

Dying to Belong: Violence and Nostalgia in *Paradise* and *The Plot Against America*

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Nostalgia has been a prominent theme in literature that can be traced back to Homer's *The Odyssey* and continues to be relevant in contemporary literature, particularly in works by multi-ethnic writers. Toni Morrison and Philip Roth examine the way minority cultures negotiate a space within the dominant American culture and show that nostalgia seems to exist as a response to fear that one's culture, and thereby one's identity, will be subsumed by the dominant culture. In both of their novels, this paranoia manifests itself in acts of gruesome violence justified in the name of protecting one's community. *Paradise* expresses the terror of the men of the all-black community of Ruby, Oklahoma and the perceived threat of the women of the Convent. *The Plot Against America* imagines the fear of Jewish-Americans if Charles Lindbergh, with his connections to fascism, were elected President of the United States during World War II. Morrison and Roth, in their respective novels, convey nostalgia primarily as a violent response to a perceived disruption of the concept of home and suggest that fluid rather than fixed boundaries between minority and dominant cultures are necessary for expanding American identity to allow for spaces of simultaneous belonging and difference.

Though it has become a commonplace critical term in literary scholarship, nostalgia remains a somewhat ambiguous concept that has not been fleshed out in its full complexity. The term was actually coined in 1688 by a Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, who combined the Greek terms *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (pain or wound) in order to describe the physical consequences of severe homesickness. Over time, nostalgia has shifted from a physical condition to more of a mental pathology in which one experiences anxiety stemming from the inability to return not only to an idealized place, but also a time.¹ Nostalgia, at its core, is a response that occurs alongside rapid or dramatic change. It seems natural that one would turn to the concept of home as a source of stability and familiarity in an uncertain world, yet much of the pain of nostalgia can be attributed to the fact that home, on both national and personal levels, is not immune to the disorienting effects of progress. In some ways, nostalgia is regressive in its retreat into memory as a way of avoiding reality, but it can also be viewed as progressive as it attempts to reject the homogenization resulting from capitalism in American society.

According to critic Joseph Urgo, nostalgia as a longing for a lost home can occur preemptively before the home is even lost. He claims, "The current emanation to emerge from the vacuum of indifference is multiculturalism, which might be understood as something like an advance nostalgia for qualities destined to become irrelevant in the United States...Faced with the feared dissolution of origins, a nostalgia for what is to be lost precedes its actual dissolution, and various forms of cultural assertiveness result" (136-137). Viewed through a nostalgic lens, the complexities and contradictions of multiculturalism become evident. For example, festivals celebrating hyphenated Americans (Italian-Americans, Greek-Americans, etc.) are meant to establish the distinctness of a particular culture and reject homogenization, but they also participate within the consumerism they are meant to repudiate as nostalgia becomes a marketable product. Morrison and Roth create worlds in which the limitations and

strengths of pre-emptive nostalgia are revealed, and they examine home as a critical intersection of public and private life.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* begins with the massacre of a group of women living together on the margins of the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma. A group of male representatives of Ruby have invaded the women's home, known as the Convent with the intention of slaughtering these mysterious outsiders. For the men, Ruby represents a paradise that their ancestors were unable to realize, a self-sufficient all-black community, and they are willing to go to any lengths to preserve it. The Ruby men are descended from ex-slaves who were rejected from joining an all-black community because they were considered to be too dark-skinned. Upon this rejection, mythologized by the men of Ruby as "the Disallowing", their ancestors formed their own town called Haven which lasted until the community gradually fell apart due to corruption, poverty and many of its members leaving or dying in the World Wars. In an attempt to recuperate this dying community, members of Haven picked up what was left of the town and moved to establish a new all-black town, Ruby, that could resist the threats that had plagued Haven. Morrison explains the rationale of the men via Steward Morgan, the unofficial leader of the men and grandson of the town's original founder, stating, "From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma territory, to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma state. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they 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 burden of preserving Ruby and honoring their ancestors weighs greatly on males of the town and their fear of losing again the home their relatives had worked so hard to create causes them to perceive the mysterious Convent women as a threat and, subsequently, brutally murder them.

While the female outsiders are targeted as being the cause for the divisiveness and unrest within Ruby, Morrison makes it clear that the internal struggles within the town itself between the traditional members of the town's founding families and the more progressive younger generation are actually the cause of the town's gradual demise. The tension between the older and younger generations of Ruby manifests itself in a continual debate over the Oven, a structure built back in Haven that the settlers of Ruby took apart, carried for hundreds of miles and rebuilt brick-by-brick in the new town. The point of contention lies in the indecipherable motto on the Oven with the older members of the town reading it as "Beware the furrow of his brow" while the younger generation interprets the motto as "Be the furrow of his brow". The act of rebuilding the Oven, meant to monumentalize the courage and strength of the founders, shows the conviction of the older citizens of Ruby that the idealized Haven can be realized and replicated, while the younger generation uses the Oven as a meeting place to drink, smoke, and congregate. In theorizing the way that nostalgia functions, critic Svetlana Boym claims that there are two distinct types of nostalgia: reflective and restorative nostalgia. Boym explains, "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (41). In this way, Boym seems to attribute qualities of positive and negative types of nostalgia to the reflective and the restorative, respectively, as reflection allows for gaps and ruptures while restoration creates a false sense of cohesion via a narration that attempts to account for or ignore such fragmentation. Rather than reflecting on the causes of the collapse of Haven, the older members of Ruby sentimentalize the founding of

Haven and focus simply on restoring it as they remember it, causing them to fall prey to the same struggles that destroyed their home in the first place.

Reverend Misner, the young preacher who was not born in Ruby, and is therefore considered to be an outsider, is sympathetic to the young members of the community who seem to want to create a new home of their own rather than living in the shadow of their ancestors' failed efforts. Misner seems to be in a continual frustrating battle with the elders of Ruby who want to dictate to what outside influences the members of the town should be exposed. Misner notes that by segregating themselves further and further from the rest of society, the members of Ruby must direct their paranoia of losing the integrity of the community somewhere, and naturally they turn against one another. The underlying issue seems to be finding a way for African-Americans to feel at home in the U.S. when stability and security is something that the members of Ruby have never fully experienced. Home, for the citizens of Ruby, is not a place to have, but ultimately one that continually threatens to be lost. Misner acknowledges this, saying, "can't you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home" (Morrison 213). The search and struggle for the feeling of home is ultimately the cause of anxiety for the citizens of Ruby and, Morrison suggests, ultimately for African-Americans in general.

Interestingly, Misner's definition of home seems to be that realized by the women of the Convent. The Convent becomes a home for lost women, women who are drifting through life, abused emotionally and physically, and have nowhere else to turn. In harsh contrast with Ruby, the Convent is open to anyone who needs help, no one is judged, and healing is allowed to take place. Several women of Ruby have even visited the Convent for abortions, magical healing, or simply an escape from the repressiveness of Ruby. One of Ruby's women, Billie Delia, refers Pallas, an eventual resident of the Convent, to the female-centered home, stating, "This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions...you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it" (Morrison 175-176). Because these women are unconventional, self-sufficient and outsiders, the men of Ruby blame them for corrupting the women and youth of the town. When the men meet at the Oven to plot to massacre the Convent women, they justify their actions by saying, "Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom... They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. We can't have it, you all. Can't have it at all" (Morrison 276). As much as Ruby has attempted to seclude itself from the rest of society by creating a fortress that is impervious to the influences of progressive American culture, these forces have undeniably infiltrated the town, and the Convent women are scapegoated as the cause of this corruption.

Although the Ruby men are able to execute their plan and murder the women of the Convent, the result is not as fulfilling as they might have expected. The women were known to dabble in magic, and their bodies mysteriously disappear soon after they have been killed. The novel ends with Consolata, the mother figure of the Convent, lying in the arms of a goddess-like

figure named Piedade. Morrison describes, “There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade’s song is about...the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun...Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). In an interview regarding Paradise, Morrison said, “I knew from the very beginning, if I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no cry could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors” (“Home” 4).ⁱⁱ Unlike the Ruby men who are left with blood on their hands and the unease of their failure to salvage the dream home of their ancestors, Morrison suggests that the Convent women have created their own home, one in which they will always feel a sense of belonging because they will work to make it their own.

In a very different way, Philip Roth explores the process of working to create a new home amidst adversity in his novel *The Plot Against America*. The story is narrated by a fictional seven year-old Philip Roth as he conveys the terror of his family after Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Delano Roosevelt to become President of the United States. Based on Lindbergh’s real-life anti-Semitic remarks and his admiration for Adolf Hitler as a leader, Roth imagines the effects of the charismatic pilot’s election to the presidency on the working-class Jewish community of Newark, New Jersey. While initially the fears of the Roths and their Jewish friends seem to be unjustified paranoia, gradually the Lindbergh administration takes steps to persecute Jewish Americans, specifically by attempting to weaken the home life and family structure of the Jews. Unlike Morrison’s community of Ruby, the Jewish-Americans of Newark, prior to Lindbergh’s election, do not feel like outsiders within the dominant American culture and consider themselves to be fully American citizens as Philip says, “we were committed irrevocably to America...we retained no allegiance, sentimental or otherwise, to those Old World countries that we had never been welcome in and that we had no intention of ever returning to” (Roth 17). Because the Jewish families of Newark had been so fully integrated as Americans, it becomes all the more unbelievable when Lindbergh’s affiliation with the Nazis threatens to enact the slaughter of American Jews that would mirror the Holocaust taking place in Europe.

An advance nostalgia on the part of Jewish Americans becomes apparent as Lindbergh’s policies start to impact their domestic lives. For the Roths and their friends, their ethnic difference from their fellow Americans manifests itself in their devotion to family and the struggles they endure to take care of one another. Young Philip explains, “Their being Jews didn’t issue from the rabbinate or the synagogue or from their few formal religious practices...Their being Jews issued from them being themselves, as did their being American. It was as it was, in the nature of things, as fundamental as having arteries and veins, and they never manifested the slightest desire to change it or deny it, regardless of the consequences” (Roth 220). Critic Gurumurthy Neelakantan claims that “*The Plot Against America* nostalgically recalls the *Yiddishkayt* [Jewish worldview] of [Philip’s] parents, and to that extent acknowledges the continued force of this folk tradition in his own life” (134). It is when Lindbergh’s policies cause the Newark Jewish families to doubt their Americanness and disrupt their day-to-day customs that they begin to become paralyzed by fear and feel “other” in their homeland. As

Bess, Philip's mother says, "Well, like it or not, Lindbergh is teaching us what it is to be Jews" (Roth 255-256).

The Lindbergh administration employs a variety of tactics designed to dismantle Jewish-Americans' most powerful weapon, their fierce loyalty and devotion to family life. Lindbergh enacts a program called Homestead 42 in which Jewish families are displaced through their jobs and are basically forced to move to areas in which they will be isolated from other Jewish families. To avoid having to leave Newark, Philip's father, Herman, quits his job to work, at a drastic pay cut, for his self-employed brother. Philip's brother Sandy volunteers to be a part of one of Lindbergh's programs called Just Folks as part of the Office of American Absorption which sends Jewish children to rural areas to work on farms in order to "introduc[e] city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life" (Roth 84). When Sandy returns home, he looks down upon the rest of the family, calling them "you ghetto Jews" (Roth 193). Herman struggles to maintain control over his family and exclaims, "They have already stolen my country—they are not stealing my son...The only purpose of this so-called Just Folks is to make Jewish children into a fifth column and turn them against their parents" (Roth 186,192). The toll that Lindbergh's presidency has taken on the Roth family becomes most apparent when Herman and Philip's cousin Alvin, an amputee who lost his leg fighting the Germans as part of the Canadian army, beat each other in a bloody battle in which Herman accuses Alvin of no longer caring about the welfare of the Jews. In the aftermath of the huge fight, Philip says, "in an ordinary family living room—traditionally the staging area for the collective effort to hold the line *against* the intrusions of a hostile world—the anti-semites were about to be abetted in their exhilarating solution to America's worst problem by our taking up the cudgels and hysterically destroying ourselves" (Roth 295). The best defense the Jewish Newark families have against losing their distinctness, and potentially their lives, is their ability to continue on and run their households as they normally would, yet Lindbergh and his administration make this nearly impossible as anti-Semitism corrupts Jewish identity from outside their close-knit community and infiltrates their households from within, causing them to violently turn on one another.

As riots erupt and Jews gradually become overtly targeted and even murdered as a result of the growing anti-Semitism in the United States, Charles Lindbergh's role as Hitler's instrument in the U.S. becomes clearer. Lindbergh's plane ultimately disappears one day (it is speculated that he has either voluntarily escaped to Germany or is taken by force) and while his Vice-President Burton Wheeler tries to continue the mass persecution of the Jews, the President's wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, appeals to democracy and begs the administration to end its terrorizing of the Jewish people. Shortly after, America re-elects Roosevelt to the presidency for his third term and the United States goes to war to help the Allies defeat the Axis powers. During the worst of the riots and violence preceding the overturn of the government, Herman and Sandy travel to rural Kentucky to rescue Seldon, the little boy who was their neighbor before he and his mother were forced to re-locate in the Homestead 42 program. The Roths adopt the now orphaned Seldon and welcome him into their home despite their own struggles. The novel ends with Philip's comparison of his relationship with Seldon to that between himself and his cousin Alvin, the amputee: "There was no stump for me to care for this time. The boy himself was the stump, and until he was taken to live with his mother's married sister in Brooklyn ten months later, I was the prosthesis" (Roth 362).

Similarly to the healing community of Morrison's Convent women, home for the Roth family is less a clearly defined place that is isolated by strict borders excluding some and inviting others, and is more the result of the people within a community who, like Philip the prosthesis, work to hold each other up. These authors seem to call for members of minority cultures within the United States to ultimately acknowledge the home within themselves, the ability to cultivate a sense of distinctiveness that can never truly be lost no matter what threats come along. In this way, nostalgia does not have to be a mournful reminder of a home which can never be recovered or a justification for violence, but can be a way of reflecting on what home really means for multi-ethnic Americans and what it could potentially become.

Notes

ⁱ Svetlana Boym explains the shift from Hofer's spatialized version of nostalgia to that of a temporal conception and cites industrialization and increasing emphasis on progress as having altered the way people thought about time. Essentially, time was money, and time not used for a productive purpose was considered to be wasted time. She specifically mentions the assessment of nostalgia during the American Civil War by military doctor Thomas Calhoun who noted nostalgia in American soldiers, but unlike Hofer he attributed this to a weakness of character rather than a bodily illness and suggested that nostalgics were lazy daydreamers who used their time inefficiently. See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 6.

ⁱⁱ For other essays connecting home and racial identity, see *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

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