustrate all the ways that it might have happened or appeared to different combat veterans who were there. Simultaneously, because *The Things They Carried* as a whole continually circles back on itself, the audience too is plunged and re-plunged into the world of Alpha Company and its veterans. O'Brien the narrator claims that each section is both fact and fiction; in fact, he goes so far as to say that each story is fact because it exists even *as* fiction. The audience therefore participates in the triumphs and tragedies of Alpha Company through the act of reading; in this way, the

experience of the Vietnam War is shared. Thus O'Brien (this time referring to writer and to

narrator/character) both claims othered status as combat veteran and paradoxically blurs the

borders between mainstream and separatist by making the audience "veterans" of the text, a

reality that is as real in his philosophy as the actual war.

The community of veterans as represented in *The Things They Carried* is also similar in

some senses to the religious communities represented in the texts that I examine in chapter two.

As argued above, joining the military or being drafted creates a sense of difference between these

characters and the civilian community. Similarly, Weir's Amish characters and Reynolds's Fire

and Brimstoners' religious beliefs and practices mark them as philosophically separatist. Yet the

practical application of those philosophies—their lifestyles that catalyze experiential

difference—truly marginalize them. These separations—both actual and perceived—based on

practical experience and religious belief reflect the perceived separatism of the combat veterans

in *The Things They Carried*. The veterans' membership in the military community separates

them from the moment that they receive their draft notices; their participation in combat—and

specifically the morally questionable, attrition-centered combat of Vietnam—creates experiential

difference, much like what happens when the religious communities' members apply their

separatist philosophies to their everyday lives. These characters' separatisms are thus both

philosophical and experiential. In a sense, this idea applies to all the characters that I have

studied herein; the experience of being separatist contributes to their insularities.

More specifically, *The Things They Carried* represents a pre-existing tradition separate

from mainstream America and a specific version of this tradition's general experiences. The

Amish community in *Witness* is not constructed as distinct in philosophy or experience from any

other Amish community, real or imagined; the veterans of Alpha Company, however, define

themselves generally as soldiers and specifically through particular events—Ted Lavender's death while returning from urinating, Curt Lemon's grisly demise, the loss of Kiowa in the shit field, the particular stories that they tell each other. Therefore, this sub-group—operating within a larger, pre-existing separate tradition—better compares to Sheri Reynolds's small Protestant/Baptist community, which also strengthens its bonds through storytelling and shared experiences. Reynolds's community, like Weir's Amish, signify difference through their philosophy, their lifestyle, and their modes of dress; but unlike the Amish of *Witness*, the Fire and Brimstone community is distinguished from other Protestant communities by their strict, particular dogma and geographical separation. Alpha Company in *The Things They Carried* is also constructed as a distinct part of a greater tradition. Although they have no particular geography to help define their community, their shared experiences bind them to each other as effectively as the religious characters' beliefs.

Many general similarities therefore exist between Tim O'Brien's imagined community in *The Things They Carried* and the representations of communities studied in previous chapters. Yet, as might be surmised from much of the above discussion, one of the ways that *The Things They Carried* can be distinguished from these other works is in its use of paradox. I shall use the rest of my discussion of this novel to discuss the particular tropes through which O'Brien—and again, here I am referring both to the actual author and to the narrator who bears his name— explores different paradoxes: the role of language in separatist demarcation and how storytelling is used to explore and explode that division. In *The Things They Carried*, language often connotes separation. One way that language functions in this manner is through the characters' use of profanity and vulgarity. Liberal use of profanity helps distinguish the veteran characters from civilians and in effect constitutes one characteristic of the combat veteran. This language

reminds us that the veteran community is predominantly male because many of the vulgarities reflect male sexism. This sexist verbiage also, by correlation, pejoratively marks both the enemy and civilian populations as female. In this respect, the veteran community of *The Things They Carried* inverts how the lesbian feminist communities of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* use language as a tool of empowerment; in the military and in Alpha Company, maleness is most valuable, and male sexist language symbolizes that power.

"How to Tell a True War Story" reinforces the notion of a separatist language. In terms of profanity and vulgarity, this section illustrates how such language can help separate veteran and civilian. After Curt Lemon is killed by a booby trap, Bob "Rat" Kiley writes a letter home to Lemon's sister, in which he details the actions that made Lemon unique in Kiley's experience. Kiley writes that, on one Halloween night, "the dude paints up his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask . . . and goes trick-or-treating [in a Vietnamese village. He was] almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16" (O'Brien 76). Kiley's in country experience desensitizes him to the disturbing nature of Lemon's jaunt and the possibility that Lemon's civilian sister might not appreciate these images.

Furthermore, Kiley's verbal response to her silence illustrates the separation of soldier and civilian and of male and female. Kiley says, "Jesus Christ, man, I write this beautiful fuckin' letter . . . and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back" (O'Brien 77). Kiley sees his inappropriate letter as "beautiful" because of the shift in his perception that the Vietnam War has catalyzed. More disturbing is his use of the term "cooze" to describe his dead friend's sister, a vulgarity upon which our narrator comments: "Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and

says *cooze*, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back" (O'Brien 76-77, original emphasis). In his grief, an emotion that his letter has perhaps failed to communicate to Lemon's sister, Kiley projects his pain onto the girl by linguistically dehumanizing her. His perceptions changed because of his war experience, Kiley does not consider that his idea of "beautiful" may be different from that of civilians who have not shared those experiences. As Mark A. Heberle has pointed out in his book *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, "We can perfectly understand and support her silence, but to the doubly spurned lover her failure to answer is an act of betrayal that leaves his own wound unhealed" (191). Kiley expresses his trauma through vulgarity, which underscores the pain of his loss, his rage at Lemon's sister's silence, and his realization that he cannot use language to overcome their differences. For O'Brien, this lingual vulgarity reflects experiential truth: "You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth . . . Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" (77). The implication is that they did not talk dirty, or at least not this dirty, at home and before the war. Thus the language of war can symbolize or even increase the space between veteran and civilian, even when they share emotional pain and trauma.[14]

Many critics have also pointed out how the often-sexist language of the military, and thus of Vietnam veterans, feminizes the enemy. Philip K. Jason, for instance, writes that "In the crude semantic equations of the battlefield, killing gooks is the same as fucking them—and being a man in the military environment means being a killing and fucking machine. The metaphor of fucking the enemy, of course, turns the enemy into women, and vice versa. Thus, in a sense, all enemies are surrogate women" (30). This passage not only suggests a very problematic paradigm in military thought but also marks the veteran community as, at least until very recently,

exclusively male and phallogocentric. In his book *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*, Milton J. Bates has also pointed to this military tendency: "Until he completes basic training . . . [the recruit] is called a 'girl,' a 'lady,' a 'pussy' . . . at least unconsciously, they understand that the 'woman' they must reject is within them" (141). This rejection of internal femininity through language is another marker of the military community's pervasively masculine character.[15] I contend, though, that language is also a marker of this community's separation from civilian society. Aggressive, sexist language becomes a defining characteristic through which members of the community can recognize each other and bond; furthermore, the military's overt sanctioning of sexism and violence is one way that it differs significantly from the civilian community.

In her book *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*, Katherine Kinney also examines the military's use of sexist, aggressive language. Focusing specifically on sexist obscenities, she argues that "The suppression of the soldier's characteristic obscenity is a traditional feature of demobilization, a way of marking a 'return' to prewar social mores" (114). She also suggests that obscenity marks a soldier's separation from "the world," while their retreat from obscenity exemplifies their reassimilation into the dominant, mainstream community. In her article "'She's a Pretty Woman . . . for a Gook': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," Jacqueline E. Lawson goes even further. She argues that

> A culture that has given us Rambo, the A-Team, Terminator, RoboCop, and slasher films; a culture in which adult bookstores, video porn shops, and X-rated cinemas are as ubiquitous as the local 7-Eleven; a culture that regards sex and violence as entertainment, aggressiveness as a virtue, and women as objects to be leered at, peered at, commercialized, and commodified should not be surprised when its soldiers go off to war and commit atrocities against women. (18)

She further points out that "It is telling that the epithets used to terrify new recruits headed for Vietnam were not 'dink,' 'slope,' and 'gook' but 'pussies,' 'ladies,' and 'faggots'" (22). Such

lingual strategies reinforce the conception of the military as a predominantly male and sexist community, even during the Vietnam War, when women were making historical strides toward equality. This historical hesitancy, or outright failure, to acknowledge societal changes occurring in mainstream America further supports my conception of the military as a separate, insular community.

Another element of the military's separatist language is the use of jargon. In *The Things They Carried*, the most prolific appearance of military jargon occurs in the title section, "The Things They Carried." O'Brien uses military terminology that is comparatively common—"R&R" for rest and relaxation (4), "SOP" for standard operating procedure (5), "C Rations" for military-issued food (4). These familiar yet exotic-sounding lingual devices demonstrate that this narrative and its primary voice are part of the military experience. Some less familiar terms, which are more particular to the Vietnam War, are explained so that civilian readers can understand; for instance, "Toe Poppers" and "Bouncing Bettys" are mentioned in this section on page 11 and are defined elsewhere in the text, while the meaning of "to hump" is both mentioned and explained on page 5. Still other terms are mentioned but left unexplained, a narrative strategy that calls particular attention to the difference between the combat veteran and much of the book's audience—"RTO" (radio telephone operator, first mentioned on page 4), for instance, as well as the names of various weapons, including "M-14s and CAR-15s and Swedish Ks and grease guns and captured AK-47s and Chi-Coms and RPGs" (O'Brien 8).

Explaining only some of these terms and acronyms reinforces the difference between civilian and veteran. The reader who has never experienced the military life, much less combat, will likely feel a mixture of enlightenment and confusion, depending on how much knowledge the narrator decides to impart; furthermore, because of the audience's slippery understanding of

the characters' basic language, any recognizable snippet—"R&R" or "C rations"—imparts a feeling of belonging, a triumph over the ambiguous meaning of the rest of the language. By constructing this section, as well as other parts of the overall text, in such ingeniously alternating patterns of understanding and confusion, O'Brien the author illustrates linguistic separation, while paradoxically and subversively attempting to lessen that separation by revealing the characters' language and emotions.

Other linguistic devices that separate civilian and veteran (as well as audience and experiential text) include the use of military slang, some of which seems particular to the Vietnam War. In this same opening section, O'Brien the narrator discusses military euphemism, particularly as it applies to death:

> They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed*, *lit up*, *zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. (19-20, original emphasis)

These "memorized lines" exemplify combat veterans' experiential difference. Civilians are much less likely to have crafted a repertoire of witty retorts especially for those occasions when someone is unexpectedly and violently killed. The lines also demonstrate how language itself can actually generate difference. Anyone can die, even from being shot while returning from urinating, as Ted Lavender is; but the "stage presence" of the veteran marks him as different from the audience, who may be shocked by the characters' indifference until the narrator explains for us the nature of death in combat.

The soldier characters also use other types of slang. Planes and helicopters that lift soldiers out of the jungle are "birds," an image that connotes freedom as well as flight. And, of course, the Viet Cong are not human, not the enemy, seldom even the Viet Cong. Instead, they

are "dinks," "slopes," "Charlie." As our narrator immerses us in his experience and the language thereof, we are reminded of the experiential gulf separating civilians from combat veterans, a gulf not fully explainable simply by reminding ourselves that *The Things They Carried* is a work of fiction and its characters constructed representations. However, that very act of immersion through narrative paradoxically acts as a possible bridge over the experiential gulf.

Representing these kinds of characters and lingual devices in a mass-marketed artifact of high and/or popular culture has the potential to convey understanding through textual experience. While neither O'Brien nor any other author can guarantee a connection to an audience, the stated intention of the author's primary narrative voice—"I want you to feel what I felt"—reveals an intention to create not just a text with variant meanings but a kind of experiential universality. Much of the language of the combat veteran in *The Things They Carried* separates these characters from mainstream civilians; their actions can also be read as separatist. But O'Brien's narrative strategy—explaining some terms while leaving others mysterious, documenting problematic experiences in a wide variety of character types—suggests that *The Things They Carried* is itself a paradoxical text. O'Brien the author constructs his characters' actions as unfamiliar to civilians; yet reading the book makes those actions knowable, those characters less separate, through the very fact of their representation.

To paraphrase one of the ideas in the first epigraph quoted above, the only certainty about these versions of separatism and alienation is an overwhelming ambiguity. My use of the term "perceived separatism" calls attention to how the text plays with various definitions of societal separation. Nowhere in the book can the reader find a politically separatist group; actual organizations such as the Vietnam Veterans against the War or the Veterans of Foreign Wars are not represented. This is perhaps because the novel focuses on the experiences of a small group of

veterans—collectively in the in-country sections, individually in most of the sections set in "the world"—and their internal reactions to their particular experiences, rather than their memberships in or decisions to eschew such external, political factions. Yet in highlighting the alienation of these veterans as a group, O'Brien the author has, whether intentionally or not, suggested a reason for the dominant society's often-incorrect view of veterans as separatist and maladjusted—segregation perpetuated by society itself. O'Brien the author has also suggested one method for bridging those gaps—the creation of narrative texts that say, in fictional terms, what veterans cannot.

Representing the experiences of veterans reminds civilian readers that they have not experienced either the military lifestyle or the particular traumas of combat. Further, for those too old for military service, such representations may highlight elements of existence that *will never* be experienced, except through representation. Such reminders may serve to relieve some members of the readership, who will be grateful for the fact that combat is confined to the page or movie screen. For other readers, especially those taken with the more romantic notions of military service perpetuated by recruiting ads and films such as *The Green Berets* or *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, such representations may evoke feelings of envy or even shame. Especially for this latter set of theoretical readers, texts by and about combat veterans may highlight the author's and/or characters' membership in an exclusive group; whether that author and/or those characters themselves read military service as a kind of elitist separatism from lowly civilians may be beside the point. Ads for the Marines, urging the viewer to join "The Few, The Proud," highlight this elitist, separatist notion, as do commercials for the army that urge the viewer to "Be All You Can Be"; the implication here is that those who do not join are *not* being all they can be. At least three purposes for military fiction and representations of combat veterans become clear: to

exacerbate these myths and images (as in *The Green Berets*), to repudiate them (a possible aim of Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* and of Oliver Stone in the film of the same name, as well as in *Platoon*), or to show how these contrasting readings of the military and combat veterans often collide to produce ambiguous, elusive meaning. I posit here that *The Things They Carried* falls into this latter category.

"On the Rainy River," as discussed above, highlights the difference between O'Brien the character's intellectual anti-war stance and his emotions after receiving his draft notice. The section also emphasizes the segregationist stance of his community once word of his induction becomes widespread. The community's attitude leads to his feelings of alienation as a solitary future soldier in a civilian community. O'Brien describes his reaction to receiving his induction notice in terms of being alienated or segregated. He drives directionless through his hometown, much as Norman Bowker does in "Speaking of Courage." He considers all the ways that he is different from his townspeople, not in terms of being one of "the few" or "the proud" but simply as being too smart and moral to participate in the war. This stance is no less elitist than that which the military uses to attract recruits.

In this section, the narrator's opening remarks, which illustrate the speaker's disconnection from his potential audience, are of particular interest to my study.

> This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession . . . by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. Still, it's a hard story to tell. (O'Brien 43)

Because the text of "On the Rainy River" discusses at least two kinds of shame—that of being afraid to fight, and that of fighting only to avoid societal censure—the section explodes the reader's initial expectations. Furthermore, because O'Brien discusses his townspeople's blind

acceptance of military honor as problematic, he creates at least two effects. First, he demonstrates how even civilians can have elitist notions of military life; from this idea, one could easily assume that the soldiers themselves would feel similar elitist pride in their separate community membership. The second, and perhaps oppositional, effect is that civilian belief in this perceived separatism may be inaccurate; the O'Brien character certainly feels no pride in his coming induction and sees little that is honorable in the Vietnam conflict. The narrative silence to which the above passage refers only exacerbates this rift in soldier/community understanding; O'Brien lists several things that he wants to tell his community about war and the soldier, none of which he actually does tell; as a result, and because he knows of no one else in his hometown who is about to be shipped off to war, he continues to carry these "things" alone. Though this version of Tim O'Brien is fictional and the text of "On the Rainy River" a construction, the silence of the soldier and his/her revision within the community transcend fiction. By constructing this text, Tim O'Brien the author tells the world community what Tim O'Brien the character cannot voice to his hometown—that not all wars are morally right, that not all soldiers participate in an elitist separatism, that societal segregation is complicit in the soldier's silence. In this sense, "On the Rainy River" demonstrates the power of narrative to bridge gaps in experiential understanding; the section is, then, a paradoxical text that both illustrates the nature of perceived separatism and undermines the solidification of such processes. Telling stories of separation and alienation becomes a healing act during which the combat veteran and civilians can speak to each other.

The ability to communicate is an important trope in O'Brien's novel. O'Brien the narrator's desire to immerse his reader in his memories of combat reflects an implicit desire for an understanding audience—the same audience that Norman Bowker desires in "Speaking of

Courage," the same audience that Kiowa desires when constantly re-telling the death of Ted Lavender in the title section, and perhaps the same audience that O'Brien the author desires when writing his works of fiction. As Jim Neilson says in his book *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics in the Vietnam War Narrative*, "[O'Brien the author] can tell no truth that is not already contaminated by its imaginative reconstruction. To resolve this paradox, O'Brien emphasizes the process of story-making. For it is in this process that truth and falsehood, reality and representation, fact and fiction cohere" (194). In other words, the idea beneath O'Brien's dependence upon textual (re)constructions of fictive events is that the borders between innocence and experience—and, more importantly, narrative and reality—can be blurred, that the act of writing (and reading) a text has its own reality and meaning.

Perhaps the book's most complex statement regarding the power and limitations of narrative experience is, unsurprisingly, a metatextual mixture of several related sections. For instance, in "The Man I Killed," O'Brien the narrator describes his reaction to killing a young Viet Cong soldier with a hand grenade during an ambush. Though the narrative voice in the tale is O'Brien's, he is, as an active character, silent; he spends the entire tale staring at the body of the young man, while Kiowa attempts alternately to make him stop staring or to talk about the act itself and thereby exorcise his shock. The final line of that section is, in fact, Kiowa's; he simply tells O'Brien, "Talk" (144). But talk is exactly what O'Brien does not do in the story— except in the sense that he talks to the reader. His talk is here generally divided into three basic variations: inventing a fictive history for the nameless dead man; repetitiously cataloging how the dead man looks, including his wounds; and detailing the one-sided conversation with Kiowa.

O'Brien the narrator reflexively narrates the story occurring in his head as he stares at the man he has killed, the fictive history serving both to humanize the man and to make his death

seem more unreal, to highlight the fictive "feel" of the experience. What the astute reader realizes is that O'Brien cannot talk to Kiowa—a fellow member of both the military community and his own squad—because his individual act has momentarily alienated him from even other soldiers; this alienation is, as other sections have shown, even greater when applied to soldiers among civilians. Kiowa, in his insistence on sharing the narrative of the event with O'Brien, seems to infer that shared alienation (or perceived separatism, in my terminology) is one answer to the emotional difficulties of battle fatigue. O'Brien, though, is not yet to that point; he can only tell the story to the audience, years later, with Kiowa just another character. The dialogue that Kiowa tries to initiate never happens. Narrative is represented as the only option through which perceived separatism and alienation can be overcome.

Neither version of Tim O'Brien is finished with this narrative. The next section of the book is entitled "Ambush" and introduces O'Brien the narrator's daughter Kathleen, who suggests that her father "must have killed somebody" because he keeps writing war stories (147). When she asks him if he has indeed killed, O'Brien is still not ready to talk; however, he writes that "Someday, I hope, she'll ask again. But here I want to pretend she's a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening" (147). The rest of "Ambush" provides background for "The Man I Killed"; whereas in the latter section the VC soldier is already dead and the object of O'Brien's horrified gaze, the former section takes the reader back in time to the ambush itself, when our narrator throws the grenade. At the end of this short section, O'Brien reveals that sometimes he imagines having let the young man live: "he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog" (150). O'Brien here continues the conversation that he

never had with Kiowa—a confessional sharing of the narrative, and through that sharing, an expiation.[16]

It is, though, quite fitting that O'Brien the author entitles this section "Ambush," for he is setting a kind of ambush for the reader. In a later section called "Good Form," O'Brien calls into question everything that we know about the events of that day—and, indeed, about the rest of the book. He says, "I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented" (O'Brien 203). After this confession, he admits that he did not, in fact, kill anyone. Arguing that "my presence was guilt enough" (O'Brien 203), he indicts not only himself but also all of the other characters; who threw the grenade or pulled the trigger is irrelevant. In this way, O'Brien again blurs the lines between active, actual experience and passive complicity in others' actions. Then he admits that "Even *that* story is made up" (O'Brien 203, original emphasis). He "makes up" stories and re-tells them over and over because, he says, "stories can . . . make things present" (O'Brien 204). The present-ness of narrative contrasts with the impermanence of memory; because O'Brien is, as a young soldier, "afraid to look," he is "left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" (203). One reason for telling war stories is to give faces to the faceless bodies, names to the nameless. We can surmise, though, that another reason is to finish the one-sided conversation with Kiowa, to expiate guilt and pain through sharing experiences. And because the "you" to whom O'Brien speaks does not refer exclusively to other soldiers, the act of narration consequently bridges experiential gaps between alienated soldier/perceived separatist soldiers and civilian populations.

However, O'Brien writes that he could honestly answer either "yes" or "no" to Kathleen's question of whether or not he has killed. As yet another wrinkle in the nature of

narrative truth, this statement again suggests that only by experiencing an event—or a story—in the moment can we truly understand it; and that understanding may change with memory (or, in the case of stories, subsequent readings). The uncertainty of memory/narrative and the constant renegotiation with both that O'Brien explores suggest that readings of veterans and their experiences should also be constantly revised and renegotiated. In her article "The (Hidden) Antiwar Activist in Vietnam War Fiction," Jacqueline R. Smetak states that "The war story, as such, is a very old form, highly conventionalized and relatively easy to tell . . . Any story can be told if people want badly enough to tell it" (142). O'Brien, his namesake narrator, and his characters would seem to disagree, positing that only through revision and retelling can a story truly be told. As Mark A. Heberle says, "Whatever the protagonist of *The Things They Carried* has experienced can never be fully represented through writing—and that is why he can never stop writing about it" (211). Perhaps this is because, as Steven Kaplan has posited in his book *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, "there is no such thing for O'Brien as the full and exact truth" (177). In this case, there is only representation and whatever momentary truth we can glean from it, a truth that will likely change when we retell and re-experience the story. Milton J. Bates sees this strategy as "a form of guerilla warfare with the reader, so that [O'Brien's] war story is also a story-at-war" (254). This view supports my notion that O'Brien the author uses confrontational narrative to bridge experiential gaps and promote understanding.

The Things They Carried is in some respects a study of how veterans feel alienated by combat experiences and how civilians may read that experiential difference as elitist and/or political separatism. In another sense, the book exemplifies how art can help bridge those gaps. *The Things They Carried* demonstrates the efficacy of a de-historicized history; though O'Brien writes memory and narrative as slippery, unreliable constructs,[17] he also argues that narrative is

not merely a record of factual or fictional experiences but an experience unto itself. For the time

required to read and imagine them, narratives takes on their own kind of reality. The only

certainty in *The Things They Carried* is the momentary surety of present-time textual experience,

wherein Tim O'Brien the author walks with the reader beside Tim O'Brien the character, his

fellow soldiers, his daughter, and the enemy. Any meaning to such events is at best slippery and

elusive because of the multiple border crossings—fact and fiction, memory and imagination,

narrative and experience. The book's lack of a narrative center, beyond the changing character of

O'Brien the narrator; its lack of traditional structure; and its shifting and even contradictory

relationship to traditional narrative devices like characterization and meaning illustrate that our

coming to terms with Vietnam and with our veterans is an ongoing project. As O'Brien the

narrator says, "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (91). We might add

that another way to tell a true war story is to keep on reading it.

Though the book is in many ways as ambiguous as its subject matter, O'Brien the author

seems to believe in the power of narrative to heal wounds and bridge gaps. At the end of "How

to Tell a True War Story," his narrator says that a "true" war story is "about love and memory.

It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (O'Brien

91). Yet the very fact that this narrator is speaking assumes an audience, one to whom he refers

to directly—the "you"—on more than one occasion. O'Brien the author seems to understand

what his narrator may implicitly know: that someone will listen if you keep talking. Thus it is

that the last section of the book, "The Lives of the Dead," ends with such hope: O'Brien the

narrator dreams (both in the story and onto the page) that everyone who has died in the book is

alive again. And, in a sense, they are. As "Tim [tries] to save Timmy's life with a story"

(O'Brien 273), he saves so much more as well: his own life, the lives of those in his memory,

and the lives of those he imagines.[18] This is perhaps the most emotionally fulfilling idea that *The Things They Carried* suggests: narrative as medicine. A story can bring together segregated/separatist soldier and civilian; it can give a kind of life to people who have died or never actually lived. And if narratives can make the reader a complicit witness at deaths, murders, alienations, and societal fracturing, then stories can also make the reader a part of the healing.

Cimino's film *The Deer Hunter* is another text in which the concepts of alienation and perceived separatism interplay in the representation of Vietnam veterans and their communities. O'Brien's book, as argued above, attains a sort of hyper-reality in its metatextual boundary crossings; Cimino's film, on the other hand, eschews realism, concentrating instead on problematizing one version of the American mythos. Most of the film is set in Clairton, Pennsylvania, represented here as an idealized industrial community. The film opens with a long shot of a steel mill set against a gray sky; the camera sits in darkness beneath an overpass. This shot centralizes the mill within the frame. Soon we are taken inside the building; here we see shots of molten metal, with sparks flying explosively through the air. These images of violent yet beautiful industrialization suggest both the creative power and the destructive tendencies of this place. Here we gain our first glimpses of several important characters, most notably Michael (Robert De Niro), the deer hunter. In one notable shot, Michael stands in back of the frame behind a rising column of flame. This shot, imaging the constructive power of industrial flame, contrasts with a shot of Michael in Vietnam that will occur later in the film, wherein Michael uses a flamethrower to kill a Viet Cong soldier. There, the column of flame is human; here, it is industrial. There, Michael is solitary, foreshadowing his post-war status; here, other workers are visible, showing that industrialization is part of what binds this community.

In his article "Rereading *The Deer Hunter*: Michael Cimino's Deliberate American Epic," Robert E. Bourdette, Jr. has discussed the importance of these communal images in the film. He argues that

> By setting the film in an ethnically unified community—with its ornate Russian Orthodox cathedral, the VFW in Lemko Hall, Welsh's Lounge, The Eagle Supermarket, the bowling alley—Cimino not only telescopes the Americanization process . . . but also evokes our own mythic and nostalgic desire for that communal sense these images create. These images are also a powerful metaphor for that larger national community that was splintered by the conflicting attitudes engendered by the Vietnam War. (171)

Bourdette further argues that "Interlaced with these *communal* images, however, are absences that show us an opposing force—a fragmentation that has the potential of isolating the individual from that sense of community" (171, original emphasis). Bourdette focuses on images of the family and its instability, and how this film replaces family with "an intricate association of friends" (172); one might also posit, then, that *The Deer Hunter* is about belonging, or failing to belong, to such an intricate association.[19] I argue that the experience of combat is what separates the veteran characters from their surrogate families; and, if this film is more symbolic than realistic, as both Bourdette and I argue, then these characters and their separation might represent similar separations in actuality.

Still, as mentioned above, many critics of this film have pointed out its historical inaccuracies.[20] Some have targeted the happy, functional industrial community in a film set during a time of steel mill strikes; others have questioned the realism of these characters' going to war at all, considering their age. However, Philip K. Jason believes that factual exactitude is less important than the other truths that the narrative might reveal: "The telling itself is what counts. Writing 'convincingly about that war' does not necessarily mean having the facts straight, though factual errors can jeopardize credibility for readers who fasten upon them"

(44-45). The import of this passage is its allowance for different truths; if we accept this premise, we must necessarily acknowledge that a fictive text must be judged not just on historical accuracy but on what rules it sets for itself and whether or not it breaks them.

I argue that, as a work of fiction, *The Deer Hunter* should not be absolutely bound to historical fact. Since this film, in my estimation, is about the physical and emotional separations that occur between civilian and veteran because of the war experience, Cimino's treatment of these fractures are more important than whether the history of the war is always represented accurately. Some aspects of these separations are symbolized in the confrontation between Michael, Nick, and Steven and a nameless Green Beret who wanders into the wedding party. As Michael and Nick attempt to converse with this man about Vietnam, he responds by saying "fuck it." Bourdette claims that "the Green Beret is isolated by his experience, and remains silent . . . in the face of their ignorance" (173). The truth of this scene—the representation of the experiential gulf and the failure of language to explain that gulf or why it exists—echoes O'Brien's construction of similar emotional reactions to perceived separatism and linguistic inadequacy.

Though the language of the soldier reinforces veterans' use of obscenity as a kind of coded separatist language, this scene also constructs Clairton as both industrious and religiously devout. Stevie's (John Savage) wedding ceremony is in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and, in the long wedding scenes, each character seems to understand both the ceremony and the language. This particular—and, for American audiences, comparatively unusual—religious affiliation and Clairton's idealized industrialization create a sense of separatism, perhaps even utopianism, in the early scenes. Furthermore, the characters do not mention other towns; the only place anyone seems to go is to Vietnam or to the mountains. The residents of this close-knit community share certain features of identity—most notably religion and blue collar economic

status. This description is similar to the religious communities of *Witness* and *The Rapture of Canaan*, in that the groups in those texts share religious beliefs and relatively simplistic lifestyles; however, the townspeople of Clairton have not consciously separated themselves from mainstream America because of their religious beliefs, nor have they formed their own geographical space in order to reject mainstream society. The assumption is that somewhere in Clairton—though Cimino never shows us where—are other people who might not be Russian Orthodox or of the lower economic classes. But the isolationist nature of Cimino's presentation, coupled with his decision not to question or problematize this kind of representation, further suggests a conscious choice to create a non-realistic communal construction.[21]

Within this blue-collar Russian Orthodox community, smaller groups of characters become, in various turns, the focus of the film. These characters include Michael; his roommate Nick (Christopher Walken); their friends Steven/Stevie, Stan (John Cazale), John (George Dzundza), and Axel (Chuck Aspegren); and Nick's girlfriend Linda (Meryl Streep), Steven's bride Angela (Rutanya Alda), and various girlfriends of the other characters. Within even this tightly-knit group, however, other, smaller groups form. For example, the men form an all-male clique; they work together in the steel mill and drink, shoot pool, and sing together after work in John's establishment, Welsh's Tavern. They also hunt together in the mountains. Though women, including Linda and Angela, do patronize Welsh's, no woman accompanies the men on their hunts. Using firearms to take life for sport is represented as an exclusively male activity. In fact, the men even discuss gender and sexual differences on these trips. In one memorable exchange during the film's first deer hunt sequence, Michael refuses to lend Stan his extra pair of hunting boots. Stan responds by reminding everyone of how many times he has tried to "fix

Michael up" with women, as well as how many times Michael has failed to have sex with these women. His homophobic, implied insult is that Michael might be gay.

In these ways, the deer hunters echo the lesbian feminist characters of *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*. The male hunters establish a separate geographical space in which to meet. Because of the group's exclusively male membership, Rich's liberal definitions of homoeroticism seem applicable, even though some characters seem homophobic. Their traditional views on gender bind them together, even as the specter of the Vietnam War separates some characters from the rest. On the day following this first hunt, Michael, Nick, and Steven are to ship out to Vietnam, leaving Stan, John, and Axel behind. Cimino never explains why only three of these characters go to Vietnam. However, the fact of their going has already begun to separate them from their community and from their other friends. In the VFW hall where Steven and Angela get married, the decorations include huge pictures of Michael, Steven, and Nick; at one point, John apologizes for not going with them. The implication is that Michael, Steven, and Nick are part of the few and the proud, while John is part of those sheepish, less "manly" masses who stay home.

And, of course, it is finally their experience in Vietnam that separates Michael, Steven, and especially Nick from everyone else. This section of the film opens on a rural Vietnam village, framed in long shot against a lush green jungle. As we watch from this relatively safe distance, a helicopter firebombs the village; it explodes into flames that leap into the air, reminding the viewer of those opening scenes in the steel mill. Here, however, the flames exemplify destruction. Cimino's camera lingers on Michael, who lies, unconscious and bloody, atop another American soldier. Nearby, village pigs consume dead bodies. A Vietnamese soldier drops a grenade into a hole, in which women and children are hiding. As they are vaporized, Michael awakens and immolates the soldier with a flamethrower, thus completing the

juxtaposition of imagery begun in the film's opening scenes—American industry vs. the destruction of the Vietnam War. As mentioned above, Michael is alone here, a symbol of the alienated soldier who has seen and performed horrors that civilians—like John, or like Michael and Nick's pre-war, Romantic selves—could never understand. When Michael is reunited with Nick and Steven, all three are captured by the Viet Cong. This situation leads to what is perhaps the most controversial sequence in the entire film—the Russian Roulette games in the prison camp on the river. These scenes have been termed racist[22]—for their depiction of the Viet Cong as unrepentantly bloodthirsty and the white American prisoners as victimized and heroic—and historically unrealistic, because no evidence exists that such "games" took place. However, what is more important to this study of separatist representations is how the scene functions to separate these characters even further from everyone else.

First, Cimino frames these scenes in ways conducive to readings of separation. Nick, Steven, and Michael huddle together in the water below the VC hut; though there are other prisoners there, both American and Vietnamese, our three protagonists do not speak to them, huddle with them, or attempt to save them. Friends from before the war, they seem to have decided to live or die together, apart from their fellow prisoners. Second, when read together, these characters demonstrate three typical ways of representing veterans. Michael is a pragmatic survivor. He shows no fear, even when he is forced to play Russian roulette; it is he who decides that they need more than one bullet in the gun if they are to kill their captors. Michael also constantly reassures Steven and Nick that they can indeed play, if only because they must, and that they will all find a way out of their predicament. Furthermore, when Steven breaks down and is placed in a pit that is almost fully below the water's surface, Michael suggests that they forget about Steven, since he will likely die. Michael thus represents the ultimate survivor type,

the veteran who has learned to put aside his emotions, even his humanity, in service to his survival instinct. This kind of character seems furthest removed from any societal connections, even with other survivors.

Steven represents the veteran who has been overcome by the horror that he has endured; he cannot function in civilian society and is physically and mentally unable to remain in the military. In terms of the prison camp scene, Steven is constantly on the verge of breaking down; only Michael's embraces and verbal reassurances save him. He is also the only one of the three who cannot play the deadly game of Russian roulette effectively enough to preserve their illusion of bravery or foolhardiness. He turns the gun slightly upward as he fires; this action saves his life, but it also causes him to be thrown in the submerged pit. Furthermore, Steven's physical weakness prevents him from pulling himself into the rescue helicopter, which prompts Michael to leap into the river after him. Steven's (in)action not only injures his legs but also separates the three friends for good. His physical and mental breakdowns reflect the stereotype of the dysfunctional veteran.

Nick represents a third possibility. Not as physically or mentally frail as Steven, Nick is also not as tough or pragmatic as Michael. He is able to play Russian roulette, even with extra bullets, though his facial expressions and body language betray his fear; he also immediately rejects Michael's assertion that they should forget about Steven. Nick is not the cold-blooded warrior that Michael is fast becoming, yet he is also not dysfunctional. He is able to take part in killing their captors and helps Michael save Steven from the pit. However, seeing Michael and Steven plummet into the river apparently breaks him in ways that the Russian roulette game could not or perhaps only started. Once safely in a Saigon hospital, Nick becomes depressed. He tries to call Linda but cannot speak to her. Because of his combat experiences, he cannot relate to

his civilian girlfriend or to "the world" in any way. Nick goes AWOL and begins playing Russian roulette for money, risking the very life he fought so hard to save and doing so using his captors' methods. Michael, for some reason a spectator at one such event, sees Nick but cannot fight through the crowd to get to his friend, and Nick disappears into the night. Now, rather than representing a middle ground between Michael's type of veteran and Steven's, Nick represents a fourth, composite type. He is as cold-blooded and fearless as Michael, yet he is also as dysfunctional as Steven is in the prison camp. Unable to cope with his experiences, with Vietnam, or with "the world," Nick simply disappears and seeks only death.

Yet neither Michael nor Steven dies; both find their way home again. And as the film takes us back to Clairton, we encounter more images of alienation, perceived separatism, and other, equally familiar representations of veterans. For instance, Michael returns home, yet instructs his cab driver to take him to a motel; they drive straight past his trailer, where Linda and the rest of his friends wait to welcome him. Unable to face Linda's questions about the missing Nick or his own sense of difference, Michael spends the night alone. The next day, he watches his friends' departures from hiding, until only Linda remains. Though his burgeoning feelings for her are likely part of his reason for wanting to see her alone, his inability or unwillingness to fit back into Clairton's civilian populace is an equally likely explanation. For most of the remaining Clairton scenes, Michael wears his uniform. This marker of his military affiliation is also a sign of his difference from his community and his friends; as if the knowledge of his tour of duty were not enough, his physical appearance marks him as separate.

A similar but even more intense example of this difference occurs upon his return to Welsh's Tavern, in the company of Stan and Axel. Everyone in the bar roars approvingly and attempts to shake Michael's hand. Michael seems uncomfortable with the attention; he quickly

allows John to usher him to a back room where his inner circle of friends can envelop him once again. Michael's return is greeted so positively for a tragic reason, however; we soon learn that Michael is the only one of the three veterans to have returned home. The above discussion of Nick details his absence; he still has not returned, nor has he called anyone, including Linda. Michael learns that Steven has in fact returned to Clairton, but not to his home and friends.

A triple amputee, Steven now resides in the local Veteran's Administration hospital, alongside other, similarly maimed soldiers. These injuries have fragmented his body and his emotions. After leaving Welsh's, Michael visits Angela and her young son. The boy sits by himself, pointing a toy gun at Michael; Angela lies prone, watching television, unable or unwilling to speak to Michael, though she does manage to give him Steven's phone number. This scene demonstrates how the experience of war has fragmented the family, as well as Steven himself; additionally, the boy's pointing his gun at Michael suggests that the cycle of male violence remains unbroken. Steven is so fragmented and alienated that he cannot even finish a phone call to Michael, a friend and fellow member of the combat veteran community.

Oddly enough, although Michael feels "far away," he is actually the most functional of the three combat veterans on which the film focuses. Nick is, after the film's first act, an absent presence in Clairton; Steven sequesters himself in the VA hospital, a perceptually separatist act. Michael, in his uniform, is both a voice for the veteran's community and a visible symbol of its difference. After Michael brings Steven home from the hospital, Steven again takes part in his former community, though his physical condition is a constant reminder of his experiential difference. Michael returns from Vietnam the least fragmented; his actions and experiences lessen the distance between veterans and civilians. In this sense, Michael resembles the Tim O'Brien narrator/character in *The Things They Carried*. Both characters function as a sort of

half-way point between the civilian world and the community of the dysfunctional, perceived separatist veteran. *The Deer Hunter* also echoes *The Things They Carried* in its representation of alienation, separation, and ways to explore and challenge those paradigms. The veteran's community in *The Deer Hunter* forms because of experiential necessity. Cimino's male characters bond in typical ways such as drinking and hunting together; the veteran characters are drawn even closer together because of their more particular, and more violent, experiences.

Both *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* represent language as both a marker of difference and a tool for uniting separated groups and individuals. In the film's first act—the pre-Vietnam scenes of Steven's wedding and the first deer hunt—Michael and Nick differentiate themselves through their discussion of the "one shot" principle. This idea refers to the art of killing a buck with one shot; needing more, Michael says, is "pussy." Michael here makes the one-shot kill a supreme act of manhood, with all other ways negatively feminized. When Nick confesses that he does not think about this philosophy much anymore, Michael says that "You have to think about one shot. One shot is what it's all about . . . I try to tell people that, but they don't listen." The fact that Michael has tried to share his philosophy with others who do not understand echoes O'Brien's problems with telling war stories to similar audiences. In spite of Nick's changing philosophy, Michael says that he refuses to hunt with anyone else because they are all "assholes," presumably because they do not take the kill seriously; Michael says that "without [Nick], I hunt alone." This comment reveals Michael's early feelings of alienation and prefigures his post-war condition.

Michael's mystical, difference-driven language is revealed to the other characters when the first deer hunt takes place and Stan, the womanizing poseur, forgets his hunting boots. When Michael refuses to lend him a spare pair, an argument erupts. Michael, disgusted, says, "This [a

rifle bullet] is this. This ain't something else. *This* is *this*. From now on, you're on your own."

Stan, in reply, can only say, "Hey, you know what your trouble is, Mike? Nobody ever knows what the fuck you're talking about. 'This is this.' Huh? What the hell is that supposed to mean? 'This is this.'" Unable to read into Michael's warrior code, Stan can only mock the uncertainty of the language by calling it "faggot-sounding bullshit." Michael's code, his language, and his status as combat veteran could—and, in Stan's case, does—imply a separatist and/or elitist philosophy; this seems to be one explanation for Stan's (and, perhaps, the viewer's) failure to understand Michael and his dismissive, superior attitude.

In the second act's post-Vietnam scenes, Michael's silences often fill the screen, mirroring Steven's and Nick's physical absences. He reclaims a place in the civilian world only when he realizes his role as Steven's savior. His uncertain silences—uncluttered with lofty thoughts of "honorable" killing or the simplicity of "this is this"—reflect his inability to understand or communicate his experiential difference. Bourdette argues, "His recognition of the true significance of community is made all the more powerful by his own sense of alienation" (181). This critic also sees Michael as the character who "goes forth to reestablish the necessary sense of community" (181), a reading that seems accurate given Michael's attempts to bring Steven and Nick back to "the world."

These actions occur in the film's third act, when references to the "one shot" philosophy—the Faulknerian tradition of loving the life you take—return. Michael, existing in the worlds of both civilian and veteran, returns to Vietnam during the invasion of Saigon to bring Nick home. He finds Nick playing Russian roulette; the only way that Michael can get through to Nick, who does not recognize him, is to buy his way into the game. As the two old friends sit across from each other again, Michael says, "I love you, Nicky" several times; but this lingual

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reference to affection and male bonding is ineffective. Nick's experiences and his heroin habit are too much. Michael finally refers to "one shot," which Nick seems to recall; he laughs, nods, and repeats, "One shot." Having remained trapped within the horror of his combat experiences—alienated from everyone and bereft of opportunities to heal within any community—this one-time paean to the wilderness becomes a prayer for death, one that is immediately answered. As if he had been waiting for Michael to witness it, Nick pulls the trigger for the final time.

This scene demonstrates that language can fail to convey emotion or experience. Nick's troubled mind does not recognize Michael's name or his protestations of love; it does, however, recognize an old linguistic reference to honorable death. Nick's death, however—as he falls sideways, face twisted in agony, blood spurting from the wound in his head—seems merely pointless. Perhaps this scene is meant to deconstruct Michael's earlier elitist philosophy, as well as the romanticization of death, especially when studied beside an earlier scene that takes place during the second deer hunt.[23] In this scene, Michael has been tracking a buck and is about to take his "one shot." Instead of shooting the deer, Michael fires into the air and shouts, "Okay!" This scene indicates that Michael has outgrown his old, simplistic philosophy; as Bourdette says, "For Michael—separated by Vietnam from Nick and Steven and from Linda by his devotion to Nick—the old macho ethic no longer has the power of truth or salvation" (180). Isolated from both civilian community and the imagined veteran community, Nick never grows in a similar way, and so ends his life in a meaningless gesture. Tellingly, Michael cannot talk him out of it.

A final example of how the film problematizes language and its role in creating a separatist community of alienated veterans is the final scene, in which the surviving characters sing "America the Beautiful" after Nick's funeral. Most of the characters sit morosely around a table in Welsh's Tavern—Michael still in full uniform, Steven in his wheelchair—while John

prepares food in the kitchen. Grieving, John begins singing "America the Beautiful." Bourdette sees this scene as John's "[reaching] after something that may give comfort. What he reaches after is a sense of order, a sense of the past" (184). Michael's uniform "[emphasizes his] own unwillingness or inability to shed that emblem of his burden" (Bourdette 184). In this reading, the past is both "comfort" and "burden"; these conflicting images reveal the ambiguities in this representation of the Vietnam experience.

At first, the other characters seem embarrassed by John's singing. As John continues, however, they all eventually chime in; the film ends with a post-song toast to Nick. The tone of this last scene is uncomfortable yet upbeat; the final toast implies that these characters might help each other heal. But the song's familiar lyrics link the audience and these characters in an ambiguous reaction to the film. In one sense, this song demonstrates again the hollowness of patriotic rhetoric and language's role in separating the veteran characters from the civilians; most events in the film do not seem particularly beautiful, and the veteran characters have discovered first-hand some effects of blind patriotism. Yet the fact that all these characters, veteran and civilian alike, join together in song shows that such language can also help transcend experiential and philosophical difference. Even the audience may find themselves singing along, or at least thinking of the words as the characters sing; this hypertextual moment of togetherness not only transcends the boundaries of narrative and memory, fact and fiction, but also reminds us that language can heal.

In some respects, *The Deer Hunter*'s ironic use of "America the Beautiful" recalls how O'Brien's novel represents and utilizes the language of the veteran in a mass-marketed text. Doing so calls attention to veterans' difference, while providing a context through which the audience can better understand veterans' experiences. Similarly, Cimino's film uses narrative

conventions to make the unfamiliar more understandable. But the film reminds the civilian audience that it can acquire these experiences only through representation. Jacqueline R. Smetak argues, "If any of us had been transported from our collective Iowas and set down over there we would have broken in precisely the same ways the soldiers did" (164). O'Brien transports us in this manner, and, if we in the audience do not break, we can at least perhaps understand a bit better why some of the soldiers do.

Cimino, however, seems to go even further than O'Brien in this regard. Cimino uses his film, an ahistorical fiction, to suggest a historical truth: America's willingness to embrace unquestioningly images of both sides' brutality. For the historically knowledgeable viewer, these images confront the greater American public's problematic assumptions about the war and its veterans. Simultaneously, accepting or rejecting those assumptions—as well as the more historical bases for them, such as the My Lai massacre and reports of Viet Cong prison camp abuses of human rights—are part of what separate those who experienced this conflict directly, as veteran or war supporter or even protester, from those who experience it only as history, representation, or abstraction. *The Deer Hunter* and texts like it serve as common points of reference for those who would engage in dialogue about the war, its atrocities, and its effects on both veterans and civilians. Mythic, ahistorical films also reflect historical beliefs and emotions, if not actual events. *The Deer Hunter* examines stereotypes and possibilities, including alienated and perceptually separatist veterans. Like *The Things They Carried*—an equally fictional but more historical narrative—*The Deer Hunter* demonstrates some possible reasons for the separation of veteran and civilian, as well as the nature of and the attempt to eliminate that separation.

In doing so, this film represents several character types present not only in America's cultural consciousness but also in much art about the Vietnam War: Steven, the wounded, physically fragmented veteran whose physical destruction catalyzes alienation or separation; Nick, the physically whole but mentally/emotionally unstable veteran who cannot cope with post-combat life without violence and/or drugs; and Michael, the comparatively well-adjusted veteran who nevertheless struggles with post-war existence. That these characters are stereotyped and recognized so easily further suggests that Cimino is attempting to create a symbolic, mythical representation of America's national post-Vietnam consciousness. This representation occurs in a widely-distributed, well-marketed film; *The Deer Hunter* won five Academy Awards, including Best Supporting Actor (Walken), Best Director, and Best Picture. Perhaps these markers of mainstream acceptance suggest a national attempt to confront our problematic, ambiguous view of this war and its soldiers. If so, then texts like O'Brien's and Cimino's have accomplished what I have argued is one aim of war literature in general and Vietnam War art in particular—facilitating greater understanding.

In the article "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," Kali Tal argues that "the personal myths of the reader are never tragically shattered by reading. Only trauma can accomplish that kind of destruction. The revision of national myth occurs only as far as the changes made do not interfere with untraumatized persons' basic conceptions of themselves" (232).[24] If reading cannot—or should not—destroy problematic national myths, perhaps reading and writing can at least catalyze a revision of our personal myths. Studying these two works together suggests that nothing about the Vietnam experience—the war itself, the soldiers, the civilians, the art that has sprung from the experience—is clear and simple. These two works both represent Vietnam veterans as

alienated/perceived separatists who long for a return to mainstream society. However, they both

also seem to suggest that such representations are one step in bringing the veterans back to the

mainstream world, even as they remind us of the problems that lead to separation in the first

place.

END NOTES

[1] Marilyn Durham has also noted this feature of Vietnam literature, in her article "Narrative Strategies in Recent Vietnam War Fiction": "Literature of the Vietnam War, since it concerns experiences most readers have not personally lived through, must face an initial obstacle in engaging not only our interest, but more crucially our participation, in constructing its singular reality" (100). Though such problems of narrative construction are not exclusive to war literature, the nature of battle experience is that most of the audience can only understand it through representation; therefore, the author of war literature must construct both a reality and a context through which that reality can be understood. One of my key arguments in chapter three is that establishing this context is paramount to both Tim O'Brien and Michael Cimino.

[2] In her essay "A Different World: The Vietnam Veteran Novel Comes Home," Maria S. Bonn quotes from an article by William J. Searle in which he argues that "Ambushed at home, returning combat soldiers . . . feared hostility and blame from their peers who did not fight in an 'immoral' war and also suffered from lack of respect by veterans of earlier wars who blamed them for not winning a war against a military inferior" (qtd. on 2). This passage implies a sense of group alienation among Vietnam combat veterans.

[3] Unlike O'Brien's work, these two books trace the authors' war experiences beginning with their unquestioning acceptance of the Vietnam War's necessity and the military's role in American life. In both of these works, the authors chronicle how their minds changed about the war because of their hard experiences—with the war itself, with the military's handling of the campaign, with mainstream America's conflicted and conflicting feelings about and reactions to the war. These books were written as factual memoirs, implying that neither Caputo nor Kovic share O'Brien's ambiguous views on the power of narrative.

[4] Herr's text is a New Journalistic book exploring many of the same ambiguities, triumphs, and blunders with which fiction writers like O'Brien seem fascinated; Herr particularly dwells on the lives and ideas of the common foot soldier in seemingly hopeless and insanely (un)planned campaigns, such as the battles at Hue and the decision to defend Khe Sanh, even though the base was seemingly indefensible.

[5] Though *Apocalypse Now* is obviously a retelling of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the setting of Vietnam, Coppola integrates many themes and images that seem particular to this War and that recall other works by and about Vietnam soldiers: the mysterious tiger that materializes out of the jungle night to harass Chef and Willard, perhaps representing the unknowable jungle's

dangers; the scene at the bridge, in which the chain of command has entirely broken down and the soldiers shoot at no one knows what; the USO show that magically appears around a curve in the river, dropping Playboy bunnies and supplies in the characters' laps. Though a richly symbolic film that seems to focus more on the "heart of darkness" in humanity than on the topic of Vietnam itself, *Apocalypse Now* contributes to the idea of the Vietnam War as one of America's great ambiguities.

[6] Milton J. Bates reads O'Brien's section "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" as an imitation of Conrad as well (156), though I suspect he reads the similarity as more thematic than structural.

[7] Kali Tal's ideas regarding "national myth" vs. "personal myth" suggest much about the nature of Vietnam in America's collective consciousness and how these personal accounts of the War, whether historical or fictionalized, operate to clarify, change, or explode national myths.

[8] O'Brien the narrator's job in *The Things They Carried* is blue collar, as are the jobs of the characters in *The Deer Hunter*. These images further the idea of war as a class phenomenon and what Katherine Kinney has called "the terrible class inequalities of the draft" (106).

[9] As shown in his article "'Afraid to Admit We Are Not Achilles': Facing Hector's Dilemma in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," Christopher Michael McDonough believes that the imagined voices of O'Brien's hometown constitute the site in which "O'Brien locates the source of his anxiety: in addition to a fundamental disagreement about the war in Vietnam, his dilemma is a struggle between a well-founded fear of death and a profound feeling of being ashamed" (25). Both this discussion of a town's voice and the vision of America as a whole that O'Brien has while on the Rainy River illustrate the character's profound sense of alienation; therefore, they also represent the imagined community of the veteran and how such voices and images might influence such a group.

[10] In fact, Timmerman relates Norman Bowker's circling the pond to his idea of self: "His aimless circling works . . . to demonstrate [his] inability to settle back into the routine of the World and exemplifies the psychological distance between his former and present selves" (108). Though the aim of this chapter is to explore representations of individual and community, this idea of the individual's past self being separated by experience from his present self seems apropos.

[11] Timmerman writes that Bowker is "blind to the ways of the world. He'll never see straight again; it will always be circular, through the crooked paths of a memory that he can neither deny nor express" (109). "Notes" reveals that Bowker has denied and/or expressed his memory in a drastic way—suicide. Timmerman's passage above does, though, suggest a link between the Bowker character and the O'Brien narrator, since the text of *The Things They Carried* is in many ways a circular path through a (fictive) memory that the narrator is attempting to express.

[12] McDonough points out that O'Brien the author writes Norman Bowker's struggle in the same ways that he represents his own ambiguous reactions to coming home in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*: "O'Brien patterns the decision between cowardice or courage in terms much like Hector's run, as a repeated circular motion" (29). McDonough argues that O'Brien re-uses certain

narrative devices, and that this particular conceit comes from classical sources about the nature of war and courage. For my purposes here, McDonough's argument is particularly interesting because it further establishes O'Brien's metatextuality and his distrust of the power of narrative to convey experience and reveal fixed truth. O'Brien, in other words, is still trying to tell a true war story by continuing to tell it.

[13] Katherine Kinney, among other critics, has discussed the proliferation of overly masculinized military imagery during the time of the Vietnam War and how these images were particularly problematic because they occurred during the heyday of the national Women's Movement and the rise of second wave feminism. In her chapter "Humping the Boonies," for instance, Kinney makes a good case for O'Brien's section "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" as a "story of the women's movement" (151). However, as images of women are, for the most part, not the focus of either text under consideration here, I choose not to explore these ideas. In *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter*, women get little attention or representation compared with the male veteran. This in no way means that I wish to excuse these texts for their failure to represent women as a major part of the Vietnam experience; however, to maintain the focus of this overall study, I must necessarily concentrate on the major groups and main characters, who bear the brunt of the artists' representations.

[14] Bates claims that war stories' language has "a political dimension . . . First, it lays claim to narrative authority . . . Second, obscenity challenges any opposing claims to authority that are couched in a centripetal discourse. The most tempting target is the managerial view of the war, whose speech is characterized by euphemism, abstraction, technological jargon, circular reasoning, and willful optimism" (225). Bates discusses how soldiers use obscenity to challenge the experience of the war; I suggest that the texts under consideration here also represent the common soldier as using euphemism, abstraction, and technical jargon that exemplify difference, whether the veterans intend it to happen or not.

[15] Bates also provides a good reading of Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* in terms of its representation and interrogation of the military's overly masculine language and imagery.

[16] In his book *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, Beidler discusses this phenomenon in terms of national consciousness. He writes, "it would be possible to measure the ongoing achievement of Tim O'Brien with a certain truth of utter simplicity just by saying that he is still telling Vietnam stories after all these years . . . such must be one of the crucial tasks of the storyteller in a country whose resolute belief in its historical exceptionalism, even after its involvement in a geopolitical tragedy like Vietnam, continues to be predicated on its easy capacity for historical amnesia" (Beidler 28). Beidler's point is well-taken, though I choose to read *The Things They Carried* less as an exercise in national memory solidification and more as an attempt at *experiential* solidification.

[17] In his work *Acts and Shadows: The Vietnam War in American Literary Culture*, Philip K. Jason suggests, as have other critics (including this author), that the slippery nature of O'Brien's work is a case of form following function. Speaking of *Cacciato*, but making statements that apply to *The Things They Carried* as well, Jason writes: "The real and unreal lose distinction over and over again, becoming part of one another, and this *slipperiness* is part of the novel's

truth about the war. This lyrical, surreal treatment . . . releases understandings of this war's absurd nature far more effectively than traditional or modified realist methods" (23, emphasis mine).

[18] Caputo speaks of this particular power of narrative as well. In discussing the death of his comrade Walter Neville Levy, Caputo writes, "What matters is that you were alive then, alive and speaking. And if I could remember what you said, I could make you speak again on this page and perhaps make you seem as alive to others as you still seem to me" (223). He also later speaks of "an icy, abiding fury; a hatred for everything in existence except those men [with whom Caputo served]. Yes, except those men of mine, any one of whom was better than all the men who had sent them to war" (283). This passage illustrates separatist feelings in veterans and the nature of that separation—veteran vs. those who send soldiers to war. Given what O'Brien and others have written about hometowns and images in popular culture, "those who send soldiers to war" would seem to include almost anyone other than the soldiers themselves.

[19] Others have argued that the film is mainly "about" something completely different. John Hellman has argued that the film actually resides in the Western genre. He writes that "The western formula affords Cimino the strengths of the central national myth in dealing with Vietnam as a collective American trauma. At the same time, *The Deer Hunter* achieves more than a perpetuation of past myth by its understanding of the essence of the myth and its critical examination of it" (58). Hellman's assertions that Michael is a character in the frontiersman tradition of Natty Bumppo support readings of this veteran character as alienated and/or separatist.

[20] In his article "Rereading *The Deer Hunter*: Michael Cimino's Deliberate American Epic," Robert E. Bourdette, Jr. suggests why critics have been so harsh in their condemnation of the film's historical lapses: "When the film—one of the first to be concerned with Vietnam—was released, there were rigid expectations about what such a film that involved that conflict should convey. These demands, often contradictory, were reflected in the early criticism: such a film was expected to be single-minded in opposing our involvement in Vietnam; it was expected to portray a literal, even documentary-like, record of events; it should demonstrate overtly and with no ambiguity our moral failure as a nation. These demands, however politically and socially understandable, tended to run rough-shod over the nuances of the text and the implications of the images of *The Deer Hunter*" (165). In claiming that the text need not be historically accurate or even realistic in order to represent concerns about veterans and their place in our post-war society, I assume that the "nuances of the text and the implications of the images" are now paramount, rather than the film's political portrayal of the war itself or the nation as a whole.

[21] John Hellman writes that Clairton is represented in the film by "eight separate locations from Cleveland to Pittsburgh" (60). Hellman asserts that Cimino's decision to film this way, coupled with his conflation of "the Alleghenies with the Cascade Mountains of Washington state, and of the deer with a stag imported from a wildlife preserve in New Jersey," function to "sacrifice authentic setting for a more powerfully symbolic landscape" (60).

[22] Other critics have attempted to rescue the film from such charges. John Hellman, for instance, writes that "The accusations of racism made against *The Deer Hunter* are not correct in a

political or social sense; Vietnamese are shown among the victims of the Viet Cong in the Russian roulette captivity scenes, a black American soldier without arms in the military hospital is one of the most vivid statements against war in the film, and white Americans are prominently shown placing bets in the final Russian roulette scene" (59). All of these statements are true. Even Hellman, though, has to admit that racial tension informs the imagery of the film in places: "But the film does employ the imagery that has obsessed the romantic tradition of American literature from its beginnings with a violent confrontation between the conscious and unconscious, civilization and wilderness, played out in the white imagination as a struggle between light and dark" (59). That the film cannot avoid such classical but problematic imagery is one of the ambiguities that must inform any reading of it.

[23] Bourdette believes so; he writes that "[the continuation of the Russian roulette motif] is . . . organic, a deliberate extension and counter-point to the 'one-shot' ideal. Russian roulette is the logical outcome of the darker elements of that mystique and conveys, in a way no set battle piece could do, the terribleness of *this* war and the utter randomness of death" (178, original emphasis).

[24] Tal also writes about communities of veterans. However, she reads these communities mostly in terms of their status as trauma victims, or in terms of the ways that, because of their trauma, they either conform to or revise national myth through use of their personal myths. Though much of what I am discussing in this chapter is similar to Tal's ideas, the fact that I am writing about fictional communities and veterans necessarily alters my focus. Rather than strictly reading the veteran characters as victims of trauma, I focus on how these fictional texts represent and explore the dichotomies of traumatized/untraumatized, veteran/civilian, and experienced/innocent forms, as well what role narrative plays in both the formation and the deconstruction of such dichotomies.

CHAPTER 4
INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, GENDER, EXPERIENCE, AND IDEOLOGY: REPRESENTATIONS OF SEPARATISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

> In *Paradise* Morrison confronts the racial imaginary in its inseparable connection to gender, class, and sexual relations, and she engages with contemporary feminist, black, and postmodern theories of representation in her literary choices.—Linda J. Krumholz, "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*"

> The attempt to enforce an overly rigid community harmony is not only deadening but can easily disrupt the desired harmony. Unity that is too tight only precipitates the dissolution it is designed to prevent.—Phillip Page, "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*"

> They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind.—Toni Morrison, *Paradise*

One type of separatist society that this study has not considered in detail is the racial community. In my examination of *Set It Off*, I discussed the racial makeup of a separatist group but was primarily concerned with that all-female group's resistance to patriarchy. *Set It Off*'s representation of race is, as I argue in chapter one, crucial to understanding the particular brand of separatist community on which the film focuses. In this film, the all-female, all-black group separates itself from white supremacist society and from their own neighborhood's people. In contrast, this final section will examine *Paradise*, a novel by African-American author Toni Morrison. In this text, race is a primary separatist signifier, at the levels of both the individual character and the communities. In *Paradise*, Morrison creates a more racially diverse group of female separatist characters and juxtaposes their loosely-structured society with Ruby, an

all-black, racially separatist town that is founded in reaction to and as an escape from white supremacist America. This novel explores representations of black male dominance, women's resistance, and the intersections of racial and other kinds of separatism.

Religious and experiential differences play less overt but crucial roles in Morrison's representations. Specifically, Morrison constructs a religious schism in Ruby that both reflects and reinforces the town's generational divide; the town patriarchs are unwilling to discuss these issues, even at the expense of communal harmony. In terms of experiential separatism, most of the major characters in this novel share like experiences with different forms of oppression— most commonly racism, but often sexism, economic subjugation, or more specific manifestations of dominance like physical abuse. Because representations of these various separatist experiences and philosophies intersect in *Paradise*, the novel is both a fitting final text in this study and a testament to Morrison's awareness of twentieth century America's often paradoxical reactions to diversity. The late twentieth century is, historically, a time of increasing acceptance and representation of diversity; but it is also a time when multiculturalism catalyzes fear and resistance to change. Morrison's novel explores specific ways that these issues manifest in Ruby. These manifestations include the characters' construction of self-image, their search for place, and their struggle to define that place within the geographic borders of a dominant, racist nation.

Morrison's text complicates the idea of racial separatism through suggesting at least two complex and contradictory ideas: that racial identity can be both a catalyst for valuable separatist revisionism and the basis for new oppressions; and that separatist communities, as well as studies of such communities either actual or fictional, are seldom, if ever, about *only* separatism. In *Paradise*, racial tensions are certainly among the central conflicts, but Morrison demonstrates that gender, sexuality, religion, and experience play important, if often more subtextual, roles in

communal harmony and strife. Though passages detailing the female characters' origins are quite important in their own way, *Paradise* mainly focuses on the conflict occurring in and around the town of Ruby; how Ruby represents both an extension of and a revision of the characters' ancestors' original town, Haven; and how Ruby relates to the dominant society and the all-female separatist community, the Convent. In this chapter, I focus on these aspects and how Morrison constructs and explores various separatist ideas through the lens of racial strife.

In introducing my study of *Paradise*, I should first discuss the history of black separatism in the twentieth-century United States.[1] This history will necessarily be somewhat reductive, as my main goal is to provide background, the better to locate Morrison's particular concerns in the broader history of the country. Many critics have pointed out that *Paradise* is the final work in a trilogy that traces American history. For instance, in the article "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," Rob Davidson says that the trilogy "is concerned with 're-membering' the historical past for herself [meaning Morrison], for African Americans, and for America as a whole: *Beloved* reconsiders the periods of Emancipation and Reconstruction, *Jazz* reconsiders the Harlem Renaissance, and *Paradise* is principally concerned with the Vietnam and civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s" (355). Critics like Davidson have established how important African-American history is to Morrison's *oeuvre*. Davidson, in fact, claims that for Morrison, "Storytelling *is* historiography" (355, emphasis mine). He sees Morrison as not only trying to understand history but also to rewrite history, in a sense, through representation. Fiction therefore becomes a kind of history in her works.

Even if Davidson's reading is correct, this does not mean that Morrison simply makes up history as she goes along. What I believe Davidson means is that Morrison represents and hence rewrites the past in order to suggest alternate readings of the ways we have lived and the ways

we might live one day. Works like *Paradise* therefore help readers deconstruct comfortable but overly reductive—and potentially sexist, racist, classist, and/or ethnocentric—versions of history. In this vein, Linda J. Krumholz has pointed out that, "Today, many people wax nostalgic over an idealized past when knowledge, law, and morality were clear. Morrison unmasks the nostalgia for such black-and-white truths as a desire for the 'good old days' of white racial dominance, male privilege, and class conflict" (31). Morrison, Krumholz argues, reinterprets the "good old days," asking whether they were indeed good and, if so, for whom. I read *Paradise* as a text that questions accepted versions of history through representations of separatism, most prominently—but not exclusively—the discourse and praxis of racial separatism. Other critics provide similar, if more ambitious, readings. For instance, in his article "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics, and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," Peter Widdowson interprets the novel as "a black [in]version of American history" (316, original brackets). The use of the term "[in]version" implies the existence of a centralized version—that is to say an allegedly correct or official version—of history, from which Morrison's perspective must necessarily differ. In this novel, Morrison acknowledges the weight and authority of this "white" history; yet her decision to separate her communities from white-dominated society helps her, and her characters, to make history anew. Part of what I intend to do in chapter four is examine how Morrison constructs this attempt and what the failure and fracturing of these communities might suggest.

So far this discussion has centered on the historical project in Morrison's novels. I should now establish a historical timeline of African-American separatism in order to reveal the backdrop of Morrison's representational communities and the events that she is reimagining. Widdowson's reading of *Paradise* as historical inversion is particularly useful here. Examining

the dates that Morrison provides in the novel and comparing them to actual historical events

occurring during those years, Widdowson makes a powerful argument for *Paradise* as

reimagined history. He argues that Morrison sets *Paradise* between 1965 and 1976 because that

period falls exactly one hundred years after Reconstruction and marks as its terminus the year of

America's bicentennial. Widdowson argues, "That free black men in early July (the Fourth?)

1976 could act in the way they do in *Paradise* is surely Morrison's fictional reflection on the

United States' failure to implement the Declaration's principles in respect of a large proportion

of its people" (320-21). He further posits, "Not for nothing is the novel's present set in the key

years of the 'Second Reconstruction' of the Civil Rights Movement. What *Paradise* does, in

effect, is to align the two Reconstructions by erasing the 100 years that separate them through its

obliquely defamiliarizing narrative medium" (Widdowson 321). One way, then, that Morrison

reimagines history is by constructing a community in which the ten decades between

Reconstructions seem meaningless. The implication here is that the twentieth century advances

in black rights have been less beneficial for practical African American life than for white

consciences.

Widdowson begins with the narrator's assertion that the families had lived in Louisiana

since 1755: "The significance of the date 1755 for Morrison's novel . . . would seem to be that

. . . her 'worthy' families were already present as free people" (Widdowson 320). As free people

of color, the families "should have been entitled to benefit from the proclaimed principles of the

Declaration of Independence" (Widdowson 320), in spite of the south's slave codes. Of course,

history—even white supremacist versions—has shown that black families, free or otherwise,

benefited little or not at all from the Declaration. Widdowson goes on to argue that, just as the

Declaration did not apply to the 8-rocks' free ancestors, so too did Reconstruction fail them, as it

did most African-Americans in the nineteenth century south. There were attempts, of course, to eliminate racial bias. Though "Black Codes" in the south "effectively reintroduced laws which replicated the earlier slave laws," later federal acts such as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments attempted to curb states' resistance to racial equality (Widdowson 322).[2] Widdowson reminds us that Morrison's characters come from families whose members held government positions during Reconstruction, meaning that, when blacks were driven from office after federal troops left the south, the families would have been specifically disallowed (322-23).

He next locates the migration of Morrison's families in the Exoduster movement, which occurred in the post-Reconstruction years (323-24);[3] given that the families are again "Disallowed" while searching for a new geographical space, this comparison seems valid. Finally, Widdowson suggests that the characters' abandonment of Haven and the subsequent creation of Ruby correspond with actual black disillusionments in the years immediately following World War II; he refers to "the realization that on demobilization the 700,000 blacks who had fought for their country would be spurned just as comprehensively as before ([Morrison] 108)" (324). Widdowson sums up these historical intersections thusly: "What the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population: it is at once the extreme of an enforced siege or ghetto mentality and the extreme of a cherished racial separatism" (324). Though his article goes into much more detail on other aspects of the Civil Rights Movement and their correspondence to events in the book, Widdowson's work here might best be summarized with this statement: "at a more allegorical level, [*Paradise*] is indeed a history of the whole American experience" (325). This idea suggests that a) more than one kind of history is at

stake in the novel and b) Widdowson reads Ruby in *Paradise* in much the same way that I read most of the fictional communities that I have examined in this study—as a work that uses representations of separatism to re-examine and sometimes critique American myths.

Most of this analysis will focus on the Convent and the neighboring town of Ruby; chronologically, however, the first separatist community that we encounter in *Paradise* is Haven.[4] Morrison's Disallowed search for a new space in which they can escape racism. Historically, the black migration from the south marked a major transitional period for both the displaced peoples, for the areas that they were leaving, and for the areas to which they were going. Morrison represents potential responses to the traumas of such a major move through both the Disallowing, a rejection of the migrants, and the founding of Haven, a community created to eliminate the possibility of rejection. The Disallowing, an instance of black-on-black racism, is the soil in which Ruby plants its own subsequent rejection of all lighter-skinned peoples, including non-8-rock blacks. This cycle of racism is the origin of the New Fathers' refusal to change, since the Old Fathers' first great change was received so negatively, and since they instill in the New Fathers such pride in the efficacy and success of Haven.[5] These responses to experiential trauma echo the representations of veterans that I discuss in chapter three; like those socially displaced soldiers, the Disallowed respond to society's distrust and rejection by reinforcing their connections to each other. Unlike those military characters, though, Morrison's Disallowed create an official bordered space—the towns of Haven and, later, Ruby—in which they can cement their communal/familial ties and shield each other from the traumas of racism.

Beyond the events of the Disallowing, Morrison provides comparatively little of Haven's history. We know that Haven is founded in 1890 by the original families' patriarch Zechariah, also known as "Big Papa" or Coffee, and his son. Morrison also tells us that the geographical

space for this first town was chosen by Big Papa either because of a vision he was following or because he was simply tired (95-99). This is also when the reader first realizes how Haven/Ruby will reject communal dialogue; when Big Papa decides that it is time to stop migrating, no one questions him, in spite of his suspect motivations. His motivational uncertainty echoes the various interpretations of the Oven's inscription and of how those words should influence the townspeople's present actions. Their modern *raison d'etre* is as problematically ambiguous as their ancestors' founding of Haven.

Another important characteristic of this early community is how its cohesive surface relations hide deeper fractures, such as how Zechariah leaves his brother "Tea" after the latter performs a dance at the behest of white supremacists. To Zechariah, the fact that the whites have guns is inconsequential; in fact, he would rather be shot in the foot than degrade himself for their amusement (302). This act demonstrates the depth of commitment Haven (and Ruby) will expect in its citizens' repudiation of white dominance. This is also an early example of the Old Fathers' refusal to consider different points of view or methods. Tea's dance is a way to avoid conflict with white supremacists; Zechariah rejects this method as too conciliatory. And, foreshadowing how the New Fathers will handle conflicts with their fellow townspeople and the younger generation, Zechariah purposefully excludes his brother from the migration (302). The leader of this fledgling separatist community rejects reconciliation and appeasement, even though it is practical and understandable when under threat of violence. Zechariah's rejection of his own flesh and blood and his decision to move, rather than live under racism's yoke, foreshadows the Disallowed's bitter, understandable, and utter rejection of all that is "Out There."

Furthermore, this brother-against-brother conflict resembles the familial fractures of the Civil War era, supporting Widdowson's assertions that Morrison is reconstructing history, or,

more accurately, constructing a "specifically *black* history" (325, original emphasis). Civil

conflicts occur during the founding of Haven and in present-day Ruby, suggesting that, for

African-Americans, the civil war over how to live in America is still being waged. The eventual

failure of Haven[6]—which, Widdowson correctly posits, is both symbolized and catalyzed by the

harsh treatment of black World War II soldiers after their return to American shores (324)—

spurs a move "even further west to create the absolute stronghold of purity, Ruby" (Widdowson

324). This westward movement reflects the white ideal of manifest destiny and suggests that this,

too, has excluded African-Americans. It is also indicative of how completely they have

abandoned dialogue with mainstream society and with other black communities. Haven, both

literally and figuratively, does not go far enough. Ruby goes much farther.

These characters' actions and attitudes as they found their isolated towns reveal many of

the potential seductions and contradictions that separatists might encounter in their new

communities, among which is the temptation to invert, rather than reject, paradigms of

dominance and oppression. In her book *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in*

Fiction by Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Joy Kogawa, Elizabeth Kella points out the

racism inherent in the Old Fathers' communal structure. She writes, "the Disallowing drew new

social divisions which excluded the original wayfarers, and when the group finally founded

Haven, it appropriated the logic of *exclusion* which had forged their communal identity, turning

dark skin color . . . into the criterion for *inclusion* in Haven and later in Ruby" (211, original

emphasis). Kella's analysis demonstrates one way that Morrison constructs Ruby's stagnation.

The Old Fathers reverse the paradigm of racial oppression under which they have suffered,

putting themselves in power; the New Fathers of Ruby mimic this structure. They predicate

inclusion in their community on dark skin, believing that their obsession with skin color is a just

response to the white southerners' or the Disallowers' racism. In many respects, their self-analysis seems accurate; their rejection of all who have rejected them—which is to say everyone not part of their own community—is understandable. But a reversal of racist paradigms is not an absence of racism, and their attitudes eventually create internal problems, particularly with the more liberal younger generation. Moreover, though the Old Fathers and their children see Haven and Ruby's insularity as a positive change, their isolation enables the perpetuation of racism. Problematic reversals like this are common to the artistic representations of separatism studied in this project. For instance, in Joyce Carol Oates's *Foxfire*, the girl gang reverses their patriarchal town's gender and economic structures, and in *The Rapture of Canaan*, the Fire and Brimstoners are dismissive and judgmental, often in response to their experiencing similar attitudes in mainstream society. Such constructions imply that these artists see reversing existing forms of oppression as one potentially dangerous seduction of separatist communities. Specifically, Morrison's characters become so insular that they are unable to tolerate any kind of difference. This insularity increases in proportion to their isolation.

With their creation of Ruby, the original fifteen 8-rock[7] families go as far as they can, philosophically if not geographically. Rob Davidson argues that Ruby's "very existence [is] predicated on racial separatism" (356), an argument not applied to Haven, a town formed because of *de facto* segregation rather than self-segregation.[8] Though the creation of an all-black town might be expected to be a politically liberal act of black agency, the town that Deacon and Steward Morgan found is highly stratified, conservative, and oppressive. As Linda J. Krumholz argues, "The New Fathers of Ruby counter the 'anxiety of belonging' by establishing a town based on racial and gender ideals that instigate processes of exclusion and othering" (24). This idea is applicable to any of the texts that I study herein, no matter the kind of separatism

represented in a given work. All of these texts imply that separatism in general requires

"exclusion and othering" from the mainstream society and within the separatist community itself.

In *Paradise*, Deacon and Steward see Ruby as their chance to create an exclusively black—but

also capitalist and patriarchal—paradise, hence one meaning of the title; other characters and

events, however, seem to question the efficacy of and motivation behind their separatist model.

The New Fathers do *not* question it, and many critics have read their refusal to engage in self-

analysis or positive dialogue with the rest of the town as an inversion of the racism that they and

their fathers experienced.[9] Though Ruby's structure is more complicated than a label of

"reverse-racist" implies, the New Fathers often fail to reject the kind of oppressions that occur in

dominant America. As stated above, using this sort of failure as a narrative device is common in

these texts; perhaps more than the other works that I have studied, though, *Paradise* seems to

suggest that the absence of dialogue facilitates these kinds of failures. If so, we could assume that

the reverse might also be true—that embracing substantive discussion might help a community

to avoid mimicking the dominant community's oppressive practices and beliefs. This assumption

seems justified given Morrison's construction of the Convent community, which I will discuss

later in this chapter.

One way that these characters imitate, rather than revise, the oppressive tenets of

dominant society is through their perpetuation of male privilege. Widdowson writes, "For above

all, Ruby is a patriarchy" (329). In Ruby, men rule, particularly the Morgan brothers, in terms of

both economics and characters' interpersonal relationships. In their discussion of Fleet's

problems with moving his inventory, Deacon and his wife Soane exemplify Ruby's patriarchal

and capitalist stratifications.

> "I don't understand, Deek."
> "I do." He smiled up at her. "You don't need to."

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out. (107)

Deacon assumes Soane's lack of understanding reflects her ignorance or disinterest in economics, an ignorance he encourages by suggesting that his understanding suffices for both of them. On the other hand, Soane believes that Deacon should be willing to share his wealth with others in the community. Deacon does not share her concern with communal cohesion; he assumes that his idea of community—male dominated, economically competitive—is somehow natural and therefore inarguable. Capitulations to patriarchy and capitalism occur in several other works that I have studied. The gangs in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* and the religious community in *The Rapture of Canaan* all recreate, to some extent, a society of rampant capitalists, and all the communities that I have studied, save perhaps the female gangs examined chapter one, are constructed as patriarchal. The similarity of these constructions might indicate that capitalist excess and gender discrimination are all but inescapable problems in America, even within the confines of a separatist community. In terms of the passage above, Soane understands his meaning but not his motivations or his philosophy, while Deacon fails to understand her query at all; he believes that his capitalist outlook is above question, and that his patriarchal privilege excuses him from answering anyway.

Through passages like this, Morrison constructs Ruby as patriarchal and capitalist, even though both physical distance—Morrison writes that Ruby is ninety miles from any other community (8)—and racial ideology separate the town from dominant white culture and its laws. As Davidson states, "In Ruby no outside judicial force is wanted or needed" (356). The New Fathers—particularly Deacon and Steward—are the law. This is demonstrated when Fleet claims that he can "arrange [Arnette's] mind" (61). Though Arnette is only fifteen at the time and

therefore a minor, less conservatively patriarchal fathers might allow a daughter to have a say in her own fate. Fleet's dismissal of Arnette's agency echoes Herman's iron grip on female voices, sexuality, and lifestyle in *The Rapture of Canaan* and the Amish's "committee" approach to making decisions for individual members, particular women; these various representations indicate that more than one type of political concern—gender, race, class, and so on—usually helps determine who has power.

Other portions of this passage reveal the deep patriarchal assumptions in Ruby. For instance, Deek says that "Women always the key, God bless 'em" (61), though, since Ruby women are generally the catalysts for and objects of male action, his metaphor implies that men turn those keys. This whole scene, in which the Morgans are represented as more powerful than the economically challenged Fleetwoods, reflects the community-wide privileging of maleness and monetary power. As mentioned above, all the texts that I am studying construct capitalist patriarchy as a major aspect of dominant society and as an insidious entity within the separatist communities themselves. The separatist societies in each of these works question and (sometimes violently) resist this aspect of mainstream America, yet most of them produce social structures that seem comparably capitalist and patriarchal.

Furthermore, Ruby's citizens, as racial separatists, are obviously concerned with maintaining racial difference, through violence if necessary. The much-analyzed first two lines begin the novel's examination of racial difference: "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time" (3).[10] The first sentence underscores the difference between "they" and "the white girl." Once the woman from the dominant, rejected society has been shot, the men's purportedly cleansing violence can focus on removing the more dangerous element, that which has not been repudiated totally even in Ruby—other dissidents, some of whom challenge the

master narrative of the Fathers. This challenge from within is another narrative element common to the texts I am studying, as previous chapters have indicated; these artists seem to see internal conflict as inevitable.[11] In terms of the Convent, these dissidents are women and mostly nonwhite; within Ruby, they include much of the younger generation, lighter-skinned families, and newcomers like Reverend Misner. The 8-rock families, especially the men, work against those dissidents to maintain the town's alleged racial purity. Their main method for doing so is their continued refusal to engage in substantive and honest dialogue with the younger generation and with their own families. Continual silence and their constant referrals to the town's allegedly unchanging and sacrosanct master narrative maintain the stasis under which many of Ruby's residents find themselves increasingly dissatisfied.

Lighter-skinned black characters do come to Ruby on occasion, though the original 8-rock families reject—and sometimes outright exile—these characters. Deacon and Steward are, from childhood, trained to believe in the superiority of their town's 8-rock families in general and themselves in particular. In the passages detailing the "Grand Tours," Big Daddy travels, and eventually takes his sons, to other all-black towns. The contrast between the first and second tours on which the twins accompany Big Daddy demonstrates Haven's prosperity compared to towns that "looked like slave quarters" or that were "intoxicated with wealth" or "affecting sleep" (109). Other towns are dying, but Haven's "families shared everything, made sure no one was short" (108). This sense of economic and material community is absent in Ruby, as evidenced in Soane and Deacon's exchange quoted above; but Big Daddy's separatist philosophy, even to the point of excluding other African-Americans, remains. The citizens of Ruby have perpetuated Haven's sense of racial distrust while failing to mimic its solidarity in other areas. Morrison uses inversions like this to represent and interrogate a separatist philosophy

that simultaneously rejects and perpetuates dominant America's racism. Here she again echoes the other artists that I have studied; this example seems particularly similar to how Foxfire inverts their town's gender and economic problems with such violence that the gang dissolves under the strain of internal disagreements and police sanction. Ruby's citizens reject dominant society's racism by constructing a space in which black people hold power, and their excluding of whites from their town mimics racist community trends in which black people are relegated to the margins of a town or to certain neighborhoods within it.

But Ruby's racism does not begin and end with a rejection of white people. The New Fathers' privileging of 8-rock skin assumes that one kind of skin color makes a person more valuable, and somehow fitter for inclusion, than all others, and that this hierarchy even applies to different shades of blackness. This is another problem similar to issues discussed in previous chapters; in most of the communities represented in these texts, a character—Maddie in *Foxfire*, Ben in *The Rapture of Canaan*, Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*—fail some kind of test that determines whether or not they are separatist enough. Loyalty to the community's particular politics eventually becomes more important than whether or not the politics themselves are still relevant and positive forces in the life of the individual in question. In *Paradise*, as in most of the other texts under consideration herein, this situation dissatisfies some characters and leads others—here, specifically, Billy Delia—to leave the community entirely.

Morrison contrasts the structures and practices of patriarchal, racially exclusive Ruby with the gynocentric, racially diverse Convent. Although the Convent grounds are much more confined and limited than Ruby, and even though this society has a very small membership, Morrison constructs it as a separatist community in its own right, with its own sense of identity, its own politics, and its own set of internal fractures. As Phillip Page has argued, "The story of

the Convent is in some ways the reverse [of Ruby]—from chaotic fragmentation to a liberating

fusion . . . the five women move gradually and then rapidly toward individual and communal

harmony" (645). In the article "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American

Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's

Paradise," Katrine Dalsgard also reads the Convent as, in many ways, Morrison's anti-Ruby; she

writes, "It is true that, echoing the contrast so frequently recurring in her fiction between a

community defined by an authoritarian male culture, on the one hand, and a house of women

outcasts living on the community's margins, on the other, the Convent in important ways seems

to function as Morrison's ideal alternative" (243). It is important to note, though, that this

"alternative" that Page calls a "reverse" Ruby does not simply mirror dominant society. Instead,

the Convent offers a third social paradigm—a matriarchal, multicultural, and experiential society

that seems less concerned with money.

 As this contrast becomes clearer, we realize Ruby is a separate space in which one brand

of oppression is often exchanged for another, whereas the Convent women tend to reject

oppression and hierarchy. The Convent—as a separate, woman-centered space—recalls Oates's

construction of Foxfire's communal house, a place in which women can relate to each other

comparatively free of patriarchal interference. The Convent also echoes Foxfire's threat to

patriarchal communities, just as Ruby's violent response reflects Hammond's. Unlike in *Foxfire*

and *Set It Off*, though, *Paradise*'s Convent is destroyed not for its incursions into male spaces

and breaking of male-written laws—although the Convent women do both—but because its

separatist existence provides another, geographically close paradigm that seems more egalitarian

and less bound to the laws of tradition. This situation seems different from the cycles of

dominant/separatist violence represented in some of the other works that I have studied. In

Paradise, one separatist community commits violence against another because of a potential threat, suggesting that separatist insularity can actually become violent paranoia.

The women of the Convent represent several racial groups, liberal religious beliefs, alternate sexuality, and communal economics. In contrast, Ruby is a uniracial town in which darker shades of blackness are privileged, where comparatively small religious differences are barely tolerated, where heterosexuality and monogamy are rigidly enforced, and where a capitalist economy ensures the existence of a ruling class. Morrison does not construct Ruby as a firmly united town; its foundation is cracking under generational conflict, religious strife, and the 8-rocks' efforts to maintain power. These conflicts eventually turn outward, against the Convent women and the difference they represent. Here Morrison departs from the constructions of the other artists whose work I have examined. In their works, this kind of conflict turns inward or emanates from outside the separatist society's borders, as it does in *Witness*, *Set It Off*, and, in a sense, the Vietnam texts. Given this trend, Morrison's alternate narrative strategy, and the work of various critics who interpret Ruby as an inversion of dominant America, Ruby could actually be read as this text's dominant community, even though it is also a separatist town. To the New Fathers in *Paradise*, the Convent and the internal dissidents represent threats to their traditional power and control; they must eliminate such threats to save themselves, hence the constant narration and revision of their master narrative, the exiling of overt "troublemakers" like Billy Delia, and the attack on the Convent.

Morrison initially represents both spaces as outwardly cohesive and internally splintered—not much different from the other fictional separatist communities that I have previously considered. But utilizing two communities in one text allows the reader to compare their differing philosophies and methods. The conflicts within and between these communities

demonstrate how dominance and oppression are in negotiation, the most important questions being who holds power and how they choose to use it. Of course, these two communities negotiate in negative ways; rather than talking about their problems, they allow their issues to fester until they burst into violence. In these respects, *Paradise* suggests that separatism and/or isolation, while sometimes temporarily necessary, is not always a sufficient answer to America's divisive history, particularly the racial aspects.[12] As discussed above, separatism connotes insularity, which precludes the idea of inter-communal dialogue, and the authority figures in these communities reject any intra-community dialogue that might criticize the communal philosophy. In order to illustrate this point, it is helpful to examine how Morrison constructs internal conflicts within both Ruby and the Convent and then determine how she constructs the conflict between these two separatist spaces.

Ruby is allegedly united through racially separatist politics and dedication to historically determined values. Several conflicts, however, rupture this communal harmony. One such conflict is generational strife. Though the overt quarrel between the New Fathers and their children concerns the wording on the Oven, the subtextual battle is over the future of Ruby, not its past. The New Fathers interpret the "scripture" on the Oven as "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," while the younger generation believe the true interpretation is "Be the Furrow of His Brow"; eventually, another reading arises and is then physically transcribed on the Oven as graffiti: "We Are the Furrow of His Brow."[13] As the Oven is the accepted physical center of the community, its use as object of various interpretations suggests that the nature of Ruby itself is questionable and in constant re-negotiation.

Of course, any negotiation that transpires is against the New Fathers' wills and occurs as they try to silence any dissenting voices; this refusal to discuss alternate ideas permeates the

power structure of Haven and Ruby from the towns' foundings and continues throughout the course of *Paradise*'s present day narrative. Their rejection of any revisions of community rules and philosophies also echoes the attitudes of previously examined dictatorial characters—Reynolds's Herman and Oates's Legs Sadovsky, for instance—who demand unquestioning obedience to the laws of their respective societies.[14] Though the Oven is, in this sense, a site of both dialogic possibility and the rejection of that opportunity, it can also be a symbol of menace; Krumholz argues that "The Oven represents the dangers of utility made sacred, of useful choices repeated and sanctified as law, of necessity redefined as piety" (25). The Oven is, therefore, a site of interpretive fluctuation *and* the loss of interpretation, of negotiation, and of growth.[15]

As suggested above, the arguments over the motto are symbolic of Ruby's indeterminate, internally fractured nature. The New Fathers—a term referring to the original 8-rock males, particularly Deacon and Steward—use the Oven as both a reminder of the past and a central symbol of their new racially separate space. Morrison writes

> 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 . . . 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. (16)

This passage is replete with images of white dominance, such as forced miscegenation and lynching. Elizabeth Kella argues that "the images of saddles and posses in this inherited memory are anachronisms even in 1949" (213). These anachronisms are still powerful today, almost thirty years after the time in which the book is set.

The use of these images suggests that the foundings of Haven and Ruby are proactive responses to the equation "alone=dead." Ruby, like Haven, is built as a free, safe black space and

as a shield against "Out There," a way not only to avoid being alone but also to be with a like-minded, physically similar group in which one can be safe. Read in this way, the townspeople's "alone=dead" equation and its corollary, "out there=alone," is one way to describe each text that I am examining. Each community is formed to resist some kind of oppression *en masse*, yet the characters who form them do so out of an individual desire or need to belong somewhere. This is the Old Fathers' crucial need; it is also what the New Fathers passionately defend and sometimes exploit.

For these New Fathers, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" is both a warning and an instruction to Ruby's citizens. The word "beware" connotes an angry and vengeful force that may strike down the outsider encroaching on Ruby's separatist space and that demands fidelity to the traditions of the town. On the other hand, the younger generations' interpretation—"Be the Furrow of His Brow"—connotes activism, a creative enterprise. Widdowson argues that "The realist in Morrison does not resolve the dispute about the Oven's words, since both positions obtain in Ruby in the 1970s" (328). The simultaneous emphasis on past experience and present activism symbolizes both the fractures in this allegedly cohesive separatist community and different possibilities for truly uniting its citizens. In the later passages on the Convent women's loud dreaming, which I will discuss in more detail below, they too produce indeterminate writings; the difference is that they embrace these writings as expressions of their individualism, whereas the citizens of Ruby attempt to use the Oven's inscription as dogma for how they should live their lives.

The New Fathers claim their past experience gives them the right to rule the future; as Deacon says, "Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands . . . They dug the clay—not you. They carried the

hod—not you . . . you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect a row you never hoed" (85-86). The New Fathers believe that their memories of the town's founding make them the keepers of its traditions, even though their interpretation of the Oven's words is based on dubious evidence.[16] On the other hand, the younger generation sees their membership in the community as the reason that they should have a say in its maintenance; as Roy says, "It's our history too, sir. Not just yours" (86). Further, the younger generation interprets the word "Beware" as "To always be ducking and diving, trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down" (84). The youth see the warning in the New Fathers' interpretation as applicable to the town. On the other hand, the word "Be" refers to "being His instrument, His justice" (87). The debate seems irreconcilable; the New Fathers continue to demand respect for the past, while the youth state that "Any talk is 'backtalk' if you don't agree with what's being said" (85).[17]

This passage sums up how the lack of dialogue between characters applies to my study as a whole. Those in power see no need for dialogue and/or discourage revisions in the community's structure and philosophy, while those who lack power want to change Ruby by using their voices to express discontent. The authorities in these communities—Legs Sadovsky, Herman, the Amish council, military authorities, the New Fathers—try to enforce "the way things are," not encourage "the way things might be." In many ways, of course, this repression of alternative viewpoints is understandable, since subscribing to the established communal ideals is what keeps the community together. Morrison, however, establishes through the Convent that generative dialogue can actually bring a bickering community's members closer together. Comparing the two methods makes the New Fathers, and the other textual leaders that are

similarly constructed, seem even more reactionary. It also suggests that these communities sometimes fail not because they are separatist but because they are unwilling to evolve.

The Oven dispute demonstrates how Ruby fractures itself over the nature of its separatism; should it be a self-sufficient community shunning all outsiders or an activist space exemplifying black achievement? Morrison's own answer might be exemplified in Dovey's assertion that "Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile" (93). This passage suggests that neither the past nor the present alone holds the keys to Ruby's future. As Widdowson says, "What is at issue here is a theme Morrison had centred *Beloved* on: not just the *fact* of being freed from slavery, but what one does with the 'freed self': simultaneously, of not forgetting one's history and of not being imprisoned by it in a way that blocks the future" (327-28). The negotiation of this problem is at the heart of *Paradise* and its version of black separatism; in terms of how the generations are represented, Morrison seems to suggest that reactionary separatist stances like that of the New Fathers inhibit growth and possibility. This is especially enlightening when compared to the passages in which the Convent women free themselves from the various traumas that hamper their abilities to communicate and heal. This contrast indicates that Morrison seems to be exploring the issue of determination—what or who determines individual identity and the make-up of one's community, who has the right to alter that choice, and what the consequences might be if these initial definitions are considered sacrosanct.

Racism also divides Ruby. As an exclusively black community, Ruby exemplifies a kind of racial politics. As Widdowson says, in Ruby "the focus is exclusively on black experience, on black racism . . . on black (especially patriarchal) prejudice" (324). That in itself does not necessitate a racist community, as Morrison demonstrates in other novels; in *Tar Baby*, for

instance, Morrison constructs the all-black community of Eloe without stressing racial hatreds. In

Paradise, certain passages illustrate Ruby's often contradictory racial attitudes, including the

section in which a white family stops briefly in town. When the white people leave, the

following exchange occurs.

> "Who is all that?" asked Steward.
> "Just some lost folks." Anna handed him a thirty-two-ounce tin of Blue Boy.
> "Lost folks or lost whites?"
> "Oh, Steward, please."
> "Big difference, Anna girl. Big. Right, Reverend?" Misner was just stepping back in.
> "They get lost like everybody else," said Anna.
> "Born lost. Take over the world and still lost. Right, Reverend?"
> "You just contradicted yourself," Anna laughed.
> "God has one people, Steward. You know that." Misner rubbed his hands, then blew on them.
> "Reverend," said Steward, "I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance." (122-23, original emphasis)

Steward, one of the most powerful New Fathers, distinguishes between "folks" and

"whites," a discursive strategy that resembles historical white supremacist dehumanization of

nonwhite peoples. His issue with "God's one people" perhaps demonstrates his awareness of

America's racial hierarchies or his tactic of calling attention to those hierarchies in order to

challenge them. Yet the citizens of Ruby claim to be "one people," so his comment could also

reflect the divisions within the town. If this is so, then Steward, perhaps unconsciously, questions

Ruby's rhetoric of unity. Yet even in this passage Steward seems to reject the idea of substantive

dialogue; his tone as he discusses the "enemy" is smug, as if he already knows everything about

them and how his own people should read them. This willingness to generalize and quickly

dismiss alternate ideas places Steward in the same tradition as Legs Sadovsky and Herman—

leaders who refuse to listen to their followers and whose communities eventually fragment under

the weight of their monomania. This trend implies that dialogue is essential for a separatist community to thrive.

Another such divisive element in the novel is black-on-black racism. Morrison writes that

> [The original migrant families'] horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. (189)

This passage suggests that inversion of the Disallowers' color prejudice may be even more prevalent in Ruby than hatred of whites. The nine original 8-rock families—"Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood, and both DuPres families" (188)—have been slowly disappearing; one reason is the aforementioned intraracial hatred that is so much a part of Ruby's structure and history. This is perhaps best exemplified in Pat Best's amateur genealogy. Writing of her own father's history, she says, "[The New Fathers] hate us because she [Pat's mother] looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me" (196). One of these children, Pat's own daughter Billy Delia, is shunned because at age three she pulls her panties down in the street; Pat believes that "had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her" (203). This double standard inverts the racism of the Disallowers; in Ruby, the darkest skin symbolizes privilege.

The Christmas pageant in which the Disallowing is reconstructed epitomizes Ruby's complex patterns of concurrent self-adulation and self-hatred, as well as the New Fathers' refusal to engage in dialogue. The number of founding families represented is, at present, down to seven. Examining this situation, Pat eventually realizes that skin color is the organizing element in Ruby's hierarchy; "Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality" (217). This call for

racial purity in a separate geography is intended to preserve Ruby's existence; however, it results in stagnation and the rebellion of the younger generation. Similarly, Maddie Wirtz, Ninah Huff, and Rachel Lapp speak out against the reactionary leaders of their communities and find themselves exiled, isolated, and chastised, respectively. These representations help demonstrate that allegedly rejected types of oppression can creep back into a separatist community.

Morrison also constructs Ruby's patriarchal nature as internally problematic. Krumholz argues that the gender schism reflects different definitions of what the town should be: "The New Fathers of Ruby want a paradise of continuity, stability, and immortality, whereas the women of Ruby and the Convent envision a haven of travel, transformation, birth, death, and rebirth" (25). The town, of course, relies on the guidance of the Old and New Fathers, yet nowhere in the novel do the inhabitants of the town refer with such reverence to any mother.[18] Even the name of the town reflects its patriarchal paternalism; the name "Ruby" comes from Deacon and Steward's sister, and only because she is, for most of the novel, the only person to have died in the town's history. They honor one woman (not women in general) in a cosmetic way.

Though Morrison writes of them as more or less united against the liberal Convent women, the women of Ruby are well aware of their secondary social status. Widdowson argues that "[Morrison] presents the wives and daughters of the main families as . . . complicit in the general ideology of Ruby: conservative, god-fearing, respectable, proud" (331). Read in this way, the women of Ruby are both conservative and feminist, in a broad sense of the term—quick to point out, at least to themselves, the faults of the men, but equally quick to defend the borders of Ruby against outsiders in general and the (female) threat of the Convent in particular.[19] This is

another characteristic of the various fictional communities that I have studied; these artists write their characters as willing to bicker internally yet defensive of their separatist allies.

Pat Best, characterized as one of the most perceptive people in town, knows that "everything that worries [the men] must come from women" (217). Ostensibly, this passage refers to the New Fathers' zeal for a purely 8-rock community. However, it could also reflect traditional attitudes regarding the importance of clear paternity to the continuation of family privilege and power; at the same time, it reminds us of the historical fear of women's deconstructing this male privilege through infidelity. This reference to outmoded patriarchal obsessions and the fact that, in Ruby, infidelity to the community includes marrying lighter-skinned blacks together demonstrate the town's stagnating over-dependence on history and tradition. Furthermore, the fact that Lone and some of the other female characters attempt to stop the men's attack on the Convent proves that these women can be proactive and that traditional patriarchy is not universally supported in Ruby. These characters' acts of agency, along with Pat's dissatisfaction with male dominance,[20] reveal another fissure in the Old Fathers' patriarchal vision.

Ruby's women help rewrite the history of the Convent attack after the fact, even though they do not condone—and, in some cases, actually try to stop—the attack itself. These representations of female agency in Ruby suggest that the women's responsibilities to themselves and each other are often at odds with their roles in the community. Such conflicts between individual concerns and fealty to the community are never truly resolved in the novel, perhaps an implication that such problems are always being renegotiated, even in communities that discourage dialogue. If so, this perhaps gives us an alternate way of reading the less hopeful or even more ambiguous endings of the other texts examined in this study; whether a work ends

on a seemingly hopeful note, as *The Rapture of Canaan* does, or whether it ends with violence

and isolation, as in *Set It Off*, the very act of demanding that their voices be recognized suggests

that these characters, and people like them, can eventually find a way to belong.

A final iteration of communal fracturing in Ruby hinges upon the religious schism in the

town, particularly how the two ministers align themselves within the generational conflicts.

Though this seems to have little to do with religion *per se*, many critics have read the

Disallowing as master narrative and/or as conflated with the story of the birth of Christ.

Reverend Misner—an outsider, born neither in Ruby nor to 8-rock parents—is sympathetic to the

younger generation; in the argument over the Oven's words, he reminds the New Fathers that

"We're here not just to talk but to listen too" (85). His willingness to listen to dissimilar points of

view differentiates him from Reverend Pulliam, the older minister, who claims that the young

people's words are "more like backtalk than talk" (85). Like the other men of his generation,

Pulliam is unwilling to question traditional values and practices. Misner's more liberal view—his

willingness to consider other interpretations of the Oven's words and, therefore, of Ruby's

raison d'etre—make him untrustworthy to the New Fathers. Rob Davidson puts the point more

succinctly: "[Misner's] socially progressive ideas are part of the problem" (357). Misner's

presence reminds the characters (and the reader) that these "socially progressive ideas" do indeed

exist, even in a community so concerned with the status quo.

Misner also represents another narrative device common to many of these texts—the

character who voices the need and desire for change within the community. Oates's Maddy,

Gray's Stony and Tisean, Weir's Rachel, Reynolds's Ninah and Nanna, O'Brien's Tim O'Brien

character, and *The Deer Hunter*'s Michael all serve this function to some extent, although not as

comprehensively or as consistently as Misner does in *Paradise*. Still, the relatively widespread

use of this character type may suggest that such a person will inevitably emerge within separatist spaces. Misner's valuation of discourse makes him an ally of the women and the younger generation. When the New Fathers and Reverend Pulliam attempt to shut down discussions about the Oven, Misner advocates open dialogue and the consideration of multiple interpretations; this stance implies that Misner sees Ruby as a community that should be open to re-definition.

Misner also values tradition, but he advocates the study of Africa, rather than of the Old Fathers' dogma. This reminds the other characters, as well as the reader, that alternate histories can be valuable to the community. Just as importantly, he does not condone making the past a sacred, unassailable master narrative. Misner says that "We live in the world, Pat. The whole world. Separating us, isolating us—that's always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future" (210). Reverend Pulliam sees divinity in Ruby's patriarchal,[21] sometimes racist mission, whereas Misner sees the flaws in the town, knowing that only by existing in the "whole world" can the people of Ruby avoid the mistakes of the past. When Misner expresses his horror at the Convent massacre, he rejects violence as a means of rebuffing the "whole world" and its influences.

The discourse between Pat Best and Reverend Misner reveals different ways of understanding black separatism. Ruby, the "paradise" in which the New Fathers intend to lock themselves and their succeeding generations, insists on racial stratification, phallocentrism, the wisdom of age, and the purity of tradition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rejection of evolution exacerbates the very conflicts that the New Fathers want to prevent. Their stubborn, reactionary refusal to change with the times further angers the young people of Ruby and the economically disenfranchised townspeople, as these groups realize that the New Fathers' resistance is in many ways grounded in a desire to keep their own privileges. Whereas Pat Best and Misner debate the

history and the future of Ruby, the New Fathers refuse to allow any voice to be heard except their own, which merely repeat the Old Fathers' dogma. Therefore, as the outside world changes, Ruby remains static. As Krumholz argues, "In Ruby, the attempt to retain an ideal of purity and righteousness, to repeat the past without change, creates the greatest changes of all: Communal spirit shifts to individual acquisitiveness, old interpretations and memories are authorized to squelch dialogue and dissent, and values rigidify into repressive dogma" (27).

Over time, the town becomes exclusive and in-bred, and, in some respects, black supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist. These various fractures suggest that many of Ruby's citizens are unfulfilled in some ways, given that racial, gender, experiential, and economic hierarchies still exist. This lack of fulfillment could well indicate a lingering stake in whatever is "Out There"—i.e., not Ruby. The New Fathers' recognition of this, and of the fact that the Convent is the nearest place "Out There," is another reason why they view the Convent as a threat that must be removed. This fear of outside contagion is also prominent in the works of Oates, Reynolds, and Weir; in each of these texts, the separatist community's narrow philosophy creates dissatisfaction and nudges individual characters to what the separatist authorities fear the most—seeking better fulfillment "Out There." The Convent women, on the other hand, eventually embrace the world beyond their borders and discover that it can be part of their healing, not just the setting for all their problems.

Initially, the Convent is not represented as a perfect or even viable community; in fact, though Morrison juxtaposes the Convent and Ruby in many ways, their internal problems are strikingly similar. The Convent is itself a separatist community. It is not an officially recognized town like Ruby; instead, the Convent echoes other representations of unofficial community such as Oates's Foxfire house and Reynolds's religious compound. Unlike Ruby, the Convent's

citizens have no shared history (save, perhaps, certain general characteristics like abusive

relationships or disappointment). These women are sexually adventurous, at least when

compared to the citizens of Ruby, and are not religious in any easily recognizable way. These

differences catalyze the conflicts between the two communities. Nevertheless, the two spaces

share many similar problems that manifest themselves in different ways.

For instance, the Convent suffers from a serious internal conflict regarding how history

affects the present and how each generation should relate to the other.[22] The histories of both the

Convent and its inhabitants are complex and potentially problematic. Originally constructed as a

mansion for an embezzler who was subsequently arrested, the Convent later earns its name when

several nuns convert the house to a school for Native American girls. This movement from an

object of carnal, secular vanity to one of sacred utility marks the Convent as a place of change,

that greatest threat to the reactionary New Fathers of Ruby. In terms of this study, this also

demonstrates the unusual nature of the Convent; the other separatist communities I have

examined actively discourage change through rhetoric, exile, and/or violence. For the reader, this

juxtaposition of the Convent's multifaceted history and Ruby's singular master narrative

highlights one difference between the two spaces, even as similar types of conflict about their

respective histories divide each community against itself.

In *Paradise*'s present day, the Convent is home to several women who represent different

aspects of mainstream dominance and oppression. Connie, of course, is already living in the

Convent, having been brought there as a child by Sister Mary Magna; as a child she experiences

the perils of economic hardship, but as an adult in the Convent she almost seems to pre-exist the

kind of trouble that the rest of the women encounter. When Mary Magna dies, both Connie and

the Convent lose the last living tie to their respective pasts, forcing Connie to remake herself and

her physical space. She does this both in spite of and for the sake of the other women. What aspects of dominance and oppression might these other women represent? Mavis is haunted because she has failed in all her traditional roles: mother, daughter, and wife. Only in the company of the other displaced women can Mavis find a role for herself independent of these traditions. She rejects historical definitions of gender roles and finds, in the Convent's separatist sisterhood, a supportive space in which she can re-imagine herself. Her in-house rival, Gigi (also named Grace), arrives in Ruby looking for a mythical rock formation in the shape of "A man and a woman fucking forever" (63). This carnal image reflects Gigi's own sexual adventurousness and contrasts with Mavis's anti-sexual representation.

Sex also lies at the heart of the other women's troubles, which is perhaps why the Convent appeals to them; Convents are, after all, supposed to be sexless spaces. Betrayal forces Pallas into the Convent when her mother sleeps with Pallas's lover, Carlos. This relationship represents for her the corruption of love and of family; at the Convent, she discovers a surrogate family and mother, as well as a sexual adventurousness that heralds a new beginning for her. Seneca comes from an equally complicated life. Her boyfriend in prison, her most recent job as plaything for a rich woman, she finds the Convent accidentally. Yet she remains there, the self-described peacemaker between Gigi and Mavis.

Connie takes care of Mary Magna as if this woman were Mother in biological fact as well as title. When Mary Magna dies, Connie becomes surrogate mother to the other Convent women. Born outside the United States, Connie is in many ways an outsider—alien by birth, oddity by her association with the Convent. Her past affair with Deacon anticipates Gigi's dalliances with K.D., Steward and Dovey's son; Connie's subsequent sexless existence echoes Mavis' post-marriage life. Her vulnerability to the pain of love reflects Pallas' own, and her desire for peace

is akin to Seneca's. Connie is perhaps the only separatist leader in any of these texts who embodies the individual traits of her followers; she is not simply the dictator, the leader, or the figurehead who represents abstract ideas like feminist resistance or religious piety. It is perhaps their awareness of how various aspects of Connie manifest in the other women's personalities that causes Deacon and Steward in particular to attack the Convent. Connie is, after all, a living embodiment of the threat of Out There; as Steward believes, "How off the course Deek slid when he was looking in those poison and poisoning eyes . . . Steward seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they owed and promised the Old Fathers" (279). Connie and the women who follow and resemble her represent the threat of contagion to the New Fathers. Put another way, their shared support system, acceptance of difference, and sexual adventurousness present to the citizens of Ruby another, less restrictive way to be a separatist, an option not present in the other works except in the voices of the dissatisfied individual characters.

The Convent women also share similar first-hand experiences with oppression and pain, even though those experiences are cast in very different locales and situations. As Elizabeth Kella writes, "Morrison suggests that the personal traumas which the women reenact have their roots in the abuses of patriarchal and racist power" (222). Widdowson concurs: "Social flotsam and jetsam the women may be . . . but the one thing they have in common is mistreatment by a society largely governed by male prerogatives, so that the Convent is truly a *retreat* for them" (330, original emphasis).[23] All of these characters see the Convent as a geographical space in which the old history can be erased, a different future built. Their ideas on what that future should be, however, are very different, as evidenced in the constant battles between Mavis and Gigi. Similar conflicts arise in every fictional community under consideration in this study, but

no other community allows every member to voice his or her viewpoint without fear of censure. For the New Fathers, acceptance of dialogue, which they have utterly rejected, is bewildering and dangerous. Mavis's and Gigi's conflict and its similarity to Ruby's generational strife threaten the New Fathers, who believe that Ruby is unique, "the one all-black town worth the pain" (5) because of its isolated geography, separatist politics, and unique historiography. Therefore, in spite of their internal strife, the women embody the New Fathers' worst fears—the realization that a separatist community of mostly nonwhite women can exist and, more to the point, thrive without their patriarchal and capitalist authority guiding it. Therefore, the women's histories further problematize their own relationships in their separatist, revisionist space and how Ruby's powerful perceive them.

The Convent women's initial dissatisfaction with themselves and with dominant society echoes the insular and oppressed situation of Ruby's women. The Convent, however, is a space wherein change is not only possible but encouraged. Because the women's changes are represented positively and in contrast to Ruby's stagnation, Morrison seems to privilege the Convent women's mutability, rather than the New Fathers' stagnant reactionism and the Ruby women's complicity. If this privileging does occur, it can perhaps be extended to the communities themselves. And since the unchanging communities of the other texts tend to fragment or dissolve completely, embracing communal evolution seems to be a positive and necessary step in separatist community formation.

Yet even if we read the text in this way, and even though the Convent lacks many of Ruby's internal problems—religious arguments, familial disputes, issues of who is in power and why, conflicts between men and women—the Convent is constructed as problematic in its own ways. A generation gap, philosophical differences, questions over the "proper" roles of women,

an inability to see how their choices will be "read" by others in the community—these problems mark the Convent as disunified. As Kella argues, "the women's space of the Convent is presented not as inherently good, but as a product of a certain type of endeavor" (229).[24] This endeavor is the attempt to build a separate space of their own in which they can move beyond the various constraints of their pasts. Perhaps the most positive difference between the Convent and Ruby is the Convent's more balanced, egalitarian structure. This communal revisionism eventually manifests more personally, in the women's changing identities and ways of healing their personal traumas; the medium for this change is, of course, substantive and empathetic dialogue, or Loud Dreaming. Their communal and personal mutability contrasts with Ruby's stasis. By paralleling these two separatist spaces in these particular ways, Morrison represents as more sympathetic the imperfect community that is willing to evolve.

In terms of allowing the reader to explore these kinds of ideas, the most effective strategy Morrison uses is her decision to write these spaces into open conflict. Much as the Convent and Ruby suffer due to the lingering specter of patriarchy, so does the conflict between the two communities center, in many ways, on gender assumptions and certain characters' repudiation of traditional roles. The patriarchal town sees the Convent and its inhabitants as unnatural. The novel's opening section immediately reveals this idea: "[The men] reached the Convent just seconds before the sun did and had a moment to see and register for all time how the mansion floated, dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth" (18). The descriptions of the Convent's decoration further these "unearthly" images, suggesting to the attackers paganism and sacrilege.[25] Intent upon repudiating any possible connection with this community of women, the men fail to acknowledge that being "disconnected" is part of Ruby's *raison d'etre* as well. As Krumholz writes, "Clearly the lack of this kind of insight [what she calls 'the ability to see the

self in the other and the other in the self"] motivates the men of Ruby to scapegoat the women at the Convent" (30). In this way, Morrison uses problems with men's inscribing their own interpretations on female space to reveal the hypocrisy in much of Ruby's separatist philosophy.

The Convent women, on the other hand, are willing to accept different lifestyles and ideologies. The women act as nurses and psychologists to Ruby's populace, thereby often seeing the townspeople at their most vulnerable moments. Though the women do occasionally come into Ruby proper, as they do during K.D. and Arnette's wedding party, it is far more common for the people of Ruby to go to them—for help, as several citizens do; for peppers, an economic concession that even some of the New Fathers make; for lovers, as both Deacon and K.D. do, demonstrating a perceived weakness in the Morgan family's men; and for friendship, as Soane does in the wake of Deek's affair with Connie. Ruby's need for these women contradicts its myth of self-sufficient separatism; that those they depend on are women constitutes a further threat to the patriarchal New Fathers.[26] The Convent, a space of healing/social revision/threat, is reminiscent of Oates's Foxfire house and the garage in which the female gang congregates in Gray's *Set It Off*; and, like these other female characters, the Convent women find that their perceived threat to male dominance will not be tolerated.

Ruby is, then, a patriarchal, capitalist, often black supremacist society, while the Convent is matriarchal, a haven away from Haven/Ruby, and a space in which the Convent women feel safe from "Out There." These differences might be threat enough to cause the New Fathers to act. Yet the two communities conflict in other ways, such as through the sexuality of the characters. In Ruby, sexuality—especially any public manifestation of female sexuality—is discouraged and suppressed, as happens with Billy Delia. In the Convent, female sexuality is equally complicated. As Morrison juxtaposes how these two communities view female sexuality,

she reveals more of Ruby's failures to account for the needs and desires of all its citizens; Mavis and Gigi are eventually able to come to terms with themselves and each other, while Billy Delia can find peace only by leaving Ruby. Ironically, the New Fathers' insistence on communal stasis and patriarchal values makes "Out There" more appealing, at least to Billy Delia.

The women who remain in or near Ruby constitute both potential threats to and possible victims of the New Fathers; this is particularly true of the Convent women as they become less individualistic. Krumholz argues that "women embody the threat of change to men" (26). This becomes particularly true in the Convent, an evolving women's community. Though many of the abuses the women have suffered were both sexualized and violent—Mavis's grim sex life, Pallas's rape, Seneca's acts of self-penetration with her knives—these characters eventually discover, through Connie's teaching, a new way of using their bodies as text to initiate and sustain a positive and generative dialogue. This lesson is the Loud Dreaming, the ritualistic healing act through which Connie leads the rest of the women to unity, peace, and understanding of their individual selves. Connie is an absent presence for most of the novel; she is isolated, separated even from her fellow separatists. Eventually, though, she becomes an active force in the lives of these women who come to the Convent running from oppression and abuse. Choosing this new role, Connie says, "If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). At first this declaration sounds prescriptive. But the characters, and the readers, of this novel soon find that Connie's lessons will differ from the structured patriarchal discourse of Ruby.

Unlike the well-defined and well-defended borders of Ruby, the Convent is constructed as a place of unstructured comings and goings, another first for the fictional communities that I am examining. In fact, as she begins to teach Loud Dreaming to the other women, Connie says,

"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. Someone could want to meet you" (262). This statement provides the women a chance to reconnect with the dominant community without fear of reprisal, another original characteristic. In Ruby, contact with "Out There" is at best granted begrudgingly, as it is in most of the fictional communities I have studied, even in the loosely-defined experiential communities of veterans in *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter*. In those texts, though, the individuals themselves are the ones who begrudge contact. In Ruby, the New Fathers encourage isolation; in the Convent, the women are free to do as they please. The aforementioned passage therefore hints at unknown future possibilities, something for which the historically determined future of Ruby leaves little room. The Convent is a separate space in which change is actually possible.

Through Connie, Morrison also represents possibility as existing in the realms of spirit and of body. Connie says, "My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him" (263). Having thus represented the binaries of spirit and body, Connie then problematizes the concept of binary opposites: "Never break them in two. Never put one over the other" (263). This speech occurs after Connie symbolically paints silhouettes around each woman's body, in a position chosen by the individuals themselves. This is the first step in reclaiming their spiritual and bodily agencies. As Page writes, "The templates . . . become self-representations through which they are able to gain much-needed perspective on themselves and each other. Getting outside their hitherto closed, self-destructive egos enables them to see themselves, to interpret themselves, and thereby to begin to cure themselves . . . achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony" (642). Similarly, Kella writes,

"Through the templates, and in the text of *Paradise*, victimhood is simultaneously claimed and left behind . . . Through the social practice of empathy and dialogue, the way they think about their bodies, their identities, and their experiences changes" (224).

For my purposes here, the most important idea is that their individual healing leads to communal harmony. Rather than replay another version of the particular traumas in their pasts, the women share their variant histories, thus merging and healing their individual traumas through dialogic community. As Morrison writes, "In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love" (264). The singular voice becomes plural, the individual and broken women a part of the cacophonous group healing. Eventually the women decorate their "templates," inscribing on these surrogate selves the pain of their histories: "Later on, when [Seneca] had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor" (265). This shared healing process and the surrogate bodies they have drawn on the floor eventually take on a kind of reality: "They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (265). The result of this group therapy is that "unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266) because, through the power of their connections to each other, they have represented, particularized, come to terms with, and begun to move past their individual traumatic histories.

This passage helps illustrate the power of narrative in community formation and in healing individuals' traumas, an idea disseminated in the other texts that I have previously examined. The act of loud dreaming is sensual, if not overtly sexual; in a scene that recalls Oates's description of the Foxfire initiation ceremony, the naked women lie on the floor and reveal themselves to each other, inscribing their pain on the floor of the Convent, taking charge

of their discordant histories. As Kella writes, "Through their collective effort, the Convent women construct individual and communal selves which Morrison suggests are authentic— whole rather than ontologically wounded selves that exercise responsible agency" (226). This use of a surrogate body-as-text allows the women to revisit their historical traumas without succumbing to them. Here Morrison echoes other artists' narrative strategy of having their characters use an unusual kind of text to reclaim their voices—Foxfire's tattoos, Maddy's written history, Ninah's quilts, O'Brien's storytelling.

In contrast, the people of Ruby live continuously with and in the past, so much so that the future is in jeopardy. "Responsible agency" is constantly deferred to the values of their master narrative; and in some senses they stagnate because they deny other non-racial aspects of being such as female sexuality and sensuality. Female trauma—social oppression, but also infertility, inbreeding with all its inherent problems, and isolation—is ignored and, therefore, festering. The way they deny these problems is, of course, by refusing to talk about them; the New Fathers seem to hate dialogue even more than outsiders. In the history of Haven and Ruby, little dialogue occurs; the New Fathers reject any discussion of change, citing the allegedly sacrosanct master narrative of the Old Fathers. Whereas the Convent is a woman-centered space wherein trauma is overcome through a communal sharing of burdens, the New Fathers of Ruby fixate on overcoming the town's historical racial traumas while perpetuating gender and economic oppressions. Even though their determination to protect their separate racial space is understandable, their determination to defend and perpetuate their personal powers and privileges is represented—and, I would argue, read—less sympathetically.

The Convent's more liberal views of the female body conflict openly with Ruby's patriarchal gender codes. Moreover, Morrison complicates this dispute over physicality through

the Connie/Deacon relationship. He is a New Father; she is the Convent's New Mother. In their relationship she wants to "eat him"; he is unable to control his sexual urges. One historical aspect of patriarchal gender conceptions that Morrison uses here is casting women in the roles of temptresses. Yet Morrison complicates this issue by writing Deacon as an equal temptation to Connie. This decision makes the reader more aware of the complex gender roles that the novel explores and of the New Fathers' oversimplification of those roles; for the characters, this situation has more specific implications. Connie and Deacon's relationship threatens the purity of Ruby's racial stock because Connie is not an 8-rock but can still have children. Thus Connie acts, in the New Fathers' eyes, as temptress for one of their own, as threat to their purity, and as leader of a separatist, revisionist community that often appeals to Ruby's citizens more than the town itself.

The Convent's comparative diversity also represents a threat to Ruby's separatist vision of racial purity. The book's opening lines tell us that one of the women is white; this likely elicits reader curiosity over which girl is white and what racial/ethnic background the others claim. However, Morrison takes care in the novel to say little that could easily categorize any of these women as belonging to any particular race. She frustrates our curiosity, perhaps to deconstruct the sort of racial categorizations that the opening lines invoke or to remind us that constructions of race are both of prime importance to the founding of these communities and an obstacle for the characters to overcome. Connie is from South America, not the deep American south of the 8-rocks. Therefore, though she is a person of color, she is likely not a person of the right color for the New Fathers of Ruby. She is dark enough for Deacon to justify having a sexual relationship with, but not "pure" enough, in their minds, to consider as a permanent partner; she

is certainly not descended from 8-rock stock. Connie and the Convent's diverse all-female populace remind the New Fathers of "impure" reproductive potential.

But in many ways, the Convent and Ruby are represented comparably. In addition to the aforementioned similarities, both the Convent women and the Old Fathers are Disallowed. The New Fathers think of the women as "detritus" and "throwaway people" (4); the Disallowers, given their actions, might have applied such a definition to the Old Fathers. The New Fathers are both aware and afraid of similarities between the Convent and Ruby; in their eyes, the Convent—with its less structured and less limiting paradigm—represents a threat because it shows how things might have been done in Ruby, where even the possibility of difference is dangerous. In other cases, they publicly affirm, and in some cases even seem to believe, that the Convent represents everything Ruby rejects. These contradictory beliefs and the New Fathers' refusal to discuss and perhaps understand them lead to the final, violent conflict between the two communities. The positive changes in the Convent and the violence that results from Ruby's lack of dialogue and reactionary politics suggest that open discourse and a willingness to evolve are perhaps the first steps in healing historical traumas, including those resulting from racial, gender, economic, and experiential oppressions.

Paradise represents the seductions and the dangers of two distinct variations of separatism—the racial and experiential separatism of Ruby and the woman-centered, diverse, experientially traumatized separatism of the Convent women. The Convent—the space in which the past is not forgotten, but is instead used to create a more promising present and future— seems the more positively constructed space. It certainly seems freer, both in terms of its communal structure—not patriarchal, not racist, not classist—and because its individual members are able to heal themselves through community, rather than give up their individuality

for community. In Ruby, on the other hand, disagreement with the historical master narrative is treason. *Paradise* demonstrates how this suppression of growth and change can be dangerous to both community and individual, an idea that I also read into the other texts that I have considered. No matter what kind of separatism a given artist represents in his or her work, they all seem more sympathetic to those characters who embrace a more open, less stubbornly dogmatic separatist philosophy.

By novel's end, Ruby has not self-destructed as Oates's Foxfire does, nor has it been destroyed, as is the *Set It Off* gang, nor has it been forced to conform—outwardly, at least—with the dominant community, as are the veterans in O'Brien's and Cimino's texts. Like Reynolds, Morrison chooses to end her novel at a more uncertain point—the first moments when the community's rulers accept the possibility of change. Historically, the town has always been willing to change, as long as any revision reifies the core values of the master narrative. The town's revision of the master narrative itself—manifested in the revisions of the Christmas narrative and the ways that certain families are written out for perceived crimes against Ruby's racial purity—become acts with both positive and negative consequences. Much has been made of how Ruby—including its women[27]—rewrites the history of the Convent attack.[28] This willingness to rewrite history for the sake of the community's self-image demonstrates the hypocrisy in Ruby, but at least it also allows for the possibility of positive change.

Though obviously still problematic, the ways in which the town rewrites the Convent massacre seem different from the more reactionary revisions of the Christmas story. The most pragmatic of the interpretations comes from Pat Best, who sees the attack for what it is: a way for the New Fathers to display and further solidify their power.

> What she withheld from [Misner] was her own [version of the events]: that nine
> 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not

8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they *could*—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the "deal" required. (297, original emphasis)[29]

As for the rest of the town, other stories circulate. One reflects Ruby's use of their almost religious terror of the Convent to deny that any murder takes place at all: "nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air" (296). This narrative recalls Maddie Wirtz's recounting the legend of Foxfire's last moment and Legs's alleged survival, as well as Mary Ann's disappearance into the jungles of Vietnam in O'Brien's "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Characters in these works about separatist communities refuse to believe that death is final for their respective societies' archetypal figures, even as they admit the need for revising those figures' visions for what the separatist experience could and should be. Again, evolution is key.

The other describes how the women attacked the men first and then fled. This description casts the murders as self-defense, though the characters who make this claim also limit the story's credibility by saying that they witnessed, but did not participate in or stop, the act (296-97). Morrison tells us that, no matter which version a family subscribes to, "people were changing it to make themselves look good" (297). As Dalsgard writes, "like the story of the Oven, the story of the massacre emerges as intangible and not susceptible to one final meaning" (243). *Paradise*, as well as the other texts in which the communities or individual characters face uncertain fates, seems to represent indeterminate meanings and lack of narrative closure as functions of evolution.

The wide-scale revisions of the tale and the ways in which the concerns of individual families become paramount over a unified version of events further imply that Ruby may finally

be evolving. Morrison leaves her separatist community intact and still isolated from dominant society; however, each family now has its own concerns, suggesting that Ruby is moving toward a less stratified, less historically obsessed separatism. Widdowson feels that the novel "[offers] the possibility of a transformed future" (328) by refusing to sanction either separatism or violence as an answer in the present.[30] Page suggests that "the raid resembles a fortunate fall" (644). As with the Biblical Fall, Page reads the problematic attack on the Convent as a backward step necessary to Ruby's eventual forward progress; the shock of seeing how far the New Fathers will go to protect their community and their privilege catalyzes in some characters the aforementioned willingness to consider new ideas. This reading again locates Ruby's status as positive community in the future, if not the present.[31]

Deacon's confession to Reverend Misner further underscores the possibilities for healing through dialogue. Page argues that Deacon's "near one-ness" with his brother Steward reflects Ruby's dependence on its master narrative; therefore, "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). This reading is doubly sound considering that Deacon and Steward, as the most successful and dominant New Fathers, often symbolize the town itself. That Deacon—and Ruby—experience what Page calls a "liberating fragmentation" (645) suggests further that hope for the future lies at least partially in internal dialogue and constructive changes. Deacon—a New Father, a member of the assault team, and an economic leader of separatist Ruby—not only acknowledges his mistakes but also does so to Misner, the new generation's authority figure. This acknowledgment of other voices and viewpoints furthers the notion that Ruby is changing for the better.[32] As Dalsgard argues, Deacon's confession and Misner's reply "renders hope that salvation will be available . . . to this central perpetrator of

Ruby's exceptionalism" (245).[33] Morrison's novel suggests, through these constructions, that a community needs open discourse, communal empathy with individual trauma, and a willingness to move past those hurtful experiences in order to survive. Ruby demonstrates how the lack of discourse and empathy can actually fragment a community and cause it to stagnate; but the last sections of the novel imply that it is never too late to accept change and new possibilities.

In *Paradise*, as Krumholz argues, "Morrison . . . does not attempt to nail down the answers to the nature of gender, race, humanity, or divinity; instead she tries to open them up, to challenge simple or singular definitions" (26). Texts like Morrison's seem to propose a similar rethinking of narrowly-defined separatism as a response to such problems. The Convent is a separatist community that eventually accepts its component differences—religious, gendered, sexual, racial, experiential. The women there do not focus on one aspect of their identities and ignore or continue to repress all the others. Ruby, on the other hand, focuses so much on 8-rock purity that many other issues fester—some even related to race and skin color. But even though it takes a violent act to awaken Ruby's citizens to the need for change, that awakening is itself a positive step. As Page argues, "That the town is given a second chance and that the five Convent women transcend death suggests the presence of divine love in this novel" (646). Morrison never represents Ruby or the Convent in Utopian terms. Instead, she writes both communities as struggling to come to terms with difference, with trauma, and with the fact that their fears often hamper their opportunities to grow. And, much as both separatist groups learn from the dominant community what not to do, so do they learn from each other in both positive and negative ways. These separatist communities therefore become sites of open-ended possibility—for the characters and for the reader.

END NOTES

[1] The history of black separatism in America does not, of course, begin in the twentieth century. For a more thorough treatment of black separatist history than I can provide here, see works such as Raymond L. Hall's 1977 compilation *Black Separatism and Social Reality: Rhetoric and Reason.*

[2] Widdowson points out that neither Amendment was worded specifically to include *women* of any race.

[3] Perhaps the best source of Exoduster history is Nell Irvin Painter's book *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction.*

[4] In her article, Dalsgard uses the term "exceptionalist," which seems close in meaning to "separatist." Dalsgard writes, "Showing the many rejections suffered by the community's founding families during their original search for a home to be the primary impetus behind their founding of Haven as a separate community, she suggests that, in its origins, African American nationalism—no matter of what its hue—must necessarily be articulated on oppositional grounds. Hence, despite its European origins, the African American exceptionalist discourse she discerns is a counter-discourse that works in the service of a separate black nation" (237). Dalsgard points out that the novel's dependence on this concept does not necessarily mean that Morrison believes in what her characters do and say (236).

[5] The New Fathers include "Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edward Sands and Pat's father, Roger Best, who was the first to violate the blood rule" (Morrison 194-95). The Old Fathers were the original patriarchs of Haven.

[6] Though exactly what leads to Haven's destruction remains fairly ambiguous, the novel does provide some clues. In the "Ruby" chapter, Morrison writes, "Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why [the men from Ruby] are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). The reference to the year 1934 might imply that some of Haven's populace took part in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, which would have weakened Haven's ideology of self-sufficiency. Subsequent passages reveal that Haven's population continued to dwindle until the men who would become the New Fathers abandoned Haven (Morrison 6-7). These passages reveal that the men of Ruby have seen the failure of their own fathers' idealism; yet they also demonstrate that Ruby is an attempt to preserve those separatist ideals. The New Fathers totally reject outside help and outside temptations as possible "rot," and, as the attack on the Convent women proves, they are determined to maintain Ruby, their own separatist town, at any cost.

[7] Morrison's characters use this term as a metaphor for themselves; she tells us that it refers to "a deep deep level in the coal mines" and applies to "Blue-black people, tall and graceful . . ." (193). As for the fifteen families, this number is somewhat confusing, as it changes several

times. In summary, nine families from the south founded the town of Haven after the Disallowing. Years later, when the New Fathers convinced many of Haven's remaining citizens to leave, approximately fifteen families journeyed to the future site of Ruby. The hierarchy of this new separatist community becomes clear, however, during the annual Christmas pageant, when only the original nine 8-rock families are represented during the re-enactment of Ruby's founding. Later, this number is reduced to eight and, later still, to seven. As members of an 8-rock family violate the town's mores, their historical contributions are "written out." These changes to the town's history will be discussed in greater detail below.

[8] Elizabeth Kella does attribute racial separatism to Haven (211), though the above reading of Haven as response to segregation—rather than the communal act of separatist agency represented in the founding of Ruby—seems more accurate to me. This reading seems borne out in the text; the Old Fathers found Haven almost accidentally, in response to the Disallowing, whereas the New Fathers found Ruby purposefully, without first seeking a place in pre-existing black communities.

[9] Several critics agree with this assessment. Peter Widdowson, for instance, writes that "the pride of the Ruby elders in their ancestral stock, their religious attitudes, their patriotism . . . their belief in the law of the gun, their capitalist ventures in banking and property ownership, their patriarchal sexism . . . and their inverted racism . . . all replicate the conservative values at the heart of white America" (326). Along a similar line, Linda J. Krumholz argues that "The men [of Ruby] become what they wish to destroy, and thus they destroy their Paradise" (22). This idea also echoes my analysis of Foxfire's destruction in chapter one of this study. Krumholz goes on to write, "The men are blind to the ways that their hidden laws of racial purity, masculine dominance, and economic competition replicate the society they mean to escape and repudiate" (24). Katrine Dalsgard writes, "Morrison suggests that the price of Ruby's insistence on maintaining a morally superior master narrative may well be the sacrifice of that very narrative. Rather than a perfect paradise, Ruby ends up as a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community" (233). Dalsgard argues here that Morrison rejects the communal values that her characters embrace. Elizabeth Kella writes, "the raced and gendered bounds of the separatist community . . . perpetuate an oppressive social order and create conditions for the internal repression of difference as well as outward-directed antagonism and vengeance" (210). Kella's is yet another reading that suggests that Ruby is another community that Disallows.

[10] These oft-cited lines are the subject of much critical discussion, some that echoes my own thinking and some that takes different, even contradictory stances. Widdowson, for instance, argues that the lines explore gender: "[The opening] suggests that while the men do indeed distinguish the women by colour, it is not colour which is their true animus—since 'first' implies that they are going on to shoot other women who are not white. Rather, it is that they are all *women*" (329, original emphasis). Though I agree in this chapter that gender is one reason the women are perceived as a threat, their racial diversity is equally dangerous to the New Fathers of Ruby. Linda J. Krumholz focuses on racial implications: "By remarking upon and marking the white girl in this sentence, Morrison creates a charged racial and gender scenario that potentially reinforces the dominant imagination . . . But Morrison evokes this scenario to confront and dispel these racial representations. At the same time that the first line conjures up this familiar racial

representation, it also works against it by releasing the novel's perspective from the universal gaze of whiteness. By specifying the white girl, Morrison has reversed the accepted racial logic in which blackness is the exception and whiteness the norm" (28). I would argue that it also reinforces how blackness is the enforced norm within the novel's communities. Elizabeth Kella approaches this subject similarly; of the first lines, she writes that they demonstrate "the centrality of racial violence, but equally central to the conflict at the heart of the novel is the issue of gender" (209). Kella's "both-and" approach seems more accurate to me, though I argue that issues of sexuality and economy also figure as central conflicts.

[11] Of course, conflict is also a necessary element of most fictive works, and the internal conflicts in these texts may indicate nothing more than narrative expediency. However, given the fact that these conflicts lead to changes in or the destruction of these communities, reading such issues as potential, perhaps inevitable, separatist problems seems necessary.

[12] This too is a stance I share with other critics of *Paradise*. Widdowson argues that "the novel as a whole neither endorses Ruby's endemic violence, old or new, nor black separatism, old or new, in proffering the possibility of a transformed future" (328). He goes on to write that "This appears to be the principal position the novel takes up: whatever the cost, separatism is not a solution—for blacks or whites; and Civil Rights must mean the political negotiation of a full place within mainstream society" (329).

[13] Phillip Page describes the New Fathers' "beware" as an example of how, "Requiring law, order, and the preservation of the status quo, they opt for an Old Testament deity whose furrowed brow enforces an implacable regime of cosmic justice" (639). In the minds of the New Fathers, "cosmic justice" refers to whatever is necessary to keep them in power. On the other hand, the younger generation's choice of "be" reflects their willingness to join "in a mutually ongoing process of creativity" (Page 639). Page's language suggests that he sees the younger generation's inclusive, less separatist stance as more viable. For her part, Kella points out that the debates over the Oven's words "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, including the group of renegade women at the Convent" (218). Again, this highlights the different philosophies that Morrison constructs. For the New Fathers, there is only one past, one present, and one future. For the younger generation, their less separatist views allow for a history not bound by the Disallowing narrative. Therefore, both the present and the future need not be bound by that narrative either.

[14] Lack of communication re-occurs as a narrative device in various forms throughout all the texts that I consider in this study. In some cases, the lack of dialogue occurs on an interpersonal level, as it does in *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter*, wherein the characters' experiential difference is often symbolized in their inability to convey their trauma verbally. Here I am examining Morrison's construction of a social phenomenon within Ruby—the New Fathers' rejection of an entire generation's voice. Morrison's situation is a larger-scale version of Legs's rejecting Maddy's concerns in *Foxfire* and Herman's ignoring everyone who does not already agree with him in *The Rapture of Canaan*, although Morrison's novel ends on a more hopeful note than either of those two texts.

[15] Of course, the fact that the Oven and its words could mean anything allows for the possibility that they could also mean nothing. Katrine Dalsgard argues that "[the Oven] has become a signifier emptied of content. By 1976, the community's unwillingness to tolerate any destabilizing elements in its heroic version of history has implied that the community has been emptied of identity" (239). Ironically, this reading seems to suggest that the Oven still signifies Ruby itself; as a town "emptied of identity," its central symbol is "emptied of content." In this complex reading, emptiness symbolizes emptiness, but Dalsgard also implies that Ruby's reactionary separatism fails in its mission to provide a space for agency and social growth.

[16] Davidson writes that "Ruby's elders have converted the narrative of the Disallowing into political dogma, an ideology that allows them any measure of terror or violence so long as it defends (what they deem) the town's common interests . . . the moral basis for this belief has eroded, and the elders now cling to it less for moral reasons (though they freely employ the rhetoric of morality) than for a brute desire to preserve their powerful position at any cost" (360-61). This reading of the elders' discourse reveals that the Disallowing has become, for the dominant in Ruby, an Allowing of a sort, one that trades the Old Fathers' oppression for the opportunity to oppress. Davidson's reading therefore suggests that Ruby represents a separatist community that merely inverts dominant privilege. Page seems to agree; he writes that "[The New Fathers' ideology] has become a means of repressing meaningful change, a club by which the ruling generation of men silences the views of the new generation and of the town's women. Seeking to possess a space and therefore find a viable place in American space and time, the town is still dispossessed, living in its past with a stagnant present and no vision of a future" (643-44). The only future the New Fathers see is repetition of the past; the Christmas play is the paradigm for what these critics seem to see as the New Fathers' project of inverted dominance.

[17] Krumholz puts the debate in religious terms: "In order to reproduce exactly the previous Haven, the fathers of Ruby must control interpretation, 'revise' the historical record, and reject their children's questions and challenges as heresy" (23). Given what I, and other critics, have read in the town's ominous recruiting of its religious leaders for the purposes of legitimizing their various agendas, Krumholz's religious diction seems appropriate. Davidson, on the other hand, sees this debate in terms of *historiography* and interpretation: "The older generation is firmly committed to its extant narrative . . . Misner and the younger generation want to rewrite the extant narrative. For them, history is open and dynamic" (358). In terms of this study, the New Fathers' brand of separatism equates separation with complete isolation in every sense, based on the narrative of the Disallowing and the Old Fathers' subsequent, exclusive dependence on each other; the new generation read the Old Fathers' lessons differently, by implication suggesting that the current communal structure in Ruby might also be open for reinterpretations, one of which might be the less separatist stance advocated by Misner.

[18] This, too, is a trait common to several of texts that I am studying—the problematic depiction or absence of mothers. In chapter one I discussed the Foxfire girls' absent or ineffective mothers; Ninah Huff's relationship to her mother is contentious; the texts I considered in the Vietnam chapters barely mention mothers at all, though fathers are often discussed. In *Paradise*, Pallas's mother betrays her by sleeping with her lover. Mothers seem to be represented negatively in most of these texts or ignored altogether; even *Witness* focuses more on Rachel Lapp's roles as

Book's potential lover and as rebellious Amish woman than on her relationship with her son, about whom we know relatively little. Connie's relationship with Mary Magna and her latter-day matriarchal role in the Convent are perhaps the most positive, well-defined representations of motherhood in any of these texts. Except perhaps for Foxfire and the Convent, this common trait seems unrelated to the formation of the separatist communities themselves, though it seems to be a topic worthy of exploration elsewhere.

[19] Kella writes, "Set in the 1970s, the antagonism between patriarchal, race-conscious Ruby and the matriarchal, gender-conscious Convent can be seen as a restaging of the tensions which feminism generated in African American politics of that time" (228). I would further argue that Ruby's women's distrust of the Convent reflects—or, in Kella's words, restages—how second wave feminism initially failed to address problems in the lives of African American women and poor women, remaining instead the business of middle-class whites.

[20] Critics such as Davidson have focused on how Pat Best—a woman whose family was written out of the Disallowing narrative—is the character who uncovers the town's internal racism; Davidson, however, also examines how Pat fails to challenge the male narrative of the town when she burns her genealogy, thus guaranteeing the traditional narrative's primacy (366-67). Pat's failure as female historian, or her rejection of the role, could be read as Morrison's own acceptance of women's secondary historical status, or—more accurately, I believe—as the author's suggestion that a female voice changes little if the forum is still male dominated. Phillip Page argues that Pat's role is "analogous both to the author and the reader. As a 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 . . . The dead-end of her effort and her destruction of her 'text' suggest that, despite her role as model for author and reader, her methods do not receive authorial privilege . . . She seeks the kind of deterministic answers that Morrison withholds" (640-41). This possibility suggests that discourse itself is more important than concrete answers.

[21] That Pulliam is an older minister who has been in town longer perhaps explains how the myth of the Disallowing is religiously revered in Ruby. Krumholz argues that "the play [in which the children reenact the Disallowing on Christmas instead of Christ's birth] performs an historical erasure that reinforces the authority of the families currently in power while it masks its own revisionary processes" (29). This tale—substituting myth for fact in a sacral performance—demonstrates how both history and religion can be used by the dominant group both to reify and justify their own power.

[22] While I call the Convent a "loose community," Kella goes even further, arguing that "Morrison suggests that the group fails to function as more than a de facto community" (222). She posits that "the Convent women have separate allegiances. Not only are they unable to co-operatively manage the Convent's only source of subsistence, the garden, but each woman continues to be marked by her own personal trauma . . . While their individual experiences of traumatic events bring the women together at the Convent, these experiences also inhibit the relations of trust and reciprocity normally associated with community" (222). Kella is here discussing the passages that occur before Connie initiates the Loud Dreaming, which seems to

unite the Convent. I suggest here not that Kella is wrong but that her description of the Convent could be applied with equal success to Ruby; in fact, such a comparison is what I am attempting in this section of the chapter.

[23] Other critics agree, though their respective foci are different. Linda J. Krumholz, for instance, sees the Convent in even more complicated historical terms. She writes, "The Convent . . . exhibits the imprint of the 'master's voice' and the racist and violent history of the United States . . . the Convent's first incarnation represents the brutality and paranoia as well as the economic and sexual domination that characterized the European conquest of the Americas. The Convent's second life as a Catholic school for Arapaho girls describes a quieter but equally insidious colonizing tactic of religious domination, sexual repression, and cultural demolition through forced removals and education. But in *Paradise* Ruby comes to exemplify the dangers of home based on sameness, unity, and fixity, whereas the Convent becomes an 'open house' where women of unidentified race convene, move through, and transform the layers of historical accretion" (23). In this sense, the Convent is a place of constant power symbolism and negotiation.

[24] Krumholz argues that "Throughout *Paradise* the men are associated with phallogocentrism, with fixed authority, unitary meaning, and individual acquisition and control, while the women are associated with movement, multiple meanings, and shared labor and goods. Nonetheless, the greater insight of Misner and Deacon Morgan by the end of the novel indicates these gender divisions are not biologically determined" (25).

[25] Krumholz points out that the male attack on the Convent—designed to prevent "a loss of innocence and an ejection from the Garden of Eden, the earthly Paradise"—simultaneously and contradictorily re-writes the women as "Christlike sacrificial victims and the men their executioners" (22). The image of woman as both tempter and savior reinforces my points about both Morrison's complicated gender representations and how the women are, through violent acts, always at the mercy of men's reinterpretations. She further argues that men's re-writing of women's roles is evinced in the town's very name: "Ruby describes woman as both enshrined jewel and dangerous sexuality" (24). Page thinks in similar terms. He posits that "For Rubyites, the Convent is an open sign, freely available for interpretation but not sufficiently known to allow any single interpretation to achieve full credibility . . . The most significant of these interpretations is the growing sense among some Rubyites that the Convent is not a sanctuary but a 'coven' ([Morrison] 276)" (638).

[26] Widdowson seems to agree. In discussing the passages in the novel that detail how Ruby's men drive to the Convent while women walk, he writes, "The oblique irony of this passage simultaneously implies the mechanistic dominance of the men driving there for solace of one kind or another—a dependence which later helps fuel their hatred of the Convent women—and the spontaneous complicity of women in trouble with their 'throwaway' sisters when the only succour is that which other women can give" (331).

[27] Widdowson distinguishes between being complicit in this ideology and in being "in thrall to patriarchy" (331). This point perhaps suggests the idea of futurity; though the women have little

reason to comply with patriarchal oppression, they do have a stake in keeping the community together.

[28] Another version of the attack is "(the Fleetwood-Jury version), [which says] that five men had gone to evict the women; that four others—the authors [of this version]—had gone to restrain or stop them; these four were attacked by the women but had succeeded in driving them out, and they took off in their Cadillac; but unfortunately, some of the five had lost their heads and killed the old woman" (Morrison 297). These two passages reflect the characters' tendency to re-write their historical narratives for their own convenience. Other versions of the Convent attack subsequently appear, reflecting how Ruby's self-image of unity continues to break down, in spite of and exacerbated by the New Fathers' violent attempts to preserve it.

[29] Rob Davidson quotes this same passage in his article, arguing that "no single explanation can satisfactorily explain the assault, which, in the complex weave of *Paradise*, results from mixed and sordid motives" (369).

[30] Widdowson does argue, though, that "what [the novel] does seem to confirm is that the purity, exclusivity, intolerance, and isolation of Ruby is a kind of living death" (328). This distinction again points out that, while Morrison may not provide definite answers to the questions that her novel raises, she does reject certain responses, Ruby's version of separatism among them. The hope he sees for the future is instead represented by Billie Delia's rejection of Ruby and in the Convent women's mystical reappearance in the final chapter; he even believes that, in Morrison's view, women will be paramount in making a positive change (333). Additionally, I would still argue that post-attack Ruby is constructed as a place where hope for the future has also been reborn.

[31] Page further stresses that Morrison surely does not advocate forgetting the past; rather, "the characters must replace their dogmatic reverence for a monologic interpretation of the past with a more balanced and flexible combination of respect for the past and the wisdom to grow beyond that past" (647). Kella is even more straightforward; she writes, "Far from abandoning the concept of African American community, Morrison envisions it as a futural site, the creation of which is, in part, the province of the black intellectual" (210).

[32] It is also telling that many of these texts make use of both "liberating fragmentation"— Foxfire's destruction that frees Maddie and perhaps Legs, Fire and Brimstone's chaotic "rapture" that allows Ninah to free Canaan's hands, the O'Brien character's fragmented narrative through which he heals his emotional trauma—and the need for confession. As Deacon confesses to Misner near the end of *Paradise*, so do Maddie Wirtz and Tim O'Brien confess to the reader, even as other characters (like Steward and Norman Bowker) miss their opportunities to heal through open discussion.

[33] Davidson argues that "Deacon's change is as close as Morrison allows any male in the novel to a sense of the individual reconstitution of the self—a process reserved in Morrison's fiction primarily for women" (370-71). Given the above arguments for how gender functions in the novel, Davidson's reading supports the idea that patriarchal, racially oppressive Ruby is undergoing real change. Kella goes even further, suggesting that Deacon's rejection of his

brother and his choice to walk the roads formerly trod by women, when juxtaposed with the violent penetration of the attackers into the female space of the Convent, represent how "Morrison advocates working against polarization to build community across boundaries of gender" (229). Read in this way, Deacon is perhaps the most complex character in the book, one who crosses several kinds of boundaries. For these reasons, critics often read his "conversion" as Morrison's symbol of hope for the community's future.

CONCLUSION

Artistic works focusing on group dynamics and the nature of belonging to a community of some kind have become increasingly prevalent in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Critics of literature have already begun to explore many of these new artistic iterations. As of yet, little has been written about representations of separatist communities. Yet images of separatism have begun to appear in some recent cinema and fiction.[1] This project is meant to be a strong beginning to a larger critical examination of fictional separatist communities.

Perhaps one reason for the aforementioned artistic interest in separatisms is the relatively recent media coverage of high-profile, real-life separatist communities. I have previously mentioned several real-life separatist communities that made national news during the time period that this study covers, the mid-1970s through the present. Since I began this project, separatist groups and communities have become even more prevalent in popular culture and in the news. For instance, several media outlets—including various web sites and the syndicated program *Dr. Phil*—recently reported on a polygamist community in Arizona in which young girls are, allegedly, forced to marry and procreate with much older men. By all descriptions, this group has its own well-defined geographical space, a set of strict rules, and a disdain and mistrust for the outside world, suggesting that it is either a religious separatist community or a cult; the term used seems to depend on how much credence one gives to their religious views and practices. A recent article on austinchronicle.com reported that the head of this church/cult, Warren Jeffs, is now wanted on several felony charges (Smith par. 2). Other recent, nationally-disseminated examples of separatists include the Chechen rebels' violent nationalist resistance against Russian forces; the civilian casualties of these conflicts, including attacks on a school and

a movie theater, have made headlines around the world. In many of these stories, the rebels were referred to as separatists.

Real-life incidents and popular artistic representations like these help demonstrate why understanding separatisms is increasingly important across a broad spectrum of disciplines. The nature of community continues to evolve, as do the various constructions—such as national borders; technology; business relations; and attitudes toward race, gender, and religion—that help shape the relations between different peoples. As this evolution occurs, issues concerning who belongs in what space, and why they might or might not belong there, and how such determinations are made and enforced become ever more crucial to understanding who we are and how we relate to each other. The importance of exploring such issues is perhaps obvious in real-life situations like the Chechen/Russian conflict. However, as this study has shown, not all those we might label as separatists are violent or nationalist; see, for instance, Jehovah's Witnesses, a widespread group that sanctions its members' contact with non-Witnesses only for evangelical purposes. And, as I have previously discussed, some groups we might label as separatist do not belong to a single, formal group with a well-defined geographic space. Continuing to examine and expand our traditional definitions seems increasingly important.

In their representations of characters and places, the fictional works that I have studied sometimes adhere to and sometimes revise the traditional definitions of "community" and "separatism" discussed in my introduction. In that section, I suggested that "community" might traditionally be termed "a group of people who share a geographic space and some aspect of identity that is often related to that geography"; I further suggested that such a definition might prove too narrow to cover the iterations wrought by recent historical, political, and technological changes. To help expand the definition, I turned to Benedict Anderson's conception of the

"imagined community." As Anderson describes them, these spaces can eschew traditional geographical borders. I also questioned the traditional definition of separatists, usually conceived as militant, violent nationalists interested in creating and maintaining a fully functional, completely self-governing state.

This project has helped confirm the value of accepting alternate definitions of community, at least for the purposes of studying relatively recent art and sociopolitical phenomena. However, ignoring traditional definitions entirely seems equally limiting. Some works studied in this project focus on groups of people who share both some characteristic(s) of identity—race, gender, economic level, religion, or even uncommon and life-altering experiences—and geography. Additionally, though, certain works center on imagined communities. Specifically, the texts about Vietnam veterans explore issues within a "community" that is spread across the entire nation (geography); the members' commonalities are experience and gender (characteristics of identity). The "community" in Gray's *Set It Off*, consisting of four women from one Los Angeles neighborhood, also applies here; they share a common geography, if not a common specific space like a house or a compound, and several identity characteristics. In these cases, the term "imagined" works both in Anderson's sense— these are unofficial groups without a well-defined space that is exclusively their own—and to remind us that these groups are narrative constructions. A consideration of the different social dynamics and values within such constructions helps create the possibility of more widespread understanding and acceptance of different peoples and lifestyles. This seems to be one potentially positive artistic response to global change.

Similarly, these texts demonstrate that our usual conceptions of separatists and separatism might be insufficient. After reading about so many different imaginative versions of separatism,

we must consider that images of violent and/or nationalist separatists might be stereotypical and, therefore, overly reductive, even if they are sometimes accurate, as with the separatists of Chechnya. Part of this project's purpose has been to explore artists' conceptions of alternate separatist iterations, in order to understand different ideas regarding America's changing communal paradigms. Some artists, like Oates and Gray, imagine violent and aggressive groups; however, most of the characters I have studied value peaceful communal insularity. Yet in these two works, violence is ultimately self-destructive. Though the actual destructive acts come from without, the dominant communities in those works characterize them as responses to the separatist characters' aggressive methods. Violence is therefore constructed as an often understandable yet ultimately ruinous method of resisting oppression, even—perhaps especially—for groups that choose to step outside of mainstream American social systems. This seeming consensus on the negativity of violence may be somewhat attributable to the generally liberal politics of American artists, but at the very least it indicates the possibility of defining "separatists" as something other than a group of violent nationals.

Each artist also seems to support and/or expand bell hooks's definition of mainstream America as a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The separatist communities in these texts form in reaction to some combination of racial, economic, gender, religious, sexual, and experiential oppressions. hooks's description implies that institutional dominance occurs along several lines simultaneously. In applying this idea to works of art, I find that one seemingly cannot write or read about any particular kind of dominance or separatist ideal without also considering other aspects of individual and communal identity. This both supports hooks's use of multiple descriptors and explains why none of the communities constructed in these texts remain as simple and unified as the characters originally intend. In these books and films, separatist

philosophies and separatist individuals are paradoxically connected to other philosophies and individuals, even their seeming opposites. Representing and exploring such connections help expand our conception and understanding of community, of separatisms, of American literature and film, and perhaps even of America itself. *Set It Off*, for instance, explores racial issues, gender problems, and economic inequalities; *Paradise* focuses on a racially separate community in which gender, economy, religion, and experience combine to fragment Ruby's allegedly pure and singular vision. Each fictional work that I have studied herein is similarly complex; perhaps, then, the American realities on which these texts are based are equally or even more complex. This possibility seems worth considering.

One way these complexities are highlighted is that these artists represent simplified, strictly-enforced communal unity as impractical, given the various possible aspects of individual identity. Many separatist characters ultimately find their respective communities oppressive and domineering, an ironic situation considering that these communities are formed in order to escape or resist some kind of oppression. The leaders of these fictional communities are intolerant of difference; in order to enforce their impractical conception of absolute unity, they must necessarily punish individuals who break or even question community rules. The difference between such rules and mainstream American laws is that these separatist communities' rules are usually determined by one person, are often unwritten, and are generally based on highly subjective criteria, such as Fire and Brimstone's definitions of Christian spirituality and Legs Sadovsky's ideas of loyalty. Nothing regulates these leaders' power but their own consciences and, sometimes, fears of the outside world's sanctions.

Ironically, these attempts to impose order usually hasten a breakdown in communal unity, the very effect that these leaders are trying to prevent. *The Rapture of Canaan* ends with Fire and

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Brimstone in chaos; Foxfire's members die, go into exile, or return to the mainstream community; Ruby's foundations are shaken in the aftermath of the attack on the Convent, an act partially rooted in the New Fathers' fear of strong and independent women. Obsessions with unity and fealty to the community's traditions usually lead to the silencing, sometimes through violence, of dissenting voices, situations that echo oppressions originally encountered in the dominant community. In this sense, these communities fail some of their members, who remain as voiceless and powerless as before. Of course, one could also argue that these dissenters are failing to fulfill the original separatist vision; however, these texts tend to focus on the dissenters themselves and/or the communal fissures that the leaders' decisions create or amplify. In effect, the reader's sympathies tend to lean toward what might be termed the doubly oppressed characters in these works, perhaps in spite of the realization that these characters are, from another perspective, troublemakers who threaten the very fabric of their respective communities.

The Deer Hunter and The Things They Carried alter this paradigm as they focus on imagined communities formed as a result of an often culturally sanctioned aggression against or marginalization of those who question mainstream American values and beliefs; these texts in fact demonstrate that such aggression or marginalization can be turned against those who have, in the past, represented America in wartime. The makers of The Deer Hunter do not construct a dissenting individual or group within the separatist community, while Tim O'Brien does so in a different manner than the other artists; in The Things They Carried, individual soldiers speak out against the war or the military, but these occurrences are usually fleeting, informal, and unchallenged. The Tim O'Brien character does become an outsider to his former unit once he is re-assigned to rear-echelon duty, and this change in both his overall military status and his image in his ex-unit leads to intra-separatist conflicts. But none of these situations threaten the

existence of the military or the imagined community of veterans. The characters in these works have problems with being veterans due to their experiences *as* veterans and mainstream postwar reactions, not because of the "rules" of being a veteran or because other veterans have rendered them powerless/voiceless.

These differences may reflect the fact that the veterans' community—in the larger, nationwide, diasporic sense—is not geographically well-defined. These narrative strategies suggest that imagined communities might have fewer, or at least less overt, problems with dissenting individuals, perhaps because that unity is a construction of someone's perceptions in the first place. Furthermore, as I argue in chapter three, Vietnam veterans' post-war community forms, whether actually or perceptually, because of the characters' similar wartime experiences and the resulting peacetime difficulties that they subsequently encounter. In their texts, Cimino and O'Brien are unclear as to whether their veterans feel a sense of kinship because of conscious separatist decisions or because mainstream America senses and then reinforces experiential difference. These different, murkier narrative situations seem to call for more ambiguous narrative strategies. Yet Cimino and O'Brien both create characters who, in addition to or in spite of their membership in a separatist community, attempt to regain a place in mainstream society and often do so with some degree of success. Whereas characters in other texts tend to identify with one side of the separatist/mainstream dichotomy, the veteran characters live in both communities simultaneously. Crossing borders like these seems simpler in *The Deer Hunter* and *The Things They Carried* because one community is imagined, but the characters' dual community membership also illustrates the increasing complexities of constructing an identity for oneself in late twentieth century America and beyond.

The texts about Vietnam veterans thereby construct imagined communities in which each character is a possible separatist *and* a possible dissenter, depending on who is reading the character and to which community he/she belongs. The other artists that I have studied create dissenting characters who seem to advocate a middle ground between the oppressions of the mainstream community and the single-minded strictures of their particular separatism. At the very least, this narrative trope—common among the various texts in one manner or another— points to a realistic problem that artists can exploit; the various conflicts between individuals and community are dramatically appealing. In fact, conflicts between a given separatist community and some version of mainstream society serve as the backdrop for all the texts that I have studied. But these smaller-scale conflicts between separatist individual and his/her community seem equally important. In fact, the artists studied in this work foreground individual separatist/separatist community conflicts; as previously discussed, even *The Deer Hunter* and *The Things They Carried* focus on characters' problems with living as separatists. One of their practical motivations is likely that focusing on one character, or at least a small group of characters, is much easier than constructing and maintaining a larger group of personages. Yet these narrative decisions might also demonstrate that Oates, Gray, Weir, Reynolds, O'Brien, Cimino, and Morrison are as interested in the community's effect on the individual—and, conversely, how the individual might affect the community—as in how and why groups of people separate from mainstream America in the first place. The reader can therefore examine the structures and possibilities of both situations.

Each text represents a particular way of exploring these issues. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, writes from a first person perspective in *Foxfire*. Through its narrator Maddy, Oates's novel begins as a story of a cohesive sisterhood's attempt to reject, resist, and separate from their

hometown's social structures and values; soon enough, though, the novel shifts focus to Maddy's withdrawal from her separatist sisterhood and their violent, illegal, and potentially lethal methods. As the novel's focus moves from Foxfire to Maddy, authorial sympathy transfers to the individual. Similarly, Gray's *Set It Off* begins as the story of four disenfranchised black women; yet as the gang's members scatter after their botched final robbery, the film demonstrates how challenging mainstream America's racist, sexist, and classist assumptions affects the characters as individuals. These works, tonally bordering on the tragic, suggest that armed communal resistance is often understandable but likely both futile and self-destructive; the separatist characters suffer death or exile, or are re-introduced into the mainstream community. Read in this sense, *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* resemble cautionary tales highlighting the dangers of violent separatist resistance, even though the works also celebrate the potential for empowerment in women's communities.

Reynolds and Weir, on the other hand, construct non-violent communities in which the most fully developed conflicts are between the separatist community and one or more of its members. In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Ninah rejects Grandpa Herman's narrow vision and indirectly fragments the community. But even though the novel ends with Fire and Brimstone in chaos, nothing in the novel suggests that the community is dissolving completely; in fact, Ninah's new sense of freedom suggests that some of the changes are positive. Furthermore, the problems that do threaten the community mostly come from within Fire and Brimstone itself; such problems include Ninah's alternate interpretation of the connection between spirituality and sex, her rejection of Herman's most stringent rules and values, and her punishment's catalyzing other characters' rejections of Herman's harshest doctrines. The final images of Ninah—still a part of a separatist community, yet to some extent happy and content—contrast markedly with

images of characters in the latter sections of *Set It Off* and *Foxfire*, texts in which a group's decision to use violence catalyzes—or provides an excuse for—an equally violent, self-preserving response from the dominant community.

Likewise, the Amish community in *Witness* does not dissolve, nor do most of its members perish or go into exile. In fact, the Amish community itself seems to change very little, in spite of its close encounter with mainstream criminals, violence, and sexual freedoms. There is no indication that the Lapps will reject Amish values or be more accepting of mainstream culture in general, nor is there any real suggestion that John Book might give up his violent ways. However, the final scenes of the film do indicate that these characters have come to a greater understanding of each others' values and ways of thinking, suggesting that it is possible for different communities to live in relative harmony. Therefore, in *Witness* and *The Rapture of Canaan*, differences with mainstream America do serve as the backdrop to smaller-scale problems and remain an important part of the narrative, but the characters' rejection of violence as a means of engaging the dominant community allows them to avoid being destroyed by outside forces. The characters in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* would rather risk death than continue to live under the particular yokes of their oppressors; these religious characters simply wish to be left alone as much as possible, in order to pursue what they believe to be a better, more spiritually pure lifestyle. When studied together, these four texts seem to imply that this goal is more realistic, if not more politically admirable.

Another difference in these texts' narrative constructions is that that the women in *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* do not live in clearly defined, relatively peaceful geographical spaces far from the sight of dominant citizens and authorities; the Foxfire house and the *Set It Off* gang's garage are smaller and less isolated than the Amish lands or the Fire and Brimstone compound.

Oates's and Gray's characters therefore conduct their separatist business in comparatively plain sight of mainstream authorities. In *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, separatists present a clear and present danger to dominant authority, one that must (in the minds of these authorities) be restricted or eliminated. But in *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness*, the separatists own their own comparatively isolated compounds. The patterns that emerge from these four works represent separatisms as workable, potentially fulfilling alternatives for disenfranchised peoples so long as separatists remain peaceful and out of sight, and as long as no one disagrees with the leaders. These patterns also reveal a collective image of mainstream America as defensive in both understandable and negative senses of the word: understandable in terms of self-defense against violent attacks, and negative in terms of the apparent insistence on alternative communities' invisibility and deference.

As previously indicated, the works about Vietnam veterans alter the patterns evident in the other texts, both in terms of how violence is used to define and/or support the community and with respect to how the term "community" applies in the first place. These imagined communities are represented through individual characters who, in spite of living within mainstream America, feel disconnected from the country's institutions and from its civilian citizens. Their best connections are with other veterans. As I discussed in the chapter, violence is a major reason for these (dis)connections. In both texts, violence is at the root of the experience that marks veterans as different from civilians; furthermore, the potential for violence, represented in the stereotype of the dysfunctional and angry veteran, can exacerbate civilians' distrust of veterans and their unknowable experiences. Similarly, the fact of their experiential difference, when combined with their perception of civilians' fears, may often cause veterans to seek out each other for comfort and connections; this, in turn, may fuel civilian distrust of the

veterans' ability to re-enter mainstream society. In *The Deer Hunter* and *The Things They Carried*, no veteran commits an act of post-war violence against a civilian. But the perceived potential for such an act helps solidify existing barriers between the civilian world and the imagined separatist community. Their finding understanding in fellow veterans precludes their seeking it out in others, as they assume—perhaps correctly—that no one else would understand. All this contributes both to their isolation and to civilians' beliefs that veterans are insular, alienated, and/or separatist. *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* represent the problems, concerns, and positive aspects of connecting with each other in spite of potentially alienating trauma. These works therefore help demonstrate that a community can simultaneously help cause and solve problems, or create and heal traumas.

The Things They Carried and *The Deer Hunter* establish this ironic paradigm in different ways. Upon receiving his draft notice, the Tim O'Brien character immediately feels disconnected from everyone who is not going to war. And, though O'Brien the author constructs him as anti-war, O'Brien the character admits to feeling a powerful sense of kinship with his fellow soldiers; furthermore, the loss he feels when he is removed from his unit seems more traumatic than his initial dislocation from civilians. These situations suggest that the connection between the veteran characters is stronger that than the one between veterans and civilians. In the sections covering post-war life, the various veteran characters—O'Brien the character, Norman Bowker—express their inner feelings and traumas to each other; few civilians are willing to listen, and those who do listen tend to misunderstand. Perhaps the most profound yet simple expression of this veteran/civilian dichotomy is found in the section called "Field Trip." The character makes peace with the past and expresses himself using the recognizable Vietnam-veteran catchphrase "There it is" (212); in the same story, his daughter Kathleen dismisses his

lingering trauma with a similarly simple expression: "That's weird" (209). As a reaction to those who dismiss traumatic experiences as "weird," veterans' experiential separatism seems understandable, perhaps even inevitable. Yet the very nature of uncommon experience dictates that veterans' reactions to trauma *would* seem "weird" to anyone else. In this novel, then, neither community is purely pro- or antagonistic. Separatism becomes a state of being, not a political choice, and seems rooted more in mass misunderstanding than any sort of dominance, oppression, or resistance.

The Deer Hunter operates on a similar paradigm. Much less politically aware—though apparently much older—than the O'Brien character, Michael Cimino's core characters live in a large but cohesive community before they go to Vietnam, as seen in the long opening wedding sequence. Their postwar disconnection first becomes apparent when only Michael returns, and even he feels isolated from his former friends. In this film, experiential differences severely limit the connections between veterans and civilians. In contrast, Michael's efforts to help other veterans return to mainstream life seem indicative of his desire to reconnect with those of his old friends who are also experientially separate. These other characters also demonstrate the necessity of such intra-communal connections; the film hints that, without Michael's comparatively smooth re-assimilation, Steven would remain in the veterans' hospital, slowly rotting in the understanding embrace of fellow combat casualties. These texts about Vietnam veterans therefore demonstrate a potential paradox of separatism; what begins as tight-knit, empathetic, secure uniformity can often degenerate into stagnation and insularity, necessitating connections with people outside one's community.

The Things They Carried and *The Deer Hunter* represent the relationship between separatist/separatist community and mainstream society as both paradoxical and symbiotic; Toni

Morrison's *Paradise* further develops these ideas. In this novel, individuals and their communities exist symbiotically; neither can be valued over the other for long without placing both in peril. The citizens of Ruby, in their zeal to protect their community and its master narrative, have suppressed individual thought and new ideas; the New Fathers reject or exile any dissenters, and no one with power (read: no New Father) seems to consider that the rules and values of the community might need to change with the times. Thus, as we first meet the citizens of Ruby, who pride themselves on their supposed unity against the outside world, we find them in conflict—men versus women, children and grandchildren versus parents, the economically sound versus the poor. In their zeal to preserve the separatist community as it was first conceived, the New Fathers nearly destroy it by suppressing the upward mobility and personal growth of everyone in town who is *not* a New Father.

In contrast, the Convent women are initially *too* individualistic to be considered a community in any but the strictest, purely geographical definition. When the reader first encounters them, they are running from different kinds of trauma; and for most of the novel they remain at odds, various women with various agendas. Their only real commonality is their finding sanctuary within the Convent grounds. Their first step toward community formation is their choosing a common geographic place, but initially they remain unable to move beyond their individual traumas to strive for common goals. Their initially tentative community is therefore always in danger of dissolving until another kind of commonality brings them together. This coalescing—when they come to share a common place, a common methodology, and similar goals—occurs during the Loud Dreaming; and through their new connections, they manage to accept their pasts and move beyond their traumas. Connie leads the women but does not dictate to them their values and their destinies; no one member is represented as less valuable

or less powerful than anyone else. Yet each member is equally invested in every other member's traumas, healing, and future. Throughout all of these texts, this is the only community, separatist or otherwise, that achieves this kind of balance. The individuals are all equal, content, and supportive; the community is united by a true singularity of purpose; and the members have found a way to exist beside and apart from other communities without resorting to violence or maintaining a rigid, artificial unity. Confronted with such an intimidating example, it is little wonder that the less highly evolved community of Ruby feels the need to invade and conquer the Convent; it is a threat to Ruby's narrative of superiority and a constant reminder that the New Fathers' philosophy is not the only choice available. However, the shock of the attack and the citizens' subsequent self-reflection catalyze Ruby's evolution, suggesting that even violence, aggression, and sacrifice can sometimes achieve positive results.

Yet the guilt that Morrison's characters experience in the wake of this violence, especially when examined alongside the generally negative results of similar acts in the other works, reminds us that these long-term separatist projects seem most viable when they eschew violence while addressing the needs of both the individual and the community. Failure to consider individual members' viewpoints, desires, and philosophical changes negatively affects individuals throughout these works and often leads to larger-scale conflicts, the result of which is temporary chaos and/or communal destruction. *Foxfire*, *Set It Off*, *The Rapture of Canaan*, *Witness*, and *Paradise*—in other words, all the texts that focus on smaller, geographically fixed communities, rather than larger-scale imagined ones—follow this paradigm. In *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter*, on the other hand, the narrative paradigm must necessarily shift. Common geography is still an important aspect of their community, but the term is much more loosely defined; here, "common geography" refers to America as a whole. The similarity of

experience among many individuals is all that allows us to label them an imagined community in the first place. In these texts, the concerns of the individual *are* the concerns of the community; they are not inter-related and inter-dependent but are actually the same, regardless, in this broad sense, of where exactly an individual veteran might be located.

Regardless of the specific narrative construction used in a given text, these artists treat the individual and the community as equally important. Works like *The Rapture of Canaan* remind the reader that separatist communities can function as safe havens for peoples who reject or feel alienated by mainstream society, even though such spaces can only exist when individuals agree to live in them and abide by their rules. Children, however, have no choice in where they live or in what rules they abide by until they become adults; and, in texts that focus on longer-standing communities, dissent often grows from the dissatisfaction of a younger generation that has never before had a voice. In these texts, separatist communities have a higher potential for internal splintering once different generations are involved in maintaining social structures. For instance, works like *Paradise* demonstrate that separatist communities can be both overly-stratified, oppressive spaces and places in which alienated individuals can find a valuable and healing sense of belonging. Each community in these texts seems to have a tipping point at which too many rules can be rejected or harshly upheld; when this point is reached in the various narratives, the communities begin to fragment. And even in the works, like *Foxfire*, during which a separatist community dissolves, the separatist experience provides individual characters with something valuable—a greater sense of self, a realization that one is not alone, a coming to terms with one's past. Ultimately, then, these works can be read as optimistic texts; even as they illustrate potential problems with separatisms, they also demonstrate that separatist individuals still have a chance to find something, if not always everything, that they need.

Therefore, a "successful community" is always a relative concept in these works. The successes and failures of these communities are not represented in nationalistic or even isolationist terms. Instead, these works seem to indicate that the successes and failures of a given separatist community should be measured by whether or not the community remains intact in the face of internal conflicts and/or external pressures. Another measure of success is whether or not the individual members are allowed some voice in their own fates and in the future of the community itself; another is whether an individual separatist makes a better life for him/herself through relations with other separatists. In fact, a group's conflicts with individual members sometimes lead to the realization that the community's survival depends upon its evolution, and that this evolution generally involves expanding its original, narrowly-defined doctrine. *Paradise* seems to suggest that this is the best outcome, for it benefits both individuals and the community, rather than choosing one over the other.

In the previous discussion I have attempted to describe what these artists have done; but what might have influenced the creation of texts like these in the first place? Each of the works that I have studied herein is created and/or set at a particularly explosive cultural moment in recent American history. *Foxfire*, for instance, is set in the 1950s, after American women were cast from the workforce in the post-World War II years and before the nationwide, organized feminist movement helped provide a widespread sense of belonging through sisterhood; the novel explores an alternative method for achieving a sense of belonging and some possible dangers of taking separatism too far. *Set It Off*, on the other hand, is set in 1990s Los Angeles, a city with a history of racial strife, including the events surrounding the O.J. Simpson and Rodney King court decisions. F. Gary Gray constructs a group of disenfranchised characters who struggle to exist within this setting; their sisterhood includes only each other. Organized

movements for widespread equal rights have, in some senses, failed women such as these

characters represent, women whose lives are still a series of struggles against powerful forces—

male and female, white people and black, faceless institutions and their own acquaintances—

beyond their control. Their aggressive, violent response is, in their minds, the only effective

alternative; their connection to each other is all they have. This film specifically applies anxieties

about racism and its consequences to a group of black single women in Los Angeles, suggesting

that Gray is tapping into both white America's cultural fear of racial revolution and the sense of

hopelessness and rage that lead to events like the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Marginalized

people whose choices have been so severely limited, the film seems to say, may eventually band

together and strike back, whether out of necessity or sheer anger.

     Whereas *Foxfire* and *Set It Off* focus on women's communities (and, in the case of *Set It*

Off, racial issues), *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* explore issues relating to religious

communities—who belongs, who does not, and why; what might actually happen to a dissenting

individual inside such a community; and what might happen if or when a religious community is

forced to interact with outsiders. These texts can also be read as responses to a particular cultural

anxiety. In *Foxfire* and *Set It Off*, violent resistance to patriarchy is one logical, if undesirable,

response from lesbian feminist separatist groups, even though women's groups have been

historically non-violent.[2] Interestingly, *The Rapture of Canaan* and *Witness* explore two realistic

representations of non-violent religious separatist communities, even though many of the actual,

widely known religious separatists did eventually become violent or self-destructive—for

instance, the mass suicides of the Jonestown and Heaven's Gate cults and the deaths of the

Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. In the cases of the Jonestown and Branch Davidian

communities, religious separatists responded to American government intervention with

increasing insularity and eventual violence. Yet Sheri Reynolds and Peter Weir both construct

representations of religious communities that do not use violence against themselves or others.

This distinction is perhaps the difference between a religious separatist community and a

religious separatist cult, but the mass coverage of such cults' demises likely contributes to the

overarching cultural concern about alternative groups. Creating or engaging with texts like *The*

Rapture of Canaan and *Witness* is one way to confront, and perhaps even understand, both the

nature of communal separation in general and some specific fears of the Other.

Likewise, as I have argued previously, *The Things They Carried* and *The Deer Hunter* are

also, at least in one sense, texts about the anxiety of belonging. In these works, the point of

demarcation between separatist and mainstream character is combat experience in the Vietnam

War. I have tried to argue that these works represent veterans as feeling distant from everyone

except other veterans, which in turn facilitates civilians' reading them as an imagined separatist

community. Obviously these texts are responses to another explosive cultural phenomenon,

reactions to the actual war in Vietnam and the soldiers who fought there. Given the problems that

Vietnam veterans have encountered after returning to America—problems with the government,

with their relatives, with anti-war protesters, with themselves—texts that attempt to understand

the nature of experiential difference in combat veterans may be crucial to healing these long-

festering national wounds. In fact, the questions that these texts raise—about war, civilian life,

the nature of belonging, and connections between all three—and whatever answers they suggest

seem just as crucial today, with the country divided over the justice and necessity of the war in

Iraq, a conflict that many have already compared to the Vietnam war.

As for *Paradise*, critics like the previously-discussed Peter Widdowson have already

suggested why Toni Morrison chooses to set her novel's beginning one hundred years after the

Emancipation Proclamation and its climax in the bicentennial year 1976. I would further suggest, though, that Morrison, writing in the mid-1990s, is also responding to what I have herein termed "explosive cultural moments" particular to the last thirty to thirty-five years. In this case, Morrison's novel seems influenced by the convergence of all the other explosive, culture-changing moments and the historical anniversaries that Widdowson discusses. As I argued in the last chapter, Morrison's most obvious focus when constructing her two separatist communities is race, but this is hardly her *only* area of concern; this novel also explores issues of gender, sexuality, economy, and religion. *Paradise*'s two differing, even opposing, separatist communities allow the reader to compare and contrast the characters' decisions as they deal with these intersecting issues. Perhaps more than any other work studied herein, *Paradise* demonstrates that these various issues tend to present themselves even in separatist communities; in fact, whenever the communities in these works reject such issues, the act of rejection itself often preserves the problem in the characters' minds. In *Paradise*, one community stifles alternative voices and past traumas in an attempt to maintain an artificially imposed unity; the other community embraces its past, with all its facets, contradictions, and problems. Only when the citizens of Ruby become equally self-aware do their conflicts seem solvable.

Learning to live with traumas both past and present is a trope in all these texts. The very formation of these various separatist communities is, in fact, represented as a way of coping with trauma, though the actual methods of the communities vary considerably from text to text. But one commonality among these artists is that they seem to recognize how the various changes in American society in the 1960s and beyond have resulted in greater possibilities and potentially greater traumas. These artists have constructed characters who wish to define themselves by a limited set of characteristics. Yet no matter how these characters try to simplify their

communities, the complexities of American life creep into their separatist spheres. Accepting these complexities and individual reactions to them is represented as more conducive to communal survival than suppressing alternate and/or dissenting voices.

I have herein attempted to focus on representations of variously-sized groups with vastly different philosophies. None of them are represented as nationalist; only a small minority is represented as violent. Nevertheless, each of these fictional groups has rejected some of the values and practices of mainstream America. They often attempt to live separately; they are all insular to some degree. Through such groups, the texts that I have studied call our attention to the mythological components of traditional American imagery—the "Union," equality, the inalienable rights that we are all supposedly born with, the various freedoms that America is supposed to embody. Reading these texts forces us to reflect on such components, as well as the artists' constructions of why they might be rejected, of what kinds of communities might be formed in the wake of such rejection, and of how those communities succeed and fail. This study has been an attempt to engage with and understand such narrative constructions from an artistic perspective and, through them, the real-life ideals, communities, and people recognizable in the representation. Our doing so can only add to our body of knowledge about these works of American art and the nature of community, of separation, and of belonging.

END NOTES

[1] For example, the last three *Star Wars* films—American-produced texts recognizable around the world—have used separatism as a narrative trope. In these films, separatists threaten the solvency of the Galactic Republic, a political entity crumbling under the weight of bureaucracy. As the trilogy progresses, the Republic becomes less and less effective as a governmental system. Separatism connotes foreboding and the potential for change, though it is clear that these changes could be for the better or for much, much worse. The separatists are eventually destroyed or subsumed, as are all potential enemies of the burgeoning Galactic Empire; the viewer never knows much about these characters or the communities that they build. What we do know, and what is important for this study, is that separatists are once again represented as threats to a larger, dominant power; their very existence is cause for mistrust and concern. Such

assumptions about the dangers of difference are, I believe, one idea that these artists are trying to explore and perhaps deconstruct.

[2] This historical fact has not, however, prevented some elements of the mainstream media from characterizing women's groups in violent terms. The term "feminazi," for instance, was coined to describe women who were adamant about achieving equal rights, even though neither their goals nor their methods reflected those of the Nazis. Characterizations like these are sometimes referred to as the "castrating bitch stereotype," a label that reflects and calls attention to the ways that women's groups have often been vilified. Another prevalent example, a myth from the time of the Women's Liberation Movement, is the widespread belief that scores of women burned their bras in protest of masculine ideology and practices; this belief attributes a symbolically violent act to the Movement, thus fueling the perception that all feminists were radicals. As Ruth Rosen points out in her book, this bra-burning action never truly occurred (297).

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