Mythical Places, Magical Communities:

The Transformative Powers of Collective Storytelling

in Toni Morrison’s Paradise and Karen Russell’s Swamplandia!

Madison Koenig, 2015.

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“Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.” – Toni Morrison, the Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993

“Stories can save you, but they can also fuck you up.” – Dorothy Allison, in conversation at Ohio University’s Literary Festival, March 2015

These epigraphs, one formal and one frank, both gesture at the theme that has guided the writing of this project. Literature has always had a self-reflective concern with story, with the powers that narrative can hold over both listener and creator, especially when such stories are pushed against our ordinary conceptions of the possible and of who we are and where we belong. In this thesis, I will examine questions of storytelling in two works of contemporary American literature: Toni Morrison’s Paradise and Karen Russell’s Swamplandia! I will look not only at the power that stories hold over the individual, but also at their ability to transform or restrict a community. Both of these novels focus on isolated communities as microcosms for the politics of the larger country. How do narratives the characters tell about the past shape a community’s present? Issues of identity—of race, class, gender, age, and other forms of marginality—necessarily come into play in the ways that these narratives
actively shape the dynamics of belonging. How do those on the margins interact with their communities’s self-narrative, the story of the group? Are they forever limited by the story their elders offer up, or are they able to create new stories for themselves? And in creating those new stories, should they (or can they) mine and revise old stories, or is it better to begin anew? My thesis suggests that these are pressing questions and that the answers depend on each individual case; however, I hope to show that paying attention to these issues of community construction through narrative forces us to confront our understanding of the work that myths do.

The first book published after she won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison’s 1999 *Paradise* begins when tension between a conservative all-black town and vagrant women of different races living in an abandoned Convent in Oklahoma erupts in violence. The novel catalogues the years and days leading up to that eruption, telling the history of this all-black town called Ruby. The town was founded by Exodusters¹, former slaves who subsequent generations call the Old Fathers who saw a brief moment of glory during Reconstruction in the South but were soon ejected from civil government positions. Rather than live the rest of their lives as menial workers, these men led a group of families, all of whom claimed to have purely African descent, out of the Southern states and to the promised land of the Western Frontier. Along the way, they were turned away from other all-black foundling towns for being too poor and having skin that was too dark in a moment that is mythologized as “The

Disallowing” (Morrison 194), which makes them even more insular and suspicious of outsiders. Two generations later, the new patriarchs of the town struggle to maintain the boundaries and hierarchies of the community in the 1970s as a rebellious youth culture emerges even in their isolated town and women of different races take shelter in a former Convent nearby, living without men or manners.

In Karen Russell’s 2011 Swamplandia!, thirteen-year-old Ava Bigtree and her family own a theme park in the Florida Everglades that draws in tourists to watch all six members of the family wrestle alligators. After Ava’s mother dies and her grandfather is sent to a retirement community, the park begins failing financially. Her brother and her father both go to mainland Florida to try and earn enough money to support their family, and thirteen-year-old Ava is left alone on the island with her older sister who has begun speaking with ghosts. When her sister runs away with a ghost boyfriend, Ava relies on an intrepid character who calls himself the Bird Man to guide her through the swamp and her own personal hell in order to find her sister. As in Morrison’s Ruby, Swamplandia visits the Bigtree family at a moment of crisis when the stories they have been telling about themselves begin to fall apart and when overlooked members step up in order to create new stories.

My analysis of these two works will intersect and draw from a variety of fields. Religion studies have served as an entry point for discussing community narratives, specifically their effects that go beyond conveying information about the past. I will argue that the way these narratives function to inform and transform the characters’ actions is closely related to Karen Armstrong’s understanding of mythos (2000),
knowledge that comes from myths and stories. This kind of knowledge is inherently different than *logos*, knowledge that comes from science and fact. However, it bears a type of truth that *logos* does not share. *Mythos* shapes our identities and offers meaningful interpretations of the world. *Mythos* finds its foundation in stories that give meaning to people’s experiences, not because of their factual details, but because of the values and understanding of the world that they offer: “Unless we find some significance in our society, we mortal men and women fall very easily into despair” (Armstrong xiii). Most importantly for Armstrong, *mythos* is a response to a people’s present circumstances. It can and must change as those circumstances change. I will argue that both Morrison and Russell offer models of communities that are in the process of this transition.

Without myths, the communities of Ruby and Swamplandia! would dissolve into a society that has no interest in their quirks and individualities, a society that at times can be more than disinterested and instead is violently oppressive. However, as I will explore, these myths can be just as limiting as they are liberating, as divisive as they are redemptive. The power of myths is that they can free us by explaining our circumstances and offer us a new understanding of who we are and why we are where we are. The danger appears when they become static and trap us in the past without connecting with our present. As Karen Armstrong says in *The Battle for God*, myths need to adapt to people’s circumstances, to give new meaning to new circumstances. If your myth is stagnant, like the patriarchs’ in *Paradise* or the Chief’s in *Swamplandia!*, it blinds you to your community’s changed circumstances.
Brian Latour’s discussion of the divides between religious and scientific knowledge follows Armstrong in informing my discussion in the second chapter on Russell’s *Swamplandia!*. Similar to Russell, Latour argues that language about science and language about religion function in differing ways. The former he calls information talk and is meant to convey information between speaker and listener; the latter is transformation talk and is meant to transform the relationship between speaker and listener (Latour 29). I use his concept of transformation talk to understand the effect family legends have on Russell’s protagonist. Indeed, Ava’s story allows us to extend Latour’s insights about transformation talk outside the situation of purely face-to-face communication.

On another level, these stories relate to sociological and literary concerns about what place marginalized groups can claim in the larger American culture or canon. In *A World of Becoming*, William E. Connolly describes the contemporary life as undergoing a “minoritization” (Connolly 60) in which small groups with different beliefs increasingly inhabit the same cultural, social, and political space. Connolly’s formulation contests the view of contemporary culture as a central majority surrounded by several well established minority constituencies for a more fluid and imbricated public sphere. These groups must examine what makes their beliefs true, or at least why they value their beliefs over the other available options. I argue that, despite their isolation from the outside world, *Paradise* and *Swamplandia!* explore these same concerns. In order to explain why they choose these counter-cultural lives in isolated places, both the community of Ruby and the Bigtrees in *Swamplandia!* rely
on collections of stories and coded language that unite the individual members and allow them to imagine themselves as a collective unit.

In his 1983 landmark work *Imagined Communities*, political theorist Benedict Anderson argues that all communities are inherently imagined; that is to say, their defining characteristics exist more in the minds of their members than they do in measurable reality. Anderson’s theory is applied particularly to nation-states, which consist of large groups of people whose individual members will probably never meet each other, but it is also applicable to smaller communities like those in *Paradise* and *Swamplandia!* which still need their members to imagine themselves as part of a larger group identity. Anderson’s central argument is that as the world develops what Connolly would call minoritization, where different groups are interacting with each other with increasing frequency, imagination is a crucial tool for shaping a collective shared identity between individuals. Communal identity— in particular, for Anderson, national identity—is not inherent to living in a place, but is constructed by members of the community. Although neither Ruby nor *Swamplandia!* are nations, they both enact this same process in forming their communities. Even more significantly, in cutting themselves off from mainstream culture, the communities in these two novels also effect a break with the structures that Anderson says create the nation. That is, they create a nation within a nation, using the same tools to imagine themselves yet differentiating themselves from the United States at large.
Minorization and Community in Ruby and Swamplandia!

However, the rift between these communities and mainstream American society is not just about an ideological difference; both communities see this intentional separation as necessary for their survival. In Ruby, the older, established members of the town speak disparagingly of the immorality of people living in mainstream American culture. The Bigtrees similarly mock the values of “mainlanders,” thinking of them as cowardly and uninformed about the world.

Unlike his sisters, Kiwi dreams of living like the mainlanders, mostly so he can fulfill his academic aspirations, yet his experiences with them come to demonstrate how different Bigtree values are. As the park begins to fail, he seizes his chance to run from home and comes straight into the hostilities of mainland teenagers. After a few months of eking out a living on the mainland, he realizes that there are hidden narratives and biases in this culture that are even more limiting than the ones from his family:

If you really were gay, Kiwi thought for maybe the thousandth time since he’d arrived at Loomis County, how could you possibly live here in Loomis County? If you were a bookworm, a Mormon, an albino, a virgin; if you were a “reffy” (\{n\} Loomis slang for a recent immigrant, derivative of “refugee” and used in Loomis night schools as a shorthand for kids with bad clothes, dental afflictions, accents as pure as grain alcohol [sic]); if you had any kind of unusual hairstyle, evangelical religion, a gene for altruism or obesity; if you wrestled monsters on an island, like Ava, or conjugated Latin,
like he did, or dated the *motherfucking dead*, how could you survive to age eighteen in an LCPS [Loomis County Public Schools] high school?

Ava and Ossie: how would his sisters survive a trip to a high school bathroom, even? (371)

Kiwi could be described as a walking encyclopedia—he collects information, and observes the behavior of his coworkers until he realizes that his “Field Notes” (88) are making them uncomfortable and doing little good for his social reputation. When he first leaves the park, he understands information talk, but not transformation talk, and he thinks he will be able to assimilate into mainland life merely by gathering facts about his peers. He quickly learns this is not the case, and struggles to make sense of mainland life without stories. Eventually he understands how vital his family network is and works to restore it.

For the disallowed African Americans in Oklahoma and the dispossessed performers in Florida, the primary tool for forging community is creating a fantastic story of exceptionalism. In *Paradise*, the sense of exceptionalism is religious and racial. As the name of their ancestors implies, the Exodusters made comparisons between their situation and that of the Israelites in Exodus: both were ethnic or racial groups who had previously been captive under slavery, recently freed, and must journey to start new communities in a predestined land. Reinforcing this connection, Steward Morgan tells a story of a mythical figure who led Zechariah to the land where Haven would eventually be founded.
The original families that formed both Ruby and Haven pride themselves on having pure lineages, on not having white masters’ genes mixed with their own. Pat Best, as the town’s unofficial historian, refers to this genetic purity as “eight-rock” or “8R” (Morrison 193), a reference to the color of coal found deep in the mountain. During Reconstruction, the families realize that this feature is the source of discrimination from other Southerners, both black and white: “They must have suspected yet dared not say that their misfortune’s misfortune was due to the one and only feature that distinguished them from their Negro peers. Eight-rock...The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain” (193-94). In a vehement reaction, the Old Fathers and their descendants become obsessed with pedigree. Pat Best frames this obsession as central to the exceptionalism of the original families, and comes to realize that any people like her father who marry outside of the town will be forever excluded:

The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. “God bless the pure and holy” indeed. That was their purity. That was their holiness. That was the deal Zechariah had made during his humming prayer...Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. 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.

Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that worries them must come from women. (217)
I will further explore the gendered dynamics of the foundation myths in Chapter One, but suffice to say here that women pose many threats to the patriarchs’ absolute control over Ruby, and racially disobedient reproduction is not the least of these threats.

The Bigtrees also have a collection of family stories that form the basis of their mythology. Grandpa Sawtooth is the Old Father, to borrow a term from *Paradise*. The home Ava’s grandfather purchased turned out to be covered in swamp water and impossible to farm. However, newly-christened Sawtooth and his wife Risa discovered a different way of surviving in the swamp:

According to Bigtree legend, it was that same day that Grandma Risa got her first-ever glimpse of a Florida alligator, the Seth of Seths, lolling in a gator hole near the cove where they had stowed their boat—and she later swore that as soon as they locked eyes, they *recognized* each other. That monster’s surge, said our grandfather, sent up a tidal wave of black water that soaked Grandma Risa’s dress. The prim china-dots on her skirt got erased in one instant, what we called in our museum Risa’s Chameleon Baptism. (31)

Even if Ava is uncertain about some of the details of her family history and mythology, she believes in the power of the Bigtrees to invent themselves. “We kids cultivated a faith in all the Bigtree legends—I’d heard them so often from my parents that they seemed to me like memories I’d made myself” (247). This ability to reinvent will come to the forefront after Ava suffers a traumatic assault and has to rely on inner resources, especially her family stories, in order to save herself.
When the ancestors of the families of Ruby tried to build a community in the South during Reconstruction, they had a brief moment of success, a taste of what a prominent African-American community could look like, but then they were violently reminded of their place in a white supremacist society. They could “survive” in the South after the Civil War, but it would have involved working menial jobs with no hope of improvement, constantly deferring to white people in their community. The Morgan brothers, who own the town’s only bank, trace their Ruby lineage back to Zechariah Morgan, whose pride was one of the determining factors in founding the town. Back in the South, Zechariah’s name was Coffee Morgan, and he had a twin appropriately named Tea. His pride not only led him to beginning a new town in the wilderness, but also to disowning his twin brother:

When Coffee got the statehouse job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he was equally affronted and humiliated. One day, years later, when he and his twin were walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren’t brothers anymore. Coffee began to plan a new life elsewhere…Needless to say, Coffee didn’t ask Tea to join them on their journey to Oklahoma. (Morrison 302)
Coffee’s pride, which his grandsons Deacon and Steward Morgan inherited, boils down to a quality of life he believes he deserves. Like his brother, he could continue to live in the South, constantly under the threat of white arrogance and white violence. However, would this life be worth having? Instead, Coffee assumes a new name and leaves behind the South for a new, uncertain future.

Ava’s grandfather made a similar choice between existence and escape, moving to a frontier of the United States and assuming a new name. Back when he was called Ernest Schedrach, Sawtooth Bigtree decided to escape his life in the coal mines of Ohio following the same impulse that led the Old Fathers to start Haven:

Grandpa, who was born Ernest Schedrach, the white son of a white coal miner in Ohio, bought the land after losing his job at the Archer Road Pulp Mill, which was just as well because he was tired of the pitiful wages, tired of his ears ringing like Sunday church bells all shift and of his bleached vision caused by blinking into the chemicals. He changed his name to outwit his old boss. It turned out he owed a sizable amount of money to the mill foreman. He picked “Sawtooth in homage to the sedge that surround his island; “Bigtree,” because he liked its root-strong sound. (30-31)

As in Ruby, the Bigtrees hoped to create a community that could provide for their material needs as well as fulfill their souls. Sawtooth assumed a new name, a new location, and began to build a new mythology to explain these changes.
In both of these cases, we see how narratives from the past come to shape a community’s present. They lead to a sense of exceptionalism as a tool for surviving in an otherwise hostile world. But in the minioritized world described by Connolly we can understand this exceptionalism as both part of and a destabilizing force in a pluralistic public world. We can see this, in part, because these new stories transform the characters, changing their identities in more than name.

**Intersections of Private Stories and Public Histories**

On first glance, Morrison’s *Paradise* and Russell’s *Swamplandia!* may seem like books coming from different worlds. One is set on the Oklahoma plains and is steeped in the African-American struggle for self-determination. The other is deep in the Florida Everglades with a family of oddballs and alligators. Yet for all their differences, these two novels address the same questions that have haunted American history since before it had any unifying legislation. Both novels are about precarious communities, families and friends who have set themselves apart from mainstream American society. The communities are deeply tied to their regions. *Swamplandia!* is infused with rich descriptions of the environment of the swamp. Although the Oklahoma Plains may not seem like a paradise, members of Ruby like Nathan DuPres would beg to differ: “I never regretted coming here. Never. There is honey in this land sweeter than any I know of, and I have cut cane in places where the dirt itself tasted like sugar, so that’s saying a heap” (Morrison 204). The stories the communities tell
about those living in the mainstream, and what their lives were like before they separated, reveal that the rift is both a matter of ideological difference and of survival.

In order to emphasize the weight of the choice between separation and assimilation, both Morrison and Russell steep their texts in the history of their respective settings, drawing the reader’s attention on occasion to examples of other marginalized people dealing with the same issues of isolation and oppression.

Peter R. Kearly notes that there is a crucial but unrecognized history of African American pioneers in the American West: “The town of Haven could be said to be part of a long suppressed and unrecorded history of black settlement and stories of self-made communities, many, like Haven, built around one or two churches and around a code of ethics” (Kearly 11). Peter Widdowson takes this argument even further, arguing that the history of Ruby can be read as a small-scale version of American history:

The history of black America over two hundred years, in other words, is the history of America over that period—and especially of the ‘failure’ of its founding principles. Neither is this just a history of the way white American has treated Black Americans: at a more allegorical level, it is indeed a history of the whole American experience. (Widdowson 325)

The history of the Exodusters is overtly related in the book and most critics draw attention to it. However, Morrison’s characters also make frequent oblique references to the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements that are occurring simultaneously
with the events of the text. Gigi, one of the transient women living at the Convent, was part of Civil Rights Movement protests, although she never says so directly. Instead Morrison offers the reader hints.

Gigi’s grandfather tells her to come home, asking “World change enough to suit you? Everybody dead anyway. King, another one of them Kennedys, Medgar Evers, a nigger name of X, Lord I can’t think who all since you left” (Morrison 65). His comments imply that there is a connection between the reasons Gigi left and the deaths of Civil Rights leaders. Each of the women at the Convent has a demon or several that she is running from, and repeatedly Morrison shows that Gigi’s demon is the image of “little boys spitting blood into their hands so as not to ruin their shoes” (68). After she and Mavis fight, Gigi’s split lip triggers a flashback: “With pressure [her lip] oozed a trickle of blood and suddenly everybody was running through the streets of Oakland, California...There were no shots...Sirens, yes, and distant bullhorns, but no breaking glass, no body slams, no gunfire. So why did a map of red grow on the little boy’s white shirt?” (170). Gigi’s rebellion, in her clothing choices and her affair with K.D. Morgan, against conservative norms may stem from her experiences during this time and her recognition that even innocent little boys in nice shoes are not spared from racist violence.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated on April 4, 1968; Bobby Kennedy, assassinated on June 4, 1968; Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist, was assassinated on June 12, 1963; Malcolm X, assassinated on February 21, 1965 (all from history.com). These dates offer a general time frame for when Gigi must have been active in the Civil Rights Movement.
Another woman who questions the town’s patriarchal leaders and their values is Anna Flood, who owns the only supply store in town and wears her hair in a rebellious afro that she started growing when she left Ruby for Detroit. She thinks of “watching baby-faced police handling guns” (116) while she was there, but does not dwell on her experiences. As she explains to Reverend Misner, the man she is dating and another former activist: “Thought I could do something up north. Something real that wouldn’t break my heart. But it was all, I don’t know, talk, running around. I got confused. Still, I don’t regret going one bit—even though it didn’t work out” (118). Anna rebellion is quieter; it manifests itself in skepticism of the Morgans and kindness toward all who cross her path, including lost white people.

Of the three characters, Misner spends the most time thinking about his previous activism and what it means for his current circumstances. He thinks of being arrested in Alabama, and tries in Ruby to raise money for teenagers who were arrested for crimes that Pat Best explains “the prosecution could ferret out of its statutes to level against black boys who said No or thought about it” (206). Their radical experiences inform Gigi, Anna, and Misner’s critiques of the patriarchs of Ruby. They were involved in a movement that reached for a better world, for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s beloved community³, and still want to bring that vision to Ruby. All three of these characters also remind the reader that violence against black people is not an artifact from the time of the Old Fathers; it remains a visceral threat.

³ http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4
Misner also offers the reader an example of how official memory is constructed:

Twenty, thirty years from now, he thought, all sorts of people will claim pivotal, controlling, defining positions in the rights movement. A few would be justified. Most would be frauds. What could not be gainsaid, but would remain invisible in the newspapers and the books he bought for his students, were the ordinary folk. (212)

This critique of constructed memory foreshadows how the same process has already happened in Ruby and will happen later when the town has to decide how it will move past the violence its leaders committed—a process that I discuss in more detail in Chapter One.

As in Paradise, Ava and Kiwi’s view of the mainlanders is shaped by history as well as personal bias. Their distrust of the mainland and its systems is strongly rooted in a real but forgotten or overlooked history of the people of the Everglades. The Bigtrees value this lost history over official records:

Most mainlanders hear “homeschooled” and they get the wrong impression. There were many deficits in our swamp education, but Grandpa Sawtooth, to his credit, taught us the names of whole townships that had been forgotten underwater. Black pioneers, Creek Indians, moonshiners, women, “disappeared” boy soldiers who deserted their army camps. From Grandpa we learned how to peer beneath the sea-glare of the “official, historical” Florida
records we found in books. “Prejudice,” as defined by Sawtooth Bigtree, was a kind of prehistoric arithmetic—a “damn fool math”—in which some people counted and others did not. It meant white names on white headstones in the big cemetery on Cypress Point, and black and brown bodies buried in swamp water.

At ten, I couldn’t articulate much but I got the message: to be a true historian, you had to mourn amply and well. (250)

Like Misner, Sawtooth Bigtree knows that there are people whose identities are written out history, and both men aim to teach their pupils about these intentionally forgotten people because of a strong identification with them. The people of Ruby and the Bigtrees could easily be written out of history without anyone in mainstream culture noticing or caring. And while this fear legitimates their stories of exceptionalism, Morrison and Russell ask us to see that such stories can become ossified and dangerous when they lose their transformative power.

Chapter Descriptions

My first chapter on Paradise explores how within Ruby, Morrison offers examples of how myths can be used to form two models for community. These models come from Carol Gilligan’s feminist psychological concept of the ethics of care, which she established in her 1982 book In a Different Voice. Gilligan identified a difference between the models of morality that boys and girls developed. Boys, and the male
psychologists who based models of moral maturity on them, thought of morality in terms of absolutes, rules that needed to be established and followed in order to achieve justice. Girls, on the other hand, tended to solve problems using communication and relying on relationships between people. Gilligan termed the boys’ model as the “logic of justice” and the girls’ as the “ethic of care” (30), stressing that neither of these models is superior, and that her ideal for the highest level of morality is finding a balance between the two. In my first chapter, I use Gilligan’s theory to explore the two models of community in Ruby that are based on these moral models.

I focus less on morality and more on mythos in discussing Swamplandia! in my second chapter, though the issues of community remain the same. I look at critics such as Jason Marc Harris who see the mythos of the Bigtree family as inherently manipulative, with little value to help and great potential to harm. This argument holds true when the myths become stagnant, but Harris does not explore the myths’ ability to transform. I argue that the family needs the myths in order to thrive as a community, but thriving also requires the space to revise the myths when new issues arise.

**Conclusion**

In *The Battle for God*, Armstrong argues that when a community is in crisis, they often create new stories as a method for making sense of a changing world. In *Paradise* and *Swamplandia*, we see communities enacting this process. As much as the communities are microcosms for the larger world, they are also unique unto themselves and have
rich but complicated histories to sort through in order to adapt to new circumstances. Myths as stories people tell about themselves and their groups help with this adaptation, but holding on to old stories without room for changes can leave people trapped in the past and unable to handle the present. These books offer examples of people grappling with the questions that plague all those who tell stories.
Chapter One:

Creation Myths and Their Revisions in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

Toni Morrison’s 1997 novel *Paradise* tells of an all-black town in Oklahoma named Ruby whose members come into conflict with a group of transient women of different racial backgrounds residing in a former Convent on the outskirts of town. In most criticisms, writers identify the conflicting ideologies of the women living in the Convent and the men living in town as the central tension of the novel.\(^4\) The Convent women live communally, leaving and returning to the Convent as they please and breaking both spoken and unspoken social mores of the town. In contrast, the men of the town live and require others to live restricted, controlled existences, in a town with traditional conventions and an obvious, if tacit, social hierarchy. Most critics tend to favor the radical image of community found in the Convent, but, as authors such as Justine Tally and Sue-Im Lee argue, this image is also unsustainable. Lee argues that the Convent is just as much an idealized community as the image of the town, and both require a level of absolute identification from their members that cannot be sustained.

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\(^4\) See “The Other Side of *Paradise*: Toni Morrison’s (Un)Making of Mythic History” by Mami Gauthier, “Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” by Magali Cornier Michael, and *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community in Contemporary Fiction* by Sue-Im Lee for a sample of sources that will also be referenced in this chapter.
Although critics have often discussed how *Paradise* offers a counter-history\(^5\) of the United States, rarely have they looked for counter-histories within the novel itself. In the relationships between the women of Ruby, I argue Morrison offers a third vision of community that strikes a balance between the absolutism of the other two either groups, living within Ruby society while still committing to care for one another. I argue that the end of the novel shows the community of Ruby, both men and women, moving toward this model.

In order to show the emergence of this third option it is necessary to establish the mythology of the two dominant communities. The first section of this chapter will look at the stories that the communities tell about themselves, and what they mean for the characters’ daily behavior. I argue that the patriarchs in Ruby fully believe in the sense of exceptionalism found in the creation stories, and that they utilize these stories as a justification for employing any means they deem necessary to protect their vision of the town. In the second half of this chapter, I will introduce Carol Gilligan’s concept of the ethics of care to place these stories into a larger framework. I argue that the women of the town have access to the same creation stories as the men, but they hear these stories passed down through a female, instead of a male, line of ancestors who offer a different perspective on the same events, and they choose to utilize the stories to build collaborative, instead of coercive, communities within Ruby.

Community of the Convent

The kind of community the Convent offers has been a source of fascination for Morrison critics. In contrast to the strict hierarchies of Ruby, membership in the Convent is fluid—any woman who finds her way there can stay as long as she chooses, and depart and return with few questions asked. All of the women who find themselves at the Convent for long stretches of time are coping with past traumas, and their reprieve from mainstream American society, portrayed as racist and misogynistic, offers them time and space in which to heal. Many critics see the Convent as a radical feminist revision of what a community could be, based on essential sisterhood between the lost women who find themselves there. For example, Peter R. Kearly describes the women living in the Convent as gender-exclusive and communally healing from past pains: “The women of the Convent do not need men to heal themselves, and in fact in their distance from men create a strong maternal space of community that poses a stark contrast to the patriarchal lineage and architecture of Ruby” (12). In general, critics speak of the Convent almost exclusively in positive terms.

However, not all critics view the Convent in positive terms. Sue-Im Lee’s chapter on Morrison in *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community in Contemporary Fiction* offers an important critique of the Convent. She argues that alongside the interpretations of the Convent as coven (the Ruby patriarch’s view) and Convent as haven (many critics’ take), there is a third interpretation of the Convent as
a dysfunctional group of individuals who end up and stay together more for convenience than for shared ideology (55). Lee points to Consolata, the oldest member of the group and the only one living there when the Convent functioned as its name implies, as frustrated and dissatisfied with the women she has accepted into her home. Lee finds value in the dissent of the third interpretation, as it makes no demands that the women surrender themselves in order to be members of a community. However, she also argues that the narrative suppresses this view, choosing instead to represent the Convent as an idealized community.

For Lee, the idealized vision of the Convent as a space where members share absolute identification with one another and must partake in healing exercise carries many of the same dangers of the patriarchs’ vision of Ruby, which I will spend more time exploring in the following section. Lee worries that *Paradise* may hold up a teleological view of community, where all members must absolutely identify with one another, and where the community must have a *teleos* or a final goal for themselves:

This idealization of identification, especially in the name of healing, raises some disquieting questions not only for *Paradise* but also for the larger discourse of idealized community dominant in literary criticism. If collective healing of the final aim of community, what happens to those factors that do not directly contribute to this teleology? In concrete terms, what happens to those members whose beliefs and practices are deemed nonconducive or antithetical to the task of healing?...Unless there is a consensus on the definition of “healing,” the collective drive towards that condition can be
indistinguishable from any other drive towards homogeneity, from any other demand for community. (Lee 57)

Ultimately, Lee finds that Morrison does not answer the question about what a non-teleological community would look like. On the contrary, I think that if we look at the relationships between the women of Ruby, who are consistently ignored in Lee and other critics’ work, we find an alternate vision of community that values love and connection over judgment and strict morality.

I contend that if the women of Ruby do have a teleos, it is merely survival. They do not look for the glory of utopia or the absolute identification with the teleos of the community that their male companions seek. Instead, they do the daily work of keeping their community together: raising children and food, caring for the sick, helping neighbors in need. As this argument moves into a discussion of the politics of the town itself, it is important to keep Lee’s concerns about community in mind. Through their myths, communities can force their members into constricting positions that limit their ability to live in the world. However, myths can also help communities understand what it means to have a disparate group of individuals live together and consider themselves a collective.

Myths of Ruby

Morrison presents the founding of Ruby as a creation myth, a story retold as a means
of reifying the idea of the community. As I used Benedict Anderson to demonstrate in my introduction, imagination is a key feature of creating communal identity.

In her book *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong frames myths as a key feature of our humanity. She speaks of myths as stories that offer people meaning that goes beyond the empirical plane and show a pattern to the nature of events. Most importantly, Armstrong says that a myth is inseparable from its function: “A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed” (10). The truth of myths lies in their ability to shape an individual’s response to and understanding of the world around them.

Stories about the past serve as myths for the citizens of Ruby, in a way that restricts the community instead of empowering it. In her essay “The Other Side of Paradise: Toni Morrison’s (Un)Making of Mythic History,” Marni Gauthier frames the collection of stories told by the Rubyites as a “mythic history” that constructs a community identity and comes “as much from myth as from historical occurrences” (396). Reverend Misner, a Baptist preacher who moved to Ruby as an adult and is considered an “outsider” by the town’s inhabitants, is confounded by these stories even as he tries to draw on their shared Christian mythology. He understands the values portrayed by the stories, but he does not understand their mythological purpose:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to
endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (Morrison 161)

As a pastor, Reverend Misner deals professionally with myths, and it is ironic that he does not recognize myth-making as it happens. These stories may not be shared from a pulpit, but in connecting with the repetitive and performative aspect of Armstrong’s concept of myth, they have the same effect on the townspeople. In the following pages, I will explain what these stories are, and how they inform and influence the characters’ actions.

In *Paradise*, there are two stories about the town’s origins that compete for primacy. As I will explain later, the ritual aspect of these stories is central to their function. Before exploring ritual, however, let us first examine the stories themselves. The first myth is the story of the founding of Haven, the original town started by the Old Fathers; the second myth is the founding of Ruby, the town started by Haven residents after they returned from serving in World War II. Both stories share central features: they include a journey narrative, and frame the citizens of Haven/Ruby as united and exceptional: “Distanced from the rest of the United States through their geographic isolation, Rubyites rely on foundational narratives to justify their continued separation and self-perceived exceptionalism” (Schell 57). However, other

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6 Authors such as David Schell have referred to these stories as “foundational narratives” (“Engaging Foundational Narratives” 69) but I prefer the term myth, operating under Karen Armstrong’s definition as a way of gesturing to their broader psychological and emotional value.
features of the creation myths reveal crucial differences rooted in their respective history. These differences lead to a divide between the values of the original creation story and its reenactment with the founding of Ruby.

The myth of the creation of Haven gives the current residents of Ruby a sense of origin, a key feature of which is their sense of exceptionalism. The citizens of Ruby rarely interact with people outside the town or the Convent, and their mistrust of outsiders is rooted almost exclusively in this story. Pieces of the foundation of Haven myth are referenced throughout the novel, but Morrison offers a full version of the story in the private reflection of Steward Morgan, one of the most powerful people in the story and one of Ruby’s founders. Of all the men’s perspectives, Steward’s is the clearest and the most unwavering in its condemnation of the young men’s push for a revision of the town story. As a character who is both a powerful player in the community and one of its most ideologically extreme members, Steward’s perspective usefully illuminates a condensed version of what all the patriarchs believe to varying degrees.

When Steward Morgan reflects on stories told by his father and grandfather, Morrison demonstrates how these stories directly correlate with his current values and actions. After the confrontation with the young men in the town over the meaning of the Oven, Steward Morgan contemplates the purpose of this all-black town by remembering stories told by his father and grandfather. His reflection reveals the two central concepts that he takes from the story. The first idea is that he considers the members of Haven/Ruby to be a chosen people, an idea supported by the fantastic
events present in the foundational story itself. In Steward’s telling, as the families wander through the wilderness of the West, a magical man appears to Big Papa and Big Daddy, Steward’s grandfather and father. Big Papa, also known as Zechariah, interprets the appearance of this man as a sign that the families will be guided on their path: “He is with us,” said Zechariah. ‘He is leading the way’” (Morrison 97). Zechariah also believes that the families are travelling on “God’s time” (98), implying that God is directly involved with their journey and that by trusting in God, the families will reach a safe destination. Steward sees the story through his grandfather’s perspective. He also believes that Ruby has a religious, as well as racial, impetus to prosper, which I will examine next.

The second value of the myth is the importance of preserving the town for future generations. The foundational myth of Haven begins in Steward’s mind with a concern over reproduction. He thinks of the original families who migrated to Oklahoma as strong, capable of travelling long distances on foot. Steward’s biggest concern is the health of the children and the pregnant women. He frames the Disallowing as traumatic not just because the families were refused access into the all-black towns, but specifically because the pregnant women were refused: “It was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones” (95). The physically evocative language here is significant. Steward believes that his ancestors were “changed…for all time”, that this change had a near-physical effect on them as “it threatened to crack open their bones”. 
This language implies that the shame from this rejection could become integrated into the genes of Ruby’s people. Steward did not experience this rejection, but he inherited its shame from his forefathers the same way he inherited his dark skin.

Steward’s perspective on this myth is gendered, and in his perspective the gender dynamics of the town can be found. Steward thinks of this story through the men’s perspective, placing himself in their position. He does not think of how the women experienced this refusal, but of what it meant to the men. When he tries to imagine how he would have responded to this situation, his central fear is the lack of ability to change the situation, a fear that highlights his violent tendencies:

How would he have felt if some highfalutin men in collars and good shoes had told her, “Get away from here,” and he, Steward, couldn’t do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with free wind blowing Night’s mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody.

(96)

For Steward, the ultimate insult is not just the refusal of the families, but the refusal of the pregnant women. This insult is so grave not because the pregnant women are more vulnerable than other members of the group—Steward is also concerned about the young children. The pregnant women represent more than themselves, more than the community’s collective vulnerability. As the only ones who have the ability to bring about the next generation, they represent the continuation of the families. By refusing to allow the women entrance into their community, Steward believes the people in the
other towns say that they do not care about preserving the future of this group, along with its present.

This dynamic offers insight into why Steward finds the young men of Ruby so threatening. His reflection comes right after the patriarchs get into an argument with the younger men about the message of the Oven, and offers the reader insight into Steward’s reaction during the discussion. Steward recognizes that the continued survival of Ruby and its mission of being a safe, all-black community lies not in his hands, but in the hands of future generations. When the younger generation disagrees about what that mission is or should be, Steward reacts violently: “‘Listen here,’ he said, his voice think and shapely with Blue Boy. ‘If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake’ (87). The Oven has worn a sign with the words “The Furrow of His Brow” engraved on it since the Old Fathers built it in Haven. The older men in Ruby interpret this message as “Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” while the younger men, influenced by the black liberation movement, think it should become “Be the Furrow of His Brow.” By wanting to change the statement on the Oven, they are threatening the homeostasis of the community. “Beware the Furrow” is an inwardly-focused statement, telling the members of Ruby to scrutinize their own actions and, in the young men’s interpretation, live in fear of what could happen to them. On the other hand, “Be the Furrow” is outwardly-focused, calling for action against the outside world. The New Fathers of Ruby do all they can to avoid interacting with the outside world, and this call to action is anathema to them. Because
it is coming from a younger generation, the men who are expected to eventually become the next patriarchs of the town, this interest in another interpretation is even more threatening.

Once again, a threat to the continuation and reproductive future of Ruby brings out Steward’s violent tendencies. His fear of whether the younger generation will continue what he sees as the mission of Ruby is compounded by the fact that he himself is childless. The only person left to inherit the prosperity, accumulated wealth, and property of the Morgan family is a nephew who, although not a member of the rebellious contingency, Steward believes is unworthy and unaware of town’s legacy. This fear is illustrated through, but also influenced by, the stories Steward tells about his community. By invoking the myths, Morrison illuminated the anxiety Steward has about whether the legacy he values so much will be carried on through the next generation.

The second time the foundation of Haven is told in *Paradise* is during the Christmas pageant, in replacement of a typical nativity story, and shows how the story engages with the ritual aspects of myth. The pageant is not the full story of the founding of Haven, but focuses intensely on the Disallowing because of its obvious parallel to Mary and Joseph’s being turned away from the Inn. The opening scene sets the stage for the Haven families to be refused shelter by people from other towns: “four figures in felt hats and two big suits stand at a table, counting giant dollar bills. The face of each one is hidden by a yellow and white mask featuring gleaming eyes and snarling lips, red as a fresh wound. Above a sign tacked to the table front, which
reads INN, they count money, make slurping noises” (208). Two features in this figuration of other towns become immediately apparent. First, the costumes and the “giant dollar bills” signify that the other townspeople have an excess of wealth. Second, the “yellow and white” masks signify that the other townspeople have lighter skin than the forbearers of Ruby. This color is actually of great significance.

The light masks reveal a covert value of the town, one that is never openly discussed. Pat Best, another member of the town whose mother was an outsider with lighter skin, firmly believes that the people in Ruby favor dark skin over light skin, that those who are considered the most valid members of the community are the ones with the darkest skin. This hierarchy is an inversion of colorism. Colorism is a term that was coined by Alice Walker in her collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Walker defines colorism as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (Walker 290). Unlike racism, which mostly occurs across different racial groups, colorism happens both between and within groups. As we see in the next paragraph, dark skin can be disparaged not just by white people, but by black people as well.

In Steward’s telling of the founding story, he remembers how the men in the original families were proud that even though they were slaves, at least their women were field workers, and only had children with other (dark-skinned) slaves:

They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman’s [sic] kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white
kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate. (Morrison 99)

Although Steward does not explicitly acknowledge it, one of the few visible signs of this heritage is the dark skin of the current generations. This element of the story, the emphasis on reproduction within the group, shows the importance of racial and genetic purity. Since the ancestors who were slaves never had children with their white masters, the current residents of Ruby, aside from Pat and Billie Delia, inherit no white genes. Pat’s mother was a mixed-race outsider, and she believes the other citizens are punishing her family for their racial impurity. In Pat’s version of the creation myth of Haven, the racial politics are made obvious:

This time the clarity was clear: for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. (194)

Pat believes that in response to the Disallowing the original families became even more prideful and closed ranks, only associating with each other. During the pageant, the light-skinned people are mocked and turned into animalistic caricatures, drooling over money with no concern for the obvious need of the black families at their threshold. The implicit value of the importance of racial purity is made explicit through the reenactment of the creation myth.
Women of Ruby and the Town’s Mythology

Although they claim absolute authority, the men are not the only interpreters of the foundational myths. Despite Steward’s insistence on keeping the Oven the same, members of his own family do not share this value. When his sister-in-law Soane—who is doubly related to him as both his twin’s wife and his wife’s sister—thinks of the Oven, she is critical of its value. She worries that this focus on the Oven is not only dangerous, but a sin, that it has become an idol and contradicts both Old and New Testament warnings: “A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine (cautioned against not only in scary Deuteronomy but in lovely Corinthians II as well) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self” (103-04). Soane worries that the conflict over the Oven will tear the community apart, and since the Oven no longer serves a practical purpose, sees no reason for this conflict. In Soane’s version of the founding of Ruby, the women care very little about the Oven: “The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed and moved and reassembled it. But privately they resent the truck space given over to it…Resented also the hours spent putting it back together” (103). The symbolism of the Oven, and the mission that the men attach to it, are far less important to the women of the community, who care much more about the practical value of the Oven.

When it comes to the foundational story of Haven, Pat Best offers the same narrative as Steward with some significant contributions. In Steward’s version, he focuses on the fantastic events that made his family in particular and the community as
a whole exceptional. Pat leaves out the incredible events and includes more moments of real community building, of the decisions women made to take care of the members of the community. She includes the stragglers the original nine families picked up along the way: “There were nine large intact families who made the original journey...Along with them came fragments of other families: a sister and a brother, four cousins, a river of aunts and great-aunts shepherding the children of their dead sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews” (188). Right from the start, Pat undermines the wholeness of the group that Steward implied. She sees part of the narrative that the patriarchs ignore. In doing so, she articulates a revision of the foundation myth, demonstrating that which facts one chooses to include in the myth can alter the dynamic of the community it represents.

**Community Morality**

We have seen what the stories of Ruby are, and how the patriarchs and the women of Ruby have different relationships to them. In this next section, I will look more in depth about how the people of Ruby use the stories to connect with larger ethical systems.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan’s research, discussed in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, illuminates the differences between how the men and the women of Ruby understand and relate to their community. Gilligan’s research responded to several contemporary theories of moral development, all of which based their
prescriptions for development on studies that included exclusively male participants. The psychologists aimed to understand how individuals develop a sense of right and wrong throughout their lives, tying moral development to cognitive development. Gilligan noticed that while developing their models of moral development, the psychologists relied solely on male participants.

Gilligan saw that this pattern of excluding women meant that within these models women rarely reached the highest levels of moral maturity, in which individuals operated under a set of universal ethical principles. Other psychologists simply believed that the women were not as capable of development as men, but Gilligan disagreed: “a problem in theory became cast as a problem in women’s development” (Gilligan 7). The problem with the theory being that the definition of moral maturity emphasized morality only in terms of justice. In response, she conducted her own experiments interviewing women, finding that they had a different understanding of morality which she termed the “ethics of care,” which she placed in contrast to the moral development models created by psychologists including Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Erik Erikson, which she deemed the “logic of justice” model (30). Gilligan stressed that neither of these models is superior to the other, and that her ideal for the highest level of morality is finding a balance between the two. In the following pages, Gilligan’s theories of the ethics of care and the logic of justice help explain the difference between the men and the women’s vision of community in *Paradise*. 
In order to understand the logic of justice model, Gilligan examines a study conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg that served as the basis for his theory of moral development. Kohlberg presented interviewees with a moral dilemma: a man’s wife is dying, but he cannot afford the only drug to save her and the pharmacist refuses to lower the price. Kohlberg asked participants what they thought would be the right way to respond, whether the man should steal the drug and why (25-26). Gilligan explains that Kohlberg believed that an individual who had reached the highest level of development saw moral issues through the lens of objective, rational values of justice and logic. In this case the value is that a person has certain inalienable rights and a responsibility to respect the rights of others without sacrificing their own rights. This logic-based understanding is what researchers sought in participants’ responses to the question. For example, Gilligan shows an eleven-year-old boy’s response as exemplifying the middle stages of Kohlberg’s theory: “Constructing the dilemma, as Kohlberg did, as a conflict between the values of property and life, he discerns the logical priority of life and uses that logic to justify his choice” (26). Gilligan argues that the boy understands the situation as an impersonal dilemma between competing rights of property and life, which the boy describes as “sort of like a math problem with humans” (26). Gilligan defines this framework for morality as the “logic of justice” (30). In this framework, a principle of justice can be arrived at through logic (26). Systems of law are created to help implement abstract justice, but as man-made systems they can be flawed and are not reliable as the sole source of information about

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justice (27). In the Heinz dilemma, for example, the law offers no solution that both preserves the right to property and the wife’s life. Gilligan sees an example of this abstract logic in the boy’s explanation of the moral situation:

Transposing a hierarchy of power into a hierarchy of values, he defuses a potentially explosive conflict between people by casting it as an impersonal conflict of claims. In this way, he abstracts the moral problem from the interpersonal situation, finding in this logic of fairness an objective way to decide who will win the dispute. (32)

A key feature of the logic of justice is that it serves super-human values. Gilligan describes the highest stage of Kohlberg moral development model as “a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity” (27). This idea that there is a “free-standing logic” that is not rooted in situational experience is a crucial part of the logic of justice.

Gilligan puts this concept of logic as free-standing in contrast to the humanly-rooted ethics of care. She sees the ethics of care evolving in women and girls’ responses to Kohlberg’s questions, as well as in her own studies. Gilligan believes that since from an early age women generally experience society through receiving care from other women and being expected to care for others, they tend to view morality as a network of relationships and obligations. In contrast to the boy’s understanding of conflict resolution just explained, Gilligan includes a typical girl’s response. The girl thinks that the moral dilemma presented in Kohlberg’s study could be solved through more effective communication and that a compromise could be reached between the
characters. In Gilligan’s interpretation, the girl sees “the actors in the dilemma...not as opponents in a contest of rights but as members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend” (30). In terms of morality, seeing a network of relationships means that the girl sees moral actions as those that respond to a need and care for a person within the network. Instead of using force, justified by logic, to obtain a solution, the girl turns to communication as a tool for preserving a relationship within the network. Unlike the logic of justice, the ethic of care stresses relative, situational responses that value context over absolutism.

Morrison demonstrates both models of morality along a gendered divide in Ruby. The Morgan men especially see morality in terms of absolutes and rights. Steward Morgan’s ideal value in life is freedom, defined as the ability to be self-reliant and to fully exercise his rights without interference—what Gilligan and other moral theorist would term separation. He sees himself striving to succeed as an individual against the natural world: “Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king” (Morrison 99). He is proud that his town receives no assistance from the state. Although he is willing to work with the other members of Ruby, he and his brother own the only bank in town, so “working with” others looks quite different and involves much less compromise for him than for other people in Ruby. Like the boy in the example Gilligan offers, Steward and Deacon see life as a competition that one wins or loses based on personal merit. Their obligations to their community only go as far as necessary to ensure the continued existence of the idea of Ruby in its
current form. They and other male leaders of Ruby prioritize maintaining the present social order and value system.

In the most extreme example, the men of Ruby choose the right of preserving the town over the right of life and decide to kill the women in the Convent when they are perceived to threaten the town. They are able, or believe they are able, to view the conflict abstractly and to come to an objective decision. In the collective third-person narration from the men’s perspective in the opening chapter, they frame the decision to kill the women of the Convent as unanimous, righteous, and necessary: “There were irreconcilable differences among the congregations in town, but members from all of them merged solidly on the necessity of this action: Do what you have to. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue” (9-10).

When the boy in the study was faced with Heinz’s dilemma, he decided that Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife, valuing the right to life over the right to property absolutely without room for negotiation. Similarly, although in a more extreme situation, Steward feels that Ruby’s right to exist is threatened by the Convent. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, preserving the future of Ruby is of the utmost importance to Steward, and he is willing to murder to guarantee that Ruby remains the way it is.

A less dramatic but equally telling example of the logic of justice at work comes from Steward’s twin, Deacon Morgan. Co-owner of the only bank in town, Deacon prides himself on the respectability of his business. One winter morning as he is about to open the bank, he notices his neighbor Sweetie Fleetwood walking down
the street without a coat. Sweetie has four children, all of whom were born severely ill, and she has not left her house in years because she devotes every waking minute to caring for them. For her to be outside at all is extremely odd. As Deacon describes it, “she was moving resolutely north, where Deek knew there was nothing for seventeen miles. What could the sweetest girl, named for her nature, be doing coatless on a chilly October morning that far from the home she had not stepped out of since 1967?”

(114). In Deacon’s description of her as “the sweetest girl,” we see his affection for Sweetie. In his own words, he shows why the situation is alarming: Sweetie is walking into the middle of nowhere without a coat when it is cold outside. Although Aaron Poole, another neighbor, is waiting to turn in a loan payment, Deacon considers interceding with Sweetie: “After considering letting Poole wait and driving on to catch up with Sweetie, Deek cut off his motor…There should be no occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time” (114). In the Heinz dilemma, Deacon would be the pharmacist who own the much-needed drug. He sees a need, but because it does not directly affect him and because fulfilling that need would interfere with his business, he chooses not to act. He sees his responsibility to his business, his right to property, as superseding the need for care.

His brother Steward agrees with this decision. When he tells Anna Flood, another neighbor and owner of the town’s store, and Reverend Misner about Sweetie, Anna asks what seems like an obvious question:

“…Deek said she was way past Sargeant’s [[sic] another neighbor’s house]—marching out of town like a soldier.”
“Didn’t he stop her?”

Steward stared at Anna as though he couldn’t believe her words. “He was opening up the bank, girl.” (124)

This interaction further illustrates my point. When Anna questions whether Deacon should have helped Sweetie, Steward condescends to her by calling her “girl,” even though Anna is an adult who successfully runs one of the few businesses in Ruby. This interaction also reveals where exactly Steward’s loyalties lie. Earlier I discussed Steward’s desire to protect his vision of the community against the younger generation’s ideas for revision. In this moment, we see that this vision of community is even more restricted than previously thought. Steward sees Ruby as a “good and serious town,” to borrow Deacon’s phrase, and that means business must always open on time. The existence of the open bank is much more important than whether the bank helps the neighbors. Even a neighbor in crisis cannot interfere with this severe punctuality.

Anna’s obvious question is a good example of what Gilligan calls the ethics of care. In contrast to the men’s logic of justice, Morrison demonstrates the ethic of care in many of her female characters, especially the women of Ruby, even those like Soane and Dovey who are closely linked to Deacon and Steward, the exemplars of the logic of justice. Soane Morgan demonstrates the ethic of care in her relationship to her neighbors, including the women at the Convent, who, despite their difference from the people of Ruby, are still a part of Soane’s network of relationships. After the Reverend Mother dies, Soane and other women in Ruby respond with care to Connie, a middle-
aged woman who has lived her life under the Reverend Mother’s care and protection. Soane helps make arrangements for taking care of the body, even though this involves needing to “telephone strangers up north”. The first thing the reader learns about Ruby, the rule that is repeated over and over, is that the townspeople do not trust or rely on outsiders. To telephone strangers up north is to break the rules, behavior that would be unthinkable in the logic of justice. Soane does not think of terms of rights or obligations, as she would under a logic of justice. Instead, she thinks of her responsibility to care for someone within her network of connections, and acts without hesitation. Soane also collects “food from neighbor women and cook[s] some things herself,” which she, her sister/sister-in-law Dovey, and Anna Flood bring out to the Convent “knowing full well there was no one to eat it but themselves.” The women in Ruby are willing to waste food, another taboo of the self-reliant Ruby, if it will provide some comfort to a member of their community. Abstract values like frugality still matter under the ethics of care, but they are much more relative and transmutable than under the logic of justice.

Even after providing all of these immediate acts of care, Soane demonstrates continuing concern for Connie: “Connie seemed strange, broken somehow and Soane added her to the list of people who worried her life” (101). Here she demonstrates an aspect of feminine morality that the young girl in Kohlberg’s study also considers: the consideration in conflict resolution of “a narrative of relationships that extends over time” (Gilligan 28). With the Heinz dilemma, the girl recognized that the wife might need continuing care and the husband could not risk absenting himself by going to
prison. Theft was not an option because it posed only a short-term response to a need, without considering the long-term consequences of ongoing need. Not only do Soane and the other women of Ruby respond to the immediate need of Connie, but Soane feels an obligation to continue caring for Connie through her worry and consideration. Connie is a part of the reciprocal network of relationships, and receives care as a part of her membership.

We see the different systems of morality contrasted in a conversation between Soane and her husband Deacon, narrated from her perspective, when Soane wonders why their neighbors cannot get a loan from Deacon’s bank even though they have demonstrable need. Deacon sees the failure of their neighbor Arnold Fleetwood’s store as simply a business matter. Throughout the passage, Deacon’s pleasure over his morning cup of coffee is conflated with his explanations of Fleetwood’s business struggles. In a kind reading, Deacon may be simply enjoying his coffee. In a more critical reading, Morrison’s choice to intersperse the descriptions of Deacon’s coffee with his comments on Fleetwood’s business problems implies that Deacon takes pleasure in both. In Gilligan’s explanation of the difference between the logic of justice and the ethic of care, she talks about the differing assumptions that serve as the base for these models. She argues that the logic of justice, and the boy who illustrates this concept, begins with “a premise of separation” between individuals (Gilligan 37). On the other hand, the ethic of care begins with “a premise of connection” between individuals (38). Where Deacon sees Fleetwood’s problems as separate from himself, he sees no reason to bridge this separation. Soane, in contrast, sees a connection with
Fleetwood as a member of their community. She recognizes why the business is failing, but feels a concern for their neighbor’s wellbeing which her husband lacks:

“[Fleetwood] used to do all right.”

Deek tipped a little coffee into the saucer. “Ten years ago. Five.” The dark pool rippled under his breath. “Boys coming out of Veetnam [sic], getting married, setting up. War money. Farms doing okay, everybody doing okay.” He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure. “Now, well…”

“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. Why, for instance, couldn’t Menus have kept the house he bought? But Soane didn’t try to explain…

(Morrison 107)

Deacon sees no moral rationale for interfering in his friends’ fiscal issues, even if he wanted to—though it does not seem like he does in this case. Under the logic of justice, he has the right to conduct his business as he chooses, especially since he does not impinge on anyone else’s right by doing so. In fact, offering a discounted loan to a neighbor would contradict Deacon’s understanding of morality. By doing so, he would be allowing that neighbor to impinge on his right to make money, a crucial right in this capitalist society. Soane’s morality, in contrast, cannot comprehend this lack of action.
She sees their neighbor’s need, and the ethics of care require her to respond. Gilligan argues that under the ethics of care, “responsibility signifies response, an extension rather than a limitation of action” (Gilligan 38). By not helping their neighbors, Soane believes she is failing her system of morality.

The ethics of care clashes with the logic of justice in the Fleetwood situation, suggesting a failure on Soane’s part to prioritize communication. Communication is key to the ethics of care. In the logic of justice, solutions can be reached through rational discernment and enforced through systems of law. In the ethics of care, solutions come through communication within the network of relationships, whether between the parties in conflict or with the aid of connected mediators. Gilligan demonstrates how the children considering the Heinz dilemma come to these differing conclusions: the boy assumes that Heinz should steal the drug and trust that others will see the logic of his theft, the girl believes that the pharmacist does not understand the situation and he and Heinz need to negotiate a solution that could satisfy both parties. Gilligan says that these two responses demonstrate the difference between the gendered systems of morality:

Both children thus recognize the need for agreement but see it as mediated in different ways—he impersonally through systems of logic and law, she personally through communication in relationship. Just as he relies on the conventions of logic to deduce the solution to this dilemma, assuming these conventions to be shared, so she relies on a process of communication, assuming connection and believing that her voice will be heard. (Gilligan 29)
Thus, the ethics of care is predicated on a belief that solutions can be reached through communication within the network of relationships. In her essay examining *Paradise* through the lens of coalition-building, Magali Cornier Michael refers to the work of psychologist W. Edward Vinacke, who “describes the differing behaviors of men (‘exploitative’) and women (‘accommodative’) when placed in controlled experimental situations that necessitate coalition-building” (Michael 643). Michael argues that the Convent models a form of coalition building based on accommodative practices: “*Paradise* explores coalition processes that are more accommodative, caring, and loving, rather than exploitative, and that are aimed principally at survival and at moving toward a new, alternative form of non-hierarchal justice, rather than at maximizing power and winning” (644). While I think that Michael’s explanation of coalition-building is useful for understanding the relationship between the women of the Convent, I think this description can also be fruitfully applied to the women of Ruby, who build coalitions among themselves and with the women of the Convent despite living within a hierarchal and patriarchal society. Unlike the isolationist practices of the Convent, their existence within this society necessitates negotiations that provide for a sustainable network of relationships.

Communication is a key tool in the ethics of care and for building accommodative coalitions. When Soane fails to explain her thoughts to her husband, she is failing to act morally under this ethical code by not using communication to respond to her neighbor’s need. This is not the only time when Soane fails to communicate with her husband, and the consequences of this failure only reveal
themselves when it is too late for Soane to make amends. When she and Dovey rush out to the Convent to try and stop the men’s massacre, Soane thinks that the conflict could have been avoided initially through communication:

Soane is chastising herself for not having talked, just talked, to Deek...Now she wondered whether her fear of suffocating in air too thin for breathing, her unrelieved mourning for her sons, keeping the ache alive by refusing to read their last letters were ways of punishing him without seeming to. In any case, she was certain that routing the Convent women had something to do with their marriage. Harper, Sargeant and certainly Arnold wouldn’t lift a hand to those women if Deek and Steward had not authorized and manipulated them. If only she had talked twenty-two years ago. Just talked. (Morrison 287-88)

The repetition at the opening and close of the passage of the word “talked” underscores that Soane views this conflict as a result of a failure in communication. Where the men think that they came together as individuals to enact a collective plan, Soane sees the ramifications of one person’s actions reverberating throughout the entire network of relationships. She sees a lack of communication and an unresolved problem with her husband having consequences far beyond her private life; her failure to act morally under an ethics of care has dire, albeit unforeseeable, consequences.

By using Gilligan’s theory, we can see clearly the differences between how the men and women of Ruby view their responsibility to behave. These differences in moral understanding are illuminated even further by considering the uses of stories from town lore. Both the different systems of morality and the different uses of stories
come together to shape conflicting understandings of what the community of Ruby is and how its members should act.

After the massacre, I believe that Morrison leaves Ruby at a crossroads of communication. On the one hand, some of the citizens continue to practice the toxic myth-making that led to the murders of the women of the Convent. These citizens compete to create a new myth about these events, hoping to portray themselves in the best possible light: “Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation” (297). However, Morrison also opens up the possibility of change. At this crucial moment where the town’s official history is being decided, Morrison highlights the ways in which myth-making is resisted. Lone DuPres, the only witness to the patriarch’s plotting, tries to advocate for her version of events, but she becomes “unhinged by the way the story was being retold” (297). She and Pat Best believe the same version of the story, but both choose to stay silent. After years of men speaking over them they recognize that their marginal positions within the town, Pat as a light-skinned woman and Lone as an orphan and non-descendant, means that their community will not believe them.

However, they have allies across the gender division. Morrison also portrays male characters stepping toward the ethics of care through communication. Misner uses his position of authority to pose “a host of unanswered questions” (298) during his sermons, challenging his congregants. Even when the Convent women’s
Koenig 53

mysterious disappearance offers the community an opportunity to cover up and forget its crimes, some of the male Rubyites will not let the story rest: “Had it not been for Luther Beauchamp—who told the most damning story—and Pious, Deed Sands and Aaron—who corroborated much of Lone’s version—the whole thing might have been sanitized out of existence” (298). Through telling the story and supporting Lone’s version, the men use communication to challenge the deliberate amnesia of their town.

When it is useful, they even employ the foundation myth as a tool for disrupting amnesia. The extend Poole family puts pressure on the only one of its members to have been included in the patriarchs’ plans:

Wisdom Poole had the toughest row to hoe. Seventy family members held him accountable (just as they had his brothers, Brood and Apollo) for scandalizing their forefathers’ reputations, giving him no peace or status, reprimanding him daily until he fell on his knees and wept before the entire congregation of Holy Redeemer. After testifying, recommitted, renewed and full of remorse, he began tentative conversations with Brood and Apollo. (299)

This passage emphasizes communication as key to healing the community, breaking the myth down to a conversation between individuals. Unlike when the patriarchs use the foundational myths to justify their actions and reaffirm their exceptionalism, the extended Poole family invokes the foundational myth of Haven with the “forefathers’ reputation” as a way of holding one of their own accountable for his actions. Reputation differs from exceptionalism in that it is tied to what one does, not who one is. From the Poole family’s perspective, the foundational myth should never have been
used to justify the massacre, and they give Wisdom no rest until he repents in the speech-act of confession. Wisdom had shunned his brothers Brood and Apollo for breaking the unspoken racial code by falling in love with Billie Delia, Pat’s daughter and the only light-skinned girl in the community whose promiscuous reputation is tied to the color of her skin. After his confession, he begins to speak to them once more, using communication to do what would have been unthinkable under the logic of justice.

Unlike Wisdom, however, the rest of the patriarchs face little fallout because of their actions. Some have even benefitted financially from the massacre. Although there is social tension, the men on the side of Lone have not yet exerted nearly the level of social pressure that the Poole family used, and at a funeral months later the patriarchs are described as looking “slightly majestic” or “smug as ever” (299). The other men may be emerging as leaders with stories of their own, but the text leaves us at a moment where the future of Ruby remains unclear. However, Morrison offers hope for the town’s improvement through the change in Deacon’s character. In omniscient third-person narration, the text states that:

It was Deacon Morgan who had changed the most. It was as though he had looked in his brother’s face and did not like himself anymore” (300). To the shock of everyone in town, Deacon begins visiting with Misner and speaking openly with him: “Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions. He spoke to his
wife in the opaque manner he thought appropriate. None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner. (301)

Deacon tells Misner stories: about his memories from the war, about his relationship with Consolata, and most surprisingly of all, of Big Papa’s own prejudices. Three hundred pages into the text, Morrison offers the first story about the Old Fathers that paints them in a critical light and shows them directly confronted by white people’s racism. Deacon tells Misner about his grandfather Zechariah, who went by the nickname Coffee as a complement to his twin’s name Tea. In Deacon’s story, while they are still in the South, Coffee and Tea are accosted at gunpoint by white men who tell them to dance. Tea accommodates them, but “Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead” (302). Deacon says that Coffee “saw something [in Tea] that shamed him” (303) and Coffee severed all contact with his brother at this point.

This story shows an Old Father navigating an impossible situation, and making compromises that end up excluding one of his own. Tea has been cut out from the foundational myths, from the story of the town. At this moment, Deacon is considering giving his brother Stewart the same treatment:

“It must have been hard,” said Richard.

“I’m saying he never said another word to him and wouldn’t allow anybody else to call his name.”
“Lack of words,” Richard said. “Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love. To lose a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that’s worse than the original shame, wouldn’t you say?” (303)

In this exchange, the separation is framed in terms of communication—the brother was never spoken to nor spoken of again. Misner sees the “lack of love” as directly connected to the “lack of words.” By cutting off contact, Coffee removes Tea his network of care. Misner and Deacon are much more hesitant to do this. Misner argues that cutting off communication with a member of the community as “worse than the original shame,” that failing to care for someone within a network of relationships is the worst possible sin.

Conclusion

Under the logic of justice, even violence can be justified if the mythology allows for it and the threat is deemed sufficient to warrant it. During a raid on the Convent in which all of the women are probably murdered one of the Morgan brothers explains that they are committing this violence for “the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). As the men work their way through the Convent searching for the women, Morrison interweaves readers’ introduction to the story of Ruby, inextricably linking them for the rest of the text.

Most readings of Paradise focus on the rift between the men of Ruby and the women of the Convent. However, as any reader of Morrison’s work will realize, she
rarely limits her novels to simply two narratives. While this rift certainly serves as the source of the conflict, readings that cannot see beyond the easy binary it offers fail to notice an important third party: the women of Ruby. As limiting and outdated as the patriarchs’ views on life are, the life of the women in the Convent is also unsustainable, requiring absolute communal identification at all times from its inhabitants, as Sue-Im Lee argues. The women of Ruby offer an important third model of community, one that is based on an ethic of care. While the Old Fathers and the current patriarchs cling to their pride and their dream for the town, these women and their foremothers hold the community together by attending to the needs of individual members and building a network of relationships based on reciprocal care. Working behind the scenes, the female leaders of the town—Dovey and Soane Morgan, sisters and wives of the owners of the only bank; Anna Flood, independent owner of the supply store; Pat Best, the town’s school teacher; and Lone DuPres, out-of-work midwife—try to understand the connections between the people in their community and respond to individual’s needs, including the women of the Convent.

By looking at both the men and women of Ruby, we realize that the town’s mythos is not solely limiting. If we look at the women of Ruby and think of Gilligan’s ethics of care, it becomes apparent that the mythos has an equal potential to provide the foundation for a united community that recognizes the need to take care of its members in the face of a hostile country. Deacon Morgan holds up the united community as his ideal for Ruby: “But against all odds, in 1932 Haven was thriving. The crash had not touched it...Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their
journey to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing, were vigilant to any need or shortage” (108-09). However, a few pages later, Morrison shows us how Deacon has strayed from this ideal: he spots a neighbor in need, but lets her walk into an impending blizzard rather than delay opening his bank (114). This ideal is still within the grasp of the townspeople—his wife Soane practices it with her care for “the list of people who worried her life” (101). The pride of townspeople, their focus on respectability over care, keeps them from returning to this ideal of kinship. The novel ends at a moment when the town’s self-definition is shifting, and where the model the women offer, built on empathy and care rather than judgment and guilt, has the potential to become the new foundation. Steward and Deacon Morgan are no longer on speaking terms, and Deacon turns to Reverend Misner for advice. Misner solves community problems through communication, such as when he forces the Morgan brothers and the Fleetwood men to meet and discuss issues between K.D. Morgan and Arnette Fleetwood; by turning to him, Deacon reveals that he is searching for a new model of community.

The Morgan brothers’ absolute control over the town has been shaken in the penultimate chapter of the book, and the town is considering what story will be told about recent events. Morrison offers us no guarantees, but Paradise includes the possibility that the logic of justice may finally have been broken.
Chapter Two:

Transformation and Manipulation in Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*

Like *Paradise*, Karen Russell’s 2011 novel *Swamplandia!* is about a small community living in the regional, political, social, and economic margins of the United States. Similarly, both novels explore how narrative is used to construct community. Through the perspective of Ava, with the reflecting characters of her two siblings, Russell examines a crucial aspect of identity: myths. Ava’s trajectory through the novel is a twist on the bildungsroman tradition—the permanent loss of her mother and grandfather and the temporary loss of her father and siblings that pushes her to leave the safety of her strange home. She needs to find ways to adapt the beliefs she has inherited from her parents and grandparents to her present experiences.

She begins with having the living story of her parents, especially her mother, as the foundation for her system of belief: her parents are magical, extraordinarily gifted at their chosen profession of wrestling alligators, and unique in their relationship to the swamp in which they live and the creatures with which they share it. Ava’s identity is her home, its physical location and its unusual inhabitants. Like the characters in *Paradise*, Ava views herself and her family community as exceptional, in ways that are limiting and worrisome, while also being necessary for surviving a hostile world. After her mother’s death, Ava’s belief system must undergo a radical transformation. Values that her mother once anchored are now unmoored. In their grief, Ava and her sister Osceola search for new bodies onto whom they can
attach both their need for emotional connection and their need for mythologies and meaning. Both are drawn into dangerous situations because of this need. However, Ava manages to become her own symbol, her own embodiment of family values. In a moment of crisis, she is transfigured into the symbol of strength and courage that her mother once was. Ava must find an exceptional strength within herself. Her challenge with her family members is to maintain her network of relationships while not relying on others to embody the values she seeks. The stories she believes are not mere artifice, but are transformative myths; enacting them through thought and action changes who Ava is and what she is capable of doing.

Ava’s beliefs are at stake in the novel. Belief is shown to be double-edged. On the one hand, believing allows you to be manipulated or duped like a tourist. On the other, the belief allows you to transform yourself and in so doing adjust to new circumstances or communities. Ava’s older brother Kiwi learns this lesson through the course of the book. Kiwi is the most rebellious of the three teenage siblings, but his rebellious impulses take the form of academic desires—Kiwi wants to leave the park and attend a university. He thinks the myths his sisters and father perpetuate are foolish and hollow, and that he can survive without them. However, when he goes to the mainland, he learns that his peers who live without myths are aimless, and their lives have no greater meaning than surviving from one day to the next. He learns that myths are necessary to form connections.

I argue that myth has the potential for both transformation and manipulation. When Ava engages with the performance of her mother on a mythos level, she sees
her mother transformed from her quotidian identity to Hilola Bigtree, famous and exceptional alligator wrestler. The transformative power of mythos is unlocked when it is used to create and sustain connections between people. Both parties have to believe in the myth they are enacting in order for this power to succeed. In contrast, the manipulative aspect is meant to divide; it creates a separation between those who are “in the know” about the myth and those who are gullible to its propaganda.

**The Mixed Reception of Myth in *Swamplandia!***

*Swamplandia!* was only published in 2011; because of this, there is little scholarly work on the novel. An exception is Jason Marc Harris’s excellent “Absurdist Narratives in the Sunshine State: Comic, Criminal, Folkloric, and Fantastic Escapades in the Swamps and Suburbs of Florida,” which puts *Swamplandia!* in conversation with Tim Dorsey’s *Triggerfish Twist* and Cal Hiaasen’s *Sick Puppy*, with a focus on “simulated folklore”—folklore that is for one reason or another he reads as false. He argues that these novels “rather than being absolutely fresh arresting distortions, resemble fun-house reflections provided by the news media” (37). Harris’s concern seems to be that these novels contribute to media stereotypes about Florida.

When it comes to the Bigtree family’s beliefs in particular, Harris presents them as foundationally false. “They [the Bigtrees] are not native Floridians, but transplants from Ohio” (52) he asserts, which to me reads as an odd argument. As Ava tells the reader, Florida is made of newcomers and immigrants, people who traveled South instead of North in their quest for the frontier:
These Seminoles, the “real” Indians that the Chief envied in a filial and loving way, were in fact the descendants of many displaced tribes from the Creek Confederacy. This swamp was not their ancestral home either, not by any stretch—they had been pushed further and further into the swamp by President Jackson’s Tennessee boys and a company of scarecrows from Atlanta, a militia that was starved and half-crazed. We Bigtrees were an “indigenous species” of swamp dweller, according to the Chief and our catalogs, but it turned out that every human in the Ten Thousand Islands was a recent arrival. The Calusa, the shell builders—they were Paleo-Indians, the closest thing our swamp had to an indigenous people. But the Calusa vanished from all maps hundreds of years ago, and it was not until the late 1800s that our swamp was recolonized by freed slaves and by fugitive Indians and, decades later, by the shocked, drenched white pioneers shaking out wet deeds, true sitting ducks, the patsies of the land barons who had sold these gullible snowbirds farms that were six feet underwater. And then by “eccentrics” like the Bird Man and my parents. (238-39).  

Two generations born and raised in a state seems like enough to claim native Floridian status. Similarly, Harris presents the Chief’s framing of the family as Native Americans as merely a marketing ploy, saying that the father has a “contrived and mercantile approach to traditions” (Harris 58) and that the Bigtree traditions and

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8 Michael Grunwald’s history of the Everglades, The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise, supports Ava and Kiwi’s knowledge of the history of the Everglades at this moment and throughout the text.
stories “are closer to fakelore than folklore” (57). While this argument may hold some weight for the Chief—he is, after all, struggling to keep the family business afloat—it ignores the complexity of this experience for Ava. Being their “own Indians” is a way for her and her family to express their marginalized status, a shorthand in American history and culture for people who have been forced to the literal margins of the country. It may be problematic for the Bigtrees to assume a racial identity other than their own, but it is a sympathetic impulse. This idea is especially relevant in the Everglades, which as Ava teaches us, have no Native people. Even the Seminoles were forced into the swamp as northern white people began to migrate into Florida; Seminole leaders like Osceola’s namesake chose a liminal existence in the Everglades rather than forcible migration on the Trail of Tears.\(^9\) Harris’s argument does not have room for these murky distinctions between “native” and “outsider” within the margins.

Although he emphasizes the negative, Harris recognizes the positive effects such propagandistic beliefs can have as well. He concurs that Ava is able to escape her kidnapper and rapist, an eccentric who calls himself the Bird Man and who promises to guide Ava to the underworld to find her sister and mother, because she relies on stories from her family: “Ava succeeds in her escape partly because she clings to a heroic version of the feminine (embodied in the legendary exploits of her mother) that she can emulate despite being in the fallen condition of a young girl kidnapped and raped by a stranger” (65). However, while I agree that the vision of her mother offers Ava the strength to escape, I find that this reading of Ava’s relationship with Hilola

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\(^9\) See Grunwald page 33.
reduces the image of the mother to an image of feminine strength, which distances her from her mother. Hilola is not a vague feminine ideal; Ava has a visceral connection to her mother’s memory that Harris’s clinical language here undercuts.

Later in his essay, Harris returns to this point about the use of story as a source of identity: “Ava learns to retell the story of her life and her family in ways that sustain and transform her identity” (66). I agree with this reading, and I would like to further explore the transformative aspects of the family traditions. Like the mythology of Ruby in Paradise, the mythology of the Bigtrees is in need of contemporary revision, but still retains its ability to transform.

Harris frames the constructed nature and necessary performance of the Bigtree identity as intentionally deceptive—the lies have no other function than to dupe foolish tourists. For Harris, the fact that the identity is not a fact, that the Bigtrees are not “native Floridians” or Native Americans, means that their performances for the tourists are inherently hollow. The beliefs function to deceive and entertain, but not to transform. This interpretation of the beliefs is why Ava and Osceola are so susceptible in their grief to dangerous ideas and dangerous men.

However, I think this reading is an oversimplification of how the Bigtree family stories work. I argue that they are not merely a construction, either true or false, but a transformative model of identity. The concern here is not simply about whether the beliefs that Ava and Osceola have are true—that question is irrelevant. Rather, the question is what those beliefs do in action, how the act of believing in them causes a transformation in the character.
The beliefs Ava explores throughout the book fit well within the category of mythos, the meaning-making, story-telling, and ritual-enacting category that Karen Russell describes in *The Battle for God*. Mythos is living, like how Ava experiences her family mythology. Importantly, mythic knowledge is also open to revision as lived circumstances change. For example, Ava must adapt the myth of her mother after her death—not abandon the transformative power she found in her mother’s performances, but find new ways of experiencing and expressing that power. Part of the mother’s myth is that she is immortal, or at least, undefeatable, and her ability to overpower the Seths extends a special sense of power to the rest of her family: “But it always seemed to me like my family was winning. We had never been defeated by the Seths” (Russell 8). Ava’s crisis in faith stems from the fact of her mother’s death, which is always presented as a shock: “Incredibly, Mom stayed dead but the sky changed...It became (how?) early April” (23). Whereas before, Ava and her sister had access to transformation through their mother’s daily performances, the performances she and her father put on after Hilola’s death feel empty and manipulative. Ava has lost the faith that made transformation possible, and she must find new outlets for connecting herself to a larger meaningful myth. After her mother’s death, Ava is dangerously open to manipulation as she seeks transformation.

Belief and Truth in Bigtree Mythology

Harris emphasizes the “truth” of the Bigtree family traditions, focusing on whether the family had a right to make claims about their identity as a collective. I find that this
interpretation’s focus on the “informational” function is a misreading of what the Bigtree family myths intend to do because this suggests that what matters about beliefs is how well they convey facts about the past. In his essay “Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame,” Bruno Latour notes the difference between information talk, which aims to convey content, and transformation talk, which aims to transform both the person speaking and the person receiving a message. Sentences that fall into this category “are not judged by their content, their number of bytes, but by their performative abilities. They are mainly evaluated by only this question: do they produce the thing they talk about...One does not attempt to decrypt it [transformation talk] as if it transported a message, but as if it transformed the messengers themselves” (Latour 29). Latour offers love-talk and religious sermons as examples of transformation talk because, first, they affect a change in both the recipient and the speaker and second, they change the way one perceives time and space, slowing down and bringing people closer. Though it is not “talk” in the same sense, Ava’s relations to her beliefs function more like transformational talk than informational. This is most clearly evident in how Ava uses her sister’s name to inspire her to keep going as she treks through the swamp alone:

Ossie, I’d think in spasms, I’m coming, but these promises were like mental hiccups. Just thoughts, mindnoises, because I didn’t feel strong enough to voice a promise. Sometimes I’d stumble on the rocky glade and not really want to get up, and then I figured out how to use the promises like poles or crampons. Just the name “Ossie” could hook me up. (338-39)
The words Ava thinks transform her. Simply thinking of this speech-act sustains Ava on her difficult trek through the swamp.

In a complementary vein to Latour, Karen Armstrong delves further into the transformation talk that occurs in religious contexts. In studying the history of religion, she makes a distinction between *logos*, the information talk in Latour’s terms, and *mythos*, transformation talk that is rooted in meaning rather than literal truth. Mythos for Armstrong is “not concerned with practical matters” (*The Battle for God* xiii) or what Latour calls “content,” but with meaning—that is, the effect upon the recipient of the belief. Armstrong frames meaning as vital to existence. To understand it, however, one must participate in the myth: “If we do not apply [the myth] to our own situation and make the myth a reality in our own lives, it will remain as incomprehensible and remote as the rules of a board game, which often seem confusing and boring until we start to play” (*A Short History of Myth* 10). Mythos is a dynamic system of truth-discovery that changes over history in response to current issues and crises. In the following section, I will explore how *Swamplandia!* offers a Bigtree mythos.

Readers who do not account for the transformational power of belief, of which Latour and Armstrong remind us, are left with a disjointed reading of the novel. They have difficulty understanding the fantastic nature of Ava’s escape and reunion with her siblings, and why after everything she has been through, she tells her sister that she believes in the ghost boyfriend. If we consider the transformational power of belief, however, we realize how crucial it is for Ava and her siblings to reassert their family
mythos of surviving crisis as a way of reaffirming their identity as a group and as a way of finding meaning in their experience. By the end of the novel, Ava especially transforms from a passive recipient of belief into an active participant in its shaping.

“She Ceased to Be Our Mother”: Hilola Bigtree and Transformation

Russell introduces transformation as a key theme from the start of the novel, opening with an example of the mother’s performance to show that the transformative power of the family mythos is going to be crucial throughout the text. From Ava’s perspective, Hilola’s performance and the Chief’s narration do the work of Latour’s transformation talk, bringing all observers, including their daughters, closer to what is happening and making them vividly aware of the present moment. Here Latour describes how love-talk brings two individuals closer and warps their sense of time:

what happens to you, would you say, when you are thus addressed by love-talk? Very simply put: you were far, you are now closer... In the same way as the word “close” captured the different ways space is now inhabited, it is the word “present” that now seems the best ways to capture what happens to you: you are present again and anew to one another. (Latour 30)

Transformation talk has an emotional and psychological effect that is just as real as any physical effect. The listener changes as they hear this kind of speak, as much as they change when they learn new content through information talk.
Although Latour spoke specifically about love-talk, his description is also applicable to the transformation enacted by Hilola Bigtree’s performance. In the following passage, Ava describes a prototypical performance of her mother’s, highlighting the ritualistic aspects—well-timed music and lighting, physical actions her mother takes—and how they contribute to the transformation of Hilola from a mother into an exceptional performer:

At last, the Chief cued up the music. Trumpet tooted from our big, old-fashioned speakers, and the huge unseeing eye of the follow spot twisted through the palm fronds until it found Hilola. Just like that she ceased to be our mother. Fame settled on her like a film—“Hilola Bigtree, ladies and gentlemen!” my dad shouted into the microphone... Three long minutes passed, then four, and at last she gasped mightily and grasped the ladder rails on the eastern side of the stage. We all exhaled with her...When the light found her a second time, Hilola Bigtree—the famous woman from the posters, the “Swamp Centaur”—was gone. Our mother was herself again: smiling, brown-skinned, muscular. (Russell 4-5)

Through this performance, Hilola shifts identities, become a new person. She stops being “herself” and becomes “the famous woman from the posters.” She brings her daughters and the audience along for the ride and causes a change in them as well, as long as they believe in the performance—the “we all” refers to Ava and Osceola as well as the audience.
After Hilola’s death, Ava and the Chief’s performances no longer have the ability to transform. Ava does not believe in her own ability to transform, and thus she cannot bring others into the performance. The Bigtree myth has lost its power because it can no longer respond to their current circumstances. In the next section, I will further explore how the myth fails after Hilola’s death.

The Chief’s Stagnant Story

The Chief holds on to a story that no longer has transformational power because it relied on Hilola in order to function. His view of the family is stagnant, and he cannot deal with the new reality in which they find themselves, one in which his wife is dead, his children are in mourning, his father is losing his memory, and his family business is rapidly failing. Armstrong says that myths lose their value when they can no longer adapt to changed circumstances, and the Chief’s disconnect from his children’s reality is a prime example of this concept. “Without Mom and Grandpa Sawtooth the whole show felt horribly incomplete to me. ‘The tourists can’t tell,’ the Chief assured us, but it seemed like even the expressionless Seths had to know that something was missing” (20). The Chief seems to be unable to acknowledge that the performance has fundamentally changed without his wife’s presence.

The Chief’s mythos of the Bigtree family centers on his wife Hilola’s presence and performance. Even his love for her was figured in terms of performance. As Ava
understand and explains to the Bird Man, she saw his love most clearly when he guided the spotlight during Hilola’s performances:

“You know, my father trained himself to be my mother’s sun, electrically speaking.”

That was exactly how my dad described the job of love... Love, as practiced on our island, was tough work: the blind eye of the follow spot took all your strength to direct and turn. Every night the Chief ratcheted its yellow-white iris around my mother’s muscular back on the diving board” (246).

Ava sees that the Chief expresses his love for Hilola through participating in her myth. By guiding the spotlight, the Chief plays a role in Hilola’s transformation, participating in the love-talk through performance. Even though the Chief has not changed his behavior or his beliefs in the mission of the Bigtree family, Ava remarks on a shift in the meaning of his actions and beliefs. As he postures in character but fails to understand what is happening with his children, Ava expresses her frustration with this loss of connection: “Oh, why aren’t you trying? I thought in his direction. Why aren’t you doing anything? Try. Pay attention. Be the Chief again” (75). Since the story the Chief is telling has lost its transformational power, Ava feels that his identity has changed. His role as the Chief of the family, in her mind, is not related to being on the island or running the park, but to his responsibility to hold the family together. When he does nothing to find Kiwi after he leaves home, the Chief loses his status in Ava’s eyes.
Not long after this moment when Ava realizes her father has changes, Russell shuffles the Chief off-stage, sending him to the mainland on “a jaunt” (75) to raise funds for Swamplandia! Russell leaves the Chief suspended in his disbelief in the background for much of the rest of the book in order to focus on the change his children are experiencing instead. Following her lead, I will next look at how Kiwi goes from a nonbeliever to a supporter of the Bigtree myth.

**Kiwi Rejecting, Recognizing, and Accepting Mythos as a Force in the World**

At first glance it may seem as though Kiwi is entirely opposed to mythos, but if we read his experiences with Armstrong and Latour’s arguments in mind, it becomes clear that Russell leads Kiwi down a path where he experiences what life without his family mythos is like and acknowledges his own need for the story of his family. Kiwi’s time outside of Swamplandia! shows the reader that the Bigtree family is not unique in their need for mythos. Kiwi gets absorbed in the manipulative myth of his minimum-wage job at a rival amusement park, the World of Darkness, and realizes that his friends have no mythos beyond that of their jobs, no larger stories that give their lives meaning. Instead, Kiwi offers brief glimpses into his peers’ social lives, which mainly consist of drinking and flirting, and the way they are manipulated into the logic of their minimum-wage job, which even has the ability to change how they perceive time: “Inside the World of Darkness, Time happened in a circle. Shifts were nine hours, and the hours contracted or accorioned outward depending on several variables that Kiwi had catalogued: difficulty of task, boredom of task, degree to
which task humiliates me personally” (82). After months of living off the island, Kiwi reclaims the Bigtree story and reconnects with his family, ready to be an active participant in the family narrative.

Kiwi initially sees his father’s language about “we Bigtrees” (34), the way his father figures the family as a tribe, as all a part of a performance in the bad sense of being manipulative and therefore empty. When the Chief begins to talk about how the family will recover its former glory now that Hilola has died and they have new competition for tourists, Kiwi tries to cut through his father’s performative language as a means of honestly assessing their situation: “Oh my God,” said Kiwi. “Dad. This isn’t a show. We are all sitting in the same room” (34). Kiwi views his father’s transformation-talk as empty performance—for him, it has lost its desired effect of transforming their conversation. Instead of bringing them closer, it pushes them apart.

Kiwi holds up the mainlanders as a sign of normalcy, entirely desirable and exactly opposite to all that his family does. When trying to convince his sister that life outside the swamp would be better, he tells her: “everybody moves, Ava. Mainlanders do it all the time” (69). Although he, his father, and his sisters were all educated at home, Kiwi’s most noticeable characteristic is his desire to leave homeschooling behind and attend a university on the mainland. Even when his mother is alive and the park is running at full capacity, Kiwi’s first priority studying for the SAT. When talking with his supervisor at his job at the World of Darkness, he notices the high school class ring his supervisor wears: “That’s the kind of wedding I want, Kiwi thought: to a school. No, to a mainland academy” (83). Without even realizing it,
Kiwi is buying into a different kind of mythology about what life on the mainland entails.

Soon he learns, however, that there are codes of behavior and belief systems under which mainlanders operate as well. His job offers new language, a mythos that is just as transformative as, and in many way even more limiting than, the one he experienced at home: “The World of Darkness got shortened to “the World”...

Everybody did this, Kiwi included, although to Kiwi the abbreviation felt dangerous; there was something insidious about it, the way it crept into your speech and replaced the older, vaster meanings” (79). Even more constricting than the ideology of the workplace is the ideology of his new peers. There are specific limits to the ways one can speak with mainlanders, and social ridicule serves to punish those who transgress them: “Every day, Kiwi’s colleagues taught him what you could and could not say to another person here on the mainland. This was a little like having snipers tutor you on the limits of the prison yard” (89). For all Kiwi found the Bigtree imagination limiting, he soon discovers that teenage imagination has even less room for deviance.

Kiwi rebelled against this father’s construction of the Bigtrees, but on the mainland, he experiences new kinds of social construction. He has even less power on the mainland to shape the construction, the mythos of society, than he did in Swamplandia! During his first GED class on the mainland, Kiwi realizes that his method of self-education will not hold up against standardized testing. He also quickly recognizes that he is still subject to an identity he did not choose, namely his racial identity:
It took a beat to realize that he was the joke here, the punch line—he didn’t think it came naturally, to see yourself as an object... So: in Loomis County he was a “white boy,” apparently. This was news. Well, it’s not like I can disagree...He wished he could explain the island to these city kids, though. Could tell them about Chief Bigtree’s “Indian” lineage...This category “white” gave him a whistling fear, a feeling not unlike agoraphobia... *Whitey, white boy*—Kiwi didn’t like getting snowballed into a color. But maybe everybody felt that way about their adjectives, Kiwi thought. (208)

Race and class, along with other social standards for behavior, serve as an unacknowledged mythos on the mainland, a method for making meaning of the world and the people in it. Even on the mainland where no one has the strange mythology of the Bigtrees, Kiwi realizes that people are still living by nonsensical rules and standards, adjective that constrain rather than transform.

After months of living on the mainland, when the opportunity arises for Kiwi to have a say in shaping the story about him, he immediately reclaims his Bigtree identity, showing that he has learned something about mythos in his time off the island. His family identity, strange mythos and all, offers him more of an emotional connection and a sense of meaning than his “normal” identity ever could. After he rescues a girl in the waterpark from possibly drowning, he starts to tell reporters who come to interview him about Swamplandia! When asked for his name, he starts to share the story of his family: “It’s Bigtree. As in Hilola Jane Bigtree,” he said. And it felt wonderful to say it, like swinging an ax into the glass case of his Loomis identity.
‘I belong to the Bigtree tribe of Swampland’” (262). Not only is Kiwi voluntarily claiming to be a part of the “Bigtree tribe,” something that would have been repugnant to him at the start of the text, but he finds relief in claiming this identity. He starts speaking like his father: “Kiwi heard himself urgently quoting his father” (262). He even refers proudly to the Chief’s “Carnival Darwinism” adaptation plan that he mocked a few chapters ago. Reclaiming his Bigtree identity gives Kiwi a purpose: saving his family. Throughout his time on the mainland, finding a way to save his family has always been Kiwi’s goal. However, only his Bigtree identity offers him a path to doing this: “This is how I can help them. If he could pull it off. He pictured an article that would drive the mainlanders seaward like lemmings, pushing them deep into the swamp, toward his father and his sisters and the patient Seths” (262).

Although it does not lead to the type of article Kiwi was hoping for, this conversation fuels Kiwi’s discontentment with the mainland. It builds to Kiwi’s eventual recognition that he misses and needs all members of his family.

**Ava Navigating Mythos**

In this section, I explore how Ava reacts in a crisis to save her sister. In the second half of the novel, Ava leaves her home with a stranger called “the Bird Man,” believing that he can lead her to the underworld where her sister ran away to with her ghost boyfriend. When it is too late, Ava realizes that the Bird Man cannot help her find Osceola and that he has darker intentions for bringing her alone into the Everglades.
In some readings of *Swamplandia!*, such as Harris’s, critics argue that Ava falls prey to the Bird Man’s ploy because she believes so fervently in her family’s mythology: “Ossie and Ava both interpret the underworld literally as a supernatural space while Bird Man uses his comprehension of Ava’s literalization of the underworld as a way to deceive and seduce her” (Harris 52). I believe that Harris misplaces the blame in this case. The issue is not that Ava and Ossie hold incredible beliefs (certainly plenty of people survive in the world while maintaining their beliefs); the issue is that the Bird Man uses belief as propaganda to manipulate Ava. This manipulative potential is something that Ava has always known was a possibility—to a certain extent, this manipulation is how Hilola’s performance affected audience members. Yet she hopes that the Bird Man will be willing to engage in transformative mythos with her as they set out on their quest.

From their first interaction, Ava hopes that the Bird Man will be able to supply the emotional connection she has been missing since her mother’s death. He taps into a mythos she believes in without ever fully being able to enact a transformation. Despite his fantastic appearance (he wears a coat of black feathers), Ava hopes for a human connection with him more than anything else: “I had childish fantasies about this man: I wanted to hold his hand in the woods again. I wanted to put my ear on his chest, something I used to do with Mom. To listen to the thud-thud-thud of another heart-beat” (169). Her need to be connected with the Bird Man is what keeps her going on the journey, and it is an intense need:
Touch me again, Bird Man, I thought urgently. Tell a joke, say anything—because I was having the convection feeling...Kiwi describes this phenomenon, “convection” {n} [sic], in his Field Notes: the rapid cooling of a body in the absence of all tourists. Even Kiwi, King of Stage Fright, admitted to feeling it on Sunday nights. Convection cause your thoughts to develop an alarming blue tinge and required touch or speech with another human as its antidote. (236)

Ava has a half-hearted belief in her sister’s underworld. If the Bird Man played on that belief alone, it would not be enough to convince her to go with him. Instead, he also feeds into Ava’s intense desire for human connection throughout their journey. He offers her little gestures of physical affection—cleaning and bandaging her scraped knee, for example—that read as sinister in retrospect, but in the moment serve as the exact connection lonely Ava has craved.

Ava does not blindly trust the Bird Man; he is never able to truly enact transformational talk. She constantly has to reaffirm her faith:

On the skiff I made up a little credo for myself:

I believe the Bird Man knows a passage to the underworld.

I believe that I am brave enough to do this.

I have faith that we are going to rescue Ossie.

Every doubt got pushed away...It was hard work to keep believing that we were going to get there, but I persisted. Faith cupped and kept the future
like leaves on the hidden water that (I believed) we were rowing toward.

Where Ossie was waiting for me, and maybe my mom. (247)

The faith Ava has in their mission, much like the faith she has in her family, is cultivated, in a constant state of reification. Without the Bird Man’s physical affection, she would not go on with her journey.

Jason Marc Harris and I are in agreement when considering the work that Ava’s family mythology does after she is raped. Harris argues that relying on her family’s stories allows Ava to escape:

Turning to folklore after her rape and flight through the swamps, Ava exemplifies one of the functions of traditional material to supply models of behavior that can offer support in times of extremity. Ava succeeds in her escape partly because she clings to a heroic version of the feminine (embodied in the legendary exploits of her mother) that she can emulate despite being in the fallen condition of a young girl kidnapped and raped by a stranger. (Harris 65)

Ava draws on the qualities she sees as intrinsic to being a Bigtree—courage, strength, willingness to fight—in order to escape. These are values she seeks in her memory of her mother.

When Ava finally begins to doubt her own belief in the Bird Man, she turns to her family qualities again, but this time she also thinks of her relationships with individual family members to escape her situation. When the Bird Man tells her not to
talk to men she sees in the swamp, men who eventually save her, because they are ghosts, Ava’s doubts come in the form of her mother’s wisdom: “Those men are alive, Ava. I heard the stern, tiny rudder of her voice, my mother’s voice. You know they are” (305). This is one of the first times in their journey when Ava hears her mother’s voice. It indicates that in doubting her new emotional connection, she focuses inwardly on previous connections, and soon will be able to return to the Bigtree mythos instead of the half-hearted explanation of the underworld the Bird Man offers.

After the Bird Man attacks her, Ava uses her Bigtree knowledge to express her feelings about the attack. To even understand how she feels, Ava compares herself to the animals she has an intimate connection with:

I wanted to go to him then? Not all of me but the same part he’d just hurt. I don’t understand this pull, still. I think it must be a really dangerous physics, the gravity of wound to fist. You can see it happen to the other animals. When a hunter or trapper begins kicking at an alligator, its body curls to accommodate the withdrawing foot. (332)

The Swamplandia! Seths have always helped Ava process her experiences. In her pain, Ava still desires an emotional connection, and she turns to the only human near her for that connection, despite the hurt he just caused her. A part of this desire is that Ava feels as though she has lost her right to a Bigtree identity: “At no point had I tried to fight this person. Less than two hours ago, when we were poling through the dusklight, I had boast to him that I, Ava Bigtree of the Bigtree Wrestling Dynasty, could defeat a thousand-pound alligator.” Whereas before Ava felt and spoke
powerfully, after the attack, she identifies not as a Bigtree but sees herself as someone completely powerless: “Instead I trailed his elbow. I talked nervously, like a tourist girl” (330). She interprets the manipulation as a destruction of her identity. No longer is Ava a Bigtree wrestler; instead she is “like a tourist girl,” which to Ava means that she is weak, ignorant, unable to take care of herself. Because they knew nothing of alligators or the swamp, Ava always dismissed tourists. Now that she recognizes her own ignorance, she identifies with them.

However, not all hope is lost for Ava. Stories and figures from her Bigtree childhood reappear to offer her an emotional support and the strength she needs to make her escape:

At the same time I heard my mother telling me something I should have figured out hours and days ago...I don’t mean that my actual mother told me this, like one of Ossie’s ghosts, but it was her voice I heard in my head:

*The Bird Man is just a man, honey. He is more lost out here than you are. The Bird Man has no idea where he’s taking you, and if he does, well that’s much worse, and you won’t find your sister anywhere near here, Ava, and I would run, honey, personally...*

What I did next was all instinct, as if my muscles were staging a coup” (332)

Ava’s subconscious offers her the only means of comprehension she needs. Earlier, she described feeling disconnected from her body: “somehow I wasn’t adding up right...
anymore. My parts weren’t summing into myself. Why didn’t it occur to my body to run then?” (330). When Ava remembers and draws upon her family mythology again, and particularly her mother’s voice, her body and her brain begin to work again.

Not only did the mythology help Ava escape initially, but thinking of her family members and her responsibilities to them keeps her going through her days-long journey through the Everglades. As we saw earlier, Ava thinks of her sister’s name, and the word transforms her, offering her strength to continue. Ava is physically and emotionally depleted, yet she recreates her family mythology at the basest level, and the foundation is her sister’s name.

Here we see the difference between the kinds of manipulative belief of the Bird Man and Kiwi’s companions on the mainland. It is easy to misread the novel as saying that myths are only meant to manipulate and that Ava needs to break free from her family’s stories in order to thrive. However, the novel shows us that supposedly “normal” life on the mainland is dreadful and unfulfilling. The novel fully acknowledges the risks and dangers of belief, but it does not tell readers to stay away from myths. Conversely, it supports full engagement with one’s mythology. Ava needs to have something to believe in, and she needs to be a fully active participant in shaping that belief. At the end of the novel, she is forming a new mythology, located not in the space of her home but in the relationships between her and her family members, especially her siblings: “When my father stepped forward it didn’t matter that we were nowhere near our island. All of us, the four of us—the five of us if you counted the Mom inside us—we were home. We were a family again, a love that made
the roomiest privacy that I have ever occupied” (391). Contrast this definition of “home” with Ava’s earlier fight with Kiwi about betrayal and you will see how far she has developed. A new telling of an old story, Ava’s nascent mythology frames the support she and her family members offer as transformative and transcendent, dynamic and yet the only thing that is dependable.
Conclusion

In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Karen Armstrong explained what the telling of *Swamplandia!* offers her narrator:

“Swamplandia!” is a retrospective look at a place that no longer exists, so within the book, for Ava’s character, I think it was essential to tell this story—it becomes her way of truly saving her home and her family…I also had to write “Swamplandia!” because I wanted to better understand why we tell stories in the first place—what separates the good, ennobling, life-saving stories from the kinds of dangerous fantasies that can ruin an ecosystem or a family.

Throughout this thesis, I have been exploring the idea of how narratives shape lives, both individual and collective. One issue that has remained in the background of my argument is how the events of the novels come into play in understanding the books’ mythology. If myths are lived experiences spun fantastically, stories based on true events that characters retell to make meaning, these novels capture moments before they become myths.

Ruby and Redemption

In the penultimate chapter of *Paradise*, Morrison takes readers on a tour through the
citizens of Ruby’s remaining frictions. In a moment of magical realism, the bodies of the Convent women disappear, leaving us to wonder whether any of them survived. Although some critics argue that at least a few of the women could have escaped, as Justine Tally explains, there is little hope that the women actually survived; she argues that in the coda of the novel, the women appear to people from their past as *remenants*, or ghosts of those who were violently killed (Tally 46). If they are *remenants*, however, they do not appear in Ruby. Instead, those remaining in Ruby are left to grapple with what meaning they will take from the recent events. As Lone DuPres realizes: “If there were no victims the story of the crime was play for anybody’s tongue” (297).

Since he was not present during the massacre, Reverend Misner’s attempts to uncover the truth of the events offer the reader insights into the town’s contested attempts to shape that truth. Pat Best offers him the two official versions—that the men went to evict the women from the Convent and “the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air” (Morrison 296), or that five men went to the Convent to evict the women, four other men followed to stop them but were attacked by the women, and in the struggle Connie was killed (297). Pat’s private theory is the closest to the version supported by the text, and her insights into the men’s motivations are nearest to those offered by the sections from the men’s perspectives, but she chooses to keep her theory to herself. Reverend Richard Misner, who as I pointed out in Chapter One is wary of official accounts of any variety, seeks more information and runs straight into mythologizing:
Richard didn’t believe either of the stories rapidly becoming gospel, and spoke to Simon Cary and Senior Pulliam [preachers at the other two Ruby churches], who clarified other parts of the tale. But because neither had decided on the meaning of the ending and, therefore, had not been able to formulate a credible, sermonizable [sic] account of it, they could not assuage Richard’s dissatisfaction. (297)

Like the account of the founding of Haven, which I spent much of Chapter One unpacking, patriarchs in town are trying to decide on a closed meaning for this lived experience. However, as we see mythologizing taking place, we also see resistance and dissent to the sanitized story coming from members of the community. Farming families in Ruby, whose men were mostly excluded from the planning of the raid, push back against the “official” version of events and support Lone’s interpretation, which is the most damning public account, yet even their respectable support is not enough to prevent other versions from spreading (297).

The text does not tell us what story will eventually become canonical, and Lone worries that Ruby will not recognize its “second chance” (297) and reform its violent, patriarchal ways. Regardless, the hold the Morgan brothers and their allies held on Ruby has been broken. The four farming families push back against the official version of events circulating through the town, and the Pooles hold the only member of their family involved in the raid accountable for his action, “reprimanding him daily until he fell on his knees and wept before the entire congregation of Holy
Redeemer” (299). Something in the dynamic of the town has shifted, and Morrison leaves the reader to interpret what the ramifications of that shift will be.

The text of *Paradise* itself offers us a glimpse into mythologizing, a record of how different perspectives or, as Gilligan might say, different voices clash and converge to create one story. It is not just about a community grappling with revising its own myths; the text itself serves as a written myth, one whose transformative power the reader can experience if they elect to participate. By including the cacophonous perspectives of the town and the differing perspectives of Kiwi and Ava, Morrison and Russell allow the reader entrance into the myth as it is struggling for legitimacy. In both novels, the multiple narrative voices allow the reader access to the confusion of creating myths, showing how difficult it is to sort through multiple perspectives to create one coherent narrative.

**Ava Telling the Story of Swamplandia!**

From the start of *Swamplandia!,* Ava acknowledges that she is telling you, the second-person reader she addresses directly, a story about the past. Within the first chapter, Ava the narrator speaks directly to the reader and gestures at the story to come and her own role in shaping it:

The Beginning of the End can feel a lot like the middle when you are living in it. When I was a kid I couldn’t see any of these ridges. It was only after *Swamplandia!’s* fall that time folded into a story with a beginning, a middle,
and an ending. If you’re short on time, that would be the two-word version of our story: we fell. (Russell 8-9)

Through a direct address to the reader as reader in offering a condensed version of the events, Ava draws the reader even further into her story by acknowledging that it is a story, and that she is consciously trying to arrange these experiences in retrospect. By having Ava acknowledge the craft of her narrative, Russell invites the reader to observe the story-telling process of making sense of the confusing and overwhelming events that Ava is about to relay. She is demystifying the mythologizing process by juxtaposing the myth of the family as a participant understands the Bigtree legacy (as the girl who believes in her supernatural mother) and the realization of what that family meant to a woman who now seeks to memorialize it. This metafictional element allows the reader to reflect on the difference of being part of a group trying to live through myths and being outside a group trying to understand what those myths mean. Ava is both participant and narrator of this story and through metafictional narration, she is able to negotiate between the two roles.

In what is, subjectively speaking, one of the most beautiful passages in Swamplandia!, Russell has Ava speak about the magic that language can work:

“God” was a word I used as a spell-breaker. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t. “God,” I’d whisper, feeling sometimes an emptiness and sometimes a spreading warmth. If a word is just a container for feeling, or a little matchstick that you strike against yourself—a tiny, fiery summons—then probably I could have said anything, called any name, who knows? I didn’t
have a normal kid’s ideas of the Lord as an elderly mainland guy on a throne.
The God I prayed to I thought of as the mother, the memory of love. She was my own mother sometimes, baggy-eyed and smiling in the Chief’s heavy canvas work clothes in the morning, one of the Chief’s cigarettes hanging from her mouth. The Our Father and the Hail Mary I’d picked up somehow by osmosis but it was her name I invoked out there, her memory I summoned like a wind I could lean into, and I liked this prayer much better:

Mom, please help me to find Ossie. Please help me to make the net.

(223)

Ava’s (the character) memories of her mother are transformative memories of love, strength, and connection—more complex than Harris’s description of Hilola’s importance as “a heroic version of the feminine” (65). Harris’s misstep is that he does not understand Ava’s conviction from the inside; he sees it only from the outside where a lived experience of being transformed by myth is subsumed into a folkloric meaning of the “heroic version of the feminine.” Ava invokes her mother’s name not only in the hopes of connecting with Hilola’s memory, but also of maintaining the living connection with her sister. For Ava, Hilola’s myth is not just that she was an exceptional alligator wrestler. She was the emotional center of the family, the gravity to which they were all drawn, and with her loss Ava and her family members are thrown off balance. Ava is attempting to pull the family back together, and the memory of her Hilola as both mother and myth can assist her in this work.
In the final pages of the book, Ava the narrator reflects on how her beliefs have changed through the telling of this story and further supports the idea that something magical happened through the myth of her mother:

I don’t believe in ghosts anymore, either. Not the kind from Ossie’s book. I think something more mysterious might be happening, less articulable than any of the captioned and numeraled [sic] drawings in *The Spiritist’s Telegraph*.

Mothers burning inside the risen suns of their children. (394)

Reflecting on her moment of escape, Ava the narrator still believes that something magical happened, that somehow she was able to tap into the strength of her mother buried within herself. The novel serves as an exploration of how she found that strength and what she lost along the way of what that lived experience means.

In her role as a narrator, Ava is in a tenuous position. The self she is remembering, Ava the character, still holds on to the park as an inextricable part of her identity. She still has hope for the park’s salvation. Yet Ava the narrator gestures toward the inevitability of Swamplandia!’s demise, and often adopts a bitter tone that reflects both this inevitability and the violence that occurs in the last part of the novel.

In the wake of her mother’s death, the younger character clings desperately to the version of her family’s story her father passes on, despite acknowledging its flaws, because it serves as a link to Hilola. The older narrator, while knowing that the park will fail and that the Bird Man will turn out to be more of a monster than a savior, still believes that the story of her family matters. Through narrating the story of her family’s fall, Ava is able to face and work through her experiences in order to fashion
a new identity without the swamp. This identity is still founded on being a Bigtree, but rather than being inflexibly tied to a location, it is instead founded on her relationships with her family members—relationships that can change and are in a constant state of negotiation.

**Stories That Can Condemn or Redeem**

In my introduction, I called on Latour and Armstrong in order to illustrate how religious talk and stories are essential to our experiences as humans. People need larger stories to make meaning of their experiences and give them a sense of place and purpose. I have chosen to call these stories myths because I think the word “myth” gestures at the collective work the stories are doing, whether you choose to call that work emotional, psychological, or spiritual. Myths are never individual in these stories. The myths tap into something essential about being human, containing within their words meanings that believers make of their lives. Both *Paradise* and *Swamplandia!* offer models of communities negotiating their myths, with some members criticizing the way the story has been told in the past while still recognizing how vital it is to have these stories. The stories within the novels and the novels themselves shape how the characters understand the world and the space they claim in it. By holding the concept of myth in mind while reading *Paradise* and *Swamplandia!* one can meditate on what the myths are in their own life. These texts call us to be active participants in our own mythologizing by showing what happens when our
stories are fixed. We need reciprocal myths, ones that shape us as much as we shape them.
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