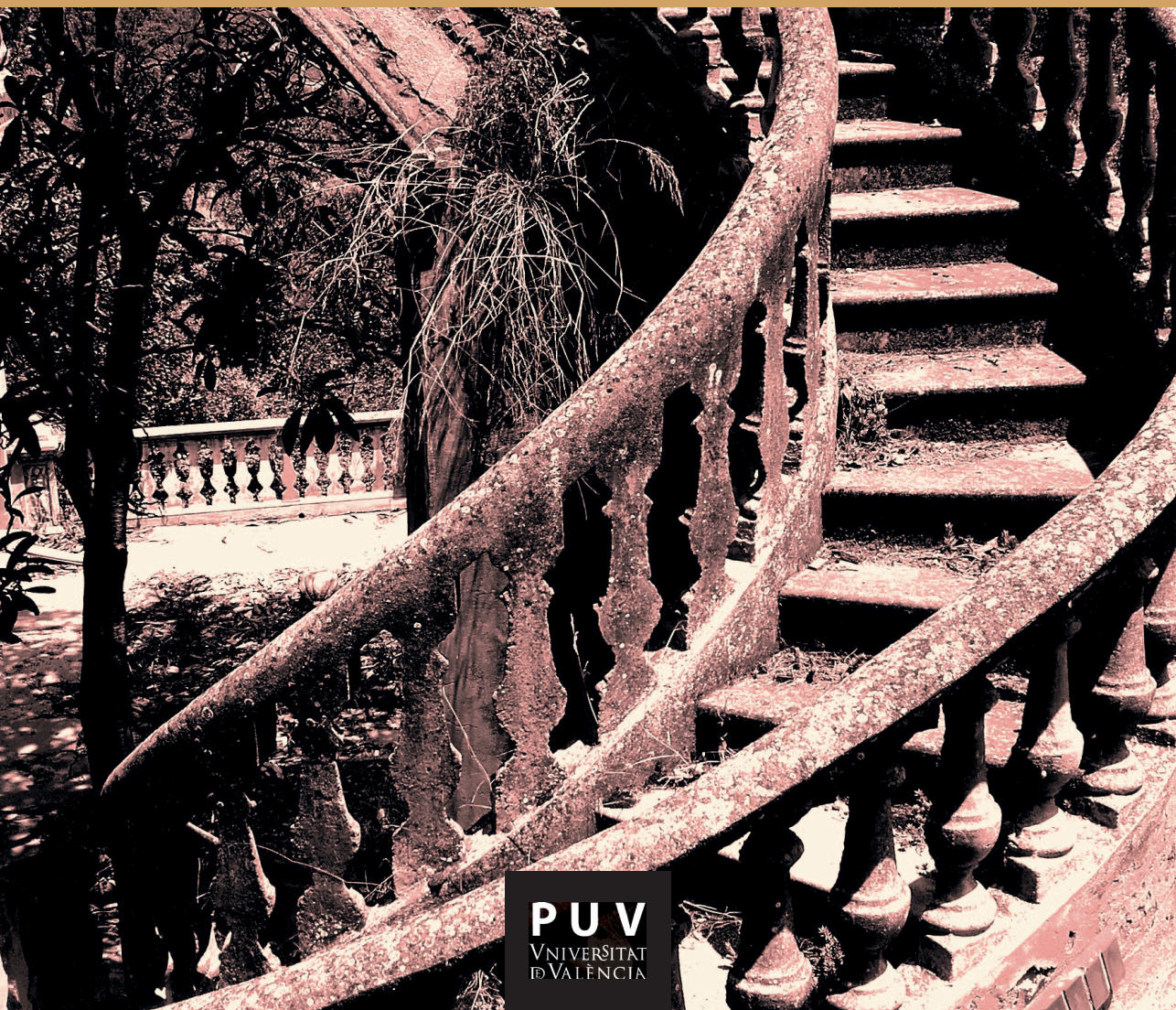


GÉRALD PRÉHER
FRÉDÉRIQUE SPILL, EDS.

FACETS OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

ESSAYS ON A PECULIAR REGION



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ESSAYS ON A PECULIAR REGION

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FACETS OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH
ESSAYS ON A PECULIAR REGION

Edited by
Gérald Préher and Frédérique Spill

P U V
VNIVERSITAT
ID VALÈNCIA

Facets of the American South: Essays on a Peculiar Region

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In memoriam

M. Thomas Inge

John W. Lowe

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Facets of the American South

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[T]here is something about writers from the South. There is a certain flavor to Southern literature that distinguishes it from other regional writing, a ferocity about it...

Margaret Eby, *South Toward Home: Travels in Southern Literature* (2015).

[W]hat makes the oft-remarked Sense of Place in Southern fiction so important is the vividness, the ferocity even, with which it implies social and community attitudes. This is because the writer's own experience of a place has involved those attitudes so pervasively that for the writer to evoke the place is to confront the community's values.

Louis D. Rubin, *The Mockingbird in the Gumtree* (1991).

In his introduction to *The Future of Southern Letters*, written in the middle of the 1990s, John W. Lowe notes that "most of today's southern narratives . . . aspire to mirror a culture in the throes of dynamic and dramatic change" (6), which he feels has always been at the core of southern storytelling and, it is tempting to add, at the center of southern life. This idea of a mirror is also present, but from a different perspective, in Howard Zinn's *The Southern Mystique* where it is suggested that "[t]he South . . . far from being utterly different, is really the essence of the nation. . . . It contains, in concentrated and dangerous form, a set of characteristics which mark the country as a whole" (218). Zinn's analysis presents the region as the embodiment of a specifically American way of life. He feels that "with this approach, the South becomes not damnable, but marvelously useful, as a mirror in which the nation can see its blemishes magnified, so that it will hurry to correct them" (263). Such an idea is reminiscent of the theories according to which the South is becoming more and more like the rest of the nation, that the South, as Josephine Humphreys puts it, is a "disappearing subject," which implies that it has not completely vanished, although Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnson, in their study of the economic and political situation of the region, have suggested that "the end of southern exceptionalism" has come and that after the Old South, the New South, there might just be "No South" now. Their focus is on convergence with national norms rather than divergence, though there is no doubt that southern culture remains distinctly regional in terms of race, class, religion and the communal spirit. The situation has obviously changed since W. J. Cash complained that "the majority of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* were primarily occupied with the

aristocratic notion in their examination of the Old South. And it is true, finally, that they took little account of the case of the underdog proper, the tenants and sharecroppers, industrial labor, and the Negroes [sic.] as a group" (382). The "backward glance" Allen Tate referred to in his 1945 essay "The New Provincialism" can certainly be applied to most, if not all historic, literary and artistic productions as the development of trauma studies shows, but this is not solely a southern concern. In fact, as Charles Reagan Wilson puts it, "[t]he South is still struggling with its heritage of tragedy and suffering and still invested with the hope that suffering can lead to salvation" (300); the recent removal of Confederate monuments and memorials certainly has led to suffering and incomprehension for some, but it also means that the South is moving on.

Changes *have* indeed occurred and are still occurring. Introducing *South to the Future*, Fred Hobson asserts that "[t]he reality—and, even more, the mythology—of the poor, failed, defeated, backward-looking South has long since been replaced by the mythology of what in the 1970s came to be called the Sun Belt—prosperous, optimistic, forward-looking, air-conditioned, self-congratulatory, and guilt-free" (4). Still, some contemporary writing does seem more inclined to look at the remains of the past in the present—Kaye Gibbons went back to the Civil War (*On the Occasion of my Last Afternoon*, 1998), Josephine Humphreys researched the Lumbees in South Carolina during that same period (*Nowhere Else on Earth*, 2000), Ron Rash and Terry Roberts explored the impact of World War I upon their respective Souths, Reynolds Price reflected on 9/11 through the prism of southern culture (*The Good Priest's Son*, 2005). Southern literature offers innumerable examples of such returns to past events. African-American writers greatly contribute to the current face of southern literature and again they seem to be picturing the present with a backward glance that informs the present in rich and varied ways—they are, as Thadious M. Davis puts it, "reclaiming the South" by "both literally and imaginatively returning to the region and its past, assuming regional identification for self and group definition" (66). There are many more writers today voicing the South, as Michael P. Bibler shows in a 2016 section of *PMLA* 131.1 devoted to that specific region. Bibler's affirmation that "exceptionalism would segregate the South from the nation, while pure anti-exceptionalism would make the South disappear completely" (154), raises numerous questions that strongly contrast with Zinn's aforementioned take on the matter.

In order to understand the South, and tell about it, it is essential to look at it not as a separate entity but as part of a whole—Barbara Ladd has provided a survey of numerous views on the matter in a 2005 essay (evoking, among others, John Bell Henneman, Jay B. Hubbell and Louis D. Rubin). Keeping in mind the context in which any text or cultural object emerged from the South is indispensable for many obvious reasons. The two world wars and the many conflicts in which the United States were involved through the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st, the Great Depression and the Civil Right Movement certainly contributed, among other major events, to the appearance of new, sometimes contradictory voices, that kept multiplying and diversifying the facets of the South. According to Lewis P. Simpson, "the deepest truth about southern literary history may finally be discovered in the 'intertextuality' of white and black writing" (qtd. in Ladd 1629). The questions of race and gender are equally essential to grasp what the South is about but, as Ladd makes clear, re-evaluating works through the prism of earlier models and methods is not satisfying. There is always a risk of "echoing past concerns and past monologues—those defined by fear of change and difference" (Donaldson 665) that are exemplified in fiction by

Faulkner's Quentin Compson or Simms' Captain Porgy. New tools have to be invented, together with new ways of looking at the South that will make it alive rather than stilted. Studies such as Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, is a particularly good example as it looks at marginal writings in relation to the canon but also elaborates on the concept of marginality and accounts for earlier limited (and limiting) readings.

New ways of looking at the South have appeared in recent years, gender and LGBT studies, food studies, ethnic approaches, urban/rural explorations, for example. Jay Watson suggests another path which could be extended to the field of nature writing: "if southern studies and environmental studies are to emerge from nostalgia and defeatism as reinvigorated and relevant disciplines, the two fields will need to learn from each other" (159). He also invites scholars to deepen "consideration of which pasts to claim and which forms of change to interrogate or contest in the field's ongoing work of negotiating tradition" (159). Television and the movies present equally thought-provoking ideas on the South, making the region different from any other while questioning its forceful singularity. It could thus be argued, with Gina Caison and Amy Cluckey, that "the New South" is no longer a relevant label because "Future Souths" are emerging and shaping time as it unfolds. The purpose of Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis' recent collection, *Ex-Centric Souths: (Re)Imagining Southern Centers and Peripheries*, is announced through a quotation from Barbara Ladd placed as an epigraph to the volume: "[Let's] reimagine the or a South or multiple Souths to take full measure of the significance of alternative memories, histories, and modes of cultural expression." In her introduction, "(Re)Imagined Souths," Niewiadomska-Flis explains that the nature of her project is to "add a modest voice in ongoing attempts to chart new routes and to decenter the South in many ways in the hope of exploring Southern identity and multiple Souths" (13). She grounds her ideas in comments by various specialists including Larry Griffin, Robert Brinkmeyer, Michael Kreyling, Tara McPherson and Richard Gray while also considering the emergence of New Southern Studies that focuses more specifically on "minority literatures, search for transnational connectivity between the South and other global regions, and employ postcolonial conceptual models of theory" (16). Margins thus become central and help the contributors "interrogate the Southern imaginary and rescue it from fragmentation, reduction, misrepresentation, and distortion in the national imaginary" (21-22). It is our goal to pursue such a project and add another brick in the wall.

Most of the articles in this volume were first presented at the 2017 Southern Studies Forum which was held at Lille Catholic University in France. Many Southernists from the world over gathered on that occasion and we had the pleasure to welcome and listen to Elizabeth Cox and Ron Rash who kindly accepted to join us and present their work and relationship to the South. We want to thank Lille Catholic University for its generosity and Carme Manuel who showed early interest in publishing a collection of essays deriving from the conference papers. The initial contributions were expanded into fully-fledged articles, and expertised by specialists whom we also want to thank here.

The first part of this collection focuses on "Images of the South in Popular Culture and Literature": it opens with late M. Thomas Inge's presentation of Richard Corben's graphic adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's specific brand of southern Gothic. While Hana Ulmanova and Suzane Joskova revisit the "white trash" mythology as exemplified by Dorothy's Allison's short story "River of Names," Françoise Clary examines the intertwining of myth,

Southern history and digital popular culture in Colson Whitehead's 2001 novel *John Henry Days*. As for Jacques Pothier's contribution, it focuses on some of the "beasts of the southern wild" that emerged in literature and movies after Hurricane Katrina.

The second part of the book is devoted to representations of "The Power of Place." Elisabeth Lamothe explores Katherine Anne Porter's Mexico through the notion of displacement. Suzanne Bray analyses Madeleine L'Engle's vision of kinship in the urban South in her novel *Ilsa* (1946). Stéphanie Maerten examines Elizabeth Spencer's depiction of New Orleans and its intense power of fascination, while Pearl Amelia McHaney offers an inspiring comparative study of the use of place in two novels by Toni Morrison, *Home* and *Jazz*, and two short stories by Eudora Welty, "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Music from Spain." Amélie Moisy closes this section with a reflection on Edward P. Jones's representations of D.C., in which the southern past keeps surfacing.

The collection's third part revolves around "Memory and Identity." Jadwiga Maszewska focuses on Peter Taylor's art of storytelling as exhibited in two short stories, "A Spinster's Tale" and "The Old Forest." Whereas Youli Theodosiadou shows how Phyllis Alesia Perry's 1998 novel *Stigmata* revisits slavery, Patrycja Kurjatto Renard compares how David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) both deal with the negotiation of family past(s). Frédérique Spill concludes this section with her reading of escape strategies in Ron Rash's 2016 novel *The Risen*, a novel set in the course of the summer of love in Appalachia.

The fourth section centers on the question of "Racial Strife," starting with Elizabeth Hayes Turner's analysis of Juneteenth as "the celebration of a gaudy illusion." Mark Newman examines the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 through the eyes of a northern clergyman. Stéphanie Suchet devotes her attention to the representations of minorities in William Faulkner's 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust*. Finally, Susana Maria Jiménez Placer compares how the image of the mammy is revisited in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* (2015).

The fifth and last section presents various "Visions of the South." Valeria Gennaro Lerda envisions early 20th century southern women's clubs as forerunners of environmental reforms. While Marcel Arbeit proposes a study of the absurd in the South as exemplified by Flannery O'Connor's writing, Susan V. Donaldson dwells on "the ghosts of Reconstruction" in Toni Morrison's 1998, post Nobel Prize, novel *Paradise*. Ineke Jolink examines the "minimal maneuvers between dystopia and utopia" in two stories by Breece D'J Pancake, while Clara Juncker presents how painter William H. Johnson's depiction of Denmark is colored by the American South.

This section also contains an unpublished article by late Simone Vauthier on the use of the supernatural in Reynolds Price's *Love and Work* (1968) which was found in Price's archives at Duke University. It is a great honor for us to have a chance to pay tribute to a great scholar who devoted much of her time, energy and passion to Southern culture.

We want to thank all contributors to this volume for their insightful contributions to the relentless vivacity of Southern Studies from different corners of the world. We dedicate this volume to M. Thomas Inge who passed away as we were putting this book together and to Richard Corben who had kindly agreed to let us use illustrations from his book before he, too, sadly passed away. May Tom's work inspire many generations of Southernists to come, and his memory live on in the hearts of those who knew him and cherished his friendly presence.

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PART I

IMAGES OF THE SOUTH IN POPULAR CULTURE AND LITERATURE

Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Corben, and the Southern Gothic in the Graphic Narrative

M. Thomas Inge

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Raised and educated in Virginia, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) considered himself a Southerner, even though he seldom wrote about the Southern experience in his stories and poems. Richard Corben (1940-2020), born and raised in the border-Southern state of Missouri, emerged as one of the most talented interpreters of Poe in the comic book or graphic narrative in late twentieth-century America.

Without Edgar Allan Poe and some of his fellow popular writers, there might not have been a comic book or a graphic novel. That is to say, in the early days of the comic book industry, desperate to meet the insistent and inevitable monthly publication deadlines, writers and artists turned for inspiration, or outright piracy, to the popular short fiction of such authors as O. Henry, Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce, or Guy de Maupassant. Before them, the nature and structure of the short story had been fully defined by Poe in his reviews and critical essays in the nineteenth century. Poe did not invent the short story, but he so successfully outlined what an effective piece of short fiction should be that everyone used his standards by which to measure their own work. Reading Poe was like taking a master class in writing fiction.

Little wonder then that the early pioneers of a new art form more frequently turned to Poe than any other author for source material and inspiration. It has been estimated that over 300 adaptations of Poe's stories and poems have appeared in comic books and graphic novels from 1943 to the present. While nearly every major and most of the minor comic book authors and artists have turned to Poe at one time or another in their careers, only one has dedicated a major part of his life's work to adapting his poems and tales—Richard Corben. Emerging from the underground comix movement in the 1960s, he quickly became a major force on the larger comic book scene with his work for *Heavy Metal* magazine and the Warren publications. Those who picked up copies of his early work like *Den*, *Rowlf*, or *Fantagor*, were immediately absorbed by the maturity and beauty of his style. Readers knew that they were in the presence of an extraordinary talent. Corben's imagination pushed the boundaries of the visual possibilities of aesthetics in comic art in amazing new directions.

Beginning with his adaptations of Poe for *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and other Warren titles, especially the brilliantly rendered version of "The Raven" in *Creepy* No. 67 (December 1974), Corben has proven to be the most acute and creative interpreter of Poe in comics history. All of his comic book work, in fact, has been imbued with the same gothic sensibility and keen eye for the grotesque that possessed Poe himself. Thus, his alliance with Poe has been a fortuitous and productive one. Time and again Corben has turned, or returned, to his favorite poems and stories, each demonstrating an original vision, a new way to interpret or understand Poe's themes. Corben's latest Poe anthology, *Spirits of the Dead*, is a peak in their collaboration, a brilliant summing up of their relationship. It includes adaptations of

five poems and nine tales, all written and drawn in splendid Corben-color, with expert lettering by Nate Piekos.

Adapting Poe's poems provides a richer source of possibilities than one finds in adapting his stories. The poems typically describe an emotion, a feeling, an idea, or a state of mind. While a backstory or prior narrative is often implied, beyond that the artist is free to invent whatever seems suitable to the main theme, be it loneliness, desperation, grief, love, or the loss of a loved one. It was Poe who claimed that the most moving theme for a poem was the death of a beautiful woman. Very often, the poem interrogates the reader about the theme, a pattern followed by Corben in his version of "Alone," which opens this collection. Corben sets the reader off balance by melding dream, nightmare, and reality into one, such that neither the narrator nor reader can tell the difference. It asks the question, do dreams really mean nothing or are they glimpses of a world beyond mortality and mutability?



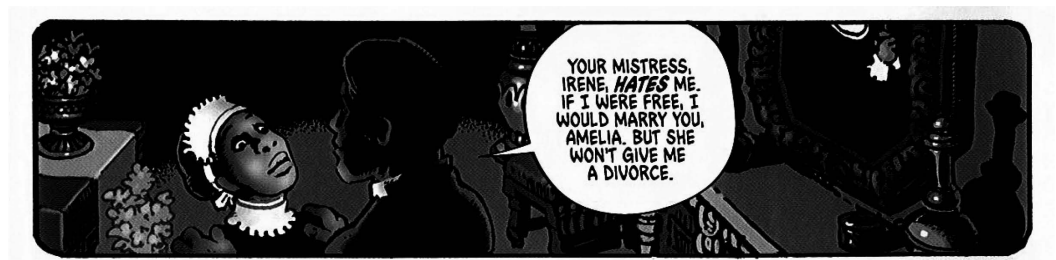
Richard Corben, "Alone," 14.

Generally, Corben does not address politics and themes of social justice in his adaptations, but they enter in two of the poems included here. "The City in the Sea" uses only the opening and closing lines of the poem to enclose a tale of a captain who has lost his entire cargo at sea. He washes up on a mysterious island populated by specters who put him on trial. When charged with crimes against humanity, he defends himself by claiming that nothing of value was lost on the ship, and its value was covered by insurance anyway. Then we learn that the cargo consisted mainly of thirty tons of African slaves, and the insensitive, bigoted captain is sent to Hell.



Richard Corben, "The City in the Sea," 25.

In "The Sleeper," Corben provides a concrete dramatic situation for a general poem about death. Justice comes to a man who has caused the murder of his wife and his mistress. Since the story seems to be set in New Orleans, and the characters appear to be free blacks of African descent, this adds a racial dimension to the story.

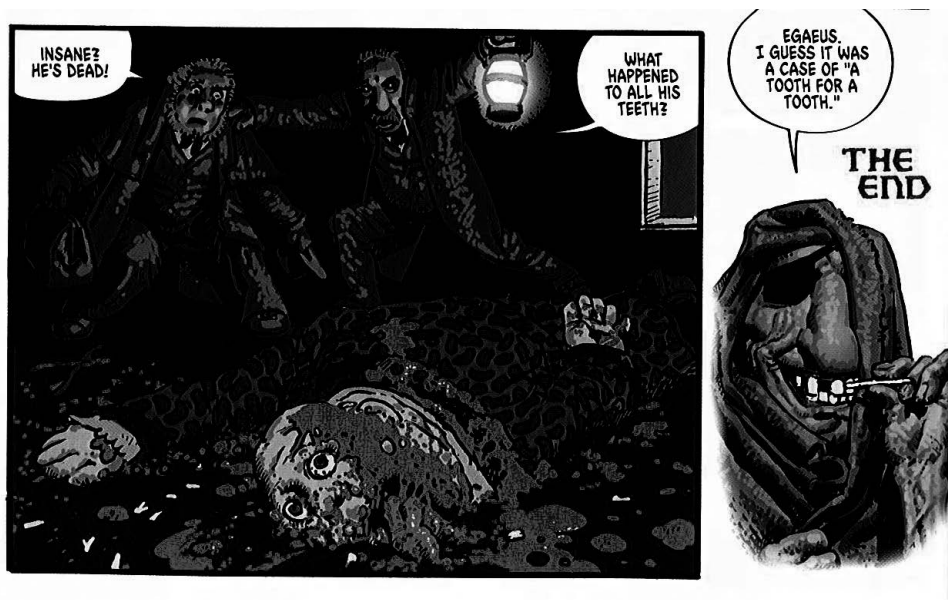


Richard Corben, "The Sleeper," 29.

Perhaps his most imaginative recasting of a poem in *Spirits of the Dead* is Corben's version of "The Conqueror Worm," which appears to be set in the American West. Colonel Mann has murdered his wife and her lover in a cold-blooded execution in the desert. Two strange performers appear and offer to amuse him with a stage play the next evening. With grotesque puppets they perform a truncated version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which also parallels the double murders the Colonel committed the day before. The skulls of the victims infested with worms appear as a part of the performance, and the worms eventually consume everyone—audience, actors, and Colonel Mann. As the poem tells us, "The story is the tragedy 'Man,' and its hero the Conqueror Worm." With its elaborate structure of a play within the narrative, Corben's story is like a Shakespearian *tour de force*.

In both the poems and the stories, Corben borrows a narrative device from the classic EC horror comic book titles of the 1950s which had either the Old Witch, the Vault Keeper, or the Crypt Keeper introduce each story. Corben's device is a character called Mag the Hag, who opens each story, concludes it, and sometimes takes part in the plot. She is an unsightly creature, sexually ambiguous, and given to rude interruptions. But her presence adds a layer of meaning to the proceedings through her ironic attitudes and sarcastic platitudes.

"Berenice," Poe's story of a lover's obsession with his late beloved's teeth, a tale not to be read before a visit with the dentist, becomes in Corben's retelling a strange experiment in gender-bending narrative. Berenice, to all appearances, seems to be a man rather than a woman. This does not disturb the narrative mood, however, since the central character has lost all sense of time and reality anyway. As usual in Poe and Corben's versions, dream, delusion, and reality are often indistinguishable. Although he is a very good writer, Corben cannot resist an all-too-easy quip at the end, "I guess it was a case of 'a tooth for a tooth.'"



Richard Corben, "Berenice," 50.

Poe's best known and perhaps most popular story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," has attracted nearly every major comic book artist for adaptation. Corben leads the reader into his version by several pages of mood setting imagery that place us in the presence of darkness and death. The narrator, here called Allan, after Poe's middle name, finds that Usher is painting grotesque images of morbidity but working mainly on portraits of his sister, Madeline, with whom he is passionately in love. Borrowing elements from another Poe story, "The Oval Portrait," just when Usher reaches the perfection he has been seeking in a portrait, Madeline drops dead, her soul apparently having passed into the painting. After days of mad delusion, Allan finds, of course, that Madeline has been buried alive, while he fights with Usher over possession of the portrait. The whole perverse and incestuous triangle tumbles into the tarn with the collapsing House of Usher. Like Ishmael, Allan alone survives to tell the story. While all of the elements of the original story are retained, Corben adds complexity and psychological power to the narrative by making explicit some things only hinted at in the story. As a tale well told with outstanding art that threatens to pull the reader into its bizarre world, this must be considered one of the finest adaptations of the story that we have. At 47 pages, it may well be the longest as well, but we value every single page as Corben unfolds the narrative slowly and wordlessly with primary emphasis on the visual rather than the verbal. Anyone reading the original after this adaptation is likely to find it informed by Corben's vision in a kind of reverse influence.



Richard Corben, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 71.

Corben's version of another very popular story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is strongly grounded in the physical reality, the architecture, and the dress of 1840s Paris. He maintains the rudiments of the original story and succeeds, as did Poe, in keeping the reader in suspense about the identity of the murderer (most comics adapters have found this difficult). Both Auguste Dupin, and his friend Beluc, fall into patterns of behavior and

modes of detection characteristic of their literary progeny, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, a tribute to their symbolic importance. Corben, however, has crafted a more original ending than Poe's, by allowing for a turn of poetic justice in the conclusion, an improvement on the master tale teller himself.

"The Masque of the Red Death" is another frequently adapted story, yet Corben brings fresh ideas and eyes to the familiar plot about aristocrats attempting to escape the plague through isolation and revelry. Mag the Hag leads the reader into a site of devastation, while a spectral figure recites the first five stanzas of a poem from another story, "The Haunted Palace" from "The Fall of the House of Usher." Although written for another context, the poem perfectly fits the events laid out by Corben in vivid color and compelling imagery. A socially relevant twist is added to the story by having the king spend the royal treasury on wanton pleasure rather than clean up the unhealthy conditions that caused the plague in the first place. Grotesque characters and beautifully designed panels and pages provide the disturbing experience that only a master comic artist can create.



Richard Corben, "The Masque of the Red Death," 145.

Corben always uses the full page as an artistic unit and moves from an expanded beginning or splash page (in the mode of Will Eisner) to carefully constructed panels that relate to or express the psychological state of a character or the emotions intended for the reader. Everything in a Corben page is functional, and there are no empty artistic gestures to fill space. Every image, shadow, facial expression, piece of clothing, color, or sound contribute to an aesthetic experience that is profound and disturbing. Quite likely Poe would have loved these graphic versions of his work and recognized in Richard Corben a soulmate.



Richard Corben, drawing used for the cover of the hardcover edition, signed to M. Tom Inge.

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The Vicious Circle: “White Trash” Mythology in Dorothy Allison’s “River of Names”

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The members of the Department of English and American Studies at Charles University in Prague first encountered Dorothy Allison’s short story “River of Names” in 1994, in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Short Stories* (edited by Tobias Wolff and published by Random House). Nothing of the author or the story’s genesis (in 1974, it started as an outraged poem full of grief) was known, but it immediately struck us as a masterpiece; beginning with the perfect Gothic image, written in a rather minimalist language (both as to vocabulary and syntax) and yet full of postmodern questions concerning fiction and its status. It had a confessional quality, and yet it never crossed the divisions between the narrator and her lover, who happened to be physically in bed, intimately touching each other.

Within a year, it was taught in our Southern literature class, and in 1996, the first thesis devoted to Dorothy Allison’s life and works was finished. Diana Krausová, its author, was—like the other students—astonished that the characters never manage to escape poverty and are trapped in a vicious circle of violence. Why this is the case has often been discussed since. A conclusion was reached that in order to explain that phenomenon, a focus on Judith Butler’s argument that “sex and gender are tools in the perpetuation of acceptable practices” (23) would have to be established.

In the meantime, Zuzana Josková who wrote her thesis on Dorothy Allison’s works, relying on the theory of myth as presented by Roland Barthes, translated into Czech not only “River of Names,” but also *Bastard out of Carolina*. Since the term “white trash” that appears in the original is impossible to accurately capture in our native tongue, three different Czech words were used in the end; namely “póvl” (an archaic yet informal and pejorative word for the rough and uneducated), “špína” (literally “dirt,” denoting both the supposed physical and mental state of the underprivileged), and “spodina” (meaning those at the very bottom of the social ladder). Only then did the tricky position and multiple identities of the “white trash” fully reveal themselves.

I

“White trash” is “the most visible and marked form of whiteness” (Wray and Newitz 2). It oscillates between being a slur¹ to a proud denomination of one’s origins (Hartigan 44). On the one hand, it is the subject of a growing body of academic work; on the other, a great number of people use it as a derogatory term—as the term “trash” means “social waste,” it suggests both degradation and shame (Wray and Newitz 4). Moreover, in the age of political correctness and official respect for ethnic diversity, it seems to be the only remaining fair game for put-down humor (Kirby 89). It is used here as an umbrella term

¹ In Slavoj Žižek’s terms, it would be an evidence of symbolic violence, since the term not only initiates, but also reproduces the relations of social domination by functioning as both a naming and a punishment.

which includes all other similar denominations such as poor whites, landless whites, rednecks, hillbillies, crackers, etc., understanding the fact that each of these labels has a slightly different referent with a specific history; this might potentially be dangerous to the argument since one of the most critical moments in the creation of a stereotype is the unification of diversity.²

“White trash” as a cultural concept unites numerous identity categories, and it is, therefore, imperative to subject it to a multilayered analysis; one which questions and attacks especially those aspects ascribed to “white trash” which have been quietly considered natural. In America’s cultural milieu shaped by the widespread belief in classlessness (Beaver 17), and the possibility of the acquisition of the American dream, “white trash” sounds like a pure literary oxymoron. It is a pregnant label referring predominantly to the never-ending cycle of poverty among white people living in the rural South,³ which is seen as un-American and alien. Nevertheless, it also carries inherent moral, biological, behavioral, and intellectual connotations. “White trash” people—read predominantly men, since in the “white trash” discourse women have always been defined, and defined themselves, in terms of their relationship to men (Tracy 185)—are and have been stereotyped as lazy, shiftless, slothful, indolent, immoral, racist, overly sexually active and violent alcoholics. These connotations have remained virtually intact for about 200 years,⁴ allowing “white trash” to become a myth.

The most important aspect of a myth is that its content (in this case “white trash” people/bodies) always lies within a considerable distance from the recipient/creator of the myth. This distance is both literal and metaphorical. The myth is naturalized, grounded so deeply in people’s minds, that even upon coming face to face with its real content and history, the recipient rather turns to the mythical explanation. This naturalization is only possible because the content of the myth is always being deferred.

The analysis of the “white trash” myth following Roland Barthes’ concept of myth proves that “white trash” people/bodies are the empty signifiers of a specific myth, devoid of their history in order to preserve its mythic dimension and retain its function. In *Mythologies*, Barthes defines myth as something vague, “a mode of signification, a form” (109), a second-level sign made from a material which “has already been worked on” (110), in other words, simplified, subjected to stereotypical representations. What formed the “white trash” myth was primarily literature with its stereotypical depictions of rural Southern whites. All these representations have been emptied of their first level meaning before entering the myth as signifiers. Their signified is the concept of the myth which, according to Barthes “is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations” (119) and holds together only due to its function. The most essential function of the “white trash” myth, according to Will D. Campbell lies in the fact that it provides a perfect scapegoat for America’s gravest sins (qtd. in Carr 9). This ultimate American “other” (Harkins 5) takes the blame for white racism, the very existence of poverty, and the inability to materialize the powerful myth of the American dream. It serves as a naming practice within a discourse of difference by

² Sylvia Jenkins Cook lists three distinct groups of white people who were put together under the same “white trash” stereotype: the mountaineers, tenant farmers, and the mill workers, noting that the differences in their representations soon became blurred, forgotten, and ignored (x-xi).

³ Since in our understanding, South is a distinct cultural entity, capital letter will be used consistently, and in the corresponding adjective as well.

⁴ Nancy Isenberg claims that for the very first time, the term “white trash” arguably appeared in print in 1821 (135).

which racial and class identities in the United States are maintained, and it is a concept used predominantly by the middle class in order to assure themselves of their superior status (Beaver 13). White trash thus serves as an example of “failed whiteness” (Beaver 15). It follows that “white trash” people pose a threat to the rest of the society—a threat that the “white trash” concept might disintegrate, and the sense of responsibility will shift to those who keep denying it.⁵ In other words, the “white trash” people act as a scapegoat in taking the blame for many of the failures and paradoxes that are inherent to American society and its dream.

“Myth transforms history into nature” (129), claims Barthes. It substitutes the linear relationship between the signifier and signified into a causal one (a natural cause replaces an individual impulse), and robs the signifier of its history. In order to denaturalize or deconstruct the myth, it is necessary to reveal the history of the signifier. In the “white trash” discourse, the signifier, or the infinite number of signifiers, are people, bodies. The naturalization of “white trash” signifiers meant not only that poor white Southerners were robbed of their history but also of their voice. “White trash” people have always been objectified and silenced precisely because of the danger they might want to narrate their side of the story, and thus undermine Southern master narratives. In this respect, “trashy” whites share the fate of all other groups (not only) in the United States. They were/are disenfranchised and oppressed based on various aspects of their identity—their race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, opinion, religious beliefs, or anything else. The “white trash” myth thus mirrors the function of the master narrative of the colonizer. It renders the disenfranchised subjects as “other” and sustains in them the notion of natural inferiority.

Dorothy Allison is the embodiment of the myth’s empty signifier. Her work is one of the very few “white trash” signifiers which has managed to acquire a voice and be heard, and she is one of the even fewer writers who dared to make their “white trash” story the main focus of their narration; she writes from within the myth and intentionally seeks to shatter it. Allison primarily disrupts the myth by placing women’s stories and issues into the center of her writing. Her authorial identity is comprised of numerous aspects ranging from that of a “white trash” girl to that of a writer, a lesbian, a fighter for the freedom of one’s sexual appetite, a rape victim, a mother, a political activist, and many more. This multilayered perspective is always connected to the questions of gender and sexuality (and, to a lesser degree, class). A close reading of Allison’s short story “River of Names” and an additional recourse to her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* will show how the numerous issues in her work intermingle and conflate, thereby producing a distinct identity, a distinct body, a unique text carrying numerous functions. Focusing on the “white trash” myth, it is the “white trash” aspect of Allison’s writings which will be given the most significant attention.

⁵ In this connection, it is imperative to acknowledge that the “white trash” myth is only one of the many that permeate the South. One of the myths which the South shares with the rest of the USA is the all-penetrating myth of the American dream, which is inextricably linked to the Puritan notion of hard work. The exhausting work poor “white trash” people are subject to is not considered hard work; they are denied approval and naturalized as shiftless for the sole reason that their work does not lead to the fulfilment of the dream. The inability to gain money no matter how hard one works is in the mythical terms interpreted as laziness. Moreover, the “white trash” myth is hugely gendered, as it plays on the divide between being a mother and being a working woman, and condemns “white trash” mothers for working, pushing the economic necessity to do so into the realm of the invisible, and putting forward the possible harm which their work causes to their families (mainly children).

Allison attempts to denaturalize the “white trash” myth and therefore sets her text in opposition to the mythical text by the acts of writing and narrating personal stories from a “white trash” subject position. However, her attempt to shatter the myth might have, paradoxically (but within the logic of the myth), only reinforced it. This paradox can be clearly seen if we consider what Barthes has to say about the difficulty of deconstructing a myth from the inside: “[I]t is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its strangle hold becomes in its turn the prey of myth” (135).

According to Barthes, when entering the myth, the signifier has to be simplified, emptied of its true meaning, robbed of its history. Only under these circumstances is the signifier sufficiently pliant, and capable of expressing the meanings demanded by the myth. Within the “white trash” myth, this simplification has been achieved through the formation of “white trash” stereotypes predominantly in literature and the press. They were either despicable or pitiable, either threatening or comic, either dull or cunning. This rigid dichotomy in the literary portrayal of “white trash” reflected their boundary existence. It advocated the impenetrable social division putting forth the less-human character of poor whites since no real human beings behave in accordance with the schematic and stereotypic portrayal.

The most frequent “white trash” literary stereotypes have been, as alluded to earlier, the following: immorality, drunkenness, laziness, beggary, vagrancy, poverty, aggression, dullness, animosity, emotional simplicity bordering on idiocy, mental and physical retardation, unconditional hatred, filthiness, malnutrition, etc. Some of these stereotypes relate equally to men and women, although it is the men who are associated with them in the first place since masculinity is seen as a master narrative.

An important moment in the creation of the “white trash” myth is its widespread representation in photography. The importance of photography in national journals and magazines from that period was considerable. In order to collect material for their social policies between 1935 and 1943,⁶ the government sent twenty-four predominantly Northern photographers to document Southern poverty (Kidd 110) and supply, in the editors’ words, “archetypal representations” of the American poor (116). The textual stereotypes suddenly met with the photographs of their protagonists—the word was united with the image, multiplying the power of the myth. To contextualize this development, we can compare it with Barthes’ perception that the complete sign, the complete “myth” is the “associative total of a concept and an image” (114) since “[p]ictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it” (110).⁷

The majority of the actual journalistic descriptions was less bound to provoke laughter than the literary ones, provided by writers like Erskine Caldwell.⁸ Here, the most representative publication is Walker Evans’ and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise the Famous Men* from 1939; originally meant to appear in a newspaper, this project ended up being a book. Furthermore, while adopting quite a few stereotypical approaches toward the

⁶ The sudden interest in the issues of poverty was unquestionably provoked by the massive rise in the number of the poor due to the economic situation; at this point, poverty became visible, especially in the South.

⁷ Susan Sontag’s thoughts on the primacy of an image over a text could be of interest in any future discussion of this topic.

⁸ For a recent discussion of *Tobacco Road* as a popular Broadway musical with its “sexual titillation and the absurd caricatures,” see McDonald 17.

poor whites, the authors also attempted to re-shape the “white trash” myth. They offered a romanticized version of poor whites, as they focused on stressing the concept of “human divinity” (Agee and Evans xiv) and the spiritual richness of poverty. Thus, they bordered on celebrating poverty, and created the “worthy poor,” while invoking further contempt for the despicable “white trash” and their presupposed immorality. At this point, the myth of the “good poor” was born.

II

Allison leads a continuous dialogue with the myth, inside and outside of textual grounds; she does not restrict her performance solely to writing as she fears the postmodern reduction of her work to pure textuality (Griffin 145). She enhances her writing by publicly speaking about her life experience and in this way, creates an additional context for her work. Within her myth-defying project, she embodies both the real poor white Southern girl and the archetypal image of what Barthes could have called “white trashiness.” Such a complex situation echoes Barthes’ claim about the relationship of the myth’s concept (“white trash” signifier) towards its former meaning (“white trash” body): “[t]he form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one’s disposal. . . . [T]he meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment” (118). In other words, the myth is nourished continuously and re-formed by reality, constantly evolving but never really changing.

Allison’s characters represent the simplified concept of the myth as well as its erased meaning. They are the products of the myth as well as the instruments of its deconstruction. They are created by a self-proclaimed “white trash” author, who thus acknowledges the existence of the “white trash” myth, yet fights against its negative impact on “white trash” bodies. In her dialogue with the “white trash” myth, Allison simultaneously de- and re-constructs the myth, allowing the disassembled parts to transgress its boundaries and take on a life of their own. Allison intends to show the linear development in the history of her characters which the myth has naturalized as simple and knowledgeable facts. Her fighting strategy is to shake the foundations of these facts and show the audience her truth—real people with all their flaws. In *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*, Allison writes: “My people were not remarkable. We were ordinary, but even so we were mythical. We were the *they* everyone talks about—the ungrateful poor. . . . I understood that we were the bad poor . . .” (13, 18). Within the structure of the narrative, she is the author, the subject, and the audience, writing for and about herself. Allison stands in the center, unifying all participants of the text, thus defying one of the major prerequisites of the myth, which is unconditional objectification, and prescribing definite meanings to signs regardless of their context.

Her work being largely autobiographical, Allison writes mainly about herself. This self-referentiality gives her texts the most persuasive argument through which the author can shatter the myth. Through her use of individual speech, Allison refuses to serve as an icon, as a body which lets itself be written over, filled by outside interpretations. By performing her unique subjectivity, she drags the empty signifier down to the first level of Barthes’ myth-diagram (115)—to the level of language and meaning.⁹

⁹ This performance is the key weapon in Allison’s struggle against the denigrating effects of the myth; in this respect, Hélène Cixous’s demand for women writers’ independence by putting themselves into the text and

Allison makes use of a vast number of Southern issues. The focus on the South as a unique region, the nature and importance of female story-telling, the Southern grotesque, and Puritan work ethics are all issues that she deals with in her work. In recent academic assessments,¹⁰ she is seen as much of a writer as a political public persona, a transgressive sadomasochist lesbian, a trauma patient, or an incest survivor, and her work is thus judged accordingly—as a literary text, a manifesto, or a rape victim's confession. Therefore, it is possible to analyze her work from a literary perspective, while not excluding the possibility of her texts to function otherwise and see her texts as an integral part of social power structures.

In all her works, Allison maps the porous borders between myth and reality, fact and fiction, truth and lie, and investigates the complicated nature of such emotions as love and hate, or pride and shame. Her texts prove that these categories do not form binary oppositions and that such strict divisions only encourage the simplification which leads to the formation of any myth. Allison's short story "River of Names," opening her collection *Trash*, reveals what the myth never considers the invisible responses of the "white trash" bodies, such as inner shame. The narrator refuses her "white trash" identity, and she consequently cuts herself off from the positive elements which have shaped her life—her family, her history—and loses herself in self-denial. She struggles to create a new self, but cannot rely upon any stable and positive elements.

The narrator of "River of Names" hides her "white trash" background from her middle-class lover whose grandmother "always smelled of dill bread and vanilla" (*Trash* 13). Entering the dangerous field of the narrator's childhood memories, the narrator's lover sincerely inquires:

"What did your grandmother smell like?"

I lie to her the way I always do, a lie stolen from a book. "Like lavender," stomach churning over the memory of sour sweat and snuff. (*Trash* 13)

The narrator lies not only about her grandmother but from a general point of view also about her childhood, and thus about herself. The memory of "sour sweat and snuff" represents her personal history as well as the "white trash" myth. The narrator's grandmother did not fit the only acceptable signifier of a grandmother, the standardized middle-class image of a spick-and-span house with a gentle laborious lady in it. On the contrary, "sour sweat and snuff" implies roughness, manliness, boldness, and self-indulgence—characteristics which are more often associated with grown men. It is crucial to note the alliteration that Allison uses as it describes the drab and repetitive nature of the real-life that many of the "white trash" people have to endure. Moreover, "stomach churning" signals a physical resistance to the memory, a denial which is rooted deep inside the narrator's body. What comes into the foreground is the tension between the safe and socially acceptable image of a grandmother, and the potentially dangerous but more authentic image that the narrator recollects. However, even this authentically experienced

creating their history as it is presented in Cixous's famous article "Laugh of the Medusa" (875) might be of interest for further research.

¹⁰ For further analysis, see, among others, Bouson's article "You nothing but trash"; the title itself is quite revealing (101-23).

portrayal of the grandmother corresponds with the “white trash” myth through allusions to dinginess, laziness, and overall unacceptability of her image.

The narrator substitutes her history with a “lie stolen from a book” which indicates the direction in which she is heading to construct her new identity—she attempts to create herself out of fiction. To smell like “lavender” is a common simile devoid of any type of originality—the narrator wants to construct an image which will be easily believable and readily accepted by her lover, an image already existing in her mind. The narrator continues: “I realize I do not really know what lavender smells like, and I am for a moment afraid she will ask something else, some question that will betray me” (*Trash* 13). The text thus brings forward the notion that one can never wholly re-create oneself based on partial self-denial. The “white trash” subject is pressured to deny her whole history because its every aspect is infected by the mythical interpretation. In other words, the narrator of “River of Names” is unable to construct her identity freely regardless of any mythical paradigms. Constrained by her resistance to the “white trash” myth, she displays a tendency to always perceive the world through a filter of some myth, be it the fairytale myth of the middle-class or the acceptable myth of the “good poor.” This compromise comes closest to social acceptability while still retaining a fraction of authenticity. However, even this myth brings her no comfort and is unable to accommodate her body.¹¹

Consequently, the only possibility to resist self-hatred and lifelong hopelessness is to resist all mythical simplifications and accept every/one’s flawed humanity. The text thus suggests that seeing a particular body behind the mythical signifiers weakens the effect of the myth. Mirroring the process of self-denial, the author has to leave the mythical battleground and re-enter her own body as a unique individual. In order to accept one’s feelings, it is necessary to separate them from those internalized by myth, to uncover the love concealed by hate, to repair the emotional damage caused to the “white trash” bodies by the myth: “Some of that stuff is true. But . . . I had to find a way to . . . show you those people as larger than the contemptible myth. And show you why those men drink, why those women hate themselves . . . Show you human beings instead of fold-ups, mean, cardboard caricatures” (Hollinbaugh 16).

The narrator of “River of Names” occasionally takes a stubbornly direct look at the way her family shaped her life. Although hate, anger or grief are not thematized, they protrude through the barrenness of the story. A poignant example of this is the narrator’s relative, Jack: “Caught at eighteen and sent to prison, Jack came back seven years later blank-faced, understanding nothing. He married a quiet girl from out of town, had three babies in four years. Then Jack came home one night from the textile mill, carrying one of those big handles off the high-speed spindle machine. He used it to beat them all to death and went back to work in the morning” (*Trash* 19). Jack’s life-story is told in a detached voice, refraining from judgement, and as part of a list, which has to do with numbers, or, as the author herself says in an interview with Robert Birnbaum, “logarithms” (“Author Interview”). The lack of articulate sound in Jack’s whole life (except for different screams or strange laughter) suggests hopelessness; stifling silence (even more dangerous and burdening) covers up eight years of Jack’s life in jail, and yet is bursting with meanings.

¹¹ Here, Adams’s point concerning autobiography should be stressed, and by extension also any autobiographical writings: “[N]arrative truth and personal myth are more telling than literal fidelity; the autobiographer’s reasons for telling lies are more important than absolute accuracy” (x-xi).

It is precisely the breaking of the destructive silence, which represents the last step of the “white trash” subject in his/her conscious resistance to internalize the myth. This process is the main issue in “River of Names” where the narrator recollects the frightful memories of her “white trash” childhood in an inner voice switching into the outer one only when she talks to her lover and tells “funny stories” or “lies,” as her inability to talk to her lover honestly is presented on nearly every page. Simultaneously, she fights the physical impulse to tell her the true story:

I open my mouth, close it, can't speak. . . .

I would like to turn around, talk to her, tell her... “I’ve got a dust river in my head, a river of names endlessly repeating. That dirty water rises in me, all those children screaming out their lives in my memory, and I become someone else, someone I have tried so hard not to be.”

But I don’t say anything, and I know, . . . that by not speaking I am condemning us . . . (*Trash* 20-21)

The strongest motivation in articulating her “white trash” history is the need to make peace with herself, to let the river of names flow out of her body. The act of revealing the truth about her family is not an act of denunciation or accusation; on the contrary, it is an act of purification saving the narrator from becoming someone she has tried so much not to be—another victim of the suffocating and harmful silence.

To reiterate and further explicate a point we have thus tried to arrive at, it becomes clear that in order to resist the “white trash” myth, one must step out of the mythical battleground, which might also mean to leave the community. The narrator is the first one in the family who has succeeded in that (and as an escapee is most probably seen as voicing something that should remain untold), while the failures of those who tried to escape are passed down in the family along with their shame only to prove that any attempt to resist the “white trash” myth will prove futile; this further isolates the family and reinforces the mythical spell. Furthermore, the failures provide an alibi for “white trash” people’s apathy and passivity. Such complex discouragement illustrates the internalization of the myth.

To metaphorically illustrate the dangers of a direct fight against the “white trash” myth (albeit an inherently gendered one), the narrator in “River of Names” mentions an episode when one of her boy-cousins tried to teach her and her girl-cousin to wrestle:

[H]is hand flashed at my face. I threw myself back into the dirt, lay still. . . . She wrapped her hands around her head, curled over so her knees were up against her throat. . . . Her teeth were chattering but she held herself still . . .

He walked away. Very slowly we stood up, embarrassed, looked at each other. We knew.

If you fight back, they kill you. (*Trash* 17)

This passage shows the difficulty of any physical resistance as the two girls are too petrified by their lack of self-respect, which is grounded in the unbreakable cycle of destruction and self-destruction they witnessed throughout their lives, to even consider the possibility that they can break free from it.

While posing the question of whether it is more effective to fight the myth on fictional or factual grounds, it becomes evident that the answer will not be simple. One of the

reasons this might be a difficult task is the unclear boundary between the narrator's voice in "River of Names" and Dorothy Allison. The true backdrop behind the stories unquestionably strengthens their impact on the audience, and the coherency between Allison's autobiographical text and her short story is undoubtedly another factor to take into account. However, as the above-quoted excerpts show, the author makes ample use of pure literary techniques (such as juxtaposition, alliteration or repetition), augmenting the content of the story by subtle allusions and metaphors. The central one is that of a river: possibly the river of consciousness, or, as stated earlier, a purifying element flowing freely, constantly changing and moving, and carrying—instead of a mass of assaulted bodies—all the names to be either forgotten or rather remembered. Furthermore, we should question the reliability of the narrator of "River of Names" precisely because of the fragile boundary between the mythical and the authentic. Concerning the myth, the short story could be seen as reinforcing it since, in fiction, all protagonists function as signifiers separated from the reader by a wall of make-believe.

Thus, in answer to the question whether it is possible to shatter the myth from within, Allison's text suggests no more that it is impossible to do so from the outside. Contrary to a "white trash" body the outside recipient of the myth can never distinguish between the purely mythical, and the personal. Simultaneously, deconstructing the myth within one's own body does not necessarily lead to deconstructing any myth as such, since myths are not limited to individuals but exist in communities.

III

The "white trash" myth is a narrative pertinent solely to the United States. As has been said in the first section, this narrative marks various persons/bodies as "others"—it imposes upon them the notion of a shared and uniform identity, it deprives them of subject positions and silences them with a language that ignores their life (and) experiences. Consequently, the humanity of these "other" bodies is, as Sidonie Smith pointed out, "opaque" (435), and if those bodies wish to narrate their stories, they have to rely on the power of ex-centric narration.¹² That is to say a narration with autobiographical elements which attacks any general master narrative, a personal narrative shaped in relation to or in a dialogue with (or even explicitly in opposition to) the prevailing narrative. In this respect, Allison is addressing these issues with an understandably higher degree of explicitness in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

Here, the decisive shift in her narratives is that she assumes the position of the subject (author): "I am a storyteller" (*Two or Three Things* 3); the object (content): "not the storyteller but the woman in the story" (4); and the recipient of the story: "the woman who believes in the story" (4). Thus, she fragments her identity by speaking through several voices, assuming multiple subject positions, and disrupts the mythical process of simplification by putting forward the complex process of construction of her authorial identity: "The stories other people would tell about my life, my mother's life, my sisters', uncles', cousins' and lost girlfriends"—those are the stories that could destroy me, erase me, mock and deny me. I tell my stories louder all the time . . . in order not to tell the one the world wants, the story of us broken, the story of us never laughing out loud . . ." (71-72).

¹² The term "ex-centric" narration is borrowed from Connie D. Griffin's article (321).

Allison grants stories no weaker than existential powers. She tells her stories “louder all the time” as if to let everyone know that her voice can be louder than the monotonous and simplifying voice of the myth. Continually perceiving a warped but uncomplicated representation of one’s self—in the form of the myth—may entail one’s gradual acquisition of this simple prefabricated identity. Within the “white trash” myth, the individual could “become broken,” and “never laugh out loud”; and it is only with her insistence and loudness that she can feel free.

Through the construction of her authorial identity, the narrator deconstructs the “white trash” myth. In order to be able to tell the story (and the story-telling process itself is one of the main themes in our text, similarly to other ex-centric autobiographies that focus less on the author and more on the author’s surroundings), the narrator in “River of Names” must first destroy the myth within herself. For this reason the storyteller in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* has to wrestle away from the myth into the full authorship of her stories, her life and herself and endow them with her meaning: “I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means” (70). On the other hand, telling the story of survival also entails the so-called survivor’s guilt which is present in Allison’s works, too: “I tell stories to prove I was meant to survive knowing it is not true” (51). This statement destabilizes the narrative and makes us question its reliability but also its connection to the myth against which it poses itself. Furthermore, knowing somebody else’s stories will never be told, Allison incorporates other people’s stories into her own—she simultaneously tells her story as well as theirs. The other reason might be the notion of “relationality” in women’s autobiographies, derived from Nancy Chodorow’s innovative research in ego psychology, which postulates that “feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 17). Having Chodorow’s concept in mind, it becomes evident that in constructing her subjectivity, Allison greatly relies on her “white trash” community, namely on “white trash” women. This is also supported by the use of oral narrative (traditionally seen as inferior, uncivilized, and feminine): namely dialogue with the audience, cyclical repetition, absence of a coherent structure, and natural flow of speech.

Dorothy Allison closes her memoir granting the audience the ultimate power of interpretation: “I can tell you anything. All you have to believe is the truth” (*Two or Three Things* 94), meaning her truth as well as their/our truth. Readers are left to decide whether to search for facts of Dorothy Allison’s real-life or accept her account of the story. Furthermore, it is precisely the interpretation of Allison’s text which each reader internalizes that is key in deconstructing the myth. Jillian Sandell claims that Allison has been successful in denaturalizing the myth, and contributes to “the urgent political project of critiquing and dismantling the oppressive system of class relations in the United States” (227). While such conclusions may not be outright wrong, they should be approached carefully. The proposed interpretation suggests that since the myth is a text of myriad variations with everybody carrying his/her version of it in their body and mind, it can only be shattered through the interpretative power of a reader, his/her resistance, and personal deconstruction.

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Colson Whitehead's Multifaceted Mode of Storytelling: Bridging Myths, the History of the South and Popular Culture of the Digital Age in *John Henry Days*

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There are many ways of looking at the South. In *John Henry Days* (2001), Colson Whitehead offers an approach to events tangible only to African American memories—some sorts of pockets of lost life in the history of the South—and transforms it into a celebratory cause commemorating the lives of the invisible and the disremembered. Still, Whitehead also carries the torch for media culture as he introduces a view of intermediality into the text. In other words, the author focuses on the interconnectedness of modern media of communication as a means of expression and exchange. In fact, after proceeding to an introductory account of the legend of John Henry—"In regards to the reality of John Henry, I would say he was a real live and powerful man, some 50 years ago, and actually died after beating a steam drill" (3)—it is a proleptic exchange about the dangers of mechanization that is developed. Thus, the omniscient narrator evokes the human cost of the struggle against technology, playing first with "structures, procedures, principles, concepts, questions of other media which have been developed in the history of Western media" (Müller 242) and establishing consequently a discursive relationship between myths, the history of the South, popular culture and figurations of black manhood.

John Henry Days, much like Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), reads like an act of memory endowed with a visual quality. It re-creates a historical reality that incorporates individual interpretations and transmits cultural experience. Significantly, Whitehead's book is filled with echoes of the legend of John Henry, the steel-driver who was instrumental in building the Big Bend Tunnel in 1872 for the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Railroad, and who died after beating a steam drill. And yet the storylines either claim or disclaim the actual existence of John Henry. More specifically, the set pieces of the novel's five parts are either centered on John Henry himself—a symbol of the stamina of a black man, bent on beating the steam drill—or on J. Sutter, a pulp journalist of the information age, deeply involved in his own pursuit of a record. While the various storylines overlap without being overconnected into false or forced verisimilitude, the historical reality that structures the novel is sociologically-oriented through the bridging of the two main stories—John Henry's and J. Sutter's. In fact, John Henry's legend and J. Sutter's life experience parallel each other. On the one hand, the fragmented narration outlines the two characters' attempts to overcome the challenge of humans against machines, whether it be the mechanical steam drill or the media machine of American culture. Then, it raises the question of transmission lines while articulating the image of black masculinity and the concept of eco-masculinity within a context of media culture. As far as the approach to storytelling is concerned, the critical task is therefore to extrapolate the intersection between the lines of transmission of memory and the switch from historical reality to social reality. It requires facing the dialectic of life writing and story writing with its understated issue: the figurations of black manhood.

Questioning the Transmission of Memory

In *John Henry's Days*, large structures of history shape the characters' personal and cultural experiences. By inventively interpreting the history of steel-driver John Henry, and re-patterning the myth of "the Old-Time Hero" (3), who actually died after beating the steam drill, Whitehead reveals that memory is a central aspect of people's inner life. The characters described in the novel may be alone, or together, but all of them live with their private ambitions, or inner thoughts converted to language. Imagining is then indispensable to understand that, in *John Henry's Days*, history is constantly transformed to fulfill individual interpretations.

For example, history possesses an element of fictionality when Whitehead's characters question the transmission of memory. An illustration of this process is notably given with the request of Pamela Street whose father's obsession with John Henry weighs heavily on her. After her father's demise, Pamela is in a predicament, not merely because the landlord is determined to have late Mr. Street's apartment vacant, but because Miss Street has to free rooms her father had turned into a "John Henry museum" (45). That is why she describes at length the movers putting the various items and goodies in boxes that she then attempts to give away unsuccessfully: "No one wanted it. She made a few inquiries, called universities. Tuskegee, Howard. She got lost in voice mail, mailed letters that did not receive responses" (45), until she gets a call from the representative of Talcott, West Virginia, that the town is planning a festival to celebrate John Henry and offers to buy her father's collection. Then, surprisingly, overcoming not only the grudge she had borne her father for being obsessed with John Henry, but also her former refusal to keep the legend of a man defeating a machine at the feat of drilling a tunnel through mountains to allow the continuation of railroad tracks, Pamela eventually refuses to sell her father's John Henry material. She even reconsiders the commodification of the transmission of memory: "Pamela did not budge. It wasn't a matter of money; they made a generous offer. She knew there were reasons, probably pertaining to the so-called grieving process, that she did not want to relinquish her burden" (46).

In this sense, the primary meaning of the word history refers to the anthropological significance of the act of memory while raising the question of its transmission. Men make their own history, Jacques Derrida contends, though he specifies that they do not make it just as they please, under circumstances chosen by themselves—but from the past (102). Consequently, when Whitehead explores the way in which myth-making and junketeering overlap, one realizes that the author is engaged in challenging southern storytelling by revolutionizing cultural practices and extending them to sociohistorical circumstances. For instance, particular transmission lines are brought out whenever the narrator varies the perspectives from which events are shown to the reader. This is particularly significant each time historical facts are seen through the lens of temporary workers and hack journalists—the novelist thus conjures up spirits of the past to his service, in order to present the new scene of world history that articulates pop culture, media and technology in the disguise of southern fiction.

Whitehead creates a new world in which he fights against historical incompleteness by way of re-enacting the historical past and the myths of the South in the present. He writes beyond boundaries, imagining a wide range of people associated with the festivities—the release of a commemorative stamp honoring the folk hero John Henry, for example. Not surprisingly, Whitehead's role as a historian is not utterly dissimilar to the one he has as

fiction writer. In *John Henry Days*, the distinction between history which works with the factual turned into a myth and fiction, and mainly deals with the possible or imaginary, becomes blurred—"John Henry was a Negro, 'a coal black man' . . . The negroes of forty years ago regarded him as a hero of their race" (6). The link established between the narrator's concern with past events—such as the feats of the black steel-driver in "the old days when hammers and hammer men could do the work of steam drills" (3)—and his singular way of looking at the reality of the industrial information age as documents is clear. This is achieved through media convergence for the description and analysis of configurations of actualities—most particularly the John Henry Festival presented as "a slice of Americana" (55).

To narrate history from the interstices between the imaginary and the real makes possible the mingling of history, legend and fiction. It is not easy to integrate side by side several facets of the myths of the South built on imaginative interpretations of the past. Whitehead contrives to do so by developing two stories that parallel each other as they both deal with the challenge of humans against odds. In other words, they deal with the improbable. They thrive on an intercourse between fantasy and realism, which is an employment of myth inherent in the tradition of southern fiction because both stories relate to illusion and make-believe.

There is, on the one hand, John Henry's myth, a challenge of man against machines, that is to say history-as-life-imagined in the legend of the He man: "John Henry was born big, forty pounds and gifted with speech straight out the womb" (138). On the other hand, one notes hack journalist J. Sutter's challenge of man against the media machine of American culture, or else, history-as-life-lived: "No matter. J. has important business. The potatoes have declined his invitation, but J. still savors the pliable tang of overcooked heads of broccoli, carrots in star shapes, decobbed corn in pearly water" (69). The novelist recreates fiction-writing by zig-zagging in time and place through a postmodern approach to the history of John Henry, a black railroad man who bore a hole in a mountain so that the train could get through. According to the legend, John Henry was a black laborer for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, a man of superhuman strength and stamina who proved his mettle in a contest with a steam drill, only to die of exhaustion a few moments after his triumph.

If John Henry Talcott's legend is undoubtedly that of a He-man who beat the steam drill in a contest and then died, it is also—historically speaking—the legend of a former slave who can be considered as an "everyman" sacrificed to progress and industrialization. However, while John Henry Talcott emerges from history as a freed slave who left the plantations for hard labor on the railroads, Whitehead searches for meanings in the legend and develops the themes of man against machine, black eco-masculinity in a castrating country or how to pay the price of progress. John Henry Talcott's legend is indeed used by the narrator in order to run against the dominant language of myth in the South and to then develop a critical analysis of the capitalist exploitation of labor. This aim is reached as the fragmented narrative articulates the legend of a former slave's challenge of industrialization and the story of hack journalist J. Sutter's challenge of man against the media machine of American culture.

Whitehead does not downplay the significance of the transmission of memory when he bridges the indictment of industrialization and that of the media machine. He rather succeeds in demonstrating that legends and oral tradition propagate myth-making, and constitute a reservoir from which a writer can mirror life in a variety of geographical settings, at different periods of time, and under an evolving socio-political climate,

providing thereby a barometer for viewing life in all its ramifications and for assessing man in his intrigues and quest to come to grip with his contradictions, dreams and anxiety. Meanwhile, the writer's hijacking of the discourse on the legend of John Henry by contemporary media culture underscores the fragmented and unfinished aspect of history, as well as life writing itself in a dystopic novel that records events through the lens of multiple characters who read them as pointless even when they try to focus on a goal. This is exemplified in Pamela's job assignments: "She was a temporary. She went where they sent her. This particular job was for a rapidly expanding company in the rapidly expanding industry called the internet. They needed bodies" (287). The intersection of past and present (just like the devious transmission of memory) is clearly placed under the sign of plurality.

Concerning the paradox of historical truth and fiction, the trivialization of the historical discourse as a dual and contradictory process that has emancipatory effects is an important element in the novel whose myth-making motif centered on "the legend of John Henry" does not just emanate from such discourse. It is successfully manipulated by Whitehead through a new form of language of myth that mixes different tendencies of thought because of the mingling of the imaginary and the real. Consequently, it appears that transmission is not conducted along lines that are testamentary, but it can be released through the twists and metaphors of popular culture into the psyche of a press junket reporter.

Considering the Dialectic of Life Writing and Story Writing: The Use of Irony

The language of memory and transmission is multifaceted and plurivocal in *John Henry Days*. Interestingly, in the context of African American Southern fiction, Whitehead's dialectic of life writing and story writing shows that the description of the events that occurred at the John Henry Days festival in West Virginia can be read as the combination of a typical western novelistic genre and of a diversified African American southern discourse in which myths and legends are prevalent. This view of overlapping perspectives has also been articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin who emphasizes that story writing arises out of the hybridization of modern and traditional genres combined in polyphonic dialogue. Indeed, in challenging a media-saturated society, Whitehead uses the John Henry myth of the black railroad man, the ex-slave turned into a favorite American hero, as a backdrop to address contemporary socio-political issues.

Despite variables, there is, in Whitehead's novel, a rationale privileging a frame instrumental to the significance of black southern performance. It is related to the history of African Americans coming up from slavery and aspiring to modernity, as exemplified by the narrator's building upon the legend of a black laborer for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, mythicized as a man of superhuman strength and stamina. Because this story has gradually developed into myth—that of man versus machine—it has simultaneously exerted global cultural and economic influence. Pointing out hidden relationships between opposites or oppositions within apparent unities, Whitehead bridges life writing and story writing. He first significantly centers the narrative on the celebration of a historical event—a black railroad man's winning his challenge of the steam drill and industrialization. Then he sets up an interface that enables him to depict the human cost of the struggle against technology, mechanization and cultural exploitation including the merchandizing of memorabilia, and the extension of the celebration to mass communication on the web. With the John Henry Days celebrations, Whitehead provides a meaningful clue. The narrator is indeed in a prime

position to ironize in so far as the celebration in Talcott builds momentum because it ends badly, thus paralleling John Henry's fatal competition with the steam drill.

It is to be noted that the author, a former TV critic for New York's *Village Voice*, evokes how the storytelling of old has given way to today's media myth-makers. The discourse under examination here does not challenge the development of a language of logic. Rather, it challenges the ideology upholding that a language of logic can exist only at the expense of a language of myth. As a consequence, myth becomes patchwork fiction as the novel narrates events moving backward and forward from late 19th century up to early, mid, and late 20th century, that is to say covering in a disorderly but not incoherent way a wide range of times and places in American history.

A significant example is provided by the fictional eyewitness account of the horrific though fascinating 1969 Rolling Stones / Hell's Angels debacle that is told in the authentic voice of a white rock journalist. Indeed, having discovered hidden order in chaos, the narrator, as ironist, seeks chaos in what appears to be order. Thus, it comes as no surprise to find a journalistic account of the Rolling Stones in the desert in the midst of a narrative that articulates the legend of John Henry and the history of the railroads in America. In these examples, the reporter-observer becomes involved with his subjects. Whether one considers the focus on the here and now, the situational embeddedness, the graphic images, and the placing of the reader in the midst of the action, such devices make it impossible to distance what is ironically observed from one's reaction to it.

Drawing on Houston Baker's essay "Modernism's Performative Masquerade" in *Turning South Again*, it appears that Whitehead builds upon black modernism as framed by the American South. That is why the legend of John Henry defeating the machine is being turned by the novelist into a useful topic for mass communication. A key to sorting out the numerous ironical observations and insights about the contemporary circus of pop culture, ecology, media and technology is the way one understands Whitehead's language as living process. So doing, Whitehead casts light on black modernism being inextricable from human life. Various perspectives are offered in the narrative where there is both poignancy and dystopia, notably from the economic grids of white power that are inseparable from the merchandizing system of mass culture. For instance, among the kitschy items displayed at the fair, one may spot statues of John Henry that range in size "from toy soldier to lawn jockey, in a range of poses that produce an animated strip of steel driving." But when the novelist specifies: "The air does not circulate, the wares exhale something not quite breathable, a gas more fit for whatever ceramic planets these objects call home" (267), what is to be understood is Whitehead's criticism of the relationship between myth and merchandizing. This brings about questions including Why does J. Sutter buy a large John Henry statue for himself? Or, again, why is it significant that this scene is immediately followed by a chapter about J. Sutter's family background?

The distortion of history is introduced in the text, as it focuses on the intersection of several media the cynical press junketeers work for. It amounts to an act of power. A comparison should be struck with the southern frame of African American writing that Houston Baker qualifies as being "methodological." It refers to memory and re-memory. Here is what Baker writes in *Turning South Again*: "one never stops remembering. We especially remember those whose examples, willy-nilly, conditions all we do and become." And he adds: "There is, I believe, a continuous memoiristic imperative to the formation of black male subjectivity in the United States of America" (29). In fact, re-interpreting history from the

black south experience, Whitehead, much like Baker, combines historical considerations with psychoanalysis, personal memoir, and studies of black manhood that have always been at the center of the African American experience. He thus meditates on black modernism which he defines as the achievement of mobile participation in the public sphere while offering a postmodernist critical analysis of capitalism with a focus on its exploitation of labor from the 19th century to the late 20th century and of the arts in a free market that has turned into the realm of publicity and marketing with the rise of the Internet.

Working in counterpoint, Whitehead structures *John Henry Days* in such a way that the two main stories (John Henry's and J. Sutter's) parallel each other. Not only is there a constant to and fro movement connecting the present to the past, involving continuous acts of re-memory, but the extension of the "industrial age to the mass culture age" design shows how John Henry, J. Sutter, and other characters (more particularly Pamela Street) attempt to overcome the challenge of humans against machines. As this theme is played out in a variety of ways over the course of the novel, it contributes to a re-patterning of history—introducing "the poetics of another story" (Baker 30) because *John Henry Days* is articulated on a re-vision of history from a present-day perspective that allows an insight into the black male's subjectivity.

If the imperative of re-memory is extended to an exploration of the writer's responsibilities to the dead, reference should be made to what Baker describes as a depersonification of African Americans: "we encounter a new kind of nightmare: not the gothic terror of being haunted by the dead, but the greater terror of *not being haunted*, of ceasing to feel the weight of past generations in one's bones" (30). Significantly, reading *John Henry Days* from the perspective outlined by Baker directs one to the focal point of questioning Whitehead's language, the twists in the lines of transmission and the use of irony. While Baker holds that "the words we use to hold to the dead are too porous, too leaky" (30), Whitehead evacuates the context and connects the dead—John Henry and Pamela Street's father—to the living, feeding on the figures of the present, the junketeers, and the hack journalists that are enslaved to digital information. They are the butt of sarcastic commentaries from the author whose satirizing of advertising and the language of public relations serves a purpose: probing the historical and contemporary conflicts between humans and machines.

Several long passages in the novel display Whitehead's impressive talents for social satire. This can be observed, for instance, in the description of a literary launch party (323) or in the description of Pamela's temporary jobs (287-91). Not only does Whitehead call upon the dead figures of the past to invent the quick, but he enlivens the new with sarcastic remarks pointing out the degree of incongruity in the attitudes of the people he describes, proceeding to unexpected juxtapositions of opposites, crisscrossing points of view to raise contradictions. Irony is a means for Whitehead to move from conventional paradigms to an original one, so that if one stands by Houston Baker's perspectives on black south writing, one can read J. Sutter's life as a modern-day John Henry story and think of the time-consuming digital age as the modern equivalent of the back-breaking industrial age.

From Historical Reality to Social Reality: The Problem of Black Manhood

Several questions remain unanswered in Whitehead's novel, such as: What lessons can be gleaned from John Henry's death? Is it heroic or tragic? Is it better to give in to progress than to fight it? Are human beings at the mercy of machines? But, as to the question of knowing how effective the use of the legend is when it comes to illuminating the

contemporary issues facing someone like J. Sutter, a hack journalist, an answer can easily be given because the matrix of *John Henry Days* emerges artistically from the labyrinth of myth and legend which structurally appears in the novel. Re-interpreting history from the experience of Whitehead is carving out space, metaphorically and literally. The concepts of Myth and Culture are intertwined. As a consequence, it is clear that Whitehead's strategy to transform history and create an intercourse between myth and media culture depends on resourceful experimentations with literary forms because the narrator introduces the concept of perspective as a multiplicity of points of view. For instance, the character traveling through the John Henry myth is not a person at all; it is a song. It is the *Ballad of John Henry*:

*John Henry was just a baby,
When he fell on his mammy's knee;
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel,
Said, "This hammer will be the death of me, Lord, Lord,
This hammer will be the death of me." (75)*

In a series of glimpses and remembrances, Whitehead shows this song's century-long gestation. Throughout the 20th century, a succession of songwriters and poets added verse to the ballad until it arrived at modern day Talcott, in the form of an African American who sings it during the celebration event. It is a force that transcends the money-making festival, a bit of culture that has managed to preserve itself against the assaults of commercialization. When the ballad is sung, all the junketeers and eager city planners in attendance for the stamp festival are momentarily taken by its poignancy.

Responding to the prevailing discursive dynamic of Southern fiction, Whitehead constructs a multivalent verbal world that contains a panoply of voices. That is why *John Henry Days* clearly showcases multivocality with a focus on the need for black men to renegotiate the terms for selfhood among a collectivity of other men, since the rest of the junketeers are the sardonically black human backdrops against which J. Sutter and One-Eye are illuminated. Although this is not discursively challenging in black masculinity writing, Whitehead does not portray black males as long-suffering. Instead, his narrative strategy fosters a convergence of John Henry's and J. Sutter's stories. Through the narrative trope of space, Whitehead shifts the construction of black maleness from the traditional relationship between the American male and nature—in other words that of the industrialized dominant and the subdued nature—to a postmodernist view that questions and problematizes this relationship, creating a subversive model of manhood. Indeed, the counter-discourse to the traditional rhetoric of masculine self-affirmation is illustrated not only by John Henry's statements but also by J. Sutter's and other characters', as all attempt to overcome the challenge of humans against machines. The counter discourse is played in a variety of ways over the course of the narrative, most particularly when the junketeer J. Sutter refers to Lucien Joyce's "list" as a machine to keep the media-saturated society up and running. By developing a counter discourse pointing out the human cost of the struggle against technology and mechanization, J. Sutter exposes individual, racial and cultural exploitation while exhibiting the potential to overcome such exploitation. Still, as far as the modernist viewpoint is concerned, one can consider that the main focus of the text is on the notions of culture and identity.

In a sense, John Henry carries each of the characters of the novel because he is the reason why they have all come to Talcott. Similarly, what John Henry represents—genuine American culture spun into content for purposes of making money—has brought each character to Talcott as well. The junketeers are there because content-making is how they earn their living. Pamela is there both because the city wants her father's collection of John Henry memorabilia and because she needs to come to grips with her fear of letting go of her identity as the daughter who hated the man who collected such memorabilia and turned his home into a museum in favor of figuring an identity of her own. Alphonse is there because he's addicted to popular culture—that of the African American folk tale—just like Pamela's father was. And last of all, as if it were one of the characters, the song is there as some leftover part of culture that refuses to be assimilated into the main trend of capitalism. It is inscribed in the novel where it represents a fragment of history that has become so real that it defies attempts to forge simulacra of it.

History and legend, myth and facts intersect in the novel to such an extent that the truth lies among symbols. Thus, J. Sutter stands as an anti-hero in so far as his behavior is a disavowal of the black masculinist protest. He rather illustrates the black man's physical and mental erasure because he is described as a man so fed up with his own life that he opts for a meaningless feat of junketeering endurance, going on junket after junket for a whole year without any break. As a matter of fact, the text is a compound of interwoven story lines articulated around the search for John Henry's truth while the other story that develops is J. Sutter's. The reader is confronted with a two-sided problem, or more precisely with the interdiscursive relationship between two visions of black manhood as J. Sutter, a free-lance journalist, and a black man, is both John Henry's doppelganger and the anti-hero. Indeed, like John Henry, he is in his own way faced with a man versus technology battle. Interestingly though, this foregrounding of an image of the black male as a fragmented personality corresponds to the modernist notion of subject-as-pariah that Georg Lukàcs outlines when he evokes a man "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings" (20). Such a representation of black manhood runs counter to the Anglo-American definition of masculinity traditionally rooted in dominance.

One example of the political dimension of the narrator's formal thought is that John Henry's life is pictured as American modern history. Considering that his competition with a steam machine to drive steel is evoked as a sacrifice of eco-masculinity to progress, John Henry stands out as the symbol of the re-evaluation of the representation of the black male emulating the standards of the larger Anglo-American milieu. To be more precise, the character of John Henry illustrates the reconceptualization of black maleness—he is one of the generations of black men who died to bring the railroad to people. Making use of the legend according to which John Henry died in Talcott right after he finished off the steam drill, Whitehead proceeds to a critical questioning of transmission. Indeed, one notes the interaction of mythified history with the material environment, whether it refers to capitalism's exploitation of labor or to the commodification of popular culture. Not only does the John Henry myth become one of the four stamps commemorating American heroes, it is also associated with the launching of a Time Warner travel Web site. The manly legend of the South is thus released into popular culture as the junketeer journalist J. Sutter, whose pursuit is that of securing 'the Record,' attempts to surpass the mark for the number of successive days spent attending publicity events. In short, the schema that is put forth is

a sort of binary relationship between the construction of a modernist subject that surfaces in African American literature and Anglo-American visions of masculinity.

A Philosophical Vision

John Henry Days compels readers to gaze upon what they would like to discard. Like the back-breaking industrial age, the time-consuming digital age has been dismissed from representation. For proof, the images of overworked people sacrificed to a capitalist society because of the constraint to accumulate jobs in order to make ends meet. These images have been laden with such political significance in the novel, that they have grown into social bodies and evolved into social texts. Whitehead employs the myth of a black man of superhuman strength and stamina defeating a machine in a contest and dying of exhaustion moments afterwards to illustrate the cyclical preoccupations of a junketeer, J. Sutter, who is enslaved to digital information but is involved in a self-imposed contest with the machinery of hype.

Just as the Talcott locals have made Henry the bearer of their fortune, so has Whitehead made Henry the bearer of his indictment of the merchandization of culture. Significantly, Whitehead is exploiting American popular culture to attack the exploitation of American culture. The key component of Whitehead's apparatus is clearly to accentuate his centering of black male interiority. That is why he chooses the main character of *John Henry Days*, J. Sutter, a hack journalist, to be the bearer of his ideas when he gets involved in his own man-against-machine contest. The machine in this case is not a mechanical steel driver, but something quite abstract: it is the media machine of American culture. More specifically, it is "The List," maintained by a public relations man, of freelance journalists who travel to all-expenses-paid events for the free food and drinks, and who can be counted on to hand in a few hundred words of puff to their respective media outlets. J. Sutter's contest is thus to see how many of these junkets he can travel to in succession. It is not exactly the raw, primal, flesh-against-steel stuff of legend, but if the Internet is to the 1990s what the railroad was to the 1870s, then J. Sutter, as the content provider for a Web site, is a likely inheritor to the tradition of John Henry, that of the black man's struggle. Consequently, in the representation of the South, one way to differentiate Whitehead from African American writers bound by their shared southern literary heritage—as is Ernest Gaines, for instance—is to cast light on his own hierarchy of action as it consists in foregrounding black men's spiritual and psychic journey and detecting a signifying relationship with the figures of the past.

John Henry Days is a philosophically bleak novel. There are certain versions of this kind of bleakness that one would like to compare with Cormac McCarthy's writing. But Whitehead's novel is mostly cynical—not in the sense of having no sympathy for characters, but rather in the sense of seeming to 'see through' characters and events, and bordering on nihilism. We may find this worldview either bracing or, on the contrary, untrue. Still, we can relate to the novel's world-weary vision that shows but a glimmer of hope in the end. In fact, *John Henry Days* can be read within the African American literary tradition, in relation to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992). As a consequence, it represents a search for authenticity in a world of fakery because it turns away from the merchandizing of culture.

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Beasts of the Southern Wild in Shattered Mirrors: Writing after Katrina

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In episode 6 of the first season of the HBO series *Treme*, the writer that John Goodman plays is on contract for a novel about the 1927 flood—but his publisher wants him to make it “more contemporary.” Actually, the publisher would prefer it to be about Katrina, especially now that the writer has become famous for his angry rants against the government that he broadcasts on his YouTube channel. This shows how Katrina has become the metaphor for natural and human disasters that have periodically plagued New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta.

Writing after Katrina, Natasha Trethewey suggests, is seeing “beyond Katrina,”—the title of one of her books—an opportunity to consider the people who lived in this area, one’s own family and community, taking it in and moving on to rebuild their lives, as the amateur actors of the HBO series *Treme* do. Yet, Katrina is not an isolated catastrophe: the South, more than any other part of the nation, has been particularly exposed to disasters, testing its inhabitants’ “endurance” (to use Faulkner’s favorite term) or resilience: slavery, war, political incompetence, corruption, as well as environmental more or less man-related disasters (land collapse due to drilling in soft soil, oil-spills, floods, hurricanes, mountain-top removals...) have taken their toll. To some (McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road...*), it has been a fitting theatre for the staging of the slouching advance of things to come that will affect the nation or the planet. The South’s exceptionalism results in isolation. “The bath-tub” in the movie *Beasts from the Southern Wild*—the nickname by which the marshland community goes—embodies the wild life of the South, beyond a wall that divides it from the ugly industrial world of corporate America, but it is also a lowland eaten up by rising seas, whose inhabitants are haunted by the global consequences of melting glaciers, with the fantasy of unimaginable hazards like the release of wilder, more ancient species like the aurochs. Waste lands, naked violence, broken lives, unraveling social fabrics are reflected in disrupted literary patterns, questioning the limits of literary genres—as does Trethewey’s *Beyond Katrina*, a mixture of memoir, essay, and poetry (2010).

In the age of Trump did the South not, more than ever, function as a magnifying glass to watch the fate of the nation? While climate change threatens the whole nation, recent years or weeks have certainly already been full of environmental disasters in the South. The Mississippi Delta has been receding for decades, turning lowland or bayou-land habitat into open sea. The second term of George W. Bush was symbolized by the tremendous inadequacy of the administration’s response to interior infrastructure decay, dwarfing other remarkable disasters like a crumbling highway bridge in Milwaukee.

I

Writers, directors and HBO series producers have seized this evolution. In the South, they have long done so, although writers have tended to use the material of past catastrophes some years after the facts. With “Chita: The Legend of L’Ile Derniere,” Lafcadio Hearn revived the memory of the particularly devastating 1856 hurricane that had happened a dozen years before he arrived in the US; the 1856 hurricane devastated the barrier islands off the coast of Louisiana and Texas. It hit the most westerly island of the archipelago particularly hard. This “Ile Derniere,” or “Last Island,” was submerged by a 11 to 12 ft. surge, and all the buildings on it were destroyed. Only a handful of the people staying or living on the island at the time could be rescued, and the island, split in two, has been uninhabited ever since. This tragic story was picked up by the journalist/writer/poet Lafcadio Hearn, who had not settled in New Orleans yet when the storm hit the island, but to whom it was a powerful “legend,” from which he made up the story of “Chita: A Memory of the Lost Island.” In this novella, published in 1889, Hearn set the cultural context of the tragedy: Last Island had been a haven of fresh air for the wealthy inhabitants of New Orleans when the city became sultry in the humid summer, if not devastated by epidemics of yellow fever. So the pleasure-seekers of Last Island, like the courtiers in Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death,” were not prepared to take the threat of the storm seriously.

Then the wind grew weird. It ceased being a breath; it became a voice moaning across the world, hooting, uttering nightmare sounds,—*Whoo!—whoo!—whoo!*—and with each stupendous owl-cry the moaning of the waters seemed to deepen, more and more abysmally, through all the hours of darkness. From the northwest the breakers of the bay began to roll high over the sandy slope, into the salines; the village bayou broadened to a bellowing flood. So the tumult swelled and the turmoil heightened until morning—a morning of gray gloom and whistling rain. Rain of bursting clouds and rain of wind-blown brine from the great spuming agony of the sea.

Typically in this passage the agency is turned over to the elements. Alliterations and the carefully engineered rhythm of the prose boost the evocative power of the description. The characters disappear. Actually their very identity dissolves: the “Chita” of the title is short for Conchita, as if cut off like the island, but the girl is not Spanish: both her parents disappeared in the surge, and she was rescued by a Spanish fisherman who raised her and adopted her. The storm decided on the decisive turn in her life. “What had she lost of life by her swift translation from the dusty existence of cities to the open immensity of nature’s freedom? What did she gain?” the narrator asks. Well, he suggests: a strong sensitivity to the power and beauty of the natural world. The lyricism of the descriptions of nature foreshadows the sensitivity of an artist who would become so fascinated by the Japanese perception of the natural world that he applied for and exceptionally obtained Japanese citizenship.

Nevertheless, the plot has to be tied up: in the last sections of the novella, the reader follows Doctor Julien La Brierre, busy in the midsummer epidemics of New Orleans, who is called to tend a patient at the fishermen’s village, and as one might expect this is when he comes across the eyes of his lost daughter. If this recognition plot looks lazy, such narrative patterns were particularly common throughout the literatures of the Americas. As Efrain

Kristal shows, it is visible in the earliest American novel with an American theme, *The Power of Sympathy* by William Hill Brown (1789), although in most cases it is made more interesting by the complication of possible incest. The violence of the environment and the expanded spaces make the possibility that families might be brutally separated more likely than in the old world.

On the occasion of the COP 21 meeting in Paris, I helped Monique Verdin, a Houma native American documentarist, show her autobiographical film. The documentary, *My Louisiana Love*, is about the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, but also about the careless exploitation of natural resources that made it worse in the backward areas to which the United Houma Nation have been relegated (the channeling of the water of the River, drilling for shale-gas, the BP oil spill, and of course climate change). Some of the most gripping scenes in the film are scenes of actual recognition, of relatives cut off by the messy evacuation process, as when Monique Verdin, the director, chances upon her father and grandmother who had been missing since the storm in a rescue center...

II

The echo of natural catastrophes also rang in Faulkner.¹ In *As I Lay Dying*, he remembered the devastating floods of 1927 in the Mississippi Basin. This flood should not be dismissed as routine; actually, the archive of contemporary press reminds us that it was quite an exceptional catastrophe. In Faulkner's hometown, the Oxford *Commercial Appeal* called it "the greatest disaster that ever afflicted our country" (Parrish 74). That 1927 flood was also celebrated in a famous 1929 blues song, "When the Levee Breaks." What compounded the catastrophe was the passivity of federal help under President Hoover. Of course the flood had been very severe because of the incompetent management of the river, but the disaster was made worse by the poor management of relief—who cared for these lowlands inhabited by Blacks anyway? This is an arguably common flaw in the lower Mississippi River basin: President George W. Bush was also blamed for FEMA's reckless management of the Katrina victims.

Faulkner started writing *As I Lay Dying* while the consequences of the flood were still fresh (at the end of 1929) and he returned to the subject with *The Wild Palms* (1939). The connection with *The Wild Palms* is probably better known, as the novel is made up of alternating chapters between two narratives, one of which is entitled "Old Man," after the popular nickname of the River. Faulkner started writing the manuscript of *As I Lay Dying* apparently on October 25, 1929, the day after the stock-exchange crashed. Memories of the flood two years before merged with the reeling turmoil of the stock exchange collapse that revived it. Gazing at the flooded river bottom, Darl Bundren is profoundly shaken by a sense of complete disruption. In his view, men are deprived of agency and meaning while the river takes over, not even in anger; it is almost strangely articulate: "Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again" (82).

¹ The present remarks on Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* are further developed in my "Raveling/Unraveling: the Fading World of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*."

“It talks up...”—whether the people are likely to recover narrative agency is another question. The quiet, alliterative power of the river is contrasted with the uprootedness, the disconnection of living things: “Above the ceaseless surface they stand—trees, canes, vines—rootless, severed from the earth, spectral above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation filled with the voice of the waste and mournful water” (82). The sentence itself comes unhinged, with words paratactically juxtaposed, suspended like the natural objects they refer to, ghostlike. In the river, Darl feels the “motion of the wasted world accelerat[ing] just before the final precipice” (85).

Darl and his brothers cross the river, but their wagon is dislocated in the stream. On the other side of the river, the reconstruction of Cash’s toolbox becomes a kind of metaphor for the reconstruction of the family:

The wagon is hauled clear, the wheels chocked (carefully: we all helped; it is as though upon the shabby, familiar, inert shape of the wagon there lingered somehow, latent yet still immediate, that violence which had slain the mules that drew it not an hour since) above the edge of the flood. (90)

One by one they recover the tools of Cash’s trade: “the plane, the saw, the hammer, the square, the rule, the chalk-line,” and it is as if the family were pieced together again after the catastrophe, although they are not unified in their hidden motivations for going to town. They have to cope with several converging disasters—the flood came after the heat, then the death of the mother. In the end, the reader realizes that the yellow mud awakened in Darl the memories of his time in the trenches in France, where he lost his mind. There is no happiness for him but for his siblings and his father, there are the simple joys that restore human dignity: enjoying a banana in the shade, a good horse, a new set of teeth to enjoy God’s victuals with, a spare Mrs. Bundren to tend to the house, and above all a graphophone to gather around and sing along to the tunes of the Jazz age.

III

Natasha Trethewey’s *Beyond Katrina* obviously revolves more explicitly around an ecological catastrophe. It is titled *beyond* Katrina, not *after*, mind you, suggesting that in one way or another you get over it. Nevertheless, Katrina also brings up the past of previous disasters, like Hurricane Camille. As in Lafcadio Hearn, the locus where the hurricanes strike are not fit for living: they are holiday sites—those pleasure casinos built on the Gulfport, Mississippi barrier islands. According to a 1990 Mississippi state-law, no gambling was allowed on Mississippi main-land, but only on “vessels” permanently docked along the sea-shore. So the hurricane struck the places of recreation, “an escape from ordinary life” (25), as if to question their capacity for bringing about happiness. In the “Prologue” to *Beyond Katrina*, connecting the book to an earlier work, Trethewey writes: “Oddly, not until *after* Katrina did I come to see that the history of one storm, Camille—and the ever present possibility of others—helped to define my relationship to the place from which I come. And so *Beyond Katrina* begins as that other book began, with a journey home—my *nostos*. “Theories of Time and Space” is the first poem I completed for *Native Guard*” (2). Trethewey is uncertain of what recovery efforts can bring—the South has long been used to the irony of the word “reconstruction.” She finds people and herself

recovering control of their lives in mastering the narrative of what happened—even at the price of distortions or omissions, but gathering all the memories is a kind of ritual. The complexity of truth involves working through the palimpsest of successive narratives, a metaphor that runs throughout the book: “a preferred narrative is one of the common bonds between people in a time of crisis” (20). Or further: “During the year or so after the storm, everything that had been disrupted seemed to be starting to settle, the narrative of recovery overwriting the devastation” (91).

Trethewey’s brother did time in jail, and she reproduces some of his letters talking of happy memories of childhood. She explains:

Reading my brother’s words the first time, I wanted to believe only what was there, what I could see on the page. The narrative of me as part of that wonderful and supportive family suited my version of myself, and my willed blindness to other things, to what was unspoken and invisible, absolved me of more responsibility. In this way, I was not unlike those people content to look around certain areas of the post-Katrina landscape and praise the state for its remarkable recovery, while ignoring the dark underbelly reflected in the ongoing devastation of the lives of some of the poorest, least visible victims of the hurricane. (107-08)

This is often the way collective, cultural memory works, full of partial remembering and purposeful forgetting.

IV

Tom Cooper’s *The Marauders* (2015) is a very different upshot from Katrina, compounded by another, completely man-induced disaster: the Deepwater Horizon oil rig leak in 2010, which brought even more devastation on the swamps and shrimp industry of lower Louisiana. Young Wes Trench, a teenager who is the most hopeful of the dozen protagonists in the novel, is

[y]oung enough to remember the air of festivity that once presided over these first nights of the shrimping season. The fais-do-dos, the Cajun dances. Those were better times for everyone in the Barataria. Before the bayou started grubbing out smaller and smaller hauls of shrimp. Before the oil spill. Before Katrina.

Before Wes’s mother died. (15)

The regional misery is compounded for him, and others, by personal loss (the death of the mother in the apocalyptic event could be inspired by a similar plot-detail in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* [2006]). Rather than a reflection on memory, *The Marauders* is definitely a choral novel, based on the interwoven stories of a dozen typical characters trying to eke out a living out of the disrupted environment of the bayou region. One of them represents the oil industry: he makes the rounds of the impoverished households of the district, trying to get them to accept quick settlement checks rather than wait for the huge compensation the courts might force BP to pay out. As is the case in *As I Lay Dying*, the chapters are entitled after the name of the character whose point of view they share. Also, as in *As I Lay Dying*, each one of them pursues his own scaled-down dream.

The elegiac tone frequent in post-Katrina narratives is there, but with a new twist: the nostalgia for things past. “Lots of stuff went missing after the storm,” a character ponders.

“Lots of stuff folks are still looking for” (89). This tends to take shape in the form of the memoir as exemplified by Trethewey, but here it is distanced, derealized as a school-exercise in composition by teenager Wes Trench, who is still a student. Wes tells how he turned the memory of the heart-breaking drowning of his mother in the flooding of Katrina because of his father’s refusal to evacuate into a memoir full of good feelings and reconciliation. He thus emphasizes how post-catastrophic narratives may artificially improve on real conditions (60). Ironically though, Cooper’s novel ends with a ten-page coda that could be described as the same kind of slapped-on, Hollywood-style sentimental happy ending that the aforementioned passage seems to expose. At the end of the novel, young Wes Trench single-handedly completes the boat he had been building in the family backyard and that embodies his personal dream. In a ceremony of sorts not unlike the hybrid festive march in *Beasts from the Southern Wild*, the community heaves it and carries it to the water—Wes’s is the optimistic voice that will prevail.

However, in most of the novel, the BP oil spill has broken up the fabric of the community, with all its members down to their individual, almost medieval quests. The main embodiment of this quest motif is Lindquist, the one-armed treasure-hunter with his metal detector, looking for the legendary treasure of pirate Jean Laffitte. At one point, overhearing a conversation in which Lundquist is mentioned, a character thinks he is hearing “Lee’s quest” (239), which attaches Lindquist’s pursuit to that of the famous Southern Civil War hero. This frustrating quest is a synecdoche of the hunt for a lost past that may never have existed. “Ever been out in the Barataria?” says one character “You’ll never find that place. Might as well be Ponce de León looking for the Fountain of Youth” (76). Of course, Barataria is a real location, the historical “Kingdom of Barataria” of nineteenth century pirate Jean Laffitte, but it is worth remembering that it is also the name of the fictional island that is awarded by some noblemen to Sancho Panza as a prank in Part II of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. The place may look primitive, but it is loaded with cultural cross-references, as when Wes notes “A chemical stink hung in the air, like he imagined napalm might smell in those Vietnam movies his Dad liked to watch” (116)—a reminder of arguably the most famous line in another apocalyptic work of fiction, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) “I love the smell of napalm in the morning...”

In these narratives of the South after the catastrophe, the region boils down to a small surviving island-community that alone can embody the sense that the Southerners are a different, sturdy and resilient race: “One thing about growing up in the swamp, it taught you to be resourceful,” young Wes Trench realizes in Cooper’s novel (121). The reconstruction of the sense of self-awareness and pride is channeled by a smaller, up to then unidentified community: Treme, not New Orleans, in the TV series; the Mississippi Gulf Coast in Trethewey; the Bath-Tub in *Beasts from the Southern Wild*; Barataria in *The Marauders* (“swamp people” 35). The battered South is reduced to an enclave where you could believe that the world has not changed. In *The Marauders*, Barny Grimes, the BP representative who has been away from the South, sees a region where “Nothing changed; still hardly even a town. No superstores or megamalls, just a loose strew of markets and restaurants and go-go bars around the crossroads” (38). Ignoring the rest of the world might be a form of self-protection when people “were losing their bearings” (40): “The Barataria was so small and smothering, it was easy to forget there was a whole other world going on out there” (40).

In the last pages of *The Marauders*, which break the dialogism of the novel, an optimistic voice over imposes an environmentalist happy ending in which the sense of

identity as community merges with the sense of place, natural smells and sounds with cultural ones:

For better or worse, the Barataria was his home. Whatever that meant. Home was the peaty odor of Spanish moss in the first spring rain. Home was the briny sweetness of fresh oysters thirty seconds out of the water. The termite swarms of early May. The cacophony of swamp frogs in the summer. The locusts in the day. The crickets at night. . . . The carnival giddiness of Mardi Gras. The blessings of the fleet. . . . The Cajun voices, briny and gnarled. The old wrinkled faces as strange as thumbprints. (299)

That nature and circular time have taken over the narrative does not seem to matter to anyone—Wes is happy with a South reduced to nicely irregular and unorganized facets—a list of itemized sensations expressed in truncated sentences, from which action verbs are missing.

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PART II

THE POWERS OF PLACE

Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico: From Displacement in Space to the Space of Displacement

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Katherine Anne Porter did not acknowledge many literary foremothers, however she felt great regard for Virginia Woolf, particularly for what the latter wrote about the importance of space for women artists in the seminal *A Room of One's Own*. To Porter also, a private, sheltered space into which one may withdraw and where creativity may come to fruition at its own pace is of paramount importance. It may even be said that Porter idealized Woolf, about whom she penned eulogistic reviews; she once wrote: "she lived in the naturalness of her vocation. The world of the arts was her native territory; she ranged freely under her own sky, speaking her mother tongue fearlessly. She was at home in that place as much as anyone ever was" (Porter, *Collected Essays* 71). Such praise for Woolf's creative freedom tellingly celebrates the way Porter claimed her rightful place in the arts while betraying her own "anxiety of authorship" to borrow from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, her conviction that her vocation was far from being a given, that she was not at home in the art world although she wanted to belong, and that she was doomed to roam in search of her own creative territory. Porter's upbringing and psyche dictated that a woman must be "natural" in a fertile sense, that is to say, must procreate or else face the fact that she was a "monstrosity," a term that Porter considered to be a synonym for the female artist. In an early note, she stated bluntly: "woman is natural or she is a failure . . . *Therefore women saints, like women artists, are monstrosities* . . . You might say that if they are saints or artists, they are not women."¹ Before her twenties, Porter lacked any kind of space allowing self-expression due to the stern upbringing she was given by her grandmother and father, for whom writing women violated the bounds of propriety. A premature marriage to a man whose family frowned upon any artistic aspiration further denied her the time and space she needed to write.

How then did she become an artist, create herself as a writer? Her initial strategy was to escape from her homeland, to resort to breaking away, dis-location; in other words, displacement in space. Porter thus fled her native Texas and settled in various American cities before electing Mexico: she lived there not only to flesh out her experience through what Susana Maria Jimenez Placer calls "adventurous excursions" (34) but most importantly to try and find a creative space of her own, along with discovering a country committed to rethinking political and social issues.

Displacement in Space

The need for mobility and displacement seems to have been a recurrent strategy with turn-of-the-century women writers. Colette Collomb-Bourreau remarked about Edith Wharton that "it is precisely this faculty to wrench herself from permanent settling down

¹ Katherine Anne Porter, Notes on "The Life of Saint Rose." Reel 87, KAP Collection, University of Maryland Libraries.

which lends strength to Wharton's work. In anthologies of American literature, she is put together with 'expatriate writers.' However, contrary to Henry James, she never forsook her American citizenship. In order to become an American writer, she had to take a step back (and thus gain a different perspective)" (29, my translation).² A similar pattern of expatriation and displacement can be found in Elizabeth Bishop's life and work, her writings about maps and traveling echoing Porter's preoccupations. In Sara Meyer's words, "[Bishop] keeps her maps open to acts of unmapping and rupture and her sense of place always coincides with the notion of exile and homelessness. The biographies continually refer to her being a constant outsider—uprooted and always wandering" (238). Janis Stout explained that Porter saw exile away from the South as necessary to the emergence of her artistic identity:

Porter regarded the problem of identity as one of life's major challenges. . . . Her own identity as an artist but also as a person torn by inner conflicts was forged in the first thirty years of her life, largely in reaction to two pervasively important factors in her early experiences: family and region. . . . Both, as well, evoked warm expressions of allegiance and identification, even as they evoked her resistance. . . . In order to reach a clear understanding of herself and her goals, and to establish herself as an artist and an independent person, she had to leave both her family and her Texas home. But the separation was never complete or consistent. (Stout, *Sense* 18, 21, 25)

In the 1910s, Porter moved West to Colorado and then headed North to New York, where she wrote for newspapers, but she did not manage to have any fiction published. My contention is that she had strayed too far away from her roots, which belonged to the Southern/Mexican borderland. Stout also penned an article about Porter's consciousness as one of the "Borderlands," a theory first expounded by Mexican-American critic Gloria Anzaldua. The borderlands, which may be psychological, sexual or spiritual, are "uncomfortable territory," "places of contradictions," and writers who identify with them "speak out of a divided, dual or multiple consciousness" (Stout, "Borderlands" 1). This may explain why Porter's eventual displacement to Mexico at the beginning of the 1920s provided her with "an aesthetic vision and method that she drew on for much of her career, . . . an index, politically and socially, by which to measure her experience of the United States" (4-5). Indeed, as Mauricio Tenorio Trillo insisted, from the 1920s to the 1940s Mexico "represented a season of revolutionary fascination, primitivism, and social hope to modernist and radical activists, artists and writers" (24). Thomas Walsh confirmed Mexico's paramount influence on Porter's personal and artistic development, pointing out that "she came to Mexico hopeful and skeptical that the Revolution could reverse centuries of political and economic oppression" (183).

The greater part of Porter's first collection of stories, *Flowering Judas*, was written while she was in Mexico, south of her native South, with geographical displacement serving to create a distance from which to reclaim home as a place where her most

² "C'est précisément cette faculté de s'arracher à l'installation qui donne à l'écriture de Wharton toute sa force. Dans les anthologies de littérature américaine, elle est classée sous le label : 'Expatriés.' Pourtant, au contraire de James, elle n'a jamais abandonné sa nationalité américaine. C'est que, pour devenir écrivain américain, il lui fallait prendre du champ."

authentic self resided. Living in the margins further down south was a way for her to find a vantage point on Texas. As Yves-Charles Grandjeat puts it in an article devoted to Cormac McCarthy, Mexico seems to function as a sort of mirror for the United States, a way to set off the opposition between civilization and savagery, “a place (which is) other and similar at the same time, the place where [America] encounters the antithetical double that reveals it to itself under a forbidden light. . . . a fascinating and terrifying world where wild nature prevails, where civilized man finds himself confronted with social anomia, the animal and barbaric violence of a merciless and chaotic nature” (134).³ He goes on to underline the role that Mexico plays in revealing the repressed: “the spectacle of Mexican disorder does not support an apology of Anglo-Saxon rationality; on the contrary, it reveals what this rationality represses” (150),⁴ thus the country both provides creative material and acts as a breeding ground: “Mexico is the very spring of inspiration that brings the text to life, a dream place, an intermediary space of decantation, gestation and elaboration of meaning, where the ever precarious passage from force to form occurs” (140).⁵

Porter illustrates this point in the short story entitled “That Tree.” Situating the action in Mexico gives her the opportunity to subvert and criticize the way reality is perceived, organized and taken for granted by American artists. The story’s protagonist remains unnamed but is clearly identifiable as an American male expatriate, a would-be poet who quite blindly believed that Mexico’s primitivism would lessen the self-censorship stifling his creativity in his home country, that Mexico’s vitality would fuel the writing impetus. However, the springs of creation remain dry. Ten years after having settled there, he still has not written any verse; the narrator shows how he lives off Mexico’s revolutions to “become an important journalist, an authority on Latin-American revolutions and a best-seller” (*Collected Stories* 66). Although he knows Mexico, lives with a Native woman and even has a child with her, his approach to art remains unchanged. It is the arrival in Mexico of his American fiancée which betrays his failure as an artist:

She spent three mortal years writing how dull and dreadful and commonplace her life was, how sick and tired she was of petty conventions and amusements, how narrow-minded everybody around her was, how she longed to live in a beautiful place among interesting people who painted and wrote poetry. . . . Well, he had something of a notion he was freeing a sweet bird from a cage. Once freed, she would perch gratefully on his hand. . . . She came out with a two-hundred-pound trunk of linen and enough silk underwear to last her a lifetime, expecting to settle down in a modern steam-heated flat and have nice artistic young couples from the American colony in for dinner Wednesday evenings. . . . His Mexican friends had scattered flowers all over the place, tied bunches of carnations on the door-knobs She had walked through with a vague look of terror in her eyes. (73-74)

³ “un lieu autre et frère à la fois, le lieu où [l’Amérique] rencontre le double antithétique qui la révèle à elle-même sous un jour interdit. . . . un monde fascinant et terrifiant d’une nature sauvage, où l’homme civilisé se trouve confronté à l’anomie sociale, la violence animale et barbare d’une nature impitoyable et chaotique.”

⁴ “le spectacle du désordre mexicain ne vient pas étayer une apologie de la rationalité anglo-saxonne, il permet au contraire de révéler ce que celle-ci refoule.”

⁵ “[Mexico est le] ressort même de l’inspiration qui fait advenir le texte, lieu de rêve, espace intermédiaire de décantation, de gestation et d’élaboration signifiante et horizon d’appel où s’accomplit le passage, toujours précaire, de la force à la forme.”

Porter was convinced that art can make order out of chaos, but in fiction she rarely depicts artists who fulfil their calling. The would-be poet's invitation to Miriam releases a disapproving super-ego taking her form to act as "avenging fury" against him.

Perusing Porter's correspondence, her journals and the fiction revolving around the character conceived in Mexico and named Miranda—whom Porter called her "alter-ego"—affords a clear view of what the South and its codes represented for her. They come across fairly obviously as a super-ego which holds up to women the model of an ego ideal (the Southern Lady) used as a prototype against which to compare the ego. Needless to say, the super-ego heavily weighs down on the ego to conform to that ego ideal, like Miranda whose father frowns upon young girls who do not align with the ideal of white womanhood. At the other end of the spectrum, the id, which contains primitive drives, is dominated by two instincts—Eros and Thanatos—sex and aggression or death. Mexico would fill the place of the id in Porter's psyche and artistic development, for sex and death lurk throughout the collection entitled *Flowering Judas* and the sensuality of Mexican women, their beauty and love of pleasure are expatiated upon.

Freud's work on concealing memories enables us to understand that displacement—a defensive process—is a strategy resorted to by individuals seeking a successful outcome for their existential and artistic quest. Southern women of Porter's generation were submitted to ideological, social and familial dictates demanding that female identity be circumscribed to the roles of wife and mother, to procreation instead of artistic creation. It follows that if acceptable female identity can only be maternal and wifely and excludes artistic identity, the ego of a woman trying to become an artist is bound to be the scene of tremendous conflicts—unless she develops a defensive strategy capable of alleviating the pressure of social representations. Psychoanalysts Laplanche et Pontalis define defense mechanisms as follows:

Set of operations whose purpose is to reduce, to suppress any modification likely to endanger the integrity and constancy of the psychobiological individual. Insofar as the self constitutes itself as an authority that incarnates this constancy and that seeks to maintain it, it can be described as the objective and the agent of these operations.⁶ (108, my translation)

A defense strategy is elaborated when an external representation or set of representations are considered to be incompatible with the ego and its own ideas. The strategy developed by the ego in order to lessen the tensions opposing them consists in substituting new images, that is to say in displacing them. In other words, displacement occurs when the id's drive conflicts with something the super-ego does not permit. The ego must find some other way of releasing the psychic energy of the id. In the case of Southern women, the representations incompatible with the ego of the artist are the restrictions imposed on female identity, which is limited to procreation. If a woman trying to establish her sense of an artist self gives in to the dictates imposed by her super-ego, then her chances of developing an autonomous artistic identity are bound to fail. Now we see why

⁶ "Ensemble d'opérations dont la finalité est de réduire, de supprimer toute modification susceptible de mettre en danger l'intégrité et la constance de l'individu psychobiologique. Dans la mesure où le moi se constitue comme instance qui incarne cette constance et qui cherche à la maintenir, il peut être décrit comme l'enjeu et l'agent de ces opérations."

Porter resorted to geographical displacement as a defense mechanism. Leaving the South was the only way for her to try to overcome and defeat the representations she had been exposed to in her native space and forced to adopt. Freud insisted on the fact that displaced actions or dreams chose related areas or subjects, dreams being the displacement of stored tensions into another form. The notion of related areas or subjects or “associative chain” fits the situation at stake. Because she associated the South with repression and Mexico with liberation, Porter was convinced that the conflict among representations would be lessened in a distant geographical space.

Unfortunately, Porter’s strategy of displacement was only partly successful. Yet, “Maria Concepción,” “The Martyr” and “Virgin Violeta” enabled her to approach the theme she would develop in her subsequent story cycles, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” and “The Old Order,” in which Southern women try to liberate themselves from the dictates of their social group.

The Space of Displacement

In the short story collection entitled *Flowering Judas*, women are quite deprived of agency. As Mary Titus put it, “they do not imagine a different, active existence; rather, their desires are either for safety, escape from or protection against the controlling male gaze, or, more frequently, pleasure, the pleasure which Porter suggests accompanies self-objectification and which can be gained by further attracting masculine admiration” (Titus, ‘Booby Trap’ 235). The artist figures are male only and they use women to shape an aesthetic, much as they did in the South where they shaped the “White Goddess” ideal for women to try and conform to.

Thus Porter displaced onto male artist figures the issues that she had to solve as a female creator. The first figure of the artist may be found in “The Martyr,” a barely veiled variation on the real-life muralist Diego Rivera, whom Porter met during her stay in Mexico City. Ruben is a painter who has lost sight of his artistic commitment, pines for his lost love and muse Isabel, and proves incapable of finishing the great political mural he has undertaken. For Darlene Unrue, the story’s theme “reflects Porter’s continuing fear that the artists of Mexico were more concerned with romantic love than with social problems” (416) but most importantly maybe, that they actually excluded women from participation in revolutionary ideals and relegated them to mere sources of inspiration and objects of the male gaze.

In the eponymous short story “Flowering Judas,” Laura is also petrified under the gaze of a male artist and revolutionary, Braggioni. She remains passive, withdraws into herself and comes to embody the negation of love. Unrue remarks:

she has displaced love on the one hand, and on the other she has idealized it. In her total commitment to the revolution, Laura has transferred libidinous passion into revolutionary fervor, as the conclusion of her scene with Braggioni suggests. Braggioni asks Laura to clean and oil his pistol, and the dialogue between them as Laura ‘peers down the pistol barrel’ is heavy with sexual imagery and illustrates a subconscious collusion. (*Truth* 53)

Laura expresses Porter's idea that women are the media, not the makers of art. This is what Titus underlines:

Although nobody touches Laura, she appears surrounded by men who watch and desire her, and she defends herself against the implicit sexual threat in their gaze by erecting barriers. She conceals her sexuality, 'her lips are tightly closed', 'her great round breasts are covered by dark cloth'. Yet her defense masks desire as much as resistance for she enjoys being a spectacle, she is pleasantly disturbed by the abstract, unhurried watchfulness of his black eyes which will in time turn easily toward another object. (*Ambivalent Art* 53)

The way Laura and Braggioni occupy space is quite telling of Laura's inability to express desire: the female body is confined and disciplined whereas the male one keeps expanding.

To Porter then, women who forsake their sexuality and withdraw from love become nun-like (or monsters) or betrayers. It is striking that Porter systematically portrays women cursed by childlessness. In other words, she never reconciles art and procreation but pits them against each other. My contention is that by failing to seek a compromise between motherhood and art, Porter's super-ego censored her imagination and rendered her incapable of drawing the portrait of the artist as a young woman.

The very first story Porter acknowledged as her own, "Maria Concepción" (see Unrue, "Newly Discovered" 182), bridges the issues tackled in the tales of her earlier, unpublished work with the later Mexico fiction. In previous stories, the freedom of the fairy tale allowed her to indirectly address issues of female creativity and authority. She used the notion of the "empty womb" and portrayed women who deliberately chose barrenness to retain control over their lives, even death if they were forced to procreate. In "Maria Concepción," the protagonist, although pregnant, is abandoned by her philandering husband, Juan, who elopes with a young beekeeper, Maria Rosa. Maria Concepción loses her child but does not mourn it; she isolates herself from the community, before murdering her rival and stealing her child. This leads Titus to remark:

Porter turns to another increasingly available discourse for staging and critiquing gender identity—primitivism. Porter focused on the potential for primitive cultures to provide alternative visions of female authority and creative power. She was especially attentive to representations of female power as generative, rooted in nature, worshipped in goddess figures. (*Ambivalent Art* 40)

When we meet Maria Concepción, she is more "body than mind, physically described in details which emphasize her togetherness with the vitality of nature and betrays Porter's idealization of women's lives within a primitive, pre-Christian social order infused with the presence of archetypal mother goddess" (Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 42). Yet it must be noted that when Maria achieves triumph over her rival, winning her husband back and defeating the representatives of the law who fail to find sufficient proof to indict her for the murder, she simultaneously loses power. At the beginning of the story she is seen as active and successful, managing her little business with intent. Conflict begins when she gives in to her sensuality and visits the beehives of her rival, thereby discovering her husband is

cheating on her. She then turns gaunt and drawn, is eaten away by revenge, and denies her sexual self. The character of Maria seems to prove that for Porter

the woman who binds her sexuality to her purpose gains a terrible kind of power. Before Juan's betrayal, her social power, achieved through her public, legal status, gave her voice and authority in her marriage. After the murder, she assumes her rival's place in the traditional women's community. At the end, holding the sleeping baby, she is as trapped as she is elevated: she now depends on her husband to protect her, relinquishing her own authority. Thus, this maternal role comes at the cost of her economic and social status. (*Ambivalent Art* 44-45)

In *Flowering Judas*, children either die in infancy or they pass away because of the latent hostility of their mothers and lack of care. The story "He" reads as a case study of maternal ambivalence which is at the center of the work of Maud Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst who has studied the mother-child relationship. She emphasizes the intensity and frequency of the mother's death wish: "The mother-child love relationship will always, in such cases, have an after-taste of death about it, of death denied, of death disguised usually as sublime love, sometimes as pathological indifference, and occasionally as conscious rejection; but the idea of murder is there, even if the mother is not always conscious of it" (4). In the short-story collection, the most horrendous reality of femininity associated with maternity may be found in "Magic," a three-page story dealing with the abortion of Ninette, a young prostitute working in a New Orleans brothel where the Madam beats her until she leaves blood "everywhere she had sat" (*Collected Stories* 40).

It is obvious that in the Mexican phase of her career Porter was pitting the figure of the artist against that of the mother, and that neither figure was successful. Women lose individual power and their children at the same time, mothers are dominated by ambivalent emotion. Besides, artists fail because they flee the problems of their native place, either engaging in vacuous discourse or using women as objects.

From Displacement to Reconciliation

The fate of these characters seems to prove that the spatial displacement Porter resorted to did not lead to the resolution of the tensions that opposed her search for an artistic "I" to the representations she had inherited from Southern culture. If we accept the idea that female characters embody the tensions that Porter was submitted to, then the failure of the displacement process to Mexico makes sense: although she tackled at length the issue of creativity, she only reproduced a dichotomous situation. The replacement of one creative space by another is contiguous to the replacement of one identity by another: Mexico is to the South what the artistic identity is to the identity of the procreative woman. Mexico was supposed to make creation and procreation easier but no compromise was achieved by Porter, as she failed because she was censored by her super-ego. She reproduced the representations she was trying to cast aside, to little avail, and as a consequence her female characters do not achieve freedom. Freudian theory has it that the strategy of replacement comes up against a great resistance on the part of the super-ego when it is not accompanied by a compromise, the absence of which increases the power of the super-ego's censorship and makes it implacable.

Conciliation was achieved in the cycle of stories comprising the *Old Order* series, thanks to Porter's thematic return to the South. The displacements at work in the first stories have given way to a focalization on Texas. Miranda, "the one who sees," returns to her native state in order to confront her past. Writing these stories enabled Porter to face the conflicts opposing artistic creation and motherhood. She confronted the ego ideal that her family expected from her and did not attempt to displace the conflicts she experienced onto another space. In the absence of displacement, censorship cannot function and sanction the ego: the concessions Porter made and her acceptance of reality allowed her to come to terms with her choices. When writing about the South, Porter's ego ideal was reinforced because it was at home in the familiar and did not come up against censorship.

Writing about her grandmother in occasional articles written for magazines encouraged Porter to delve into the more painful loss of her mother, who died in childbirth when she was but an infant. "The Fig Tree," published in 1960, is an exploration of the terror and guilt connected with memory and may be construed as an effort to solve the traumatic effects of her mother's death. In the last short stories of the *Old Order* cycle, Porter's literary alter-ego Miranda is in the throes of acute emotional turmoil. Having just lost her mother, Miranda is preoccupied with motherhood and death and buries baby animals in tiny graves:

Sometimes [her father] called Grandmother "Mama," but she was not Mama either, she was really Grandmother. Mama was dead. Dead meant gone away forever. Dying was something that happened all the time, to people and everything else. Somebody died and there was a long string of carriages going at a slow walk over the rocky ridge of the hill towards the river while the bell tolled and tolled, and that person was never seen again by anybody. Kittens and chickens and specially little turkeys died much oftener, and sometimes calves, but hardly ever cows or horses. (*Collected Stories* 354)

Miranda's thoughts move from her grandmother, who has replaced her mother, to burial rites, and from these to the baby animals she finds dead at the summer-house and on her grandmother's farm. In an attempt to gain control over her death-filled world, she has developed rituals mimicking those of adults. She repeats the ceremony each time a small animal dies: "she always buried it in a little grave with flowers on top and a smooth stone at the head. Even grasshoppers. Everything dead had to be treated this way. 'This way and no other!'" (*Collected Stories* 354), as her grandmother would entreat. Through these gestures, Miranda repeats her mother's burial, and as the story progresses it appears clearly that the correct performance of the rites has become her way of coping with the terror connected with death.

Besides, the fig grove near the town house represents a source of nurture for the child, as "the deep branches bowed down level with her chin, and she could gather figs without having to climb" (*Collected Stories* 354-55), and the soft round leaf smell like the milk found at a mother's breast: "the early dew bringing out the sweet smell of the milky leaves. They passed a fig tree with low hanging branches, and Miranda reached up by habit and touched it with her fingers for luck" (361). However, one day, under the shelter of branches, Miranda finds a small chicken that does not move: the nurturing grove is transformed into a place of terror. She begins an elaborate burial, but cannot complete it

because of her relatives' departure. Just as Miranda is called to the carriage, she hears "a very sad little crying sound. It said Weep, weep, weep, three times like that slowly, and it seemed to come from the mound of dirt" (356). As the family leaves for the farm, the distraught Miranda imagines the trapped chick crying in the grave: "She had to go back and let him out. He'd never get out by himself, all tangled up in the tissue paper and that shoebox. He'd never get out without her" (357). Implicit in Miranda's distress for the animal is her guilt at being somehow responsible for her mother's death, not performing the ritual adequately, and so causing her loss. Guilt swells in the child's heart, for the cry becomes more frightening in the fig grove at the farm. Just as Miranda touches a low-hanging branch for luck, as she is used to doing, she is struck by what she takes to be a desperate cry: "From the earth beneath her feet came a terrible, faint troubled sound: "'Weep, weep, weep, weep' murmured a little crying voice from the smothering earth, the grave" (361). Miranda manages to overcome fear and to rationalize her terror triggered by guilt with the help of her Great-Aunt Eliza, whose scientific mind, represented by her spectacles and technical equipment, can provide Miranda with a new perspective; Eliza's logical occupations replace the little girl's fascination with baby animals: "Miranda almost forgot her usual interests, such as kittens and other little animals on the place . . . anything at all so it was a baby and would let her pet and feed it, for Great-Aunt Eliza's ways kept Miranda following her about" (360). By the end of the story, the child is released from her terror by her Great-Aunt's rational explanation: the dreadful crying sound is correctly interpreted as a natural phenomenon, that of tree frogs; it is not a voice from the grave. The child can thus enter an ordered world that is much less terrifying: "Miranda took a deep trembling breath and heard them. They were in the trees. They walked on again, Miranda holding Great-Aunt Eliza's hand" (361).

Displacement to Mexico proved necessary and fruitful and allowed Porter to learn not only about the arts and revolutionary ideals, but also the difficulties involved in sustaining creativity away from one's native place, leading her to realize the importance of what Lewis Simpson called an "aesthetic of memory" at work in much of Southern literature: "My time in Mexico and Europe served me in a way I had not dreamed of, even, besides its own charm and goodness: it gave me back my past and my own house and my own people, the native land of my heart" (Porter, *Collected Essays* 470). She was indeed to return to the very core of that land, as she requested to be buried in her mother's grave, in the Texas she had resisted going back to.

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“A Small, One Might Say Almost Claustrophobic World”: Kinship and the Urban South in Madeleine L’Engle’s *Ilse*

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C. Hugh Holman’s well-known statement that there are “not one but many Souths” (4) is today beyond dispute. Despite this, the vast majority of Southern literature, and critical writing about it, concerns rural, cotton-growing areas or small towns. Relatively little fiction has been written about the urban South. Equally, many maps of the region, or attempts to divide it up into sub-regions, speak of Uplands, Lowlands and coastal regions, but stop at Georgia’s southern border. However, the carefully depicted, but anonymous, Southern town in Madeleine L’Engle’s second novel *Ilse* (1946), although described by its creator as entirely imaginary, may easily be identified as Jacksonville, Florida, and her characters inhabit a world strongly resembling that of L’Engle’s mother’s family and her kin in the period from 1901 to the late 1920s.

L’Engle’s town, despite its non-central location and geographical particularities, is presented as typical of the whole region with its numerically small, self-perceived elite and their emphasis on kinship networks and strict, genteel, code of conduct which tolerates no exceptions. While both the principal characters attempt, in different ways, to break free of this stifling, almost claustrophobic society, neither is successful. In spite of this depressing outcome, the novel’s strength lies in the authenticity of its atmosphere, as the Southern world in decline and in thrall to the past, spins the web which will finally tie its children to their fate—some freely and others grudgingly.

Jacksonville, Madeleine L’Engle and the South

Although nearly all critics agree that the Deep South of the United States includes several subcultures, opinions vary as to where can be considered as part of the South at all. Charles S. Aiken, for example, in his article in the *Geographical Review*, provides a map of the South, dividing it into Upland South and Lowland South. However, the region, for him, stops at southern border of Georgia and Alabama and does not include any of Florida. Colin Woodard, on the other hand, includes the top half of Florida in his Deep South, explaining that the whole region “traces its roots to the caste system established by masters who tried to duplicate West Indies-style slave society” (Wilson) and also values states’ rights and local control while fighting the expansion of federal powers.

Madeleine L’Engle, whose mother’s family came from Jacksonville, Florida, had no doubt that the town and the culture were Southern. She refers to Jacksonville as “this Southern city” (*Day Forward* 10) and her relations as “old Southerners” (*Summer* 203). However, in spite of the fact that L’Engle set two of her novels and at least two short stories entirely in the South, and several others partly in the South, lived for part of her youth in Jacksonville and went to a high school in Charleston, she is very rarely referred to as a Southern writer. She is not even mentioned in the many lists of literary works set in Florida, which mainly seem to think that Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ *The Yearling* (1938) and Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s *The*

Everglades: River of Glass (1947) are the only notable works set in the state (Bancroft). Part of the reason for this may be that L'Engle does not explicitly state that her novels are set in Jacksonville and the surrounding area, even if it is easy for the reader to work this out.

In a note at the beginning of the original edition¹ of L'Engle's second novel to be published, *Ilsa*, the author claims that "the town, the people and the happenings in this story are entirely imaginary. Any resemblance to actuality is purely coincidental." This is clearly untrue, as the town is unmistakably Jacksonville and many of the people are very similar to L'Engle's relations. First of all, Henry Porcher, the main character, describes the town as "too far south to be really southern in the old tradition, and yet not far south enough to be a resort" (*Ilsa* 17), giving a clear indication of its location on the southern borders of the traditional South. In addition, halfway along the road due north from their town to Charleston, Henry's family "stopped off for the night in Savannah" (*Ilsa* 39), which means they must have started their journey in the region of Jacksonville. Moreover, the Porcher family obtained their wealth from a lumber mill (*Ilsa* 144), of which there were many in Jacksonville at that period. The Porchers' mill seems very similar to and situated in much the same place as Wellington Cummer's real lumber mill and phosphate shipping facility, which employed 1150 workers in 1906 (Crooks 445). To this one can add the lightship in the Porchers' town, which is described as having three crew members "there for six-month stretches with nothing to do but tend the light" (*Ilsa* 15). Jacksonville had a lightship from 1857 to the Civil War and again when L'Engle knew the city, from 1929 to 1954, and there were indeed three people working there at a time: the captain, the cook and a crewman (Taylor 29). Other small points include the fact that a poor white character, Ira, speaks of "the couple of years [he] spent rum-running" (*Ilsa* 185) during the Prohibition period, which is entirely credible as the famous William Frederick McCoy (the real McCoy) came from Jacksonville and also Al Capone used Jacksonville for various of his liquor-smuggling activities. The flora, fauna and architecture of the town are also identical to those in Jacksonville: Spanish moss, palm trees, pine woods, ilex bushes, palmettos, myrtles, coquina, redbirds, sea gulls, sandpipers, mosquitos, moccasins, locusts, grape vines, magnolias and chinaberry trees.

However, the event which most clearly identifies the city and dates the start of the action in *Ilsa* as taking place in 1901, is L'Engle's powerful description in the first chapters of the novel of the Great Fire of Jacksonville, considered by historians as "the most destructive urban fire the Southeast had seen" (Soergel). L'Engle would later describe the fire, which occurred when her mother was twenty, in the second volume of her journals, *The Summer of the Great-Grandmother* (1974) and this description strongly resembles the scenes in *Ilsa*. Fictional Henry and Ilsa first see the fire, as L'Engle's mother did, from outside the town and then hurry into the endangered area. In L'Engle's family, "Mother and Dearma packed china and crystal in buckets. Grandfather and the boys cut portraits out of the frames, buried what silver they could" (*Summer* 213), while the fictional Porchers and Woolfs also cut pictures out of their frames, bury silver at the foot of the oak tree in the garden and load what household goods they could into the vehicles they drive away (*Ilsa* 21-23). In both works L'Engle also evokes the terrified population, fearing the

¹ It was removed in the 2018 edition.

end of the world, “waving flaming torches and crying, ‘Jedgement Day! Jedgement Day!’” (*Summer* 214, *Ilsa* 21).

In addition to giving *Ilsa* a Jacksonville setting, L’Engle also dedicated the novel to her mother and used several details from her own family history in her portrayal of Southern society. While L’Engle herself found Florida “stultifying and surreal” (Zarin 63), she knew that her open-minded mother loved Jacksonville and actively chose to live there, surrounded by her numerous relations. First of all, Porcher, the surname of her protagonist’s family in *Ilsa*, was also the name of a well-known family in Jacksonville and a family surname for L’Engle. There had been several marriages between L’Engles and Porchers in the mid-nineteenth century; for example, Madeleine’s Aunt Nadia, whom the author did not greatly appreciate,² was descended from the Porchers. The fictional Porchers, like the L’Engles, are of French Huguenot extraction and still have relatives in France. Moreover, L’Engle gave her fictional Porchers a similar background to her mother’s paternal relations, the Barnetts. Madeleine’s Barnett great-grandparents came from the West, but from Southern stock, and so when they moved to Jacksonville “the fact that they were of Southern ancestry was in their favour with the Southerners” (*Summer* 158). In the same way, the fictional Porchers, although they were newcomers in the town, “were considered Southerners because, although Grandpa was born in Colorado, his people emigrated from Kentucky and Grandma came from Missouri” (*Ilsa* 18). Also like the Barnetts, the fact that the Porchers had made a lot of money and intermarried with the local gentry made them socially acceptable, even though some people still considered it was “too close to the civil war for [them] to have so much money, if [their] father and grandfather were honest” (*Ilsa* 18)—a point of view shared by L’Engle’s mother about the rich in Jacksonville (*Summer* 163). There are also certain points in common between Henry Porcher and two of L’Engle’s maternal uncles, who went to France and married French women, enjoyed artistic pursuits in Paris and showed no interest in the family business. Bion Barnett Jnr was a moderately talented painter, just as Henry Porcher was a moderately talented musician, and also like Henry, never managed to earn his living. As one of L’Engle’s cousins observed about Bion Jnr, “his banker father paid his bills” (Marcus 33).

The plot in *Ilsa* unfolds in some places L’Engle knew well. *Ilsa* and her father’s home is based on L’Engle’s maternal grandmother’s beach house in San Pablo (now Jacksonville Beach), to the south of Jacksonville, while Silver and Eddie live in a small house “on the wrong side of the river” (Marcus 29), like the one Madeleine’s parents bought on their return from Europe in 1934. Jacksonville society in the novel also resembles that which Madeleine’s mother knew in her youth. The population of Jacksonville in 1900, the year before *Ilsa* starts, was 28,429 people of whom 43% were white. The town was, like most other Southern towns, racially segregated. However, as James B. Crooks observes, “power and wealth were centred in a relatively small white elite” (441). The Social Register, which recorded the members of the elite, listed just 1386 people in 1904, and church records show that there were just 1200 Episcopalians, including all the numerous L’Engle relations (Crooks 440). Gardner McCall, from Jacksonville, explains that “the L’Engles belonged in the uppermost reaches of Jacksonville Society and were very well regarded” (Marcus 337). In the class-conscious atmosphere of the time, the children of the elite did not mix with the rest of the population, so it is not surprising that Madeleine’s mother claimed that, when she

² Information confirmed by Madeleine L’Engle’s grand-daughter Charlotte.

was a little girl, Jacksonville “was a small town where everybody knew each other and almost everybody was kin” (*Summer* 197). In fact, her very sheltered life revolved around St John’s Episcopal Church and her “four great-uncles and their large, multi-generation families” (*Summer* 198) who lived nearby. Even when Madeleine herself visited Jacksonville in her late teens, she found herself “the outsider in a closely knit group of young people who had grown up together in Jacksonville, gone to school together, would marry one another” (*Day Forward* 10). It is therefore not surprising that Henry Porcher’s world in *Ilsa* should be peopled almost exclusively with his kin from the Porcher-Woolf-Silverton clan. Robert Pick comments that “it sometimes seems silly that, except for the servants and the occasional schoolmate, there appears to be no one in that town who isn’t ‘kin’” (30), but this appears to have been the world as the young L’Engles and their relations knew it at the beginning of the 20th century.

Writing in the Southern Tradition

As Robert O. Stephens points out, “the family saga was a principal feature of Southern writing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (2). This is hardly surprising as the family, the extended family, has been until very recently the basis of society in the South. And these extended families tended to be large. As Madeleine L’Engle explains, “a southern family is usually impossible to sort out; after the immediate uncles and aunts and first cousins, little distinction is made between second, third and far more distant cousins; they are kin and that is all that matters” (*Summer* 164). In addition, for Stephens, “the Southern family has had to act as the individual’s link with past, the place where cultural values are learned” (2). As a result, “individual and regional identity, self-worth and status were determined by family relationships” (King 27). In order to maintain that status, close-knit marital alliances were created within the existing elite, restricting the circle of gentility, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown observes, “to the very wealthiest and most well-born families” (41), frequently creating an incestuous atmosphere and sometimes leading to health problems related to inbreeding. However, one advantage of the strong Southern family identity was that Southerners have traditionally had a strong sense of family history. As Eudora Welty famously stated, they have lived in a place “where storytelling is a way of life” (qtd in Stephens 7) and where often, as in Madeleine L’Engle’s family, knowledge of family history and traditions was passed down, via storytelling, from mother to daughter. It was therefore practically inevitable that, in the middle of twentieth century, the writers of the Southern Renaissance would compose novels structured around “the literal and symbolic family” (King 7). Although L’Engle was not part of this movement, she was inevitably aware of it as the main literary tendency in the region at the time when she was writing her first Southern family saga, *Ilsa*. She also followed several of the traditions of the genre. For example, Stephens refers to the narrator in such works as a “chronicler and observer . . . who speaks little . . . and lives as a watcher of other people’s lives, rather than an actor in them” (Stephens 19). This is an accurate description of L’Engle’s narrator/protagonist, the observant but ineffectual Henry Porcher.

Authors attempting, like L’Engle, to produce a popular Southern novel in the 1940s, were also writing in the shadow of *Gone with the Wind*. The 1936 novel and, perhaps even more so, the 1939 film adaptation with its shots of wide open spaces and depiction of plantation life marked the imagination of a generation as well as winning 11 Oscars.

The Atmosphere in Ilsa

As Madeleine L'Engle herself claimed to find Florida oppressive, it is hardly surprising that she gave the same atmosphere to her fictional Jacksonville. From the beginning Henry is described as a member of "the famous Porcher-Silverton-Woolf tribe" (*Ilsa* 17), who dominate the town, are remarkably exclusive and look "askance at anyone who lived there whom [they] had not always known" (18). The tribe is very close-knit, but quite large as Henry and his cousin Eddie amuse themselves "by trying to count the family . . . all the great-aunts and great-uncles, aunts and uncles, all the cousins; but there were so many [they] could never remember them all" (60). Most of the tribe have what Uncle Montgomery calls "great family feeling" (83), even bed-ridden Cousin Eustacia in Charleston, who seems to detest a large number of her relations but welcomes Henry's family into her home after the Jacksonville fire because "kin is kin" (48) and relationship implies obligation. From a very young age the atmosphere of the Woolf family house oppresses Henry (97) and even when Ilsa lives there, "all the oppression and hate the walls of the house had stored up seemed to descend on [him]" (114). Even out in the open on family property, Henry is suffocated with heat and, as he looks up into the sky, it seems "to be bearing closer and more heavily upon [them]" (85).

Part of the reason for the feeling of oppression comes from the family's "overpowering sense of superiority they pour on high and low" (67) and their isolation from other people. Cecilia Porcher in particular will not even allow people she perceives as inferior, like John Brandes and Ilsa, to enter her house and she teaches her daughter Silver not to talk to Ilsa (31). Although Brandes is a highly educated, internationally renowned naturalist who studied at university first in Baltimore and then in Europe, for Cecilia and her Woolf relations the fact that he "comes from a poor white family downstate" and "hasn't got any kin at all" (64) means that he is not a suitable person for them and their children to mix with. During Henry's early teens the claustrophobia and isolation are made worse by his mother's insistence on cutting herself off from society after she has been refused Holy Communion in a church in Charleston on account of her uncharitable attitudes. Henry explains that Cecilia "had decided she was disgraced and was going to retire from the world" (73). Her husband and children are obliged to follow her and live until Cecilia's death in an "awful yellow hotel" (97), far from the town. For Henry, "it was like being buried alive" (97).

Most critics seem to feel that L'Engle successfully captured an unattractive, but regrettably genuine, atmosphere. For the *Kirkus Reviews* in March 1946, the novel's definite appeal came from the fact that it "was dominated by an all pervasive, if tenuous atmosphere" and that it accurately drew "a still life of the South in all its inertia." Robert Pick, at the same period, rejoiced in the "absorbing atmosphere of authenticity" (30) in the claustrophobic town. A more recent review on Amazon, written after the release of *Ilsa* as an e-book in the spring of 2017, states that "this may be an accurate portrayal of the Old South, but it wasn't a comfortable place" (Jamesby). This is certainly one of L'Engle's main points. Perhaps more surprisingly, considering that the action in *Ilsa* stops well before the Second World War, in another recent review, Laura Douglass writes: "As a Southerner, I felt very connected to the descriptions of the Southern landscape and culture and felt that they were quite true for both the time period, and in some ways,

present day” (Douglass). L’Engle’s evocation of the South appears to be one of the most compelling aspects of the novel.

If the Porcher-Woolf-Silverton tribe are portrayed as living in a stiflingly restricted, all-white and affluent world, at the start of the novel John and Ilsa Brandes appear refreshingly free and relaxed, especially so to the discontented Henry. Ilsa is first seen in a torn dress with her hair loose, sitting on a fence and talking to an all-black chain gang, seemingly unperturbed by their stories of theft, murder, rape and domestic violence. She and her father live in an isolated house on the beach and Ilsa enjoys lying “out on the dunes at night to look for falling stars” (*Ilsa* 99). They are open and friendly and mix with people from all backgrounds, their closest friend being the adventurous Ira, referred to by Henry’s relations as “that low-down no-’count piece of white trash” (63), but appreciated by John and Ilsa for his helpfulness as well as for his skills and creativity. During her early life, Ilsa’s is a “casual non-conformity” (Kirkus). She is not a rebel so much as someone for whom the constraints of life in a strictly regulated society do not exist. She has no social ambitions and, even when she is in love with Henry’s cousin Monty, makes it clear that she has no “great desire to become a member of [their] august tribe” (107).

The dual tragedy of the novel comes from Henry’s inability to escape from the all-engulfing constraints of his background and from Ilsa’s voluntary submission to the petty and stifling values of the town for the sake of those she loves. Henry travels to Paris to study music in an attempt to escape Ilsa, the town and his family, but is unsuccessful. Not only does he discover the limits to his artistic talent, but the only close relationship he forms in Paris is with one of his Porcher cousins, the singer Telcide. Although he finds Telcide attractive, she is still a cousin and Henry is aware that his connection with her only reinforces his emotional imprisonment:

It seemed as if I could never get away from my family. It was like one of the heavy mullet nets with the little iron weights around them. Even in my one futile splash for freedom I was caught in this net. Telcide was a Porcher. (125)

Henry sees his own search for freedom as futile and, for this reason among others, will never get free. As soon as he returns to the town after his eight-year absence, he immediately slips “back into the old groove” (129), weighed down at least in part by his father’s conviction that “a Porcher is always a Porcher” (125) and that there is no escape from the family destiny. Although, at the end of the novel, it seems as if Henry may get a job with Eddie’s company and leave the town, the reader hardly believes this. L’Engle herself obviously did not believe it as, nearly forty years later, she wrote that Henry came from “one of those inbred Southern families” and had “late in life married a distant cousin in Paris, a singer” (*Lotus* 249), thus causing congenital mental problems in his descendants.

Although Ilsa starts life carefree and attached firmly to the beach rather than the more oppressive town, she gradually starts to change through her attachment to the Porcher-Woolf-Silverton clan. She even convinces herself that the oppression is not affecting her, claiming that “the air here often seems heavy and oppressive to people unless they were born here and love it, as I do” (177). However, she does not really love it, but loves, very deeply, her daughter Brand, who does care for the town and has inherited her father’s family’s innate desire to conform and be respectable. Even when she is left a widow after Monty’s death, Ilsa knows that she is not free, because Brand is part of the town and its values:

It's the most important thing in the world to the child. For some reason she's chosen the people of this town as the people she wants to live with, belong to . . . If Brand marries Lorenzo, she has a chance of happiness, as long as I don't ruin it . . . I love my child and I want her to have her chance. (342)

Ilsa is only too aware that she could ruin her daughter's chance of happiness—by pursuing her relationship with the actor Franz Werner, or even by diverging too strongly from the standards of behaviour laid down by respectable Southern society. Ilsa never accepts the validity of those standards, but because she loves Brand, she voluntarily gives up her natural freedom and submits to them.

L'Engle in later life was quoted as declaring, "I escaped Jacksonville" (Zarin 63). *Ilsa* is her novel about a man and a woman who did not manage to do so. For this reason the book may seem somewhat depressing and lacking in the hope and dynamic sense of life found in nearly all her other works. L'Engle was disappointed to find, shortly after publication, that her book got "distinguished reviews but very modest sales" (*Day Forward* 130). However, some readers have been entranced by the novel and its emotional impact. Writer Paige Johnson describes her first encounter with *Ilsa* at the age of thirteen in the following terms:

Ilsa grabbed at my heart and brain and shook them around a bit, and I have never forgotten it. It was all light and beauty; beautiful, complicated prose about a beautiful, complicated heroine named Ilsa . . . I loved *Ilsa* because the writing and the characters made me feel more than I felt at home or at school. The words on the page made me feel like I'd taken a giant breath of autumn air, laced with joy and melancholy, highs and lows. Like I'd won a lottery, like my dog died, like I'd been loved and betrayed and loved again.

Part of the ambiguity in reader reactions to this novel of the urban South is the nature of the South itself, as well as the author's ambiguity about the region. In L'Engle's early short story "White in the Moon the Long Road Lies," the protagonist Selina feels that the South is part of her and that leaving is "tearing [her]self up . . . breaking [her]self off at the roots" (3), and yet she wants to get out. Oppressed by Southern society, as Gérald Préher has noted, Selina does not want so much to "get away from the South, but 'out' of it before it closes in on her" (153). This is, overwhelmingly, the atmosphere in *Ilsa* and it is possible to see Henry and Isla, like many characters from the Southern Renaissance, sharing in Quentin Compson's more famous, but equally unsuccessful, struggle "to achieve identity and a measure of . . . freedom in a complicated, if not suffocating South" (Brinkmeyer 159). Yet, L'Engle's heroine, Ilsa, is unique in that she submits freely and even joyfully to the constraints of kinship and the strict rules of southern society. The South does not overcome her, she chooses it while remaining fully aware of all its disadvantages. She does not appreciate the tribe or the closed, elite society any more at the end of the novel that she did at the beginning, but she knows by then that other people can feel at home and find security in it. As a result, although L'Engle's presentation of the South, and more particularly of Jacksonville, is highly critical, through her characters Ilsa and Brand, she shows she is aware that some people flourish in such an environment, as her mother had always done.

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A Peculiar Sense of Place: The Fascinating Side of New Orleans in Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction

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Elizabeth Spencer's first three novels and many of her stories are rooted in the Deep South. As Eudora Welty puts it in her foreword to Spencer's collection of short stories published in 1981, "[t]he good South, bestowing blessings at the cradle of storytellers, touched her most tenderly with the sense of place" (xiv). This "sense of place," commonly associated with southern fiction, describes the peculiar bond between southern writers and their environment. Both Spencer and Welty were born in Mississippi and have been fully aware of the specificities of their native land. Place, according to Welty, is the backbone of a story since "it is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place" (Place 118).

Even after Spencer left the South in the 1950s to settle in Italy, and later in Canada, she remained deeply attached to Mississippi. Although her expatriation did not alter her attachment to the South, Catherine Selzer remarks, "the borders of the South itself become increasingly porous" (111) in her later novels;

[i]n employing settings such as Dallas, Florida, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, for example, Spencer moves from the deep South of Faulkner and the Agrarians to the New South, an ambiguous, evolving space not wholly unlike the "foreign" spaces she explores in *The Light in The Piazza*. (112)

Spencer set her 1972 novel *The Snare* in New Orleans, in a city which geographically belongs to the South but which culturally stands apart.¹ New Orleans's dark history, its ties to voodoo and witchcraft, the rampant criminality, coexist with its reputation as a hedonist city. This rich interweaving of cultural and historical influences and the city's dreamlike quality have given it a special place in the popular imagination. New Orleans inspired many writers, from George Washington Cable, Alice Dunbar Nelson or Kate Chopin who, in the 19th century, explored the social and racial complexity of the city, to William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams or Walker Percy in the 20th century, who rendered the peculiarities of the city's identity by portraying its cultural changes and its paradoxes; it has more recently become the setting to Anne Rice's novels and been labeled a "gothic capital."

Elizabeth Spencer knew the Louisiana city well and experienced its singular atmosphere. The portrait she draws of New Orleans in *The Snare* is a fascinating one,

¹ As Thomas Bonner puts it, "[n]ever comfortable with being an entirely American city, clearly not pleased during the Spanish occupation, and noticeably angry with the French for ceding it to Spain initially and then selling it to the United States, New Orleans has had its own identity that resembles metaphorically its insular geography" (196).

where the “straight world” and the “crooked world” intertwine. The reader is transported into the labyrinthine city, following the path of Julia Garrett, whose deep and complex inner life is a reflection of the city itself. Spencer also mentions New Orleans in several short stories. The allusions, despite their brevity, seem to have an impact on the characters or the plot; whether the characters actually travel to New Orleans or simply refer to the city, its fascinating power is always palpable.

The aim of this essay is to examine Spencer’s depiction of New Orleans in the light of Eudora Welty’s theory about place in fiction and to determine the way in which such a peculiar setting is used as raw material for the crafting of a story.

New Orleans and the Southern Sense of Place

When Elizabeth Spencer wrote *The Snare*, she had already left the South and was living in Canada. She had begun to see herself, as she explains in an interview with Charles Bunting, “as being no longer part of the Southern locale in a strictly realistic way and having to find [her] place in a world that was geographically bigger than that and was different from that” (31). She always remained a Southern writer though; as she points out, “I’m instinctively still a part of it. A strict Southerner would say that. You carry the South with you” (31). By setting *The Snare* in such a peculiar Southern city as New Orleans, Spencer departs from her previous Mississippi settings, modifying and enlarging her sense of place. Thus, we may wonder if Spencer’s New Orleans still complies with Eudora Welty’s theory about place in fiction, since place, according to Welty, is where the writer “has his roots, place is where he stands” (Place 133). Welty examines three main aspects of place which she considers to be responsible for the “goodness” of a story: the “validity” or accuracy of the location, its ability to define the characters and its capacity to trigger the imagination.

As regards the first aspect—the “validity” of the setting—, Spencer convincingly shows her knowledge of New Orleans by providing the reader with accurate descriptions of the city life, its topography and even its climate. Not only does she have childhood memories of the place, but she also admits to having spent some time doing research in New Orleans for the novel.² She thoroughly describes the typical New Orleans weather, with its heavy rains and oppressive heat. She also provides information about the city’s dark history through the description of Julia Garrett’s adoptive family and of her uncle’s father Henri Devigny in particular. “Dev,” the “old man” who introduced Julia to the underworld is depicted as “that marrier for money, that printer of obscene literature, that murderer of a Negro woman” (186). Details about his troubled past are provided by Julia’s friend, Tommy Arnold, a journalist who consults numerous files about the old man at his newspaper office. The journalist’s search for information parallels Spencer’s own extended research for the novel and adds to the story’s verisimilitude. Spencer, like Welty, acknowledges that the “validity” of the setting is best asserted when the author talks about a place s/he knows and where s/he has lived. Nevertheless, as Spencer suggests in her essay “One Writer’s Sense of Place,” s/he can make a place seem real thanks to a “willful,

² “I have all kind of firsthand knowledge of it without ever having been, strictly speaking, a resident. I went down there any number of times to write large chunks of the novel . . . everything that I called to hand, like the setting of a house, the growth of a tree or a flower or all different things that all furnish part of a novelist’s milieu to move in, came naturally, just flowed into place” (In *That Time* 32).

unpredictable power”: imagination (63). She cites as evidence the convincing manner in which she depicted Texas, a place she did not know well, in her novel *No Place for an Angel*, or the way Joseph Conrad let “the currents of his powerful imagination” run in order to “invent[] a whole country in Central America for his novel *Nostromo*” (63). The work of the writer then comes close to that of the painter capable of creating a detailed and credible landscape based on his memories or his imagination alone. “Painting and writing,” Welty remarks, “always the closest two of the sister arts . . . have each a still closer connection with place than they have with each other” (Place 118). Spencer’s portrait of New Orleans in *The Snare* is a highly colorful one, rich in contrasts, in good accordance with the reality of the city. Gérard Préher compares the novel to “a drawing in the making, onto which the artist constantly adds new colors to modify the texture and give more depth to the image he means to conjure up: Julia is a multilayered character; her story, a palimpsest” (241). Indeed, the drawing evolves in the course of the novel, alternately tending toward realism with its detailed descriptions of New Orleans lifestyle, and impressionism when Spencer reveals the city’s mysteries and its emotionally charged atmosphere. The protagonist, Julia, blends into the landscape and evolves with it.

The second aspect of place is determined by the importance of “making the characters real” (Place 121). “Place,” Welty explains, “has the most delicate control over the characters too: by confining character, it defines it” (122). In *The Snare*, Spencer identifies Julia, her protagonist, with the city: “she was the whole city of New Orleans; its life was hers and hers its own” (162). As Constance Adler points out in her foreword to Louise McKinney’s thorough study of New Orleans’s cultural history, the city is “utterly, palpably and indisputably female. Not that she is simply *like* a woman, but that she *is* a woman who may speak to those inclined to listen” (v). All the characters in *The Snare* are defined through their relationships with the city, and their belonging to the “straight” world or to the “underworld” they proceed to explore. For this reason, the story told by Spencer could not take place anywhere but in New Orleans without becoming, in Welty’s words, “unrecognizable as art” (Place 122). Other writers who have used the Louisiana city as a backdrop have exploited the capacity of place to define their characters. In William Faulkner’s early short pieces collected as *New Orleans Sketches*, Frédérique Spill explains, the city is perceived as a place of shelter for marginalized people and as such, becomes a place conducive to the creative process: “The powers of imagination seem indeed to be encouraged by the non-conformist way of life to which the city invites its residents and visitors.”³ In the same way Tennessee Williams’s complex characters reflect “[t]he decadent ‘crazy broken-down city’ [that] in large part created his oeuvre” (McKinney 53). Welty also uses New Orleans as a setting in several short stories and novels.⁴ In “No Place for You, My Love” for instance, the intriguing place south of New Orleans where the two characters drive reflect their state of mind, illustrating Welty’s idea that “[l]ocation pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place” (Place 122).

The third aspect is related to the writer’s use of a specific place to provide the point of view of the story, or, as Welty puts it, “the changeover from the objective to the subjective”

³ “Les puissances de l’imagination semblent en effet encouragées par le mode de vie anticonformiste auquel la ville invite ses résidents et ses visiteurs.”

⁴ The role of New Orleans in two short stories (“The Purple Hat” and “No Place for You, My Love”) and two novels (*The Robber Bridegroom* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*) has been thoroughly analyzed by Jan Nordby Gretlund in *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*.

(Place 124). Spencer's New Orleans transcends the idea of a mere setting. The feelings of attraction and repulsion for the underworld experienced by Julia in *The Snare* are made credible by the potential fascination elicited by the city. The various details about the weather, for instance, reflect the characters' emotional states and are used to trigger the reader's imagination, as in a passage in which Julia realizes that her relationship with the musician Jake Springland is likely to fail:

[they] took the streetcar back to the Quarter, riding silently. The day was warm but she felt a sort of half-inch insulating coldness surrounding her, and wondered if she was catching cold . . . Then she knew what it was: a solstice in the "We"—a seasonal change in Jake and Julia. (145)

By drawing a parallel between the evolution of the relationship and a solstice, a natural phenomenon considered as a symbol of change and renewal, which affects both the city and its dwellers, Spencer not only reveals Julia's difficulty in controlling the course of her life, but also emphasizes the influence of place in the shaping of the story. Place becomes in Welty's words, "the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course" (Place 128).

New Orleans departs from the traditional location of Spencer's first novels and from the familiar atmosphere of small-town Mississippi. The city is perceived as mysterious and threatening; the lurking danger of the underworld emphasizes its alien quality. Nevertheless, it seems to represent, to use Welty's words, "a plausible abode for the novel's world of feeling" (Place 121). The reason probably lies in the fact that Spencer did not intend to write a novel about New Orleans but rather "about the people who are in New Orleans" (In That Time 32); her vision of the city throughout *The Snare* remains a vision from the outside. According to Welty, a writer "can equally well be true . . . to an *impression* of place" and the only way to write about an unfamiliar place is to write from the point of view of strangers (The Art 97).⁵ Indeed, Spencer's Julia Garrett was raised in New Orleans but she was born in Tennessee and adopted by her uncle and aunt at the age of six. She remains an outsider to the part of the city she explores—the underworld. She is described as an "[o]rphan girl in a voodoo city" (118). Likewise, although Tommy Arnold, the newspaperman from New Orleans, is not theoretically an outsider, James Randal Woodland suggests that "[h]is distance is the objectivity of the reporter who takes care not to become involved in the stories he covers" (283-84). In Spencer's as in Welty's fiction, the alien quality of the city, the atmosphere of "otherness," are all the more perceptible since New Orleans remains an unfamiliar and mysterious place for the main characters, and for the readers alike.

New Orleans in The Snare—A Case Study in Fascination

In *La Mort de Méduse*, a study of Welty's short fiction, Danièle Pitavy-Souques points out that Welty's use of less familiar settings such as New Orleans, New York and San Francisco enables the writer to turn geographical spaces into oneiric spaces. She analyzes the role of three elements in Welty's "oneiric" stories—the descent, the tunnel and the

⁵ Asked about the setting of her short story "The Music from Spain," Welty explains: "It's written from the point of view of the stranger, of course—the only way to write about a strange place" (Art 97).

water—that undeniably make the stories take on Gothic undertones. Likewise, in *The Snare*, Spencer presents New Orleans as an oneiric more than a geographical space, an elusive and disconcerting place structured like a labyrinth, both literally and symbolically, which emphasizes the character's feelings of confusion and the possibility of transgression.⁶ During his first romantic meeting with Julia, Jake, her lover, wanders in the maze-like streets of the French Quarter, “as if he knew where he was going . . . But he didn't know. He just turned corners wherever they appeared to interest him” (39). Physical disorientation echoes the character's mental confusion. The center of this labyrinth for Julia is her house in Audubon Place, in a dead-end, where she is able to “touch home, to find her touchstone . . . In other words, to touch Dev” (25), Dev being the minotaur-like figure who haunts her. Julia follows several life paths in the course of the novel and engages into several relationships. Nevertheless, she seems to retrace her steps when she realizes that the path does not lead her closer to Dev. The labyrinth Julia is trapped in is a complex one where a dark path and a “virtuous” path coexist, making her appear as the heroin of a gothic romance.

Beside the labyrinth motif, Spencer uses other devices to infuse the novel with a gothic sensibility. The typical Gothic setting is defined by Sherry R. Truffin in her essay “New Orleans as Gothic Capital” as “an unsafe, physically isolating space in which a past characterized by archaic authority structures, religious superstition, and/or transgressive excess is experienced as omnipresent, threatening, seductive or maddening” (187). She notes that “ghosts are omnipresent in New Orleans literature, emphasizing the inescapability of the past” (190). Several episodes in *The Snare* carry obvious gothic undertones; Julia recalls the story told by Dev of a journey he undertook with his family through the dark forest in the Bayou country:

Late in the evening and almost within the last of three forests along the road, with swampland among the oaks, a wheel came off the carriage. The nurse was scared of this part of the country (she thought it was full of voodoo spirits . . .), so she jumped out of the carriage and ran back through the dark, down the road toward the town of St. Martinsville. For all they ever knew she might have been trying to make New Orleans. Did the spirits get her? They never saw her again. (210)

The charged atmosphere of the hostile swamps creates a sense of unease, reinforced by darkness. The evocation of the voodoo spirits, pertaining to local superstitions, contribute to the feeling of impending threat. The rapidity of the nurse's escape conveyed by the succession of particles and prepositions (out, back, though, down, toward) emphasizes the intensity of her fear. The next sentences cast doubt on the woman's fate and do not exclude the possibility of a supernatural explanation. Another example is Julia's childhood memory of a rag doll that mysteriously appeared in her room:

Who had got in to leave it? It was lying face up on the floor of the bedroom, arms flung wide, as though run down, a rag doll out of nowhere. “[The nurse] left it for a present,” Aunt Isabel quickly assured Julia, who has been frightened of it . . . But

⁶ Discussing the figure of the labyrinth in gothic romances, Fred Botting explains: “The horror of the labyrinth and its confusion of fear and desire lie in its utter separation from all social rules thus allowing transgression of all conventional limits” (74).

Julia didn't believe that and knew she was being lied to. Was it a threat, a warning, a punishment, a spell? . . . She had already felt the chill, a thrill out of a world she vaguely sensed to be there, but able to reach out and touch her... (271-72)

By endowing an innocent toy with a sinister quality, leaving its mysterious appearance unexplained, Spencer confronts her protagonist with a manifestation of the uncanny. The young Julia chooses to reject the plausible explanation she is offered and considers the possibility of a more frightening yet more enticing one. The use of asyndeton in the question reflects her accelerating flow of thoughts and her growing excitement. The "thrill" she experiences as a child, defined as "both mystery (like a sign of hate) and joy" (272), is the starting point of her attraction to the dark side of her adoptive city. These episodes emphasize the vision of New Orleans as a haunted place and pertain to the overall fascination which pervades the novel.

In *Literature and Fascination*, Sybille Baumbach explains that fascination

is often connected with the thrill arising from a lack of understanding, coupled with a desire for greater insight into the matter and an inner drive for knowledge, . . . [it] is a borderline experience. It arises from the combination of two opposing forces and marks the concurrent awakening of deep attraction and intense repulsion. (3)

These elements are palpable in Julia's feelings for the New Orleans underworld. Her friend Tommy Arnold depicts her as "courting danger everywhere she turned, determined to do the off-beat, turning herself on with whatever swamp-light shone" (82). Fascination cannot be reduced to a way of escaping boredom, or as a mere "love of evil" as Julia's aunt puts it (285). Unlike Tommy Arnold who is "a little in love with it" and "thinks about crime" (81) to turn his attention away from his wife, Julia's feelings are more deeply entrenched as they resonate with her hidden and subversive desires. Julia's simultaneous attraction and repulsion are closely linked to her relationship with Dev, the old man, who "initiated" her to the crooked world when "she was a child and liable to enchantment" (199). As Peggy Prenshaw explains, "Dev's sensuous and sexual appetites ensnare the child Julia" and the old man is at the origin of "Julia's development of a 'secret self' that is fascinated, even haunted by the debased, hidden world" (113). This fascination mainly arises from the "lack of understanding" mentioned by Baumbach: Julia was confronted at an early age with the "human swamp" (78) pervaded by "evil, vice and sex-mania" (213) and death, and was obviously incapable of dealing with events beyond a child's comprehension. Already unsettled by the traumatic experience of rejection she experienced when her father abandoned her after her mother's death, Julia developed a strong and unhealthy attachment to Dev—"She felt in deep communion with his thoughts without knowing what they were" (199).

Her initiation to sex by the old man is not clearly stated⁷ but the cognitive confusion which ensued is still perceptible in her sexual life as an adult. It pervades her intimate relationships with Jake, a combination of love and violence described by Prenshaw as a "year-long orgy—really a sexual idyll—[that] comes to a close with a violent lovemaking scene and Jake's departure" (115). Her descent into the human swamp culminates in an

⁷ "and then I don't know what happened. He was convulsed, panting and heaving, and I was not thinking anything at all" (191).

episode of sexual abuse, after she and Jake were kidnapped by a dangerous drug dealer, Ted Marnie, who represents in Spencer's words, "a kind of debased image of Henri Devigny" (Prenshaw 118). Julia painfully admits her responsibility: "There was something in me that wanted to, that wanted it, wanted the worst that could happen" (343). Yet, the use of "something in me" instead of "I" shows that Julia is no longer in control of her subversive desires, while the repetition emphasizes the power of the dark forces that have taken hold of her. Julia is thus portrayed as a victim of evil, albeit a consenting one. According to Baumbach, fascination is connected to "the pleasure we take in the outrageous and the irresistible lure of the forbidden. The latter feeds into the ethically highly disturbing attraction of taboos, and aesthetic, artistic or sexual transgression" (16).

Julia's feeling of shame and guilt, reinforced by the discovery of her pregnancy, enables her to break the circle of attraction and repulsion and thus puts an end to her fascination. It required her to "hit the absolute muddy bottom where there's nothing but old beer cans, fishhooks and garbage" (346). The use of "nothing" echoes the "something in me" that had taken hold of her. Julia rejects the dark world that had attracted her and now perceives it as repellent. She dissociates herself from the abject. In Julia Kristeva's words, she experiences "[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [her] as radically separate, loathsome" (2). Her confrontation with the abject culminates when she finds herself face to face with Marnie's dead body at the bottom of a well. For Kristeva, the corpse is "the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4).⁸ The vision of the body makes Julia face the inevitability of her death and acts as a wake-up call, allowing her to hold on to life. As Prenshaw suggests, "Julia Garrett struggles to find out what kind of human being she is, what her limits are, and then matter-of-factly sets out to live her life with the full knowledge and acceptance of her nature" (120). Nevertheless, she refuses to erase the memory of her journey to the underworld and remains a part of the city.

Spencer mentions in an interview the deliberate connection she makes between her heroine and the city, and considers the novel to be "an exploration, in depth, of both simultaneously"; "She's a human compendium of the city. New Orleans reveals the woman and the woman reveals New Orleans" (A Whole Personality 228). Because Julia embodies New Orleans, she becomes herself an object of fascination. She is described as an attractive young woman who seduces most of the men who cross her path. Although the words "seduction" and "fascination" are often used interchangeably, Jean Baudrillard makes a clear distinction between the two: "Seduction is always a *dual* relation. There is always a game, a possibility of a game, and a very intense dual relation through defiance, etc. In fascination, there's no defiance; on the contrary there is a kind of respective neutralization of things" (85). Thus, Julia seduces men through her attractiveness and her capacity to engage in a romantic and/or sexual relationship but the fascination she exerts is more closely linked to the city she embodies. One of her suitors, Joe Delaney, is attracted by her "New Orleans something" (277) and Martin Parham, another suitor, develops an unhealthy obsession with her troubled past. As Prenshaw puts it, "there is about her a mysterious aloofness which Martin imagines to cover some unspeakable secret from her past, one that attracts and horrifies him" (116).

⁸ The fact that Marnie's body is found at the bottom of a well literally illustrates Kristeva's definition of the word corpse: "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death" (3).

In the same way, the reader, following Julia through the dangerous streets of New Orleans and vicariously confronted with drugs, voodoo and rape, is also led to feel the city's inherent fascination. The numerous quotations in French from Baudelaire's poems, scattered throughout the novel, as a haunting presence of the city's French past add verbal enchantment to the readers' experience and contribute to elicit fascination.⁹ The narrative itself reflects the labyrinthine city—the constant shifts back and forth in time, the succession of short chapters presenting the story from different perspectives each time, lead the readers into the novel's textual maze.

New Orleans as a Place Imbued with Feelings

Spencer makes numerous allusions to the Louisiana city in her short stories. New Orleans is perceived from the outside and is always presented as a fascinating destination rife with opportunity. The protagonist of "Ship Island," for instance, bears some similarities with Julia Garrett—both heroines are attracted to the seedy city and end up putting their lives in danger.¹⁰ Nancy Lewis, who lives a well-ordered life with her kind and affectionate boyfriend in South Mississippi, constantly talks about her wish to go to New Orleans, a place she does not know. Her attraction is first presented as a desire to experiment "the things that other people said—food and jazz in the French Quarter, beer and crab on Lake Pontchartrain" (95); yet, the city is also presented as an oneiric space: "She could feel that city, hanging just over the horizon from them scarcely fifty miles away, like some swollen bronze moon, at once brilliant and shadowy and drenched in every sort of amplified smell" (95). By comparing New Orleans with a swollen bronze moon, Spencer emphasizes the dreamlike quality of the city as well as its deceiving nature through the optical illusion that makes it appear bigger near the horizon. The use of the antithetical adjectives "brilliant and shadowy" echo the two sides of New Orleans present throughout *The Snare* and the feelings of attraction and repulsion that combine to prompt fascination.¹¹ Although New Orleans is very close to the place where Nancy lives, it remains far from her everyday life. To use Pitavy-Souques's words about Welty's oneiric cities, "these real places become less real than the places spawned from fiction."¹² The relationship Nancy develops with the city is the product of her imagination; she does not know the city intimately but conceptually. She eventually gives in to her whim, recklessly runs away with two strangers and comes back with bruises. Spencer does not reveal what actually happened to Nancy during the trip and the readers, influenced by the reputation associated to the place, can only imagine the worst-case scenario.

In "The Eclipse," Spencer shows how the behaviors of the two main characters are altered by the city. Twelve-year-old Weston, a choirboy infatuated with his teacher,

⁹ According to Prenshaw, "[e]xplicit references to Baudelaire throughout the novel, as well as pervasive correspondences between Baudelaire's view of life and Spencer's portrayal of Julia's world as a 'snare' establish the primacy of the French poet as a literary influence in the novel" (122).

¹⁰ See Prenshaw, in her introduction to *The Snare* (xiii).

¹¹ The evocation of the city's smell in the quotation is reminiscent of Walker Percy's description in "New Orleans Mon amour": "Somebody said that the only interesting thing about New Orleans was that it smelled different. There are whiffs of ground coffee and a congeries of smells which one imagines to be the 'naval stores' that geography books were always speaking of" (11). McKinney talks about "the ubiquitous New Orleans scent, something profoundly sensual and redolent of dampness, decay" (2).

¹² "ces lieux réels deviennent moins vrais que les lieux nés de la fiction" (85).

fantasizes about a romantic relationship with her during a trip to New Orleans. Miss Eavers has lived in New York and “everyone back in town said she was ‘stuck up’” (13) but once in New Orleans, she—as Winston puts it—“went off with the first man that came along” (18). The young Weston, left on his own, buys cigarettes “just to see how it felt” (15) and sets out to discover “some HOT SPOT” (15). New Orleans is also depicted as a place of opportunity in “Mr McMillan.” Aline escapes her uncomprehending family in Mississippi to live in the Louisiana city in order to pursue her career. She recalls the story of old Mr McMillan, another outsider, who found a way to get his unusual last wishes fulfilled by a stranger in New Orleans, “somebody who would do it for him, as nobody in that little town or in the family would have known what to make of such a request and would have probably decided right away that he was crazy for even asking it” (338). The use of the conditional shows that Spencer’s characters always have preconceived ideas about New Orleans that affect their perception of the city and stimulate their imagination.

Images of New Orleans as an exotic and intriguing place, both Southern and radically different from any other Southern city, pertain to the existence of a “New Orleans myth.” “[M]ythical space is a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known,” Yi-Fu Tuan explains, “Worlds of fantasy have been built on meager knowledge and much yearning” (86). Indeed, the fascination exerted by New Orleans on Spencer’s characters is often based on hearsay and resonates with their subversive or transgressive desires, which are repressed by social conventions. This idea of a city on which outsiders project their individual expectations is also reminiscent of Italo Calvino’s imaginary city called Irene, that can only be observed from a plateau and becomes “a magnet for the eyes and thoughts of those who stay up above” and can only “conjecture about what is happening” (124). As Calvino’s Marco Polo puts it, “Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes” (125). New Orleans, just like Irene, underlines the inability for the outsider, to differentiate between reality and imagination.

Even when New Orleans is only briefly mentioned in Spencer’s stories, its reputation influences the characters’ and the readers’ perception of the event. Marilee, the protagonist of “Sharon,” who admires and fears her uncle Hernan, comes across a small golden box he bought in New Orleans. His trip to “that strange city [she] had never seen” (288) enables her to discover “another facet of Uncle Hernan” (288) and emphasizes her fascination for the character. By connecting the uncle with New Orleans, Spencer reinforces the feeling of mystery that surrounds him and foreshadows the story’s final revelation about the uncle’s secret relationship with his black maid. There are several other examples of stories in which New Orleans is alluded to, such as the mention of Charlie’s casual relationships while he was in Tulane in “The Business Venture,” or the group of boys in “The Name of the Game,” who allegedly “brought that stripper back with them from the Sugar Bowl game in New Orleans and kept her in the dormitory for a week before anybody found out” (112). In these examples, the city seems to live up to one of its most popular nicknames, The Big Easy, a synonym for the city’s spirit, evocative of its laid-back atmosphere. Eudora Welty suggests in her analysis of “Place in Fiction,” that place is pervaded by feelings through a mechanism of associations:¹³ “Might the magic lie partly, too, in the name of the place—since that is what we gave it? Surely, once we have it named, we have put a

¹³ “feelings are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations—associations more poetic even than actual” (Place 118).

kind of poetic claim on its existence; the claim works even out of sight—may work forever sight unseen” (119).

How can the evocation of New Orleans still trigger the same response on present-day readers when, like any other city, it keeps changing? According to Janet Abu-Lughod, its personality remains because its past, with all its contradictions, is contained in the city:

Each city has its own essence, its own, albeit ever-changing, amalgam of flowing elements coexisting until they move on to the next state which, like the growth of a human being, is partially contained within the past but never fully anticipated. Thus, just as we recognize a woman as the same, yet different, person she was as a child, so also we recognize in the New Orleans of today what she has been in the past. (66-67)

Comparing New Orleans to a woman is reminiscent of Julia Garrett in *The Snare*. Just like the city, Julia has evolved and despite the hardships she went through, she is not willing to wipe out her past—“I’ll have it. . . . All of it. I’ll not refuse any part of it” (402). Julia’s past is an integral part of her present and in the same way, the dark chapters of New Orleans’s past are part of its present mystery and provide endless possibilities of storytelling. As Gérard Préher points out in an essay on Richard Ford’s New Orleans, “[the city] keeps changing for the better or sometimes the worse. It is, of course, the worse that inspires writers, for it gives them the tension that is needed for fiction to work.” Spencer puts her heroine in hazardous situations where she often experiences the worse and the choice of New Orleans as a backdrop enables the writer to make the worse plausible. She conveys an authentic, unadulterated setting while conforming to the reader’s preconceived ideas about the city. Part myth, part reality, New Orleans provides in Welty’s words “a chink-proof world of appearances” (Place 125) and thus enables Spencer to produce a vivid sense of place.

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Facets of the South in Toni Morrison's *Home* and *Jazz* and Eudora Welty's "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Music from Spain"

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In his essay "Poetry and Ambition," Donald Hall, American poet of the late twentieth-century, defines *home* "as a place *first* to leave and *then* to return to" (305), a concept significant to authors Toni Morrison and Eudora Welty and to several of their fictional characters (305). Focusing on Toni Morrison's and Eudora Welty's characters who escape from or otherwise leave their southern places, the conscious and subconscious spaces remembered as *home*, we can examine what facets of the South are taken to the North and West and what facets pull (literally, or in memory) the characters back South. Both Morrison and Welty privilege the power of place to root characters, but Welty makes clear that it is feeling that is the archangel of fiction ("Place in Fiction" 781). Furthermore, both writers express the emotive lives of their characters through memory's "willed creation" (Morrison, "Memory" 385). Morrison proclaims: "the act of imagination is bound up with memory" ("Site of Memory" 76-77). These concepts—feeling as the uppermost element of fiction, memory as "willed creation," and imagination as inseparable from memory—are helpful in reading Morrison's novels *Home* (2012) and *Jazz* (1992), in which the South figures prominently as both a place to leave and a place that draws one back, and Welty's stories "Flowers for Marjorie," set in New York City, and "Music from Spain" that takes place in San Francisco. The principle characters in the four texts are from the South, and each of these texts, set in part or whole outside the South, offers opportunity to view the facets of the South that haunt, pleasure, or mystify the characters. *Home*, *Jazz*, "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Music from Spain" demonstrate those aspects of the South that seem indelible, those that are "willed creations" of the characters' memories.

Morrison and Welty are both insiders and outsiders of the South and thus can see the South and the not-South at the same time, as one sees two images combined into one "imagined" whole. To memory and imagination, Welty adds two additional dimensions explaining that the writer

is always seeing double, two pictures at once in his frame, his and the world's, a fact that he constantly comprehends; and he works best in a state of constant and subtle and unfooled reference between the two. It is his clear intention—his passion, I should say—to make the reader see only one of the pictures—the author's—under the pleasing illusion that it is the world's; this enormity is the accomplishment of a good story. ("Place in Fiction" 789)

Morrison's and Welty's characters see their Souths through what Tara McPherson describes as a lenticular lens, seeing only one view or aspect of their world. They think to abandon this South, but the fiction illustrates that escape is not simple. McPherson explains that

[a] lenticular logic is a covert racial logic. . . . [Whereas] the stereoscope . . . privileg[es] the whole[,] the lenticular image partitions and divides, privileging fragmentation. A lenticular logic is a logic of the fragment or the chunk, a way of seeing the world as discrete modules or nodes, a mode that suppresses relation and context. As such, the lenticular also manages and controls complexity. (Par. 21)

In Joshilyn Jackson's novel *Almost Sisters*, Leia Birch Brigg comes to recognize two Souths, their distinctions and difficulties, and eventually combines them into what one would see through a stereoscope. "They [the two Souths] were both always present, both truly present in every square inch, in every space, in both Baptist churches, as both tables" (222). Away from the South, however, Morrison's black characters and Welty's white characters, decades before Jackson's character's realizations, remember/imagine primarily only one South, through a lenticular lens. Morrison's characters are able to reconcile themselves to their Souths by self-understanding; the same is not true for Welty's men in "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Music from Spain."

It may seem unusual to speak of Nobel Laureate of Literature Toni Morrison (née Chloe Wofford) in connection with the South, yet Morrison's southern roots demonstrate the double frame of the author's and the world's pictures of the South in her work enlivened by her characters. Morrison's father, George Wofford, was born in Cartersville, Bartow County, Georgia, in 1908. Her grandfather was a railroad engineer for the Western and Atlantic line that ran 138 miles from Atlanta, Georgia, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. This was surely one of the rail lines that was intentionally halted during the Great Migration when blacks were legally restrained from seeking different jobs and earning better wages. Many were held at gun point when they tried to leave. Many were jailed for loitering when waiting for transport. In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Carol Anderson explains, that "when more than 1.5 million African Americans left the land below the Mason-Dixon Line, white Southern elites raged with cool calculated efficiency. . . . [M]ayors, governors, legislators, business leaders, and police chiefs . . . devised an array of obstacles and laws to stop African Americans, as U.S. citizens, from exercising the right to find better jobs, to search for better schools, indeed simply to escape the ever-present terror of lynch mobs" (41-42). By the early 1920s, life in Cartersville, Georgia, became unsustainable. George's father lost his job to a white man and was demoted to working as a drayman. In their neighborhood, several of the "600" lynchings in Georgia "between 1877 and 1950" took place (Schrade).¹

George Wofford, his brothers Harry, Howard, and Henry, and his parents moved to Lorain, Ohio on Lake Erie; he later married Ramah Willis whose family had lost their Native American great grandmother's Alabama lands to a white man and had moved to Kentucky and then to Lorain. Chloe (Toni) was born in 1931 and lived in Lorain until she went to college at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and traveled through the South for the first time with the Howard Players Theater Company. Although Morrison's father

¹ See Ben Schrader. In 2017, in LaGrange, Georgia, the dedication of a historic marker "included a church service where white religious leaders in Troup County apologized for the community's silence in the lynching and acknowledged a moral failing by the white community during the era of lynchings." "About 90 percent of the victims were African Americans." The newspaper headline and the story's first paragraph cite "more than 500 lynching victims," but the final paragraph states "more than 600 people were lynched" in the state.

visited Georgia often, he never brought his family to Georgia, the state he believed to be the most racist in the nation. Although Morrison's mother spoke nostalgically of Alabama, she never journeyed south to visit. Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* quotes the *Chicago Defender's* trust regarding the African Americans fleeing the South, asserting that "If all of their dream does not come true . . . enough will come to pass to justify their actions" (535).² Wilkerson then concludes that "many black parents who left the South got the one thing they wanted just by leaving. Their children would have a chance to grow up free of Jim Crow and to be their fuller selves. It cannot be known what course the lives of people [such as] Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, Michelle Obama, Jesse Owens" and twenty named others "might have taken had their parents or grandparents not participated in the Great Migration and raised them in the North or West" (535).

In 1998, during the inaugural biennial Toni Morrison Society conference held in Atlanta, Morrison visited her father's Cartersville, Georgia, home for the first time. The conferees on a bus and Morrison in a limousine traveled north from the city, stopped at the church the Woffords had attended, enjoyed barbeque on the grounds of the 1923 Nobel Hill Rosenwald School, and went to the street where Morrison's father had lived. We watched from the bus as Morrison walked toward the home. Before she stepped up onto the porch, she reached down, pinched up a bit of earth and dropped it into her pocket.³ Welty counsels that "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better," and I wonder if these pieces of Morrison's father's South gave the author further opportunity to root her characters in her novel titled *Home* although we can read Morrison's renderings of Georgia, drawn from her imagination and her memory's "willed creation[s]," in many of her novels ("Place in Fiction" 792). Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, recalls traveling to Macon, Georgia, to find his father (*The Bluest Eye* 151-53); Macon Dead, Sr., was shot by white men who took over his Georgia peach orchard (*Song of Solomon* 235-36); Paul D, a character in *Beloved*, is haunted by his incarceration on a prison farm in fictional Alfred, Georgia. Morrison explains in "The Site of Memory," that what makes something "fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to the recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By 'image,' of course, I don't mean 'symbol'; I simply mean 'picture' and the feelings that accompany the picture" (71).

The pictures and the feelings of family and southern places comprise much of the "willed creation" in Morrison's 2012 novel titled *Home*. Frank Money, the protagonist, left his home in Lotus, Georgia, to fight in Korea, and now he is traveling back home to Lotus from the Northwest coast, through Chicago, then Kentucky and Tennessee. Frank's chapters are in italics to indicate that he is "telling" his story, creating as he remembers. Place, specifically Lotus, Frank's home, unlocks his memories, his feelings, the archangel of fiction in Welty's lexicon, and allows a confession of his weaknesses. The confession allows absolution, an action also found in Welty's story "Music from Spain."

Frank travels south to a suburb of Atlanta to carry his sister Cee (Ycidra) home to Lotus. Cee is dying from surgeries executed in eugenic and gynecological experiments performed on her by her "employer," Dr. Beau (Beauregard Scott), a character modeled on

² *Chicago Defender*, "Our Part in the Exodus," 17 Mar. 1917, 9.

³ For more about Morrison's visit to Cartersville, see McHaney "Toni Morrison and Georgia."

Doctors William Beaumont and J. Marion Sims.⁴ Frank journeys into the dreams and nightmares of the past as he travels to save Cee. Home is where Georgia's racism as well as her beauty traumatize but then ultimately heal both brother and sister. This is the same awful duality that *Beloved's* Sethe experiences when she feels guilty remembering the beautiful sycamore trees from which Sweet Home men were hanged (7).

Frank thinks,

Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, and some chance of winning along with the many chances of losing. Death is a sure thing but life is just as certain. Problem is you can't know in advance.

In Lotus you did know in advance since there was no future, just long stretches of killing time. There was no goal other than breathing, nothing to win, and, save for somebody else's quiet death, nothing to survive or worth surviving for. . . . Nobody in Lotus knew anything or wanted to learn anything. It sure didn't look like anyplace you'd want to be. (83)

...

I don't miss anything about that place except the stars. Only my sister in trouble could force me to even think about going in that direction. (84)

For both Frank and his sister, Cee, it is the heat that works synesthetically to create the memory of the South. Frank thinks, "*You don't know what heat is until you cross the border from Texas to Louisiana in the summer. You can't come up with words that catch it*" (41). Cee had escaped from Lotus to Atlanta, but almost immediately was abandoned by her husband, ironically named Prince. The narrator describes her as follows: "She was all alone now, sitting in a zinc tub on a Sunday defying the heat of Georgia's version of spring with cool water" (50). Here in both references, southern "feeling" is tactile, not solely emotional.

Through Frank's sister's trouble and his realizing and articulating the truth, Frank finds himself and is able to right some of the wrongs in healing ways rather than by vengeance and rage. Morrison narrates that Frank thinks how "he could not believe how much he had once hated this place [Lotus]. Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding" (132). Forced home to rescue his sister, he allows the willed creations of his memories to make amends and begin anew. The negative facets of the south—the heat, the poverty, the lack of goals, the absence of future—are overcome from within himself.

In Morrison's novel *Jazz*, the protagonists Joe and Violet ride the Great Migration train out of the Virginia countryside to Harlem. It was 1906, when Joe and Violet "boarded the Southern Sky for a northern one. They moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law" (127). Joe remarks how "Crackers in the South mad cause Negroes

⁴ Beaumont is the "father of American physiology, who asserted the importance of experimental treatments and is known for his 10-year insensitive research on a man with Gastric fistula and Dr. Marion Sims [is] touted as the American founding father of gynecology by reason of the major scientific breakthroughs he achieved conducting surgical procedures on powerless female slaves (who could not give voluntarily consent) without anesthesia" (Ramirez 123).

were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming” (128). Joe and Violet are not like the “stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards and overworked fields to come to the City” (71). For Joe, the South is where his mother is, *is* his mother perhaps, and he wills into being a memory of “how the hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream at dusk; how he can barely see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers in that light” (36). Except for this pull of his mother-need, Joe soon “forgets little pebbly creeks and apple trees so old they lay their branches along the ground and you have to reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. He forgets a sun that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky” (34). He forgets the Joe that Violet married. She says, “my Virginia Joe Trace . . . carried a light inside him, [his] shoulders were razor sharp and [he] looked at me with two-color eyes and never saw anybody else” (96).

In the South, Violet had “loaded hay and handled the mule wagon like a full-grown man” (92). She says,

I have stood in cane fields in the middle of the night when the sound of it rustling hid the slither of the snakes and I stood still waiting for him [Joe] and not stirring a speck in case he was near and I would miss him, and damn the snakes my man was coming for me and who or what was going to keep me from him? Plenty times, plenty times I have carried the welts given me by a two-tone peckerwood because I was late in the field row the next morning. Plenty times, plenty, I chopped twice the wood that was needed into short logs and kindlin so as to make sure the crackers had enough and wouldn’t go hollering for me when I was bound to meet my Joe Trace don’t care what . . . (96)

Being hauled out of the funeral home where she has slashed the deceased Dorcas’s face, Violet thinks, “She had not been that strong since Virginia” (92). “The hips she came here with were gone, too, just like the power in her back and arms” (93-94).

Morrison’s narrator confirms Violet’s feelings: “It was there [in Tyrell, Virginia] [Violet] became the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man. It was there where the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet grew shields no gloves or shoes could match” and explains that it was “All for Joe Trace, a double-eyed nineteen-year-old who lived with an adopted family, worked gins and lumber and cane and cotton and corn, who butchered when needed, plowed, fished, sold skins and game . . . He loved the woods. Loved them” (105-06).

In the city, however, Joe makes money (“tips dropped in my palms fast as pecans in November” [128]), but he tells young Dorcas that he left the South because he had no freedom, no choice to become who he yearned to be: “back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to . . . stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And let me tell you, baby, in those days [being who you were] was more than a state of mind” (135).

Violet has lost her physical self, the freedom and satisfaction of working hard for Joe. She grows thin and remembers that “[w]e ate good down home. . . squirrels. . . Rabbits too. Deer. Possum. Pheasant,” although “Landowner didn’t want rabbit. He want soft money” (81). Alice, Dorcas’s aunt, replies, “They want money here, too,” and Violet counters, “But there’s a way to get it here” (81). Violet tries to calculate the losses and

gains of leaving the South. “‘Everybody I grew up with is down home. We don’t have children. [Joe,] he’s what I got. He’s what I got’” (111). “‘Before I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn’t have nothing but we didn’t miss it’” (207). “‘Now I want to be the woman my mother didn’t stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like’” (208).

While the North gave Joe and Violet freedom from lynching, freedom to earn money as they wished, freedom from racial strife, and gave them the mothers they imagined loving them, it was the South in whose woods they hunted meat, whose soil grew fruit and nut trees, and in whose place there was family. All these facets of the South, made Joe and Violet strong and gave them a future. Without these inherent aspects of the South, Joe and Violet reduce themselves and lose their love for one another and for themselves. But *Jazz* is not a tragedy; in her “Foreword,” Morrison tells a story of her parents marrying in 1926: “They had both left the South as children, chock full of scary stories coupled with a curious nostalgia. They played records, sang the songs, read the press, wore the clothes, spoke the language of the twenties; debating endlessly the status of The Negro” (xvii). She explains her intentions for the story of Joe and Violet, leaving the South for the great jazzy Harlem; it’s an examination of “couple-love—the reconfiguration of the ‘self’ in such relationships; the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another” (Morrison, Foreword xviii). Absent the horrors of the South, but also without the empowerments of the South, Joe and Violet must rely upon themselves to build a relationship.

Unlike Morrison, Welty is recognized as a quintessential southerner, and the majority of her fiction is set in the South, yet in the 1930s, she spent a year at Columbia University School of Business in New York City and thereafter returned often to New York for weeks or months at a time. She took numerous photographs of unemployed men, lonely, cold, gathered in huddles at Union Square or leaning alone against the park rails. She sets just one story in New York City, creating, as biographer Suzanne Marrs says, “the physical environment” of the Depression “to emphasize the failure of the marriage of Marjorie and Howard,” the couple in her story “Flowers for Marjorie” (82). Marjorie and Howard have left their home of Victory, Mississippi, for potential economic opportunity in New York. There are no jobs, however; their money has run out; they have moved from room to room. Howard becomes more and more despondent and desperate. The South that comes North with them is a child growing naturally in Marjorie’s womb, conceived, the reader imagines, in the early optimistic excitement upon arriving in New York. This living proof of a viable future drives Howard insane as he confronts the stasis and sterility of hope. The facets of the South that glimmer in “Flowers for Marjorie” are family, stability, love, and a future—the same aspects that Joe and Violet leave in Virginia and then recover in New York, but only after fracturing. Howard stabs Marjorie to death. Their clock (a sure marker of time) falls from the open window to smash on the sidewalk below, and Howard rushes out of the apartment and wanders, emasculated and nearly-mute, throughout the city.

A longer and later story by Welty, “Music from Spain,” also of a lonely man who wanders silently through a city, offers greater perspectives on the aspects of the South that remain integral in one’s conscious and unconscious. Eugene MacLain, twin brother of Randall (Ran), has left Morgana, Mississippi, to live in San Francisco. Eugene and his wife Emma lost their daughter a year ago to a sudden illness (Welty, “The Wanderers” 553). One day, Eugene, uncharacteristically slaps Emma, walks out, saves a Spanish guitarist

from being hit by a car, and then wanders with the exotic, mute stranger throughout San Francisco to the cliffs of Land's End and back. It is clearly, as Rebecca Mark explicates, a Joycean journey.

"Music from Spain" is the lone story of seven in *The Golden Apples* cycle, "set entirely outside Morgana, [yet] it too in a way is about Morgana and how it [Morgana, the southern town] meets another world," wrote a contemporary reviewer (Hutchens 82). That is, Eugene MacLain is a synecdoche for Morgana. We come to realize that although he may have left his small-town South, the South has not left him—it remains in his memory, belyingly nostalgic, haunting, and elusive.

As Eugene leaves the apartment, he imagines that he can "see" Emma looking at him, and he thinks, "it was like having eyes in the back of his head" ("Music from Spain" 473). And then, in shock, he realizes, parenthetically and with emphasis "(Only in the back of his head!)" (473). As readers, we can interpret Eugene's conscious but unspoken revelation as acknowledgement that he does not see forward, ahead of him, but sees only the past, with eyes to the rear. Such an understanding prepares us to watch Eugene in a near-blind daze, seeing only what was, not what is or what might be (as Howard was unable to see any future moment). Welty emphasizes the temporal nature of Eugene's sight by giving him the job of repairing watches: stopped time being put back into motion. As Eugene and the Spaniard walk the hills of the city, Welty bends the narration out of time altogether, toward surrealism:

The hills, hills after hills that they walked over, the increasing freshness of the air, the warmth of the nearer sun, all made Eugene feel as if he were falling asleep. . . . the hills were to Eugene increasingly like those stairs he climbed in dreams.

The hills with their uniform, unseparated houses repeated over and over again his hill on Jones Street; . . . Suppose another Fire were to rack San Francisco and topple it and he, Eugene MacLain out of Mississippi, had to put it all back together again. His eyes half closed upon the mountains of houses not wall-like, as houses were in other places [in Morgana, for example], but swollen like bee-hives, and one hive succeeding another, mounting into tremendous steps of stairs—and alive inside, inwardly contriving. How could he put a watch back together? (497)

Before meeting the Spaniard, Eugene momentarily notices something in the present: "the bright clash of the pink, red, and orange azaleas lined up in pots," but immediately, he reverts to nostalgia: "Oh, to have been one step further on, and grown flowers!" (478). A young clerk tips his hat and bows "like a Southerner" (479); Eugene finds himself with "a longing now like that of vague times in the past, of long ago in Mississippi, to see the world—there were places he longed for the sight of whose names he had forgotten" (480). San Francisco "awoke a longing for that careless, patched land of Mississippi winter, trees in their rusty wrappers, slow-grown trees taking their time, the lost shambles of old cane, the winter swamp where his own twin brother, he supposed, still hunted" (480-81).

The past, the South, and Morgana are fraught with ghosts. Although he can say his name to himself, he thinks how he "never could bear the sound of his own name called out in public" (473-74). As he leaves his wife, he does not want Emma calling out "'Eugene Hudson MacLain, come here to me!'" He fears the recollections of his mother Snowdie Hudson, whom he had left in Mississippi, and of his father King MacLain, "the one who

had never seen him or wanted to see him” (492). He appeases himself, recalling that “he had been noted for his running when he was a boy back home; in Morgana, Mississippi, he was still little old Scooter MacLain” (483). “Suppose he was still in the process of leaving Mississippi—not stopped here [in San Francisco], but simply an artist, touring through. Or, if he chanced not to play the guitar or something, simply out looking: not for anyone in particular; on the track, say, of his old man? (God forbid he’d find him! Old Papa King MacLain was an old goat, a black name *he* had)” (490). Welty punctuates Eugene’s interior monologue, his panicky thoughts, with a dash, non-restrictive commas, a colon, question and exclamation marks, parentheses, and italics, and thus our understanding of his self-torture is intensified, too.

This loneliness that Eugene feels after slapping Emma and walking out, especially before meeting the Spaniard, is as palpable as the southern heat felt by Morrison’s Frank and Cee in *Home*. Eugene feels “sure in some absolute way that no familiar person could do him any good. . . . Friends: no help there” (481). In his anxiety, he imagines himself a rough sailor “seek[ing] a stranger” to whom he might confess slapping his “*little wifey over the puss*” (481). After taking up the silent Spanish guitarist who serves as just such a confessor, “Eugene felt all at once an emotion that visited him inexplicably at times—the overwhelming, secret tenderness toward his twin, Ran MacLain, whom he had not seen for half his life, that he might have felt toward a lover. Was all well with Ran? How little we know! For considering that he might have done some reprehensible thing, then he would need the gravest and tenderest handling,” an understanding that could come only from his twin, from a time and place of the past (499). Although Eugene has been in San Francisco for an extended time, when he is thrown into his existential crisis, the California city is a new and frightening territory for him. This is as it was for Welty during the months she spent in San Francisco, in a relationship with a Mississippian who could not return her love, and as she had been in New York during the Depression and in the World War II years, without her friends and family.

“Music from Spain” began as the story of Francis Dowdie titled “The Flower and the Rock” set in racially diverse San Francisco, but with no connection whatsoever with Morgana, Mississippi. But as Welty was retyping the story for publication, she realized that her lonely, wandering character was “one of the MacLain twins” and that the story’s trouble was “his lack of any taproot” (qtd. in Kreyling 141). By naming her character “Eugene Hudson MacLain,” giving him a family, a history, and a place from which he could wander, Welty grounded her story. Now from Morgana, Mississippi, Eugene can long for what might have been, can compare his youthful, confident, promising self to his grand surreal abstraction, can recollect the racial divisions of the Jim Crow South in contrast to the African Americans comfortably themselves in the city. Still, he “remembered away back: there was an old Negro and everybody in Morgana knew when he was in trouble at home; he walked into the store and asked them to play him a record—‘Rocks in My Bed Number Two,’ by Blind Boy Fuller,” and Eugene sentimentally notes that when “he saw . . . a big colored woman plying the keys[,] [s]he looked a long way from home” (“Music from Spain” 498).

Eugene returns home to Emma, who seems not to have noticed or not to recall the morning’s aggression. While we may question the realities of Eugene’s sojourn through the city, we can accept the verity of Eugene’s longing for the South, its flowers, woods, rivers, flat terrain, for his youth, family, friends, and possible futures. Virgie Rainey, the

protagonist of Welty's *Golden Apples*, offers some further insight into Eugene's southern past in the final story of the cycle. As she wanders the MacLain cemetery, she studies Eugene's grave:

His light, tubercular body seemed to hesitate on the street of Morgana, hold averted, anticipating questions. Sometimes he looked up in the town where he was young and said something strangely spiteful or ambiguous (he was never reconciled to his father, they said, was sarcastic to the old man—all he loved was Miss Snowdie [his mother] and flowers) but he bothered no one. "He never did bother a soul," they said at his graveside that day, forgetting his childhood. ("The Wanderers" 553)

Virgie summarizes, "Eugene, the only MacLain man gone . . . Eugene, for a long interval, had lived in another part of the world, learning while he was away that people don't have to be answered just because they want to know" (552).

Welty advises that "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better" ("Place in Fiction" 792). Both Welty, whose parents were from Ohio and West Virginia, but who grew up and lived in the South, yet all of her life sojourned elsewhere for months at a time, and Morrison, whose parents and grandparents knew the South, clearly understand that it is "the business of writing, and the responsibility of the writer, to disentangle the significant . . . from the random and meaningless and irrelevant that in real life surround and beset it" as Welty explains in "Place in Fiction" (785). Welty continues that the choices the writer must make are guided by "what he knows inside himself" (785). Judging from Morrison's and Welty's fictions, I conclude that the landscapes of one's youth—physical, emotional, sensate, peopled with family and friends, understood by the archangel of feeling—are the inherited aspects, pleasant or not, of one's region that one carries wherever one travels. Perhaps in the twenty-first century, one can break the binaries of black and white to hold a true stereoscopic view of the South to accept past, present, and future.

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Edward P. Jones's D.C., Where a Southern Past Informs the Present

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The “New South” envisaged after the Civil War was one with a rebuilt economy and harmonious race relations. Yet, African Americans faced the Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement, and the new mills did not hire blacks, most of whom lived in dire poverty as sharecroppers, and found themselves worse off still as trucks and tractors, then farm aid, reduced landowners’ need for labor by tenants. From the nineteen-twenties to the nineteen-fifties, more than three million Southern blacks left for Northern cities.

Edward P. Jones, Pulitzer-Prize winner for *The Known World* in 2004, shows that the old Southern ways are hard to die in his short stories on Washington D.C., collected in *Lost in the City* (1992) and *All Aunt Hagar’s Children* (2006). The nation’s capital, just south of the Mason-Dixon line,¹ is the “up there” that his African American characters move to, both a separate North and a place where they imagine “God and his people” to live (*Lost* 241).

This contribution centers on the typical Jones African American protagonists of Southern extraction, whose “mental image” of the city and worldview are shaped by a Southern past, although Jones sometimes shows them interacting with characters born of long generations of Washingtonians, or natives of other states. This study will concentrate on Jones’s characters and discuss the effect on the reader of the stories Jones involves them in, while bearing in mind that they are not like people, in that, as Milan Kundera points out in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “[characters] are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about” (qtd. in James 141). Jones says something essential about D.C., but also about human life in the modern world. A first section will examine the image that Jones sets out to give of Washington, taking the story “Common Law” as an example of his technique. The second section will demonstrate that the residual traits and values which Jones illuminates refer to a Southern identity informing the present of his characters, and that these markers are central to the economy of the stories, in which he presents his characters’ “salvation” as a return to original and sustaining values. It will finally be argued that Jones’s transformative vision of D.C. distinguishes him as a Southern writer and leads the reader to reconsider his own inner scape. Indeed, through his presentation of inner “imaging,” Jones reflects on constants and on present-day society, encouraging change.

¹ That Washington D.C. is south of the Mason-Dixon line is incidental. As Northerners and Southerners both wanted the capital in their territory when it was established in 1791, a compromise was reached and it was built on the border between North and South.

The Southern Mental Image: A D.C. of Neighborhoods

It has long been a matter of debate whether Washington D.C. was a Southern or a Northern city, but today the terms of the debate have changed. As James Peacock argues, the U.S. South can no longer be considered backwards: the region has gone global, “embraced the world,” and the urban development of the sunbelt since the 1980s has made it a land of skyscrapers. And in the District of Columbia, besides the government agencies and embassies that it is best known for, are the headquarters of some of the world’s largest companies.

James Goode recalls that “Washington was essentially a Southern city until World War II,” meaning that whites and blacks lived together there much as in the South (185).² In a 2011 *Washington Post* article, Greg Carr, chairman of Afro-American Studies at Howard University, contends that traces of the Old South survived in the area (Hendrix), citing the entrenched black elite in Washington and the city’s history of sharply segregated neighborhoods, with few white ethnic neighborhoods, as examples. Still, Jones pictures a D.C. of cohesive African American neighborhoods, born of the South, as a thing of the past. According to him, there used to be a sense of fellowship that no longer exists. “Those communities have been sort of shattered,” he says. “[D.C. has changed], and for the worse, too, because a lot of people who can’t afford to live here have to find other places to live” (Personal interview, 16, 3). In his stories of its common folk, some arriving with the twentieth century, such as Ruth Patterson in “In the Blink of God’s Eye” (*Aunt* 1-30), or of its new elite, like Lydia in “Lost in the City” (*Lost* 141-50) or Sharon Palmer and Terence Stagg, the “good” neighbors in “Bad Neighbors” (*Aunt* 347-73), Jones provides a sense of the history of a city which is today being built up by developers with the result that young professional whites are moving back into town and many blacks are being “gentrified” out.

Jones concentrates on the neighborhoods where African Americans live or used to live rather than on the White house or famous monuments in D.C. because in college, he found that “very few there knew anything about Washington, D.C., other than that it was the seat of government. They themselves had come from places and communities but they could not envision that with D.C. I was thinking of Joyce and what he had done with Dublin when I began thinking of my own stories” (“Meet the writers,” qtd. in Henry 163-64).

The stories show that Jones’s characters create “worlds of their own,” as Lorraine Henry has stated, in “every quadrant of the 68.3 square miles of Washington, D.C.—Northwest (NW), Northeast (NE), Southwest (SW) and Southeast (SE)” (164). Henry’s article, “Mr. Jones’s Neighborhoods,” shows how Jones’s stories highlight both the ways in which African Americans tried “to circumvent the hostile political, social and economic forces threatening to defeat them” and established “virtual centers of power” over the years in D.C. (164); it also suggests aspects of mental imaging as she points out that such a reading of Jones is particularly apparent to an African American Washingtonian. That readers the world over can appreciate Jones’s work on the city, I argue, is due to a residual and

² The African American population in the District has always been high. According to the World Population Review, until 1940, African Americans made up 30% of the population in D.C., reaching a peak of 70% in the 1970s before declining as more African Americans moved to the suburbs. Between 2000 and 2010, there was a 31% jump in the non-Hispanic white population and an 11.5% decline in the black population (“Washington, D.C. Population 2018”). In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that blacks or African Americans comprised 47.1% of the District’s population.

sustaining Southern mental image, which Jones has and provides for his characters. The concept of mental image, which Kevin Lynch developed in *The Image of the City* (1960), has in its full application some of the same characteristics as Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, but predates it and is more site than class specific.³ Jones allows the reader to form a picture of the city, as he is precise in his recreation of its areas, and often gives specific addresses. Yet when I speak of mental images, I also refer to the affects that crop up as one moves through the environment. A distinct image of one's surroundings is, as Lynch puts it, "a useful basis for individual growth" (4), and one which plays a social role as well, establishing symbols for group communication. Southern blacks in small towns had a distinct mental image of how to negotiate their paths, and these homely ways were also a bond in the city.

Jones explains that his stories show the city he experienced as a child: "Ninety percent of what I remember and use in this work has to do with my mother and the other ten percent comes from the people I knew when I was growing up who were adults born and raised in the South" (Interview 432). He is concerned with doing justice to "the kind of world that [he] grew up in" (Personal interview 14) as he portrays the ways, speech and solidarity of the Southerners he has known since his birth in 1950, in the many neighborhoods to which he and his family moved because of his single parent's poverty. "I lived in eighteen different places by the time I was eighteen—my mother was a dishwasher," he explains (Personal interview 3). The city landscapes of his boyhood were filtered by the Southern ethics of his elders there. He remembers: "As a kid, walking around, I'd be with my friends and we might be cursing and everything, but we'd come to a church and we'd stop, and then proceed to the other side" (Personal interview 16). Today, he rarely returns to the old D.C. neighborhoods: "[W]hat happens is that you move to another neighborhood, or another part of the same neighborhood, and you don't have the same ties anymore. You know, you may go back and visit for the first month or so, but after that you get on with the rest of your life. And those people may well have moved as well" (Personal interview 4).

Asked whether his present image of the city includes a sense of loss, Jones says that change led him back to the South through literature.

No, I don't have a sense of loss I guess. And it might well be because we did live in so many different places that I didn't establish a connection . . . [I]t sort of takes its toll on a kid when you move around and lose your friends. So when I was about twelve or so we moved to 6th Street, and I would just go to school, come back home, read, and watch television. It was around this time that I discovered real books as opposed to the comic books that I'd been reading. Those books opened up different worlds for me, especially the world of the South. I couldn't wait to get home from school to start reading. (Personal interview 4)

Adolescent disconnection, his readings, a consciousness of the different mores in the rest of Washington D.C. and at Holy Cross College in Massachusetts from which he graduated in 1972, no doubt gave Jones the distance to view the specificities of his

³ Bourdieu posits that an unconscious internalization of social structures ensures the cognitive structuring of situations, organizing practices and actions (ch.3). Although Bourdieu's theories have been used in research projects to consider how migrants adapt to a new environment (Nowicka 99), I feel that Lynch's mental image is an apt instrument for the study of the patterns that Jones's migrants to the city reproduce. Fredric Jameson uses Lynch's imaging in his global "cognitive mapping" of a social structure (xx), or of what he calls its "psychic habitus" (51), of relevance to Jones's writing, and which I refer to in part three.

familiars, D.C. African American Southerners, as relatively exotic. He earned an MFA in creative writing at the University of Virginia, and while working as a writer of news summaries began to publish his work about them and move readers of all horizons by sudden glimpses into his characters' psychological depths and plots that depend on a Southern ethos.

"Common memories of the 'home town,'" Lynch points out, "were often the first and easiest point of contact between lonely soldiers during the war" (4); in the same way, Jones's beleaguered Southerners stick together in D.C. In his story "Common Law" (*Aunt* 203-37), for example, one gets a vivid sense of the community living on Ridge Street. The title refers to the common law couple of Georgia Evans and Kenyon Morrison, who meet at a tavern frequented by the Devil, who wears a grey suit, and by a mutual friend. Yet the focus of the story shifts to dwell on the infatuation of one seven-year old, Carlos Newman, for another, Amy Witherspoon, and on the manners and preoccupations of a variety of Southern characters.

The setting is limited to the houses around Georgia Evans's at 459 Ridge Street Northwest, between 4th and 5th, although Georgia works as a maid at a hotel on 14th and Pennsylvania Avenue, near the White House and Federal Triangle, she is never pictured frequenting that area. As Lynch says of the city environment, "Image strength rises when the landmark coincides with a concentration of association. If the distinctive building is the scene of a historic event, or if the bright-colored door is your own, then it becomes a landmark indeed" (101).

The characterization of Georgia as a simple soul for whom relationships are a matter of luck as are the numbers she plays is accomplished through association: "Georgia had always considered the corners of 5th and M as her lucky corners. One night in a rainstorm, she had found a diamond ring in front of the liquor store on the northeast corner, and on the southwest corner she had met her second husband as she came out of the Goldbergs' basement grocery store" (*Aunt* 204). Georgia comes from Alabama and her last three husbands were Southerners. Kenyon is a Southerner: "'Hi you do, Georgia? Thas a pretty name,' Kenyon said. Then he told his first lie. 'Georgia my favorite state.' He actually hated the state of Georgia because it had executed his uncle, an armless man who was as innocent as Jesus Christ" (204-05). The passage introduces the theme of lies, love, violence and hate. And Georgia, a happy-go-lucky, none too bright woman who wants a good time, is ill-equipped to deal with Kenyon.

"Common Law" abounds with real local landmarks, such as Walker Jones Elementary School on New Jersey Avenue and Pierce Street, which the children attend, or the Police Department N°2 Precinct down 5th Street (probably at n°600 where the Transit Police is now) and the Women's Bureau up 5th Street, to which Kenyon and Georgia are sent after disturbing the peace outside the What Ailing Ya Beer Garden. Though the bar on 5th Street (where they meet) and the Gem Colored Theater (where they go on their first date, when Kenyon's brutal manners ought to warn off a wary woman) may be inventions on Jones's part, like the authentic landmarks, they give the story credibility: "These people are made up. . . . [T]he more you prettify the lie . . . , the more the reader is able to accept it. If it's not detailed enough, then the reader can . . . brush it off, and that's not something I want you to do" (Personal interview 6).

On Ridge Street, all the children play on stoops, in the street itself, or are supervised in the apartment of the married Miss Judy, whom they call Grandma, who is from Arkansas

and cooks Southern dishes such as greens and neckbones, cornbread and crackling, gravy and biscuits. She takes on unexpected substance as a character when she recalls how she murdered her first husband in Arkansas because he beat her—but she is devoted to her present, humorous, third husband.

Jones shows the Southern background of the men, women and children responding to Georgia Evans and Kenyon Morrison's stormy relationship, and who, after initial tolerance, put an end to Kenyon's violent abuse. "Common Law" offers an African American take on the Southern preoccupation with breeding and connections: everyone in the community's lineage is known as it would be down South. "Ethel's mother had been a Crenshaw before marriage and everyone in the neighborhood said that if you married a Crenshaw you had a good partner for life" (209); Tommy's aunt "was marrying . . . one of the Northeast Jaspers. People said she was lucky not to get mixed up with one of the Southwest Jaspers" (219). These associations give the narrative a wider range, as Jones's characters' worldview encompasses a community further afield, in other parts of Washington. Randy Comstock, who ends up driving Miss Georgia to work to protect her from Kenyon, has a fiancé who grew up in Georgetown, and he is going to take her to live on South Dakota Avenue in upper Northeast (236).

Most particular of Jones's work, however, are the following points. He frequently employs narratorial shifts to another space or time, as when Georgia and Kenyon meet, and are joking: "He laughed and she laughed. The last woman Kenyon Morrison was boyfriend to was even now in the house of her childhood on East Capitol Street, N.E., recovering from a broken jaw and a dislocated eye socket" (206). "The cumulative effect [of these deictic shifts]" in D.C. settings, according to Christopher Gonzalez, "gives one the sense that Washington, D.C. is both ever-expanding and dominating" (197). Moreover, the wide range of community is reinforced as characters reappear in other stories and in the two volumes—even the Devil in his grey suit plagues characters in "The Devil Swims Across the Anacostia River" (*Aunt* 271-92)—and the characters' mental imaging of D.C. is built up as various sites are mentioned recurrently. Walker Jones Elementary School and N^o2 Precinct feature respectively in "The First Day" (*Lost* 27-31) and in "All Aunt Hagar's Children" (*Aunt* 103-32); African American institutions like Dunbar High School, Howard University or the Howard Theater, those testimonies to their alternative power which Southern blacks were discovering, are frequent landmarks in other stories. A deictic shift reflecting both the concentration and the expansiveness of the African American community's life opens up Georgia's story at the end of "Common Law," establishes a parallel with Lydia Walsh's in "Lost in the City" (*Lost* 141-50), and connects her with the Southern ethos of her Kentuckian driver, Randy Comstock, musing on marriage:

Georgia was one and a half years from marrying Alvin Deloach. She was more than eight years from marrying Vaughn Anderson, who would worship the ground she walked on, but that was not the kind of love she was used to. "I think three children will do me quite well, Miss Georgia." She was nearly twenty years from going to Israel with Cornelia and Lydia, who would not be a doctor but who would make more money than all her ancestors put together, all of them, all the way back to Eve. "A real man can defer to his wife and still be a real man, is what I say, Miss Georgia." She was just about thirty years from seeing her first grandchild come into the world. "A little give and a little take make a good marriage, my mama always said." She was more than forty and half years from death. (236-37)

This “fast forward” has another effect. Like the bad-tempered Roxanne in “Blindsided” (*Aunt* 293-321), Georgia, who prefers the destructive Kenyon to her loving friends, may seem unworthy of sympathy. Yet neither woman is an unsympathetic character, for Jones gives the reader access to their manners, thoughts and dreams. And Jones says of Roxanne, whom he shows reconciled to family and life at the end of that story, “I think she has to have some sort of salvation Because . . . she needs something, and I wasn’t inclined to put her in a hole and leave her there” (Personal interview 11-12). The ending of “Common Law” leaves the reader with the impression that the misguided Georgia, whose values the Devil had a hand in warping, may have “some sort of salvation,” something to redeem her suffering and redeem her in the reader’s eyes.⁴ In Jones’s stories, none of the characters can be termed unsympathetic if that means so unidimensional that the reader cannot connect with them; yet their error is straying from the values that strengthened the community in the South, while those same values and group support aid in the characters’ moments of recognition, or in what Jones might call their “salvation.”

A Connection to the South Amid Change

Jones’s African American community’s mental image of D.C. centered on the South meshes with their broader worldview. James W. Coleman has argued that “the connections to the South and its black tradition of strength and survival” (6) are a central theme in Jones’s volumes. Indeed, Jones shows that the old ways inform the present, for departure from them alienates, while grace means being attuned to the values that fortified Southern blacks.

The connection to the South is apparent in Jones’s use of language. Many characters use African-American English inflected with Southern dialect. “I think when I am writing certain things, I don’t have any particular lines in mind, but there are those phrases that keep coming back to me from my mother. A phrase like ‘A month of Sundays,’ or ‘That would be too much like right’” (Jones, Interview 431). Moreover, language conveys value. Sharon Palmer in “Bad Neighbors” has been taught not to drop her G’s, to mark her difference from “those who do not know any better” (*Aunt* 373) and mark her progress from a grandmother “who had seen only the morning, afternoon and evening of a cotton field” (*Aunt* 349), yet she comes to see the authenticity in the old forms, reflecting what is vital in the rural South. Her lower class “bad neighbor” Derek Bennington has proven truer feeling than the rich Terrence Stagg, whom she married, is capable of: Derek has loved her steadily and shown up to defend her against white aggressors who stabbed him, while Terrence was sleeping. As she goes over Derek’s actions, she reconnects with simpler elocution (“Bleeding. Bleedin’”) and a more authentic approach to life, and “she [gets] into bed the way she came into the world” (*Aunt* 373). In “Lost in the City,” lawyer Lydia questions the grammatical English she has mastered. Her mother, who spoke as they did on the farm down South, has just died; though she would not move to Lydia’s “white people”’s neighborhood, the daughter feels her identity is lost, despite her Fendi bags and cocaine. As Lydia, seeking oblivion in a cab ride, is driven to the locus of the formation of her original

⁴ Some commentators cite redemption as an important theme in Southern literature, although, editing studies on the theme of “Sin and Redemption,” Harold Bloom includes works of all epochs and provenances along with those of Southerners Flannery O’Connor and Robert Penn Warren, specifying besides that true literary themes are error and recognition, as sin and redemption are religious considerations (Bloom xv).

mental image—the streets of her childhood—it appears from her memories that her mother had a religious faith and personal loyalty that anchored her.

The older generation seeks to live up to the Southern mental image of how one should behave in the world, the young do not. Mississippian Anne Perry judges George Carter on how much work he can do in “Tapestry” (*Aunt* 375-400): “George, with his fancy wool suit, was sweating from doing no more than saying, Hi you doin, Hi yall doin this afternoon, not a sign of a man used to hard work. Anne thought as she took him in with one hurried glance, If he sweats with just this much work, how much work could he ever manage behind a plow?” (*Aunt* 380-81). The fathers passed on a strong work ethic to their sons until the sixties. In “A New Man” (*Lost* 203-16), “[Woodrow Cunningham’s] father had sat his children about the supper table . . . according to who did the most work. His best workers sat closest to him” (215), and in “The Store” (*Lost* 77-104) the narrator remembers: “My father . . . worked as if that business was his own” (84), and he does the same in Penny’s store, using the Southern manners inculcated by his mother: “My mother had always taught me and my brother that the currency of manners didn’t cost anything” (85). The later generation in the city is different: the young men and women in “A Rich Man” (*Aunt* 324-45), including the runaway daughter of “A New Man”’s steady worker, Elaine Cunningham, who makes a reappearance in that story, prefer sponging off others to getting jobs; they move in with an old man in a retirement home.

In the two latter stories, Jones deforms values into the grotesque: Woodrow does not see that his putting work and strict morality before the relationship with his teenage daughter, just as his father had raised him, is alienating; as her absence when she runs away becomes the center of his and his wife’s life, he takes comfort in “searching”—going randomly into people’s homes and basking in their pity and good will when he shows them a photo of her as a five-year-old. And in “A Rich Man” philanderer Horace Perkins lives a travesty of a marriage with his wife Loneese before she dies; then his hospitality is lustful and prideful—he believes that the young women living in his Sunset House apartment desire him and that the young men admire him in earnest; they take drugs together. When the police raid Horace’s apartment the young people are gone; when he gets out of jail, all his possessions are smashed up—those the hangers-on had not sold. It is all the more grotesque as neither Woodrow nor Horace understands that he is responsible for his misfortune, whereas in “Common Law,” as noted, Georgia is given a moment of salvation and may see where her error resides. For it may appear to be a virtue in Southern women to be compliant, but the derisive song that the prostitutes in the jail sing about Georgia’s love for Kenyon who brutalizes her points to its aberrant nature. Respect of self and others are strong values in Jones’s work, illustrated in this story by Miss Judy, who killed the husband in Arkansas who beat her, and by what Randy Comstock, “only one year out of Tennessee,” tells Georgia about what makes a good marriage (*Aunt* 237).

The deterioration of the family is shown in “The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed” (*Lost* 33-54). Cassandra Lewis, rebellious, powerfully built, who lies to her sister’s husband and whose swearing causes her to lose the interest of a handsome Southern student she is interested in, has only a part-time home. She pins her hopes for the future on her friend Rhonda, who is a talented singer. Cassandra drives a classmate to Annapolis to see that girl’s divorced father; and Rhonda is murdered by the father of her child. Cassandra lacks the shaping presence of a Southern community, the Misses Jenny and Etta who nurtured the motherless Betsy Ann Morgan in “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons” (*Lost* 1-25), to channel

her energies and accept her grief. Still, she has her “salvation” at the end as another schoolmate’s family takes her in and the young girl sings to her through the night, warding off trouble in the only way she knows.

The old folk take their responsibilities seriously while the younger generations seem rudderless. In “The Night Rhonda Ferguson Died,” Rhonda’s parents kept that teenage mother and her child in the family, and the parents of Joyce Moses and Pearl Guthrie were shown setting up house for the two pregnant teenagers to live together on P Street between 9th and 10th, “across from Shiloh Baptist” (*Lost* 40). But the elders know when to put their foot down: in “His Mother’s House” (*Lost* 151-76), Joyce’s mother, who had a farm down South, will not visit her daughter in the house in the integrated neighborhood that Joyce’s firstborn, Santiago, has bought her with drug money, whereas Joyce turns a blind eye to Santiago’s criminal activities. Likewise, Pearl is content to have married into the wealthy suburb of Potomac where her own son is not allowed, until Santiago kills Pearl’s drug addled son. In the end, an anguished Joyce leaves her house open all night in hopes of the wanted Santiago’s return. Joyce and Santiago have come too far from honesty and authenticity for “salvation.”

Yet, Jones does not always leave a capital sinner “in a hole” without suggesting a possibility of grace. Caesar Matthews goes from being “Lemuel Matthews’s son” in “Young Lions” (*Lost* 55-76—see 68) to finding murder amusing: “The last time had been eight months ago when they crossed into Maryland and he shot the 7-Eleven clerk in the face. A few miles from the store, back in D.C., Caesar was still laughing about how the man’s face had drained of blood as the gun came toward his face” (58). Still, in “Old Boys, Old Girls” (*Aunt* 75-101), once he has served time, that he should vomit at the thought of child molesting, perform last rites for his old lover Yvonne, leave their tenement before committing another murder, and have final thoughts of returning to his father suggests a return to original values. It is this possibility of grace that the adulterer Noah Robinson recovers in “Adam Robinson” (*Aunt* 239-70), when he and his wife Maggie find and take in their missing son’s two children. Noah has always thought that his son and daughter-in-law taking to drugs and disappearing with the children was God’s punishment for his sin. With Noah and his Southern neighbors, the children plant trees and learn of picking cotton; their lives are made solid and comfortable; they attend church. Taking responsibility for his grandson Adam in church, Noah redeems himself and the traumatized Adam attains a moment’s salvation as he understands that he has a real family. Jones shows the strength of the Southern adults in the church as necessary, as “the city government people” and the foster home services have failed Noah’s grandson.

In “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons,” the first story of the first collection, the people in his D.C. neighborhood help the widower Robert Morgan bring up Betsy Ann as a single father, and she becomes, in Jones’s words, “self-confident” (Personal interview 14). Although the community and her homing pigeons are destroyed, the final image of her sharing the birds’ flight over the city suggests her inviolable knowledge of beauty and freedom, for which she will yearn and which will guide her, as pigeons know where to go. Community could foster such confidence, sustain such a vision in the South for African Americans to love and endure in spite of hardship.

Not all of Jones’s characters learn endurance from the Southern mindset. In “Gospel” (*Lost* 183-202), neither faith nor loyalty temper gospel singer Vivian Slater’s sense of loss on her way home to a man who is dying; the vignette of the South that comes to her is of its

lavish hospitality and the romance of graceful women and handsome men that fueled her girlish expectations, and Jones's final focus on her alone in her car awaiting a blizzard suggests the irrecoverableness of a sustaining past. However, "Root Worker" (*Aunt* 163-201) reasserts that redemption is inseparable from the Southern context. Washingtonian Glynnis Holloway's psychologically disturbed mother is cured by a Southern root worker and Glynnis, a physician, traces the origins of her mother's illness to a lapse of her own, when she cast off the charity and courtesy of her elders. Still, the reader knows that Glynnis's "salvation" is at hand—she is studying the old ways of root working herself and has found suitable companionship in a Southern man. Her mother's helper, Maddie, whose idea it was to seek out a root worker, affirms the need for a lasting relationship with the South: "[S]ometimes black people from the South need to go back home. . . . The South is like that. It's the worst mama in the world and it's the best mama in the world" (*Aunt* 177).

Writing the Southern Past into the Present

D.C. originally seemed better than a South where racial laws and customs were prohibitive, Jones suggests in "Marie" (*Lost* 229-43) and "Tapestry": "*My mother had this idea that everything could be done in Washington 'Up there,' she would say 'things can be made right.' . . . I got to thinkin . . . maybe God lived there*" (*Lost* 241, italics in the original); "They treat colored people like kings and queens in Washington, cause that's where the president lives" (*Aunt* 379). Yet his characters who leave the South as unskilled laborers are often disappointed, though Jones has some of their children become civil servants, doctors, or lawyers. For in Jones's Washington, some Southern ills are not righted: inequalities between whites and blacks, for example.

In "All Aunt Hagar's Children," the women had to run away from the South because as girls, they defended themselves from a white attacker. They find injustice in D.C. as well: the police "'ain't done any more than the day it happened'" to solve the murder of Agatha's son—"One more colored boy outa their hair" (*Aunt* 106). Jones portrays the segregation that existed in practice if not in law in Washington D.C. till the mid-50s (Zimmerman and St. Louis 267-68). The children in "Common Law," learning that they cannot see the actors who played the Lone Ranger and Tonto appear at a segregated theater, protest in the mild expletives allowed them: "'What a gyp!' . . . 'Dag!'" (*Aunt* 233). The restricted jobs of the past contrast with wealthy lawyer Lydia Walsh's status in "Lost in the City": "In one of the museums white men had allowed [Lydia's] father to make a living pushing a broom" (*Lost* 148). And the story "Marie" shows that a form of segregation from rational life is still enforced when one has to navigate the labyrinths of Social Security.

Come into our office at 21st and M streets, Northwest, the letters said in that foreign language. Come in so we can see if you are still blind in one eye, come in so we can see if you are still old and getting older. Come in so we can see if you still deserve to get Supplemental Security Income payments.

She always obeyed the letters, even if the order now came from a dead man, for . . . once cut off [from SSI] you had to move heaven and earth to get back on. (*Lost* 229)

Is Jones's treatment of race, as well as the reflection on values past and present brought home in his scenes of "salvation" or alienation, aimed at raising social and political consciousness? Jessica Brown has seen in his focus on neighborhoods in D.C., or the "lived spaces" of the African American community, an oppositional force to the white power's hegemonic forces, and believes that thanks to such writings, cities may integrate greater diversity in the future (10-11, 32). Questioned, Jones says that he is not intent on conveying a political message when he writes; he admits to having "a counter image" of America, "but I can't say that with every single word and paragraph, I'm driving that point home. . . . It's just something that's in your blood and your bones, that comes out in a certain way, you don't always sit down and come to think about it" (Personal interview 14, 20). Jones maintains that he does not overtly write to cause change. But his "Marie," for example, from which the above passage on Social Security was taken, is an affecting and effective piece of indirect commentary. Though octogenarian Marie carries a knife and uses it against attackers in D.C., when she slaps the female clerk for being short with her after making her wait for hours at Social Security, she longs to apologize—to let her know "I whatn't raised that way" (*Lost* 240)—but cannot bring herself to. Jones conveys the complexity of her personality, the importance of her Southern upbringing despite her present hardships at the hands of an inhuman administration in a crime-ridden city; her final distaste for the sound of her own voice on tape may stem from either the virtue of humility—not wishing to believe in one's importance—or that of pride—a refusal to accept the old woman she has become. Marie, like Jones's other characters, is mysterious enough for the reader to peruse each passage of his story for clues. Her recapitulation of her life for George Carter, the grandson of Anne Petrie in "Tapestry," links the two women and the Howard University student as symbols of Southern African American experience. I believe this indirect approach does, as Brown suggests, contribute to promoting diversity and change.

Jones's writing can effect this because it is both specific and universal, and that is its power. One finds in his works what are deemed to be characteristics of Southern literature, such as a tendency for the grotesque and the preoccupation with redemption, and Cleanth Brooks's trilogy: a sense of place, a conception of time that takes account of the past and the timeless, and narrative that includes the oral as well as the formal traditions (5). If Jones recognizes that he is "kind of a Southern writer" ("Belva Davis") and that he writes in the Southern tradition, it is because "it just becomes a part of your being. . . . I grew up with these people for whom the South was still a very real place" (Personal interview 8). But Louis Rubin's statement that for repatriated Southern writers, the South is "the country of fiction" (20) is even more valid for Jones: "I was born in Washington D.C., and I write in Washington D.C., and I write about people in the South based on my imagination" (Personal interview 8). Never predictable, his Southern characters strike a chord of recognition in the reader, and his fiction can introduce a change in imaging and new connections. Though it might be said that Jones "assum[es] regional identification for self and group definition," as Thadious Davis writes of contemporary African American writers and the South, he makes others connect with his Southern mental image as well.

Fredric Jameson has applied Lynch's "mental imaging" to ideological mapping. He believes that a "cognitive mapping" of society ensuring a realistic and unified view of history can be envisaged if one takes into account the distinct ideological formations Raymond Williams distinguished (Jameson 6): the "residual" ideological formations

(ideologies belonging to the past but that still have a degree of currency) and “emergent” ideological formations (new ideologies that are beginning to have currency) which exist alongside “dominant” ideological formations (those ideologies supported by what Louis Althusser terms “ideological state apparatuses”). Through cognitive mapping of the present, Jameson believes, one can make sense of one’s place in the global system and apprehend the cultural dominant. Jones portrays residual Southern ideological formations in his Southerner’s worldview. And in the opinion of the senior citizens in “Gospel” (“The only thing to do is just to pick up and move back down South”—*Lost* 189), in Maddie’s comment in “Root Worker” (“We leave, we run away and don’t realize how much we’ll need to go back home one day”—*Aunt* 177), as well as in his theme, he shows the emergent trend described by Thadious Davis, of African Americans returning to what might otherwise be a new white Southern Sunbelt as residents, or to the region and its past through art (63-64). Yet, although individualism and mobility are often cited as characteristics conducive to success in capitalist America, and part of the dominant ethos, the qualities of group mindedness and rootedness, for example, which the Southern residual and emergent ideologies prize, are also valued in the dominant culture. Jones’s stories “take us to . . . fictive towns in Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kansas” (Graham 597), as he says of the South that was his reference growing up: “[I]t was always, always about living on the farm” (Personal interview 7). But any reader can sympathize with Jones’s characters. For Jones’s theme of change and its impact on the individual is universal.

As Henry has noted, he records “the semantic memories conjured by references to the cultural heritage of African Americans in Washington, D.C., and the episodic memories of his own experiences of that heritage and its legacy in his lifetime” (172). In that way, he records history so that the reader can appreciate the process by which landmarks “embody and gain fixity and meaning from internal processes” now that shopping galleries and office blocks downtown are “seemingly dissolving that history as they join global force fields” (Peacock 131). Lynch’s interviews with residents in Los Angeles in the sixties revealed that “the fluidity of the environment and the absence of physical elements which anchor to the past” moved established residents to describe the city by “the ghosts of what used to be there. . . . There seems to be a bitterness or nostalgia among natives which could be resentment at the many changes, or just inability to reorient fast enough to keep up with them” (45). It is this feeling of disorientation and nostalgia, which all residents on this earth feel when they cannot keep up with change, that makes “The Store” so poignant, as the narrator recalls the ghosts of shops that came after his employer Penny’s store, and his youthful self in front of it (*Aunt* 104).

Jones leaves room for positive change, for change need not, as the frequent alienating estrangement from Southern values suggests in his stories, always be for the worse. The view he gives of African American Southerners disposes the reader to look out for the unjust or the absurd as white people set “the world [they] had made for themselves . . . right,” as in Jones’s Choctaw, Alabama (*Aunt* 131). The stories foster a spirit of community: they may be about D.C., but his South, the terrain that they are based on, is so universal a nostalgic referent and foil that it makes understanding of the other and change possible. Jones leads us to question our society and values by presenting a changing world, and what does not change. Tightly-knit communities are on the wane, the desire for justice, happiness and security that brought his migrants to D.C. is not.

Jones is a writer for the global age, who in writing about his culture establishes bridges with others. The stories in his two collections, which show his characters' personal landmarks and Southern mental image, are perhaps most valuable in that they illustrate a "poetry of the city," a genre which, according to Pierre Sansot, is both ethically and esthetically engaged, and "magnifies man for being able to go on living in the inhuman city and to wrest a little happiness from it." Jones transforms D.C., expanding its limits by reflecting the workings of time and fate and the consciousness of his characters, influenced both by the South and by universal affects. "When the city dilates, man can breathe better," says Sansot (qtd. in Serre—my translation). Jones's transformative, poetic work reminds us of all that we are and suggests what can be.

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PART III

MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Peter Taylor's Art of Storytelling: "A Spinster's Tale" (1938) and "The Old Forest" (1985)

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January 8, 2017 marked the centenary of the birth of Peter Taylor, a Southern writer, appreciated above all for his short stories. Taylor's literary talent was first recognized by Robert Penn Warren, who included "A Spinster's Tale" in his 1954 collection of thirty-five British and American stories, *Short Story Masterpieces*. A disciple of Allen Tate and Randall Jarrell, a close friend of such influential figures as Robert Lowell or Elizabeth Bishop, professor at prestigious American universities (Vanderbilt, the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia, Harvard), recipient of two PEN American Center Awards, an O. Henry Award, a Ritz Hemingway Award, and the Pulitzer Prize, Taylor remains relatively little known to the general reading public. Walter Shear's opening sentence from his 1989 article in the *Southern Literary Journal*: "Though acknowledged as one of the masters of the short story in English, Peter Taylor has, in an era of voluminous critical activity, received comparatively little attention" seems still relevant, although several books and articles which encouraged reevaluation of Taylor's fiction appeared later, in the last decade of the twentieth century, following the author's death in 1994.¹

In his review of the 2017 *Library of America* commemorative edition of two volumes of Taylor's *Complete Stories*, entitled "Southern Discomfort," which appeared in the March 22, 2018 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Michael Gorra situates the Southern author closer to Eudora Welty than to William Faulkner, referring perhaps to Taylor's literary preoccupation with the everyday private experiences of individual people living in small communities, rather than with issues of national or global significance. The Civil War or the Great Depression are not confronted directly in Taylor's fiction. Taylor's mentors were major representatives of New Criticism, which, in the opinion of Gorra, strongly influenced the aesthetic aspect of his writing: "The New Criticism gave the young writer the belief that a fictional page could be as compressed and elliptical as a sonnet, along with the emphasis on voice and tone and point of view that taught him how to place and judge his characters without ever saying so" (39). However, the uncertainty, ambiguity and sense of unease which characterize Taylor's stories, where, as Ann Beattie writes in the Editor's "Introduction" to the two volumes, "everything . . . must not be taken at face value" (xvii) and where the reader frequently gets caught up in the writer's "illogic," seem to point to Taylor's affinities with the literary ambiance of the later decades of the twentieth century.

Born in Trenton, Tennessee and deeply rooted in the state through long family history going back to colonial times, Taylor dedicated his writing career to traditional Southern issues: the confrontation with the past juxtaposed with the growing restlessness of

¹ Besides such important books as James Curry Robison's *Peter Taylor: A Study of Short Fiction*, Catherine Clark Graham's *Southern Accents: The Fiction of Peter Taylor*, C. Ralph Stephens and Lynda B. Salamon's *The Craft of Peter Taylor* or David M. Robinson's *World Relations: The Achievement of Peter Taylor*, numerous scholarly articles appeared in scholarly journals.

Southerners to reach beyond their historical and social limitation, the encroachment of modernity upon a conservative region, changing family relations, gender roles, and racial attitudes in the twentieth century. He has been called a “master of false epiphany” (McAlexander xiii) and an explorer of self-deception. In his stories events traditionally regarded as happy, elevating or pleasurable are perceived as frightening, creating anxiety and a sense of awkwardness: his families are dysfunctional, the marriages he creates evoke insecurity, sex in his stories is terrifying and frequently associated with alcohol. Endowed with extraordinary gifts for observation and storytelling, Taylor writes texts seemingly simple in their narrative patterns but invariably indicative of the complexity of “Southern living.”

Peter Taylor was the fourth child of Katherine Baird Taylor, daughter of the governor and later senator of Tennessee, Robert Love Taylor, and Matthew Hillsman Taylor, whom Hubert H. McAlexander, Peter Taylor’s biographer, introduces as “a promising young lawyer of Trenton” (1). The future writer was born exactly on the ninth anniversary of his parents’ wedding, remembered as an event of “wide social interest throughout the state” (1): “This union of Taylors, one from the eastern mountain region, the other from the western cotton country, encompassed the state and led back to its earliest days. The two Taylor families were no kin, the eastern one of Virginia extraction, and the western one of Carolina origin” (1). Joined under a common name, Taylor, the two families represented the South’s social, historical and natural diversity, which became a characteristic setting for Peter Taylor’s tales.

The writer’s first ancestor in the New World identified in historical records was Isaac Taylor, a Scot who emigrated to America in 1740 and settled in the Valley of Virginia. The family of Peter Taylor’s mother was more prominent than that of his father; nevertheless, on both sides there were high-ranking military officers, lawyers and politicians, among them such charismatic figures as the already mentioned grandfather, “Our Bob,” and his brother Alf, both of whom campaigned in 1886 for the Tennessee governorship, Robert Love Taylor as a Democrat and his brother as a Republican. Although they represented opposing political views, they supported one another as members of the same family. “The products of a musical family circle, the brothers took their fiddles on the campaign trail. They traveled together across the state debating each other, afterward often sleeping in the same bed” (McAlexander 4). The memories of the achievements and adventures of the more distant as well as recent members of the two Taylor families were kept up by Peter Taylor’s parents, Katherine and Matthew Hillsman, both of whom “were great talkers, great storytellers” (McAlexander 1). These stories enriched Taylor’s imagination with historical consciousness; they provided subject matter for his literary works.

Peter Taylor’s readers and critics draw attention to the numerous female characters he created in his fiction. His heroines were often modeled on women he had known in real life. As a child, Taylor felt particularly close to two women: his mother and his sister Mettie, “who mothered him a great deal in his early years” (McAlexander 8). In an interview he gave to Barbara Thompson in 1982, Taylor talked about his intense affection for his mother, stronger perhaps than a son’s love is expected to be, and about her rejection of his “adoration” (qtd. in McAlexander 9): “If she had not been that way I think she might have ruined my life, because that is often the fate of little boys who adore their mothers. If the mother responds, it’s a love affair for life. But my mother wouldn’t have it so. She was

much too interested in my father. He was the only man in her life. At an early age I had to look around for someone else” (qtd. in McAlexander 9).

Reference to Taylor’s feelings for his sister Mettie can be found in a letter to Robie Macauley, his college friend. Taylor writes about the way he and his sister played as children, sharing their imaginary alternate worlds, and concludes: “my sister . . . was nearer to me than anyone in the world” (qtd. in McAlexander 13). As a man of uncommon sensitivity, Taylor readily identified with the feelings of women and sympathized with them. Michael Gorra points out that Taylor realized early on in his writing career how underprivileged women were in the South, thus somehow allowing a parallel with the condition of African Americans: “In a 1985 interview Taylor said that he saw two things when he began to write. One was how consistently black people got the ‘short end’ of the Southern stick. That wasn’t always obvious to writers of his background, and the second thing was less obvious still: the degree to which women got the short end from men” (39).

Peter Taylor’s first successful story was “A Spinster’s Tale,” written in the summer of 1938. It impressed Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who helped the young author get a modest stipend at Louisiana State University and publish the story in the *Southern Review*. The narrator of “A Spinster’s Tale,” a woman who never married, recollects her lonesome and “motherless” childhood in a wealthy Southern family’s big, somber and somewhat mysterious 19th century mansion. In the tradition of the Southern Gothic, there are numerous descriptions of the house decorated with objects that seem exotic today: the rooms, “with their stained-glass windows, antimacassars, and beaded lampshades” (McAlexander 44), the furniture, mirrors or stairs inviting a metaphorical reading and suggesting a possible identification between the house and its inhabitants. The little girl from long ago, who is now the spinster narrating the story, lived there with her father, an older brother and the memory of her mother who had died in consequence of childbirth, and whom no one ever talked about. Words such as “darkness,” “shadowy,” or “heavy” appear in descriptions of the house located on Church Street, and a sense of loss hangs over the story: the mother’s death, the stillborn baby’s funeral, the arrival of the police car called the Black Maria, Mr. Speed’s imprisonment.

Deprived of female companionship or guidance, the girl, “named Elizabeth, for [her] mother” (Taylor, *Vol. 1*, 3), and, like the mother, isolated in a men’s world, developed a “scaredness” of men and of sexuality, which she associates with drinking, just as her deceased mother did. A Mr. Speed, the town drunk, who “stumbl[ed] past [their] house two or three afternoons a week” “instilled” “terror” in her (3). Elizabeth was afraid the man might barge into the house, and then she would have to confront him directly. Neglected by her father, she had no one to share her fears with. Following the lengthy dinner-time conversations between Father and son, the reader becomes more and more aware of the importance of inter-generational education in a strict traditional Southern family. Excluded from the men’s discussions about law, history or geography, Betsy (as she is referred to in the story) remained silent at the table, with only the black servant, Lucy, helping her to fill her plate. She was also alone in the house when the man whom she called Mr. Speed ultimately did come inside, invading her privacy and violating her purity, committing an act of which his tobacco spit, staining the whiteness of the snow in the street, was emblematic. Frightened, Betsy then called the police station and “asked the voice to send ‘the Black Maria’” (23) and arrest the invader, a reaction her father did not approve of. Had the mother lived to instruct the daughter how to interact with men and how to judge their behavior, the

girl would perhaps have been more tolerant. Mr. Speed's role in Betsy's process of initiation is intentionally ambivalent. Watching him pass by the house intoxicated, dreading the moment he would appear but at the same time waiting for him expectantly, Betsy was introduced to emotions arising from sexual desire she soon realized to be closely connected with uncontrollable energy, such as of a large and strong animal: "Mr. Speed's like—a loose horse" (14).²

While women are virtually absent from the house on Church Street, three men play key roles in Betsy's upbringing and sexual initiation: Mr. Speed, Father and Brother. The Father, a Southern gentleman, intends to raise his daughter in the tradition of Southern propriety. Seeing his daughter mature, he gives her a "little dressing table" for her birthday: "The card with his handwriting on it was still stuck in the corner of the mirror: 'For my young lady daughter'" (15). When an uncle notices that Betsy has been flirting with young cousins, the father's reaction to her behavior, which he fears might have been inappropriate for a young Southern woman from a respectable family, verges on violence: "My father looked at me and twisted his moustache and said . . . that he didn't know what he'd do with me if I started that sort of thing" (18). As the head of a patriarchal family, Father, the figure of authority, whom the reader never gets to know by name, considers it his duty to keep his daughter under control in the house. At the same time, he must protect the liberties of the men, that include drinking, and spaces reserved for them, such as the parlor.

Unlike Betsy, Brother who, like Father, is nameless in the story, goes out of the house frequently and returns late at night, a little drunk but relaxed, with a piece of candy he offers his sister in return for keeping his condition a secret. She is fascinated by his playful mood but on those occasions she also remembers her mother's words: "'Son, I'd rather see you in your grave'" (3). At times, in the evenings, when the serious topics of conversations with his father have been exhausted, Brother jokes and makes fun of Betsy, bringing her to tears. On other occasions, recognizing her isolation and the limitations of her position, he pities her: "'Are you lonely, Betsy?'" he said. 'Are you a lonely little girl?'" (10). Bewildered by his recognition of her need for intimacy, he promises to spend more time with her but when they finally sit down to play chess, "he picked up with talk of the senior class play and his chances for being chosen valedictorian. Apparently I no longer seemed an enigma to him" (12).

Commenting on "A Rose for Emily" in his essay "Inside the Dark House: William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* and Southern Gothic," Richard Gray presents Miss Emily as repressed by "the pressures of a stiflingly patriarchal society" and reads the story as offering "an unerring insight into repression and the revenge of the repressed" (23). By killing Homer Baron, Emily Grierson takes revenge on him as a man who slighted her. In a broader metaphorical sense, a Southern Belle, betrayed and taken advantage of by a day laborer from the North, Emily can be seen as the victimized South taking revenge on the North. For Emily Grierson, Gray explains, the act of revenge is an act of rebellion against the patriarchal Southern society and at the same time against the North's victory and the South's defeat. Betsy's situation in Taylor's story is somewhat comparable to that of Emily. If we think of Betsy "as a figure to patronize and pity" because she is lonely and has never married, we are actually looking at her from the perspective of patriarchal ideology, as a

² As McAlexander notes, the story's grounding in Freudian theory has been explored by several critics, including a 1988 article in the *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* (44) or Roland Sadowsky and Gargi Roysircar Sadowsky's "Determined Failure, Self-Styled Success: Two Views of Betsy in Peter Taylor's 'Spinster's Tale.'"

woman strictly controlled by men, someone who failed to do what was expected of her, who failed to fulfill the role she was assigned. However, this young woman needs not be reduced to the position of an object deprived of her own will and dependent on men. I argue that she should rather be recognized as an independent subject who makes a conscious decision to rebel against the rules of the patriarchal society by remaining single and refusing to marry. Ann Beattie describes Taylor's female characters as "capable, intelligent, if sometimes unpredictable in their eccentricities as well as in their fierce energies and abilities" (xii). "A Spinster's Tale," a story of initiation, presents reasons behind Betsy's decision to remain single, which she, confused and frustrated as a child, begins to understand in the course of growing up, observing the behavior of her father and brother, and decoding the atmosphere in the house on Church Street, of which Mr. Speed becomes a significant element for her. Among these reasons are: Betsy's alienation in a household dominated by men, the lack of female companionship and guidance, the fear of sexual contacts which she learned to associate with alcohol and violence.

Hubert McAlexander suggests that Taylor may have based "A Spinster's Tale" on a story he heard from his mother and reads it as a "story of a young girl who refuses to accept her passional self and the otherness represented by male sexuality and thus becomes a stifled, repressed spinster" (44). As a story of a girl's anxieties relating to sexual initiation, "A Spinster's Tale" could perhaps also be read as containing allusions to the situation of the author's sister Mattie, whom Taylor observed maturing and whose marriage, on April 8, 1933, left him with an acute sense of loss. As his biographer writes, "[o]ne of the close relationships of Pete's life had ended" (25). A sensitive man and a loving brother, he may have been concerned about what Mattie's married life would be like.

Elizabeth or Betsy (we get to know her by the two names) plays a double role in Peter Taylor's story: she is its main character as well as its narrator. Such a structural arrangement, common in Taylor's fiction, is quite different from what one may find in some canonical works of American literature where the narrator often is a common man bound to understand the actions and motifs of heroes exhibiting extraordinary courage, ambition and determination. Taylor's narrators tell their stories in an attempt to understand themselves, to comprehend the complexity of their present condition from the perspective of how they remember themselves from their past, their memories of the distant times of youth or childhood having inevitably been altered by unexpected, often dramatic events. The narrators also try to acknowledge the role other people—relatives or acquaintances—played in their lives and how they changed them. In this sense, "A Spinster's Tale," one of Taylor's early stories, published in the 1930s, in which the narrator goes back to her childhood, is similar to "The Old Forest," a story from the 1970s, in which Taylor, throwing a "backward glance," reflects on his literary and academic career, as well as on the role of women in his life.

In an unhurried act of oral storytelling, the narrator of Peter Taylor's "The Old Forest," Nat Ramsey, recollects the life of the upper-class society in Memphis, Tennessee in 1937. The son of a cotton broker, he was then 23 years old and his engagement to a "debutante" had already been announced at the Memphis Country Club. Nat is reflecting on the unexpected and potentially precarious events immediately preceding his wedding from the perspective of the college professor of literature in his sixties that he has become, having at the age of 35 sold the family business and returned to the university. Ramsey's "backward

glance” is thus conditioned by a sense of distance of almost forty years from the narrated events and filtered through the critical, literary and cultural discourse which he has become familiar with in the course of his academic career. Nat Ramsey’s narrative becomes Peter Taylor’s short story about a Southern white man trying to define his identity through his relationships with women. Taylor makes use of literary orality, traditionally associated in Southern literature with women and blacks, to create a representation of Southern masculinity, in need of reconsideration as a result of the current crisis of the patriarchal system.

Nat’s account of the events from his youth seen, as the narrative suggests upon several occasions, “in retrospect,” and his questioning the decisions he made at that time echo Allen Tate’s words: “The older I get the more I realize that . . . the significance of the Southern way of life, in my time is failure . . . What else is there for me but a complete acceptance of failure” (qtd. in Gray and Robinson 3), or Richard Gray’s more celebratory and equally familiar evocation of the voices from the past when he writes of there being nothing left for scholars of Southern literature and culture to do but to capture the South as “the last great moment in Western culture” and “to commemorate its glory” (*Companion* 3). That is the choice the narrator of Taylor’s story makes when he decides to abandon the liberated demimondaine Lee Ann Dechart, a girl emblematic of the South’s future, and to marry Caroline, who embodies the Southern tradition of aristocratic womanhood, “a very remarkable girl,” and today “a very remarkable woman of sixty,” whose “good judgment in all matters relating to our marriage has never failed her—or us” (*Vol. 2*, 434). A sense of failure never ceases to be an element of the Southern definition of judgment. In the 20th century failure has also become an element of the definition of Southern masculinity.

In an equally measured and controlled manner, Peter Taylor transforms the story from several decades ago into a literary text intended for future readers. Nat’s recollections of events from 1937, captured in Taylor’s story, are “not static remnants of the deep past but living, infinitely adaptable images that continue to feed the artistic imagination” (O’Toole 39). Of particular interest to the present reading of the story is the relation between the narrative voice of Nat Ramsey, an aging Southern intellectual and academic, and Peter Taylor, a Southern writer and also an academic in whose literary text the oral narrative, originally intended for recreation in every new retelling, is formally arrested and yet at the same time made open to endless interpretations.

In his introduction to *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the South*, Richard Gray quotes William Faulkner saying: “We need to talk to tell since orality is our heritage,” and adds: “Old tales and talking have, in fact, long served as both a local art and a preservative tool—a customary, carefully cultivated skill and a vital medium for the transference of custom” (11). Taylor’s story is self-consciously literary. Written in refined language, it aims to recreate the way of speaking of the Memphis upper class in the mid-1930s. It abounds in sophisticated vocabulary that might seem slightly dated today: “calamitous,” “facetiously,” “reticence,” “equanimity.” The author refers to writers who most likely inspired him, representing different literary periods, from the antiquity to the 20th century: Horace, Marcel Proust, André Maurois. In order to understand Horace, Nat must consult the “big dictionary,” the Book in his Latin mentor’s office, which he never gets to but where, he is told, he would always find the door open. Peter Taylor’s process of transforming Nat’s narrative into the written form has some affinities with the emergence of Southern writing, of shaping oral stories into literary texts.

The story's opening sentence recalls the life-long commitment Nat was preparing to make in 1937 not only to his fiancée, whose name we do not actually get to know until much later in the narrative, but also to the community and the culture he feels a part of, as marked in the sentence by the first person plural pronoun "we": "I was already formally engaged, as we used to say, to the girl I was going to marry" (469). The wedding is to take place within a week, early in December, a winter wedding "freezing" the status quo, the beginning of a conservative marriage requiring clearance not only from the prospective in-laws, but also from the city's mayor, lawyers, and the police. Dinner parties at the homes of relatives had been scheduled for every night of the week preceding the wedding.

However, before the wedding can take place, Nat's "demimondaine" companion, the "city girl" Lee Ann Dearheart, who was with him in a car accident he caused, must be found. She had escaped from the site leaving behind traces in the snow leading to the eponymous old forest, a remote place where women were at times abused and on other occasions saved from oppression. As long as she remains in hiding, Lee Ann poses a threat not only to the planned wedding but to the entire social order of the Memphis upper class that the wedding represents. The violence of the accident—the blood on Nat's forehead testifies to it—disrupts what he, in his narrative, recognizes as "our old way of life," the times before "the terrible events" and "acts of terror" took place.

Lee Ann, an independent working girl of unknown origin is a liberated woman of the New South. Nat feels strongly attracted to her, in ways he is not always conscious of; yet, at the same time, he is so deeply attached to his own social group which Caroline Braxley stands for that he is not prepared to reject the beliefs of his parents and earlier ancestors, even if these are being supplanted by the new order of life in Memphis. Thus, Nat's narrative becomes an exercise in remembering and forgetting. As the soon-to-be-married couple are driving out of Memphis heading for the future, leaving behind a series of events that might have prevented their marriage, Caroline gives "one long look over her shoulder and out the rear window of the car." Her fiancé repeats her action: "I myself gave one glance into the rearview mirror" (519). Recurring backward glances, recollections, and mirror reflections which often distort reality allow Taylor to create a tension between the need to question seemingly outdated values and to simultaneously honor the ancestors who held them.

However difficult it might be for the readers to detach themselves from the romance of Taylor's text, in an effort to grasp its meaning, it is necessary to examine the story's central figure who is a storyteller, a writer and a literary critic, all in one. Nat Ramsey gradually reveals himself as he keeps talking about his relationships with women, whose position in the South has traditionally been conflicted. At the same time, he gradually becomes perceived as an ambiguous literary character in the course of being interpreted and reflected upon both by the readers and by literary scholars. Rather than assume the pose of a writer distancing himself from the universities, Taylor, educated at Vanderbilt University and Kenyon College, a professor at the University of Virginia, Harvard, and several other institutions of higher education, as well as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters embraces the academic tradition.

After many years at the university, Taylor had to be familiar with the academic discourse concerning the role and power of women in the repeated attempts at defining the American South. Not surprisingly, in "The Old Forest" the "fair-haired," "hazel eyed," "far from stupid" yet at times "vulgar" and "a little bit coarser" working girls are representative

of the New South, whereas their opposites—"guardians of tradition," "heirs to something" yet "innocent" and "untutored" society girls who "took seriously the forms of the life they lived"—stand for the Old South. The automobile and the telephone, emblems of modernity in the 1930s, become instrumental to the inevitable confrontation between the two epochs and the two kinds of women. A sense of something new, unexplained and perhaps inexplicable in Taylor's story must then come not so much from the symbolic female characters he introduces in his text but from the way Taylor, as a relentless observer reflecting on the world around him, and above all reflecting on himself, constructs Nat's relations with these very different women, undertaking once again the arduous task of understanding the South and his own place in it.

Nat is made to realize that the women he regards as important are inaccessible to him. His fiancée breaks into laughter when he offers to help her with the wedding preparations: "No indeed," said my bride-to-be, "I want to do everything myself. I wouldn't have it any other way" (473). Direct personal communication is replaced by matter-of-fact telephone messages: "At two o'clock, Caroline called again to say that because of the snow, her aunt was canceling the dinner party she had planned that night in honor of the bride and groom" (490). When Lee Ann remains in hiding, Nat receives phone calls from her anonymous friends telling him to "lay off and stop chasing her" (493). Later, as Caroline gets out of the car to meet Lee Ann, she says to Nat: "This is something I have to do without you" (514).

At last, when he is given the opportunity to be alone with Caroline, Nat has to remain silent. His ability to stay quiet and keep on driving during their long car ride out of Memphis and back, through Southern space and history is what saves him. He becomes a mute witness to Caroline's emotional outbreaks, her tears and pain, as she scrutinizes her position as a Southern "society girl" whose prospect of getting married becomes for a moment uncertain. Nat gives silent approval to her search for "the power of woman in a man's world" (523), just as she will later approach with "rather silent" "support and understanding" his decision to abandon the role of a Memphis cotton merchant, which he had been prepared for as a young man, and become a professor of literature at the university, making a choice that could be regarded as an act of resistance to the Southern patriarchal order:

Though it clearly meant that we must live on a somewhat more modest scale and live among people of a sort she was not used to, and even meant leaving Memphis forever behind us, the firmness with which she supported my decision, and the look in her eyes whenever I spoke of feeling I must make the change, seemed to say to me that she would dedicate her pride of power to the power of freedom I sought. (523)

The two stories, "A Spinster's Tale" and "The Old Forest," can be seen as framing Peter Taylor's writing career of forty years, driven by his Southern need to confront the past before coming to terms with oneself. The confrontation with memories of important people and events, as well as emotions associated with them, usually takes place in dramatic, life-changing situations, on the borderline between significant stages in life, such as childhood and adulthood, being single and getting married, shared by people worldwide, and yet embedded in local tradition which, on these occasions, one is called upon to uphold though at the same time tempted to resist.

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Revisiting Slavery Through a Contemporary Lens: Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

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In her 1998 novel *Stigmata*, Phyllis Alesia Perry raises many questions about writing history. How does an African American woman approach southern history from a contemporary perspective? How does the past affect the present? To what extent can collective memory be accurate? Perry's novel offers an insight into the experience of slavery from a black woman's point of view and presents its bitter aftermath, which is still very much alive in contemporary culture. Haunted by the traumatic memory of slavery and the Middle Passage, Perry's characters try to liberate themselves from the burden of their communal past. Unsurprisingly, when she was asked if *Stigmata* is a fictional re-writing of slave narratives, Perry responded positively and proceeded to comment:

And I have read a lot of slave narratives. But there was an emotional component to them that I sometimes felt was missing. I would read them, the narratives would be telling about horrific things that happened, but there was something about them that was too matter-of-fact to me. I don't really know how they felt. I was also really obsessed with knowing how people got through it, what they called upon, especially if they were first-generation slaves from Africa. And what do you call upon if you are in an alien culture and these things are happening to you? So, it's rewriting the slave narrative, but it's also about the connection between those slave experiences and who we are right now. (Perry, "Confronting" 635)

Perry's novel begins in 1974 when fourteen-year-old Lizzie Dubose inherits an old trunk that contains a faded quilt made by her grandmother Grace, together with a very old bit of blue cloth and a diary written by her great-grandmother Joy.¹ The diary records Ayo's narrative; she was Lizzie's great-great-grandmother and the family's first African ancestor, kidnapped from West Africa to be sold as a slave in America. This disturbing legacy has an unforeseen impact on Lizzie who starts having visions and becomes mysteriously scarred with wounds on her wrists, ankles and back. Interpreting these episodes as signs of mental illness and attempts at self-mutilation, and her visions as clinical manifestations of insanity, Lizzie's parents institutionalize her for the next fourteen years. When she returns to the "real world," apparently cured of her demons, she decides to make her own quilt as a means of recapturing the past, offering visibility to her ancestors, and at the same time expressing her own suffering. By this time, she has discovered that dealing with the horrors of the past is an empowering and liberating experience that helps her connect with the outside world. She has accepted her great aunt Eva's idea that "the past is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself" (*Stigmata* 117).

¹ In order to shed light on the relationship among the different characters in the text, I have added an appendix (after Works Cited) with the genealogy chart that Perry has incorporated at the beginning of her novel.

Traveling in time and space, Lizzie experiences some of the worst moments in American and southern history. Through multiple incorporations that merge past and present, Lizzie's body is colonized by Grace's and Ayo's spirits, and her mind is constantly invaded by her ancestors who demand that she become pure medium. She carries the heavy responsibility of becoming the psychic and bodily repository of a precious family legacy. Combining three different time periods into one, the author leads her protagonist to a point where she reunites with her ancestors as one single self. Lizzie's journey brings her back to the original trauma: the forced transatlantic journey that meant separation from the mother and uprooting from the ancestral homeland. Perry depicts the black body as a *lieu de mémoire*, a space where collective memory "crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 7).² Lizzie's and Grace's wounds from whips and chains, originally inflicted on Ayo, are the marks of brutal subjugation and corporeal punishment received by rebellious slaves.

Through her bodily identification with her female ancestors, Lizzie comes to realize that their suffering is also her own.³ The body, then, becomes a medium for self-expression. Lizzie very often wakes up with pain, cuts and blood on her wrists, ankles and back, the scars of the Middle Passage and slavery that her great-great-grandmother endured. Perry's references to the body function as a way to commemorate Ayo's trauma and to dramatize the violent nature of the pursuit of historical truth. Examining Lizzie's back, which bears the marks of Ayo's lashing, her lover Anthony Paul observes in both awe and disgust: "There is something beautiful about it," [he] said, 'following the raised pattern on my back with his fingertips like a blind man trying to read a horror story.' 'Gut-wrenching to look at. But so beautiful it's hard to stop looking'" (*Stigmata* 147). Corinne Duboin notes that

Anthony Paul's examination is reminiscent of Paul D caressing Sethe's back in *Beloved*: "And when . . . he saw the sculpture her back had become, . . . he could think but not say, 'Aw Lord, girl.' And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years" (Morrison, *Beloved* 17-18). . . . The lacerated, withered skin and its hard-edged scars are to be read as the brands of an intriguing yet attractive otherness. (288)

Perry also draws a parallel between African folk culture and Christianity. While in the hospital, Lizzie meets a Catholic priest who associates her scars with stigmata, the symbolic marks that the Catholic Church has come to recognize as the authentic experience of Christ's torture. Camille Passalacqua observes that the priest's "validation is paramount in helping her establish and affirm the authenticity of her reality. The priest validates that her wounds are not self-inflicted; he compares them to the stigmata, or wounds of Christ, and explains that they are a mark of her merging with the spirits of her ancestors" (154). In referring to stigmata and crucifixion, Perry indeed suggests that Lizzie's inherited wounds are the symbolic visible marks of her immersion in the history of the black diaspora, a painful collective history of victimhood and sacrifice. Though not literally a stigmatic,

² *Lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) is a concept that was coined and popularized by the French historian Pierre Nora. According to Nora, it refers to collective memory, stating that certain places, objects or events can have special significance related to a group's remembrance (see Nora 7-24).

³ Lisa A. Long asserts that "in stigmatizing not only those who lived through slavery, but also those contemporary characters long removed from slave times with physical amputations, bleeding whip marks, and manacle wounds, Butler and Perry insist upon the tangible reality of slavery in twentieth-century lives" (460-61).

Lizzie may then appear as a Christlike figure, a victim whose suffering will eventually lead to some kind of deliverance and recovery, as the priest suggests: “Maybe you’re marked so you won’t forget this time, so you will remember and move on” (*Stigmata* 213).

In her study of trauma, Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). For Caruth, an important characteristic of trauma is its “belatedness,” suggesting that it is not fully experienced at the time it happens. This delay of trauma applies to later generations of family members as we find out in *Stigmata*. The present is haunted by the past and the two spaces of time often merge as Perry constructs literary narratives outside the conventional linear storytelling. While experiencing one of her repeated flashbacks, Lizzie meets and merges with her grandmother Grace, against her own will, sharing her ancestor’s pain, hearing her voice:

She moves closer . . . she nudges me from the inside and I try to resist, to listen to her without becoming her. But you’re already here she whispers. This is your own self talking to you. Don’t you understand? Ayo and me we’re here. A spasm of pain sears my back. I gasp, trying to keep my focus, and in that moment Grace steps forward and takes the blow. We stand together in her battered body, bent double with pain. (*Stigmata* 123)

In this passage grandmother and granddaughter stand together, receiving the blow which marked the back of the first ancestor of the family, Ayo, the African. The grandmother’s voice addresses Lizzie’s consciousness and it becomes her own new awareness of the transgenerational trauma that shapes her whole being.

In *Stigmata* many female narrative voices are being heard: Lizzie’s, Ayo’s, Joy’s and Grace’s in addition to Perry’s authorial voice. Incorporated within Lizzie’s first-person frame narrative is Joy’s fragmented diary, which chronicles Ayo’s life in bondage. Adopting this textual composition, Perry revisits the slave narrative and extends it. As Duboin points out, “she creates autodiegetic narrators who speak through and for others, endowing them with a dual function as both ventriloquists and ‘ghostwriters’ (to use Levin’s term)” (289). Through the dictated pages of Ayo’s diary, Perry provides descriptions of Ayo’s experiences within the context of slavery. In the following diary entry, she recalls being inspected physically by a prospective buyer:

He put his hand in my mouth. Taste like dirt. He pulls my lips back and points to my mouth. My eyes open and I see all those ghosties lookin and pointin and talkin. I start to cry. Then he lifts the skirt of my dress with this walking stick he carrying. He lift it up up up and points. He say something, but I cant understand it I cant even hear. Just see him lips movin. I start cryin and moanin. I cant tell you the fear daughter. Fear. A scream starts creepin up in the back of my throat and I let it loose. They laughin laughin. Them strange people. And I scream and turn round and round in the same spot lookin for somewhere to go. But there aint none. I had a scream in me that go on for a hundred years. (*Stigmata* 132-33)

The passage reflects the inhumanity of the situation and the traumatic memory that has become embedded in Ayo’s psyche. Her screams illustrate her need to break silence and

protest for the loss of her human dignity. By including fragments of Ayo's diary in her text, Perry places her female characters within the original site of trauma: the Middle Passage, the auction block, the southern plantation and the beatings, the humiliation, the sexual harassment that were all part of slavery. Moreover, by employing the trope of the diary, Perry allows Ayo a voice which she was denied while being enslaved.

The writing of the diary is undertaken by Ayo's literate daughter, Joy, who tries to reconstruct and appropriate her mother's tongue—Ayo's lived story. Joy becomes the mediator who records the ancestor's voice while at the same time she cannot quite comprehend and questions the veracity of her mother's narrative: "And I say Mama I get tired of you talking all about stuff that aint real" (*Stigmata* 34). Ayo's compulsive need to share her memories is not a self-centered act of transmission but a commitment to those who perished during the Middle Passage and the years of slavery. Moreover, as an agent, she takes possession of her own past through empowering words that commemorate the evils she has survived.

Perry's novel with its references to the slave narrative through Joy's diary notes brings to mind canonical works such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (especially the description of the Middle Passage from the perspective of a traumatized child) or Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which gives an account of the black female experience of slavery. However, while antebellum abolitionist slave narratives dealt with the quest for freedom, Joy's text is a narrative written out between 1898 and 1900 that looks back at slavery and the Reconstruction period. As Corinne Duboin notes, Perry's fictitious slave narrative is closer to autobiographies such as Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (published in 1901), chronicling Washington's life during slavery and Reconstruction (291).

Ayo speaks out and asks her daughter to record her haunting story more than three decades after her emancipation. She relates her experiences so that she can exorcize her demons and liberate herself from a traumatic past. This psychic and emotional liberation indicates that, like Lizzie and Grace, Ayo has to go through the difficult process that Dominick LaCapra defines as "acting out" and "working through":

In acting out, one relives the past as if one *were* the other, including oneself as another in the past—one is fully possessed by the other or the other's ghost; and in working through, one tries to acquire some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility—but that doesn't mean that you utterly transcend the past. It means that you come to terms with it in a different way related to what you judge to be desirable possibilities that may now be created, including possibilities that lost out in the past but may still be recaptured and reactivated, with significant differences, in the present and future. (148)

Perry's female characters are haunted by history. They manage to control their suffering and pains and reclaim their past through language. Duboin asserts that "willing to testify and remember, they resort to storytelling as a healing form of post-traumatic self-expression through dialogue" (292). Lizzie discovers that facing the fear and horrors of the past is psychologically and physically liberating. Instead of escaping from her familial legacy of slavery, Lizzie finds a way to merge and integrate this history with her present self.

Storytelling in *Stigmata* takes on varied artistic forms including quilting. Through her characters' recourse to both writing and sewing as feminine modes of reconstruction and resistance to trauma, the author makes a fresh use of "metaphors of pen and needle [which] have been pervasive in feminist poetics" (Showalter 224). The quilt is a recurrent motif in contemporary African American women's novels (one may think of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Morrison's *Beloved* or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*). The quilts that are crafted or inherited by Perry's characters are to be seen as narratives that relate individual or collective experiences. They constitute a gendered expression of a shared cultural memory, the rewriting of African American history. This collective needlework gives the characters a sense of belonging within the black female community. Moreover, the novel's narrative space is built as a quilt. The author, like a quilter, pieces together the lives of her characters and their varied narratives (diaries, letters, slave narratives).

To Lizzie, the quilt she inherited from Grace is at first a warm blanket for everyday use, something that symbolizes the warmth of her home. Nevertheless, owning the quilt turns into a regressive experience for her, a return to the past which proves to be quite disturbing. Both Grace and Lizzie feel the need to make a quilt so as to tell the stories of haunting forebears and free themselves from their traumatic hold. Quilting serves the same purpose as writing. As Judy Elsley points out, "a quilt is a text . . . Quilts and texts are inseparable" (1). Following the example of Grace's quilt, Lizzie decides to design and sew a story quilt about Grace. She sees it as a link to the past, "[a]nd putting the past aside when we are through" (229). Lizzie's quilt is composed of nine pieces set in a circular arc, like a horseshoe: for the pieces of fabric to be appliquéd, she uses and recycles scraps from the old clothes, remnants of her past life, as well as the inherited scrap of indigo-dyed cotton.

Lizzie stitches her repeated visions into the quilt: she reconstructs meaningful fragments of her grandmother's life and pays homage to her, while at the same time she expresses her own suffering, her need to recapture the past through genealogical memory. Both Grace's and Lizzie's quilts vividly depict and validate a communal experience, the perpetual sense of uprootedness of the black diaspora and its resulting dislocations (both geographical and psychological). They explore the past and revisit the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the slave trade and slavery, Reconstruction and the Great Migration.

In her discussion of *Stigmata*, Lisa Woolfork claims that "Perry distinguishes between a pieced or patchwork quilt and an appliquéd one. Her choice of appliquéd rather than patchwork as a mode of transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory reflects the symbolic and metaphoric differences between the two forms" (51). And she goes on to explain that appliquéd quilts are not restricted to the geometry of the patchwork quilt as the fabric is cut into shapes representing people, animals, flowers, or objects and then applied to a whole-cloth foundation. According to the same critic, this type of quilt tells a story, expresses a scene, or documents an event or social moment (51). It is then easily understood that Perry privileges the appliquéd quilt because it serves her purpose as a strategy for traumatic recovery. Lizzie's appliquéd quilt narrates Grace's trauma, whereas Grace's appliquéd quilt relates Ayo's story. In one of her interviews, commenting on the narrative function of quilts, Perry explains: "The quilt is a material representation of the way the story is told. It's not a snapshot; it's not a realist representation of the past. It is a story the way that most stories are told" ("Confronting" 646).

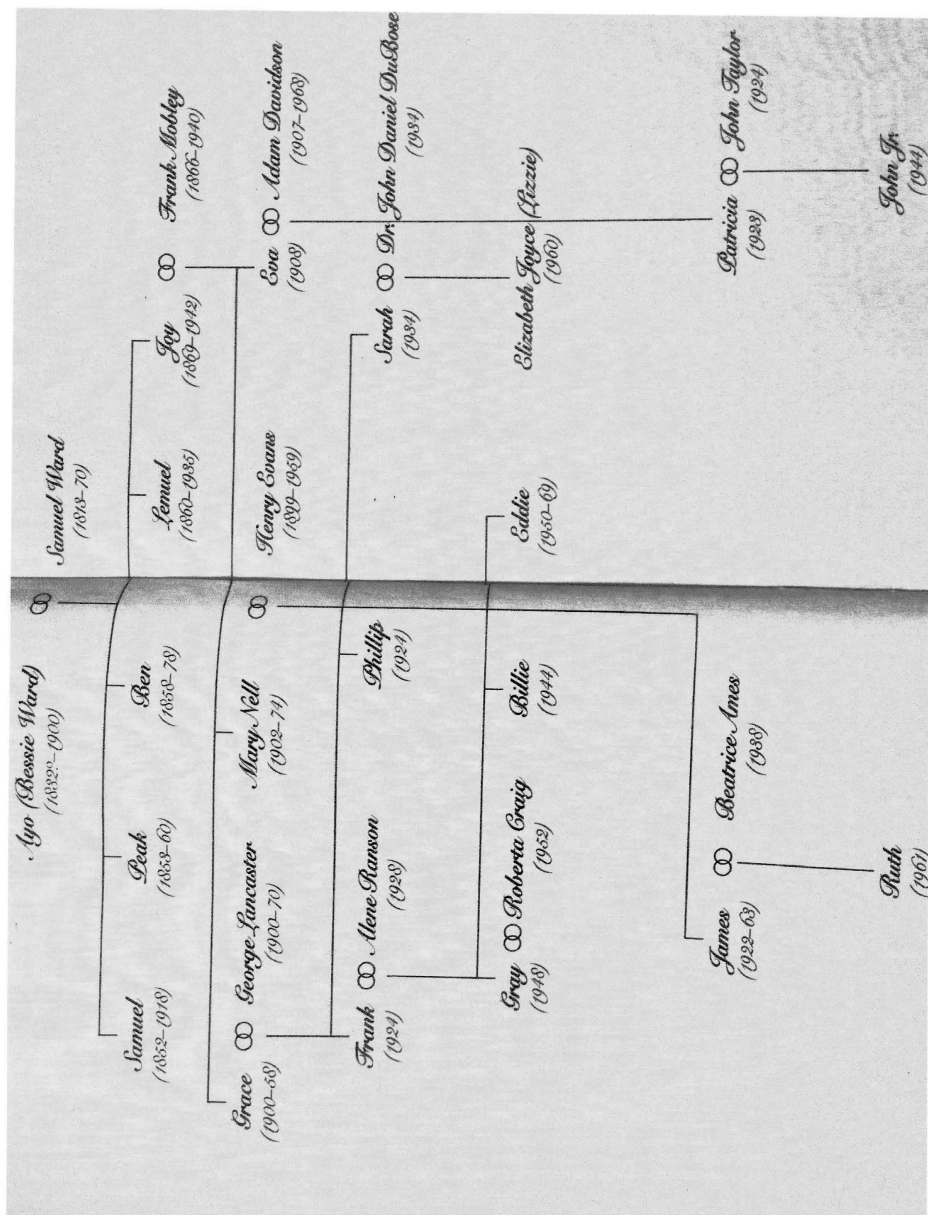
Perry's close association between quilting and writing as feminist aesthetic modes that revive trauma yet bring relief is very much apparent in the way the author conceives her

polyphonic novel as an assemblage of fragmented narratives. *Stigmata* is a multilayered, quilted text that connects and stitches together three distinct yet intersecting lives and their accounts. The novel's twenty-six chapters alternate between three time periods. There is no linear type of development since memory is fragmentary and nonlinear. The "disorder" of the text keeps the reader in suspense and requires the reader's attention and active participation. Through her female characters, Perry suggests that one is bound to confront and acknowledge the past as painful as it may be, so as to mourn and bury it peacefully. Lizzie's female ancestors passed on to her their ability to create. Indeed, Lizzie has handwritten her own diary; she has also hand-sewn her own quilt, which will in turn be handed down. She intends to leave her mark, being just one link in the chain: "I am telling Grace's story with this quilt—just as she had told Ayo's with hers—and the fabric has to hold up at least until the next storyteller comes along" (*Stigmata* 63). Her artistic creations belong to family and community traditions that she perpetuates for posterity against forgetfulness.

At the center of *Stigmata* is the exploration and excavation of how the encounter with a traumatic past influences living in the present. The body absorbs and expresses the trauma but also becomes the site for psychological and physical healing from such experiences. Perry reveals the complicated relations between traumatic historical events and personal memories and illustrates how to render trauma authentic for her characters and readers. For the female protagonist in this work, the journey to psychological healing demands a confrontation with personal and inherited turmoil. Confronting trauma means that Lizzie's life will be irrevocably changed, but change does not necessarily mean more destruction and violence for her; rather she begins living in a new way. At the end of the traumatic journey through the past, a form of empowerment emerges for the heroine. Perry's novel proves that literary art has the power to imaginatively write back into history those who were silenced, hurt, forgotten, and erased by traumatic historical events.

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Negotiating Family Past in David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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David Bradley and Octavia Butler are two African American novelists who might be called Southern writers from other places. Indeed, they were respectively born in Pennsylvania in 1950 and in California in 1947, so neither of them is a native Southerner. And yet, their novels *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) and *Kindred* (1979) explore returns to the South as well as returns to the past, wondering whether this Southern past should be claimed or put to rest. Like Toni Morrison, they have roots in the South but have not lived there themselves, or done so only very briefly. However, by imagining the plight of Southern Blacks and by using historical research, they have been able to “provide . . . an empathetic representation” of Southern Blacks (Harris 17).

Both novels have been classified as neo-slave narratives, “novels of memory” (Foster 146) whose conspicuous subject matter is slave experience in the Antebellum South seen from the perspective of post-Civil Rights era, but in fact highlighting contemporary issues. In both narratives, the present suffers from the impact of racial domination on Black people's family life and interracial love. Besides, as Trudier Harris points out, neo-slave narratives express “the desire on the part of twentieth-century African American writers to rewrite history or, given the problems inherent in that endeavor, to reenvision what might have been possible during slavery in the United States” (62). This genre helps to imagine that “more black people resisted slavery than traditional histories tell us” (Harris 63). Butler's and Bradley's novels explore resistance strategies, but also their difficulties. In fact, Butler said that the idea for *Kindred* was born out of her “desire to correct a modern sense of shame for an older black generation that showed ‘acceptance’ of and ‘humility’ toward white masters and employers” (Wagers 27), showing how difficult resistance could be. Contrary to *The Chaneyville Incident*, and because it deals with time travel,¹ *Kindred* is also classified as speculative fiction, a term referring to literature set in a universe that differs from our own in varying degrees. A writer who chooses speculative fiction as his or her form of expression can question his or her own society in a way that would be too provocative in more mainstream forms. Such works “blur chronological time and portray interactions between real, ghostly, and imagined figures” (Commander 5). It offers the author and the reader the freedom to think outside conventions. Both slave and speculative narratives speak to the desire of freedom: liberty from convention and from bondage.

¹ Dana Franklin enjoys a “supernatural status, as a time-traveling present-past subject” which “fractures rational time-space progression by allowing her to be experientially tied to urban California in 1976 and a Maryland slave plantation roughly 200 years earlier” (McKittrick 1).

Both Bradley and Butler illustrate Trudier Harris's claim that "no matter where an African American writer is born in the United States . . . , he or she feels *compelled* to confront the American South and all its bloody history in his or her writings. . . . The American South, therefore, becomes a rite of passage for African American writers" (1-2). Harris points out that African American novelists experience and depict a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the South, so that their representations of that region correspond to the topos of "a cultured hell" (Claude McKay's phrase from the poem "America" [1921]). The Mason-Dixon line, constituting the border between the safe Northern territory and the scary "cultured hell" of the South, acquires prominence in the geographical representations of the region.

However, the South is not only a site of fear for African American writers: while it represents danger and constitutes "a reminder of guilt and servitude that had to be abandoned," it is also "the site of the birth of African American culture, the locale of one's ancestors, and therefore the source of one's collective and individual identity" (Page 7). For those who left the South or who were born elsewhere, this region is "like a ghost . . . always already both present and absent, undying yet inaccessible" (7). Furthermore, the South is also the place associated with the weaving of complex intersubjective links between individuals and community, a collective creation which is "as tough and real as the iron chains that bound African Americans" (42-43). These links can both help an individual and imprison him /her, so that the journey to the South is fraught with the risk of losing one's freedom.

Last but not least, the two novels display certain characteristics often associated with Southern literature. A quick list of the elements Bradley and Butler employ includes using the supernatural to translate the character's psychological reality; representing violence as both a collective experience and a fruit of past tensions; dramatizing the conflict between light and darkness; and, in Bradley's novel, equating the death of the father and the erasure of God. In addition, a big family with a complicated past is evoked in both novels, albeit the protagonists-narrators, Dana and John, have both severed their ties with their blood relatives and live in relative isolation. These characters are able to better understand their respective family situations when they get to know the kin who are dead in the narrative present. This knowledge, however, comes at a high cost, and they struggle against achieving it.²

The present contribution will focus on the representations of the protagonists' journeys South. The physical return to the sites where Dana Franklin and John Washington can perceive their families' origins is dangerous, but essential for them to be able to move on with their own lives. Dana and John begin by traveling there by themselves, but their life partners must join them for the initiation to be complete. Without examining the descriptions of landscape in detail, the article will show how the protagonists react to Southern landscape and nature, as this throws a certain light on their relationship to tradition and to the frames of reference constituted by the literary genres the novels belong to. Finally, interracial love stories and the homelessness of the protagonists will be discussed.

² See Spill and Tromble who both list characteristics of Southern literature.

A Journey South: Southern Landscape and the Physical Integrity of African Americans

Instead of focusing on what the protagonists of the two novels actually learn about their ancestors, it is interesting to compare the circumstances in which John and Dana, as well as their white partners Judith and Kevin, encounter, get to know, and finally come to terms with their family secrets. Consequently, the journey to the South will be discussed first. During these trips, “the physical movement becomes symbolic passage as external space and physical places become metaphors for internal states of being” (Page 29). In both novels, it proves to be necessary for the protagonists to physically come back “home” in order to solve the riddles linked to their ancestors and to understand their ancestors’ secrets. However, the actual homecoming is more traumatic for the woman narrator in Butler’s text, since it involves being forced to travel in time to the Antebellum South without any possibility of controlling the movement backward in time and with an extremely limited possibility of provoking return to the twentieth century. This means that Dana is treated like a slave and suffers physical abuse. Interestingly, while the male narrator of Bradley’s novel uses more down-to-earth methods to achieve his goal (he starts off by studying available historical sources and family records), he too makes himself undergo some measure of physical strain by returning not only to his hometown, where he does not feel comfortable, but by living in an isolated cabin in the woods, which his girlfriend describes as a return to the seventeenth century. Throughout the novel, he nevertheless maintains a higher measure of control over what he does and does not do than Dana.

Butler’s protagonist, Dana, keeps returning to the Weylin plantation in Maryland over the period of what amounts to a fortnight in her twentieth-century California but to many months in Maryland. The stay is much longer for her husband Kevin, who is stranded in the past for five years. The last return to Maryland, which closes the novel, is a trip they both take to the location where the plantation used to be after Dana is no longer forced to travel in time and save her white ancestor’s life.³ This is also the only return Dana undertakes of her own free will, all the previous trips South were “coerced passages,” mirroring the lack of freedom of movement characteristic of the Middle Passage and more generally of slaves’ plight. Indeed, “in her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors” (Crossley xi).

When Kevin travels to the 19th century, he does it intentionally: indeed, he decides to follow his wife into the past, by grabbing her arm when she starts traveling. However, his agency is limited: he does not manage to come back with her. During his five-year-stay in the nineteenth century, he travels to many places, unlike Dana, for whom doing so would be extremely problematic. In the course of the last trip to Maryland, Dana and Kevin discover that Weylin house has disappeared without a trace, although they see a few similar Georgian Colonials: “The house was dust, like Rufus” (Butler 262). Although the local people claim ignorance, Dana and Kevin find “a notice that Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was partially destroyed,” as well as a list of slaves destined to be put on sale (262). In this way, they discover that Dana’s ancestors, Joe and Hagar, were not sold, and neither were two of Dana’s friends, Nigel and Carrie. Dana draws

³ At this point in the narrative, the reader knows that Rufus, Dana’s ancestor who has been repeatedly making her come to his rescue since he was five years old, is no longer going to do so. Indeed, just before returning to California for the last time, Dana killed him after he had conceived his two children. These children are the founders of her family, so she does not need to keep him alive anymore.

the conclusion that Nigel burnt down the house in order to hide the evidence of Rufus's murder after she killed him in self-defense.

John Washington, in Bradley's novel, comes back to the place where he was born and grew up. Instead of staying at his mother's house on top of the Hill, he moves into a cabin belonging to his old friend Jack Crawley, his father's best friend, who helped bring him up and who requested John's presence by his deathbed. Contrary to the house Moses Washington, John's father, built for his family, this cabin is situated in a place "where, quite literally, the sun didn't shine" (Bradley 17). The cabin is devoid of the most elementary comfort that he enjoys in his own house in Philadelphia and in his childhood home located close to Jack's cabin. While his trip to this place is not supernatural, the place where the cabin is situated has been described as haunted to all children growing up in the area. In fact, it is the place of past tragedies: Jack's family perished in an epidemic which he and another boy, Josh, survived. As John explains later, a smallpox epidemic erupted there twice, and the second time, in 1904, the death rate was "close to a hundred percent" (272). The cabin is situated in the middle of the woods, far away from the human settlement where John's mother still lives and which is on the other side of the hill from the cabin. For Judith, it is a relic from another century, so she is shocked that John might elect to live there: "'It's just perfectly normal for you to walk away from everything to come set up housekeeping in a one-room shack with a dirt floor'" (256). The original inhabitant of the cabin, Jack, is from the start presented as an outcast, not only by virtue of being born in a cursed place and living out in the woods, but also because he belongs to a lower social class than John's mother, who does not allow him to enter her house.

The direction of the journey(s) the protagonists undertake is, strictly speaking, west or east rather than south, and yet culturally they move South. Once they cross the "scary Mason-Dixon line," they discover "that the very southern landscape and the white people in it become enemies of black people" (Harris 10). This is made obvious, in Butler's text, by the association between Antebellum Southern violence, even before Dana learns where and when exactly she is. Indeed, upon the first visit, which only lasts for a few minutes, Dana saves a drowning child's life, only to face the boy's mother's anger and his father's gun. The ghostliness of this South is highlighted in the image of the river.

Dana's first visit dramatizes crossing the border between past and present in the form of entering a river. As Brogan points out, in numerous works by African American novelists "the mediate nature of ghosts (always associated with water imagery) cannot be separated from the disaster of the Middle Passage" (16). African, Greek and other countries' mythologies claim that the river constitutes the border between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Water is also believed to be endowed with the capacity to remember. In her influential essay, "The Site of Memory," Morrison writes: "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" (77). In *Kindred*, appropriately, the first time Dana sees Rufus is when he is drowning in the river: at this point in the narrative, they both cross the symbolic border between life and death. An already-dead ancestor, a white child, is rescued from dying by a not-yet-born Black female descendant who could not be born if Rufus died at this moment. At the same time, the river Dana dives into to save his life is also the Lethe, the Greek underworld river whose water helps the souls of the recently deceased to forget their past suffering and in which a soul about to be reborn must bathe so as to obliterate its previous existence. Dana must cross it back to recover her memory of past family trauma.

Butler's use of the river as a site of recovering memory bridges the gap between classical Greek, traditional African and contemporary African American representations of the spiritual reality. In African mythology, rivers are places related to the underworld, too. In her essay on African contribution to beliefs of Afro-Americans, Margaret Washington mentions that in BaKongo religion, "deceased ancestors became white creatures called *bakulu*, who lived . . . under riverbeds and lakes" (176). Rufus, a white body emerging from the waves of the nameless river, is Dana's long dead ancestor who claims his right to her aid by recognizing the unity of all humans, regardless of whether they are alive or not born yet, a concept typical of African *Weltanschauung* (Washington 56). The river symbolism, the lack of knowledge about the geographical situation, and the suddenness of movement all intensify the feeling of hauntedness. From this moment on, Dana is possessed by Rufus, dead in her time but able to call her to his side whenever he is in danger of dying.

Contrary to *Kindred*, in which the actual location of the Weylin plantation is only discovered with difficulty over a long period of time, the reader of *The Chaneysville Incident* is informed immediately that the Town is "located '19 miles and 290 perches north of Mason and Dixon's Line'" (11). Although geographically it is situated in the North, the narrator labels the Town's attitude in the Civil War as "ambiguous," claiming that its citizens enlisted on both sides of the conflict. What is more, the Town and the County developed well before the war and declined economically after its end, which mirrors the situation in the South (12). The best neighborhood of the Town, called the Heights, is to be found in its southern part (168), and the county Jail is located south of Jack's cabin (54). In this way, the southern side of the Town combines sites of fine living and of repression, highlighting the ambivalence of the South mentioned earlier.

On the whole, Bradley's novel depicts the South as "a big, dark place" (357). Indeed, the South used to be the source of slave work and later, of cheap labor (53). It is also the direction where all kinds of dangers are encountered. Chaneysville, where John's father Moses died in mysterious circumstances, is south of the Town and the Hill (237). This is where both John and Moses find the tomb of C.K. (John's great-grandfather) along with twelve other graves. These graves belong to people who have run away from slavery and who preferred committing suicide to being caught by slave catchers. The graveyard faces south and C.K. killed himself in its southeast corner (376). This cemetery is set in a bucolic setting: "the hillside was smooth and clean and white, interrupted only by the rounded tops of the gravestones.⁴ The hillside fell away into a silent valley, the snow cover deep and cottony-looking, shining golden in the sun" (376). These geographical markers of trauma are in fact hidden under the pristine cover of snow, but their presence disrupts the innocence and purity of the snow-covered meadow. Thus, the South is consistently associated with death, bondage, danger and darkness, it is the direction bad tidings come from and the direction dead bodies face.

Throughout the novel, the narrator is threatened with a blizzard. John is familiar with weather patterns in the area, so he knows what to expect. The first stage of the blizzard consists in snow falling from the clouds which had been driven by the south wind, called "matronly wind" (47, 76, 243, 306). This adjective is associated with mature womanhood, childcare and marriage, but also with supervision. After the snowfall, a misleading period of calm weather may occur, but it is followed by the most dangerous phase, brought about

⁴ These bigger gravestones belong to white families, the slaves' gravestones are small and triangular in shape.

by the west wind, “witch wind, cold and sterile” (47). This wind is described as lifeless and infertile, but also endowed with special powers. The reader might interpret the south wind as slavery, setting and preparing the scene for present day Black people’s difficulties, or as the presence of oppressive family, while the west wind represents the empty promises of westward expansion and the opportunities it was supposed to bring to all American citizens.

The protagonists of both novels are initially cut off from their regular partners while sojourning in the place where they go to discover family secrets, and then joined by them. In a way, their stays in the past can be read as initiation rituals. For Dana, of course, it is impossible to communicate with her husband across time; and John chooses not to call his girlfriend or to write to her. Both protagonists need their full attention focused on their encounter with the Other: the mysterious family members and more generally, their ancestors’ lived experience. However, this state of isolation is achieved against their wishes: they are both forced to abandon their comfortable lives, Dana by a mysterious force of attraction drawing her to Rufus’s side whenever he is endangered, and John by Jack’s deathbed request. In this way, they are confronted with the past they previously refused to acknowledge.

Both novels dramatize the tension between an endotic journey and an exotic one. These two terms were coined by the French travel theorist Jean-Didier Urbain. “Endotic travel . . . is an exercise in staying close by, not leaving the familiar and traveling interstitially through a world that is assumed to be known” (Cronin 229). When a protagonist undertakes an endotic travel, he or she is trying to find his own identity (Viviès 7). By contrast, exotic travel implies visiting a place which is very distant from what the traveler knows, and its aim is to look for the Other (Viviès 7). For John, in Bradley’s novel, the Hill is familiar and infra-ordinary; he is the cultural insider; for Judith, the Hill is exotic and extraordinary. Dana may not know the South when she first gets there (indeed, the novel dramatizes her constant fear of transgressing the rules that she does not know or has not managed to integrate sufficiently), and yet, she is *of* the South not only because her ancestors lived there, but also because, by the time Kevin gets to Maryland, she has had time to acquire some knowledge of it.

Furthermore, while both Dana and John live in a big city, they do not have the same relationship to nature. Dana is a city-dweller, has no previous experience with living in the woods, and the novel contains several passages in which she worries about her inability to face wild animals, poisonous plants, and other dangers that might lurk in Maryland forests. The one day she spends working in the field is a terrifying and exhausting experience for her. The only places where she feels reasonably well are her California home, and sometimes, the inside of buildings on the Weylin plantation. At the same time, this well-being is not necessarily translated into a sense of safety. *Kindred* does not present Southern nature nostalgically, insisting on its beauty. By contrast, John is well prepared to live in the woods: he is a good hunter, can read the weather and knows the woods very well, thanks to the education Jack gave him. However, like Dana, he is partly oblivious to the beauty of the landscape, which his girlfriend finds striking, even if he manages to imagine how beautiful this landscape may seem to a person unfamiliar with the violent past of the region.

Dana’s imaginings of nature are very far from the Romantic ideal of a healing nature and from the American myth of wilderness as a place of opportunity. She does not appear to have retained, or recovered, the ability to coexist harmoniously with nature. At the same time, her time travel is not dependent on technology: indeed, it appears that it is solely

possible thanks to Rufus's special power, which he cannot control either. His power to make Dana appear by his side seems to be innate. It might be argued that Butler's preference to focus on (supernatural) psychological powers (also featured in several other novels, such as her cycle *Seed to Harvest* or *Parable of the Sower*) is an ironic comment on the so-called "blanching of the future," namely the trend to represent any future human society as "racially unmarked," or rather, "covertly racialized as white" (Dubey 15). "Until very recently, African Americans in particular were racially coded as the primitive others of scientific rationality and technological progress" (16). Dana is excluded from technology and forced to depend on nature for her survival, but whatever form nature takes, it is threatening.

Even if John can survive and even be comfortable in the woods in the middle of winter, nature is certainly not a pleasant refuge from "the stress of modern civilization" (Pughe and Granger 5) for him. Arguably, nature in *The Chaneysville Incident* might be seen as "a space of freedom" (Gavillon 51), but the text makes it clear that the freedom to investigate and to follow the natural rhythms does not make John feel happy or relaxed. Note that Jack, the previous resident of the cabin, was forced to remain in the settlement after all the adults had died in the epidemic, because the inhabitants of the other side of the Hill refused to let him come near them. This left him free to die or to live. His existence was always governed by seasonal rhythms of nature, but this existence did not lead to happiness thanks to its conformity to natural rhythm, because he had been deserted by the community he was born into and rejected by the closest neighbors. On the Hill, the isolation only makes the sense of community stronger to a certain point. In Bradley's novel, nature is a familiar universe but it is nevertheless either indifferent or hostile to humans.

Ancestral Secrets

Dana meets Rufus and Alice in person, interacts with them, saves Rufus's life several times and gets to know them intimately during her ever longer stays in the past. The fact that each of Dana's stays in the past appears to be longer than the previous one results from the fact that the returns to the present are triggered by her fear of death, and the longer she stays in the past, the less afraid she seems to be. This indirectly comments on the ease with which a person may accept slavery as a non-life-threatening system, as a way of life, even when one is a slave. Dana meets Rufus and Alice when they are children, but then accompanies them throughout their youths to the days of their death over a period of about twenty or twenty-five years, since this is the time span of cumulative stays in the past. Still, she pays for her knowledge with wounds, scars and losses of body parts, missing teeth and finally a cut-off arm.

John's discovering his family secrets and stories is a process that spans many years, starting in his childhood with the discovery of his father's notes and writings in the attic and ending with the nine-day stay in and near his hometown. John is summoned by his dying friend who was also a foster father to him, spends the last days with him and prepares the body for the funeral, but ends up re-reading the documents his father had left in his study before committing suicide, as well as those that a solicitor gives him as part of his late father's legacy. Being a historian, John tries to analyze the documents using the logic, research experience and know-how of the discipline. However, this seems to lead nowhere, and it is thanks to his girlfriend's presence that he finally understands the story, as she

makes him admit that the missing elements which kept escaping him can be filled in thanks to imagination. At the end of the novel, John burns “the tools of his trade” (pens, inks and pencils, cards and pads) in front of Jack’s cabin, while leaving his father’s notes and other source material in a safe place, for the next person who might need them (Bradley 431). This act may mean that John has recognized the limits of historical knowledge or that he is disappointed with his vocation; it might also simply be a way of putting his family ghosts to rest.

Ultimately, one way of looking at Bradley’s and Butler’s texts is seeing them as travel accounts. Matthew Graves highlights that this genre expresses the desire to share extraordinary and unique experiences and to “claim unknown places as one’s own” (186, translation mine).⁵ However, Dana does not appropriate the unknown space but rather is appropriated by it. Through revisiting the symbolic places of the confines of the free United States, the protagonists build a new identitary geography and pay for this construction with their bodily and / or psychological integrity. While the texts display affinity with post-modernity via hybrid genres, intertextuality, subverting the relationship between the center and the periphery etc., it is not done playfully, but in earnest.

Continuities and Break-Ups

One of the underlying principles of the two texts is the opposition of continuities and break-ups. As has been mentioned, the protagonists cut the ties with their immediate families, either by choice or because their families reject them on account of their lifestyle choices. By the time the split is effective, both families have already suffered losses due to the untimely deaths of Dana’s parents, John’s father and his younger brother. The break-ups leave Dana and John in isolation.

Nevertheless, considering the family stories of both protagonists, these break-ups can be considered a tradition in both families. First of all, Dana’s ancestors, who lived in Maryland, at one point migrated to California, perhaps in early twentieth century when numerous Southern Blacks did so. Besides, Rufus’s lie about selling his and Alice’s children off resulted in the destruction of the Weylin plantation: indeed, Rufus lied to Alice so as to make her obedient, but the news made her commit suicide; then he wished to replace her with Dana as his lover, but Dana killed him and the murder was never discovered, since the house burned down. It is likely that Alice and Rufus’s children were raised in Baltimore, where Rufus’s mother lived. Besides, while Alice’s name was recorded in the family Bible, her story was lost, and the family tree starting with her was hidden in a carved wooden chest.

As for John’s ancestors, C.K. escaped slavery and arrived in Philadelphia, where he spent some time before moving to the site where the bulk of the novel is set, close to the Mason-Dixon Line. C.K. also participated in several slave saving expeditions to the South, meeting the mother of John’s grandfather during one such outing. His grandson Moses, born in Philadelphia, followed into C.K.’s footsteps and left the big city in order to live near the Mason-Dixon Line. Moses is consistently presented as a mysterious man, who on a few occasions radically and suddenly changed his lifestyle and behavior.

⁵ “Le récit de voyage a été souvent comparé au tourisme dans sa soif de l’extraordinaire, de l’expérience inédite, dans son besoin de s’approprier des espaces inconnus, comme dans sa capacité de les user.”

Both novels also dramatize continuities, by following the master plot of the cultural ghost story, defined in Kathleen Brogan's seminal study as "a paradigmatic movement from possession to exorcism" (6). In this kind of narrative, a traumatic event, or a series of such events, leads to pathologies of memory, in which the recollection of traumatic events is involuntary and automatic, and prevents the individual from leading a normal life. The narrative often begins when the protagonist becomes aware of the haunting and begins the process of coming to terms with it; it usually ends with a successful exorcism, which enables the protagonist to transform the past trauma into a usable story that may reinforce his or her links with community. The ghosts may be "full-bodied and dangerous," as is the case of *Beloved* in Toni Morrison's eponymous novel, they can also be more elusive. The traumatic experience is linked to racial oppression, death of family members, losing home, language, culture and being forced to leave one's native country. The ghost is a messenger from the past, communicating the unspeakable events that have been forgotten, providing the link with the past while at the same time highlighting the difficulties of historical reconstruction and the role imagination plays in bridging the gap.

Apart from the ghostly presence of ancestors, there is another kind of traces of the past, in the form of the practices of domination that inform the protagonists lives. These seem to replace the positive continuities represented by such Southern values as loyalty, cohesiveness and family involvement. Dana is struck by the persistence of violence in racial relations on the global scale (196), but the violence that is prominent in the plot remains interpersonal and domestic.

As both protagonists have a white partner, their love relationship is built in the shadow of other people's perception of the legality and propriety of such unions. For instance, Dana's aunt and uncle, who brought her up, refuse to accept Kevin as a family member, and the same is true about Kevin's only surviving close kin, his sister. So, in effect, Dana and Kevin are estranged from their blood families because they decide to marry across the barrier of race. As far as John and Judith are concerned, they both seem to lead quite solitary lives: Judith is a psychologist and devotes a lot of time to her work, John has been refusing to visit his mother for years and she never comes to see him, and the break has come about much earlier than John's moving in with Judith.

On numerous occasions in *Kindred*, Dana downplays the difficulties encountered by interracial couples in her time and defends the idea that in 1976, mixed marriages are not only legal but common. She might subscribe to the idea that "increased rates of interracial marriage . . . [are] evidence of a 'revolution' in values that is ushering in a new nonracial America" (Collins 75). However, the reader notices that few seem to accept Dana's relationship with Kevin. In truth, her marriage to Kevin may appear to be an unusual occurrence in the extra-textual American reality, given that most heterosexual African American women, even today, "lack substantive opportunities to exercise the freedom of choice" in marrying across races (Collins 263).

Butler's novel is set less than ten years after the *Loving v. Virginia* case, when the Supreme Court authorized interracial marriages and invalidated state anti-miscegenation laws. In California, where the narrator resides, interracial marriages were legalized in 1948 (*Perez v. Lippold*). However, Dana's and Kevin's families' reactions are more in keeping with the public opinion: for example, "a Gallup poll in 1958 found that 96% of white

Americans disapproved of interracial marriages.”⁶ According to the Pew report on intermarriage in the USA, published in 2017, even today Black men are twice as likely to intermarry as African American women, even though the opposition to intermarriage has dropped dramatically. The report also states that although the public is now much more inclined to accept intermarriage, a still significant number of people, particularly older ones, feel disinclined to accept the idea that a family member might marry a person of a different race or ethnicity (Livingston and Brown). In her essay, Maria P. P. Root claims that interracial dating “can be fraught with all the tensions that have historically accompanied it” (446) and as for interracial marriage, it is not fully accepted by the public yet. Moreover, if one considers the response to interracial marriage within the African American community alone, it can be observed that “Black men who date and marry White women are received quite differently from Black women who date and marry White men” (Collins 261).

The choice of the states where the plots of the two novels are set is significant when one thinks about the history of interracial bans in the United States. Indeed, Maryland was the first state that enacted anti-miscegenation laws, as early as 1664. In contrast, Pennsylvania was the first state which repealed anti-miscegenation laws in 1780.⁷ The two novels therefore similarly portray interracial love relationships and the hardships they involve. In Butler’s novel, the representation of Dana and Kevin’s marriage provides a bridge between two very different situations the young woman experiences.

That rejecting familial racial backdrop, against which the trips to Maryland stand out sharply in bas-relief, reseats race in a central position in Dana and Kevin’s lives. . . . Their trips serve to remind them that race dominates the twentieth-century landscape in ways comparable to how it dominated the nineteenth-century landscape. Again, the past is not past, and love alone is not necessarily a buffer against racism. (Harris 79-80).

The same claim could be made about Judith and John. Despite the difficulties, Judith and Kevin do not give up on their Black partners even though John might be willing to end the relationship with Judith. However, in spite of their loyalty, certain traces of less savory emotions color their relationship to Black partners. To put the main characters’ love relationships into perspective, both authors evoke older times and other cases of interracial love. In both texts, initially, blood is stronger than love, and history is more powerful than the present. The claims of the dead ancestors must be satisfied before the protagonists are granted the freedom to live their love.

Butler depicts Rufus’s jealous love for Alice, his childhood playmate born of a free mother. This possessive feeling makes him hunt for her when she runs away with her slave husband, has the man killed and Alice maimed, only to buy her for himself. The novel shows how his ideas about interracial love may have been influenced by Dana’s presence and example, but given Rufus’s unpredictable, possessive and immature personality, his relationship with Alice degenerates to such an extent that she commits suicide. In parallel, as Dana is spending ever longer periods in the past, she discovers similarities between Kevin and Rufus, but decides to overcome her fears. Her rejection of Rufus as a potential

⁶ blog.legalsolutions.thomsonreuters.com, accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

⁷ blog.legalsolutions.thomsonreuters.com, accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

lover and her killing him enables her to come back permanently to Kevin, or at least that is the promise she and Kevin seem to believe in at the end. In this way, Dana's rebellion against the sexual advances of a white man, Rufus, makes it possible for her to guiltlessly enjoy the sexual advances of the white man she is married to.

Butler provides a lot of details about Kevin and Dana's relationship: the reader learns how they met, what the circumstances of their marriage were, and the ending of the novel arguably focuses on the promise of their happily-ever-after life. By contrast, Bradley deals with John and Judith's relationship in a more oblique way. The reader knows that they live together and have been together for about five years. Tellingly, Judith complains that John does not talk to her about his family and hometown, casting herself as the more open partner, though the reader does not know much about her family either. In the course of Bradley's novel, the reader discovers that Judith may be a descendant of a slave trader, since one of her ancestors was a sea-captain (241). She certainly is a descendant of slave masters, being the daughter of "one-of-the-finest-families-in-Virginia" (113). Wagers observes that "Judith . . . unknowingly but conspicuously exercises a related choice by remaining unaware of her own familial ties to the town's slaveholding founders" (41). However, Bradley attracts the reader's attention to this heritage in his description of Judith, who, like a typical Southern belle, has small, beautiful feet: "a foot so small and dainty it seemed more suited to ballet slippers than to the 'sensible' shoes she wore" (114). Moreover, Judith's mother advised her never to do anything that might result in sweating, as this was an unladylike behavior (266). In the narrative present, she is a hard-working psychologist who clearly cares about preserving the relationship with John. John, however, does not feel comfortable about her lack of understanding, resulting from her ignorance about his family or the social group he stems from. Nevertheless, he shields her himself from any enlightenment; if she comes to the Hill, it is because she insists on doing so.

John's family tree certainly includes white ancestors: his mother comes from a light-skinned family. John vents his wrath at this state of things in the short note he sends to Judith, informing her that he is probably not coming back to her. His resentment also flares up at one point when he is still a young student dating another young white woman. It builds up to a fury, which drives him to rape his date after coming back from his brother's funeral (Bradley 74-75). In this way, after following the middle-class codes of romantic love, inviting his sweetheart for dinner in a restaurant and then accompanying her home, he assumes the controlling image of the Black rapist, using his "penis as a weapon of violence against White women" (Collins 64). This image originates in the African Americans' slave past and was devised to justify their animal status. If one short trip to his hometown results in John's complying with a controlling image he despises, it may explain why he refuses to come back to the Hill. Besides, the memory of this rape must haunt his relationship with Judith, but this memory is somewhat put to rest when "John narrates C.K. and Harriette's reunion, [as] he enacts reconciliation in his own relationship" (Wagner 37). The novel's juxtaposition of elements which help classify Judith as a white Southern lady with those that essentialize John as a Black rapist (while neither of these labels appears to be "true") plays upon the opposition between total lack of desire and excessive desire that is associated with those types in "stories designating hierarchical relationships among race, class, and gender" (Donaldson and Jones 1).

The shame and the danger of having a love relationship with a white person is further illustrated with two stories. The novel contains a lengthy episode dealing with the lynching

of Josh, an albino African American, a friend of John's father's, who falls in love with a white woman (Bradley 78-112). Josh decides to pass for white and to marry her. However, his racial identity is known to his sweetheart's father and brothers, who imprison him and prevent the girl from helping him. He is rescued from certain death by Moses and Jack. The second tale deals with the feelings of a child of mixed origins, Harriet: her rejection of her mother results from the idea that the latter is debasing herself living as a white man's concubine and from her own self-hatred because she feels she is eating the white man's bread without even debasing herself to earn it. Harriet is not related by blood to John: while she was his ancestor's partner, she and their child chose to die rather than be captured by slave catchers. In this way, Harriet, her mother and Josh serve as reminders that romantic involvement with a white person is either an illusion or a threat to one's security, or both.

However, Judith and Kevin become involved in the quest for the truth about their partners' family past. More than that, they offer John and Dana essential help to fully understand the past, and their interracial relationships grow stronger after the ordeal of negotiating the past together. Having said that, neither narrative offers a happy ending: "Although there are elements of hope in Butler's projects, this is not her central concern—revealing the hierarchical and self-destructive nature of the human species is" (Gibney 105). The end of *Kindred* is not univocally optimistic, and the same can be said about Bradley's novel.

Finally, the journey South is also related to the issue of home and homelessness. *Kindred* opens with a striking prolepsis: "I lost an arm on my last trip home" (9). What Dana means is that it was hurt beyond healing when she last came back from nineteenth century Maryland to twentieth century California, because just before returning, she killed Rufus, whose corpse burdened her arm, and when she found herself in her house, her arm was stuck in the wall so that it was necessary to cut it off. As Tananarive Due explains, Dana is "literally sacrificing her flesh as a cost for the experience and the memory" (276). The opening sentence features the protagonist calling the Weylin plantation her home, and turns her house into an instrument of torture while also evoking Rufus's shapeshifting into a house. In other words, Dana still inhabits a white man's house, since Kevin was the one who paid for it, but also, metaphorically, because Rufus shapeshifted into this house. The house is therefore associated with bondage and physical pain rather than offering protection. Throughout the novel, Dana's perception of what can be called her home changes. First of all, the house she inhabits is new to her, as she is in the process of moving in when Rufus makes her come to his rescue for the first time. Kevin, too, can say after a few years spent in Maryland that he no longer remembers how to use various things in his house (190-91). Dana realizes early on that her new house offers no protection, and then goes through two stages: at first, she thinks that Alice's mother's cabin in the woods could be her "refuge" because it is inhabited by her ancestors (37); then she believes that she is safe in certain places at the plantation (for example, Kevin's room there becomes her "refuge" [81]). In fact, Dana feels "caught between [Rufus's] home and mine" (115). What is more, she ends up by thinking that there is a similarity between the two houses "big comfortable rooms that reminded me a little of the rooms in the Weylin house" (193).

The novel depicts Dana being offered a home by various characters. The first of those is Kevin, who tells her "'just keep coming home'" (51), then she receives a similar proposal from Rufus's father and Rufus himself (143, 201). As an orphaned child, she was offered a home in her aunt and uncle's house, where she grieved after her mother's death (258).

These examples show that throughout the text, various characters view Dana as homeless, or as having inadequate or insufficient protection granted to her. At the same time, she never seems to really feel at home in any of the offered spaces. John Washington in Bradley's novel is also presented as homeless, but in his case this is a condition he seems to embrace. Thus, he gives up his childhood home built by the father, who fascinated and scared him. This departure is triggered by his disapproval of what he construes as his mother's betrayal of his younger brother. With the father and the younger brother both dead, he apparently wants to take permanent leave of the house which he finds oppressive. Later, he embraces a temporary refuge in Jack's cabin. He appears to abandon his Philadelphia home, shared with Judith, easily enough. This might link this character to the stereotypical representations of rootless and restless Black men, always on the run and unable to attach themselves to a woman.

While imagining and writing their novels, Butler and Bradley were attempting to decide which pasts to claim, which versions of history to challenge, and how to achieve this goal. The pasts Dana and John decide to claim include white and black ancestors, complex interracial relationships, erasing differences between ancestors and descendants, and difficult race / class / genders interactions. In order to claim and make use of their pasts, they have to recognize the impact of the past on the present and admit that their present relationships do not exist in a vacuum. They also have to recognize the similarities and differences between their respective white life partners and their white ancestors, or the white people whose actions influenced their black ancestors' lives. Dana and John also reach a point when they realize that their quest must end, that there is nothing more for them to discover, though future generations will perhaps continue it. This is why John leaves some of the papers behind, for another historian, and this is why Kevin tells Dana she will probably never know some things (Butler 264). Claiming the past also means accepting one's limits, acknowledging that one is powerless to change what has already happened, though one might hope to change one's perception of it. Finally, it offers a sliver of hope that one may be able to overcome past trauma and shame and open oneself to the person one shares their life with: this is why John wonders if Judith will understand why the smoke is rising, and why Dana goes to Maryland with Kevin.

Introducing *South to the Future*, Fred Hobson asserts that "the reality—and, even more, the mythology—of the poor, failed, defeated, backward-looking South has long since been replaced by the mythology of what in the 1970s came to be called the Sun Belt—prosperous, optimistic, forward-looking, air-conditioned, self-congratulatory, and guilt-free" (4). *Kindred* and *The Chaneysville Incident* were written at the end of the 1970s, so it might be interesting to wonder whether these novels claim the positive or the negative image as their own vision of the South. The Southern places they describe are certainly not modern, and what is more, the past shines through, in a way, for the buildings and landscapes the protagonists are looking at betray traces of older buildings, of other landscapes, and above all, of suffering and oppression. There is certainly some optimism in the endings of the two novels, but it is expressed in qualified terms. After all, John's burning the papers might announce his intention to commit suicide. Dana notices black and white children attending the same schools in Maryland, but older people gaze at her and Kevin maybe more than is comfortable. Ultimately, it seems that the first step on the road to a better future consists in coming to terms with one's difficult past rather than abandoning it. Whether this is sufficient for the future to be better is another story.

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Short-Lived, yet Long Remembered: Exhilaration and Other Escape Strategies in Ron Rash's *The Risen*

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"O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."
(Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*)

Ron Rash's seventh novel, *The Risen*, appeared in the United States in the fall 2016. His books have lately been following one another in particularly quick succession: *Something Rich and Strange*, a volume of selected stories, was published in 2014; Rash's magnificent sixth novel, *Above the Waterfall*, came out in 2015; *Poems {New and Selected}* was published in early 2016. *In the Valley* (stories and a novella based on *Serena*) came out in 2020. Ron Rash has doubtless become an extremely prolific writer whose frenetic pace it is not always easy for the critic to follow. *The Risen* is a love story, though it is not quite that. It is a detective story, though, as often with him, this aspect merely is a pretext for other pursuits. What is for sure is that, as in all Ron Rash's books, nature is omnipresent in *The Risen*, operating as much more than a mere backdrop. As in his second novel, *Saints at the River*, the power, beauty and unyielding continuity of nature are mostly epitomized by a river, in this case Panther Creek. As Rash's "interest in family dynamics" certainly is at the core of *The Risen*, its "very title is as boldly religious as his *Saints at the River* or *One Foot in Eden*" (Powell). *The Risen* also confirms the writer's characteristic merging of present and past.

The Risen develops along two time layers involving the same characters half a century apart. On the one hand, it tells the story of "a summer of love" at Panther Creek: the year is 1969; two brothers from Sylvia, North Carolina, Bill and Eugene Matney, meet Ligeia, a hippie girl from Florida, who gives them both a taste of the high life and introduces them to a counterculture that is otherwise slow to reach the mountains.¹ On the other hand, in the present of *The Risen*, which corresponds to our present, a skeleton encased in a shredded blue tarp comes to the surface after sections of the riverbank have collapsed. The police investigation that follows momentarily shakes the community and suddenly revives Eugene's memories of the long-gone past.

The sunny giddiness of youth at the end of the 1960s is thus made to contrast with a bleak awakening, forty-six years later: "The story is told by Eugene, who writes chapters that alternate between the furtive events of 1969 with his teenager lover . . . and the criminal case that torments him in 2015 with the discovery of her remains" (Weaver). Hence *The Risen* "provides a damaged man's look back at a long-ago and haunted past"

¹ "Ligeia turns out to be a Daytona Beach wild child whose parents believe she might benefit from good old churchgoing reprogramming Instead, [she] brings to the sticks all the freedom and dangerous allure of the Summer of Love" (Welch).

(Kirkus). The two time layers keep intermingling, allowing contrasting portrayals of the two brothers to develop, both as young men and as older men.² Likewise, Eugene as a first-person narrator, a man capable with words, sharply contrasts with his bashfulness at the time of events: “Can your brother talk?” (20), Ligeia asks Bill when they first meet.

Though Eugene’s memory focuses on the events of one specific summer, forty-six years earlier, many other memories bristle around the summer 1969, as elements of the Matney family history are scattered throughout his narrative, as when Eugene contemplates “[his] daughter Sarah’s photograph, the sole proof in this house that [he] once had a family” (29). The insistent return of memories, which, apart from those involving Ligeia and the river, are mostly unpleasant ones, is encapsulated by a haunting detail from a print by Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, that hung in the grandfather’s office: Rembrandt’s “disembodied hand comes to me with an almost hallucinatory intensity, beckons me back to a childhood afternoon when Bill pressed a blade into my flesh and cut” (130). At that point Eugene remembers when the old man actually coerced twelve-year-old Bill into performing his first surgical operation on his younger brother. A traumatic experience for both, this memory is also a compelling illustration of the kind of education the brothers received from “their tyrannical town doctor grandfather” (Kirkus). Though the brothers now live radically different lives in which they no longer have much in common, the places where they evolve have remained singularly changeless. Against the backdrop of life in small-town Appalachia where conformism reigns, leaving little room for wildness, Ligeia’s fortuitous appearance in Eugene’s life awakens his taste for exhilaration and his wish to escape.

Eugene’s quest for elation and happiness indeed goes hand in hand with his increasing willingness to escape his narrow world. Escapism defines the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities or routine. There is actually a number of things characters are eager to escape from in *The Risen* (Eugene is not the only one in that situation): poverty; a rough, painful childhood marked by the loss of a parent; an excessively orthodox life made of too many restrictions; an overbearing figure of authority; a sense of failure, a sense of guilt, a sense of loss.

In the present of narration, the suspicious Sheriff pays a visit to Eugene: “I mean, look at you, your brother and grandfather both doctors and here you are, holed up drinking away your life. Maybe there’s something you want to forget involving Ligeia Mosely” (127). While, judging from his present circumstances, the Sheriff implies that Eugene could well be involved in the disappearance of Ligeia, his remarking on Eugene’s drinking makes it clear that the exhilaration of youth has turned sour and that occasional drinking bouts for the mere fun of it have transformed into an addictive behavior. Whereas *The Risen* hinges on the motifs of murder and betrayal, it is

² Portrayals of the two brothers form an uninterrupted counterpoint throughout the novel: “‘You know, little brother, being the shy sensitive artist only works on girls if they *know* you are shy and sensitive’” (25). Bill’s attitude toward Eugene is unfailingly marked by his condescending or patronizing tone. Bill, indeed, forever acts like the big brother: “‘Try not to let those beers shake much,’ he said, handing me the sack. ‘Of course with all that Aqua Velva you splashed on your face, my Aqua Velva, I might add, you could probably get drunk just licking around your lips. Anyway, it’s aftershave, not cologne, Eugene. If you want to smell good for a girl, use British Sterling or Jade East’” (55). He is also the one who equips his younger brother with “a thin foil packet,” makes sure Eugene “know[s] what it is” and, assuming that Ligeia “might decide [Eugene is] more her type” (which will, indeed, be the case), patronizingly insists: “‘Make sure you *do* put it on, little brother. Even if hippies believe in free love, that doesn’t mean they can’t get pregnant. They can get other things as well’” (56). This last quote is fraught with proleptic hints. Understandingly, Eugene often finds his brother’s superior tone quite vexing: “The tone in his voice, part instructive, part exasperation, was one I’d heard too often” (57).

paradoxically also a very luminous Ron Rash novel. Likewise, the theme of addiction, which is at the core of many of Rash's plots (in *The World Made Straight* and in *Above the Waterfall*) and recent stories (in *Burning Bright* and in *Nothing Gold Can Stay*), paradoxically takes cheerful hues by Panther Creek, as the trio meeting there is young and still naïve to the dangers of drugs and life in general. Though short-lived, exhilaration in *The Risen* is not only long remembered; it ends up being memorialized.

Ron Rash's Appalachia in the Late 1960s

Many aspects of *The Risen* contribute to making it a very Southern book. Abounding references to hippie counterculture, including rock music, drugs, free sex and love beads (23), unmistakably anchor *The Risen* in the sixties, an era in which Rash made a few prior incursions with the short story entitled "The Magic Bus," first collected in *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, or with secondary characters like Hubert Toomey in *The World Made Straight*. Likewise, part of the background, the Vietnam war is evoked several times. But while such events generated considerable changes—let alone small-scale revolutions—in the United States, their effects occurred tardily in Sylva or Asheville: "In San Francisco, the Summer of Love occurred in 1967, but it took two years to arrive in small-town Appalachia" (43). The area's isolation and sense of disconnectedness from the rest of the country is emphasized several times in *The Risen*.³

When I look back on the summer of 1969, I marvel at how unconnected Sylva seemed from the rest of the United States. To young people raised on the Internet, it would be unimaginable. A boy from Sylva had been killed in Vietnam, another badly injured, but the war never felt *within* our world. Neither did the antiwar movement in Berkeley, the civil right protests spilling into violence in Louisville and New York, or the killings of Sharon Tate and her friends in California. We saw these events on WLOS in Asheville, the sole TV station we could pick up, but drained to black and white and behind glass, it was as if we peered into a telescope at some alien world. (191)

While America is either at war, or rebelling against war, racial injustice or values suddenly deemed much too traditional, Bill and Eugene spend their Sundays fishing at Panther Creek. The plot is actually punctuated by references to the trout they fished as "[t]he midday sun fell full on the pool" (7), "[a] trout leaped in the pool's center and a ring rippled outward" (56) or "[a] trout rose in the pool's center, sipped an insect off the surface" (143). The way trout are insistently described as leaping, rising, or sipping in the creek's water, at the same time extraordinarily lively and immune to the wider world, echoes the brothers' protection from the world until that summer. In a striking reversal, the earlier image of the television evokes an aquarium from which they get surreptitious glimpses of a world to which they do not quite belong. However, some of the bright-colored trout end up being cut

³ Places convey a misleading sense of changelessness and permanence across generations: "I drive down I-40 to the Sylva exit but instead of my usual route home I go straight into town. Little has changed since my childhood. Businesses have different owners and different names, and another stoplight has been added, but the buildings themselves are the same. Main Street ends in the front of the same grassy hill, atop it the white marble courthouse that looms over the town, the same huge clock on the facade. At night the hill darkens except for the clock face, which brightens the sky like a second moon" (85).

up, ominously foreshadowing the plot's dramatic development: "The blade tip settled on the trout's abdomen and in one quick motion the flesh opened like scissored silk" (107). Throughout the novel, the innocence of trout fishing is contrasted with experience derived from fishing for trouble.⁴

The unmistakable southernness of *The Risen* is also elicited by its numerous intertextual references to Southern writers; they may, indeed, be more numerous than in any other book by Rash. First of all, the novel is dedicated to contemporary Southern writer George Singleton. William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams both make an appearance through one of the main motifs of the novel, drinking, inebriation and alcoholism. As the young version of Bill wonders whether there "[h]as . . . ever been a writer who *didn't* drink?" (28), his adult brother comments: "Years later I would read Faulkner's answer when someone asked why he drank. To feel braver and stronger, he'd answered, and I had been feeling exactly that way, but the sensation quickly drained away" (97-98). Years earlier, in the summer of 1969, Eugene's first beer is described as an utter moment of pleasure, tinged with a mild sense of guilt, which certainly contributes to sharpening the pleasure; this is when Williams is conjured up:

I pulled the tab, a soft sucking sound as the tin separated. Foam rose and covered the top. I wiped it off and raised the can and swallowed. It didn't taste good, but I knew instantly I could get used to that bitterness. That I *would* get used to it. . . . Here I was, underage and drinking, out in the open, and on a Sunday, and with a condom in my pocket. I drank quickly, hoping to blot out the sense of being observed from the heavens and by a grandfather who seemed as omnipresent as God. I tossed my empty on the bank, belched loudly, then went to the creek and pulled free another can. As I opened it and took a long swallow, I didn't experience what I'd read later in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the "click" Brick spoke of. No, what I felt on this Sunday afternoon was a gliding sensation, then a soft smooth landing where the world greeted me with a warm glowing smile. (58)

The first two sentences constitute a compelling sonorous poetic evocation of the opening of a beer can, intertwining monosyllabic words with alliterative /t/ and /s/ sounds, as *tab*, *tin* and *top* generate "a soft sucking sound." As the discovery of inebriation goes together with promises of another kind (Eugene has "a condom in [his] pocket"), an exhilarating sense of transgression weaves its way into that Sunday afternoon, reaching a peak in the young's man unembarrassed belching. As representatives of law and order (in the form of God or of a domineering grandfather) merge and vanish in a blur (in a burp), Eugene enjoys an unprecedented sense of freedom and wellbeing, "a gliding sensation," as he puts it, whose "soft" "smooth[ness]" echoes and prolongs the earlier /s/ sounds. While at this specific moment, pretty much everything seems possible to him, beer, the prospect of sex and poetry constitute a thrilling combination, which is certainly part of one of the sunniest moments of the novel.

⁴ I'm deliberately focusing on two examples, but there are more to be found: "A rod tip quivered and I reeled in a foot-long rainbow trout" (64); "I lift the stringer and showed Bill a fourteen-inch rainbow, the biggest we'd caught that summer" (97). For more considerations on the symbolism of trout in Ron Rash's writing, see Spill.

The Ghost of Thomas Wolfe

As suggested by the previous passage, *The Risen* qualifies as a Bildungsroman, insofar as it inventories a young man's first times⁵ as he remembers them, together with his vivid impression that things are about to change forever:⁶

Of course, who can forget that first love, or first sex, or first drink—especially if they all occur together. I also remember how, after Ligeia had left our lives, I'd worried for months that she might reappear and tell Bill what I'd never confessed to him. But after a while nostalgia supplanted guilt and our summer at Panther Creek became more a tender coming-of-age story, a summer of love complete with bucolic setting. (48-49)

This aspect puts *The Risen* in the same category as another Southern novel to which the plot alludes several times. That novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*,⁷ is one of Eugene and Bill's mother's favorite, so much so that she named her second born "after the book's main character" (169).⁸ In a 2012 article entitled "The Legacy of Thomas Wolfe in Contemporary Appalachian Fiction: Four Recent North Carolina Novels,"⁹ George Hovis demonstrates that "Thomas Wolfe continues to be an inspiring presence in—if not a shadow overhanging—Appalachian fiction" (70). The Rash novel Hovis discusses is *The Cove*, but *The Risen* certainly provides yet ampler examples of appearances of the ghost of Thomas Wolfe in Ron Rash's fiction.

An Asheville neighbor, Thomas Wolfe certainly occupies a particularly prominent place in *The Risen*, which actually includes many references to Wolfe and the family's boarding house, to Wolfe's first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, first published in 1929, as well as a hint at his last posthumous novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, in the form of "a nice new edition" in an Asheville bookstore (184).¹⁰ Of course, the notion of home is very obtrusive in both titles, defining a paradoxical place that one can neither fully escape nor return to. The expression "*by the wind grieved*,"¹¹ which appears in the conclusive sentence of the

⁵ "'I think you've drunk enough, little brother,' he said, and turned to Ligeia. 'His first time.' 'No shit,' Ligeia said" (62).

⁶ Eugene's impending sense that things will take a radically different turn is clearly expressed, together with the anticipated regret that he may be wrong: "*something could happen today that I will never forget*, I told myself. *Or it won't happen*" (55).

⁷ *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* is Wolfe's first novel, a coming-of-age story. The character of Eugene Gant is generally believed to be a depiction of Wolfe himself. The novel covers the span of time from Eugene's birth to the age of 19. The setting is the fictional town and state of Altamont, Catawba, a fictionalization of his hometown, Asheville, North Carolina.

⁸ While Wolfe's third-person narrator tells his story through the eyes of Eugene Gant, Eugene Matney is, as pointed out before, a first-person narrator.

⁹ Hovis interestingly points out that "[w]hereas Wolfe sought in his life and writing to escape the prison of the mountains in order to make contact with a more expansive, modern world, most contemporary Appalachian fiction retreats from modernity by moving backward in time and crawling as far as possible back into the remote fastnesses of the mountains in order to explore there a culture that has not yet been thoroughly obliterated by the forces of global capitalism and mass media" (70).

¹⁰ New editions of Wolfe's posthumous novel were indeed published, both in hardcover and in paperback, in 2010 and 2011.

¹¹ The phrase was selected and translated into French by Ron Rash's translator at Le Seuil as *Par le vent pleuré* for the publication of the French edition of the novel which came out in August 2017; it is doubtless a splendid title.

prologue of *Look Homeward, Angel*—the complete sentence reads: “O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again” (Wolfe, unpagged prologue)—surfaces in *The Risen* when, driving past the Wolfe house in Asheville, Eugene remembers his thwarted desire to write his dissertation on Wolfe (169). These words are in perfect keeping with the mood of *The Risen*, in which, as often with Rash, the motifs of loss, mourning and the urge to remember intertwine. Meanwhile, Ligeia’s elusive quality foreshadows the way she turns into a ghost in Eugene’s mind, a haunting object of the past: “I’m here when I appear” (22), she says. Characteristically, though Ligeia is quite ready to share in some of Eugene’s literary tastes, *Look Homeward, Angel* is a book she will “skip,” as she says, because “‘angels don’t much interest [her]’” (159).

A great admirer of Wolfe, Eugene defines himself throughout the novel either as an aspiring writer—“During my early twenties . . . I thought that, like Wolfe, I might write my own small-town novel...” (90)—or as a failed writer. Indeed, in the list of “what had been lost,” he repertories “the academic, perhaps even literary, career; a teaching job; the marriage” (135-36). But as the plot progresses towards its ultimate revelation, Eugene’s models evolve: “No longer the Eugene Gant who sought escape, but instead Raskolnikov, who embraces his incarceration” (244). This late allusion to Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* echoes the novel’s epigraph, which is borrowed from *The Brothers Karamazov* (another novel focusing on brothers): “And after that the punishment began,” permeating *The Risen* with the urge for truth and retribution. To say a last word about Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* is supposedly a largely autobiographical novel. Likewise, it is difficult to overlook the fact that, in the summer 1969, Ron Rash was a young man the age of Eugene Matney—a young man whose discovery of Dostoyevsky’s work was to leave a deep mark on him.¹² It is, of course, likely that there’s an autobiographical touch to those memories of first times with alcohol, drugs, sex and genuine rock music (all in profusion), though when asked, the writer demurely focuses on the atmosphere and the music:

I think the most autobiographical thing was growing up in a small town in the 1960s. I grew up in Boiling Springs. In 1969, in the sense of all that was happening in California, the Love Generation, all that change in the world, and yet nothing was happening like that in my town. And in the book, when I talk about the radio and music, that was my experience, as if these songs on the radio were like messages in a bottle. (qtd. in Woodward)

The Risen also quotes from the ending of Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* as Eugene remembers how he hoped that, “like Wolfe,” he would manage to “escape the ‘imprisoning’ mountains” (156), imagining himself as a traveling writer: “He was like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say ‘The town is near,’ but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges, Thomas Wolfe declares at the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and those words I spoke aloud to the bathroom mirror that summer, and thought of Wolfe in New York, writing between journeys to the West, and of Hemingway traveling from Paris cafés to African veldts” (156-57).

¹² “When I was 15 years old, I read Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. I was too young to understand many of the novel’s complexities, but the narrative’s intensity, particularly Raskolnikov’s murder of the pawnbroker, was overwhelming. I had entered books before, but for the first time in my life a book had entered me. Reading *Crime and Punishment* remains the most intense reading experience of my life and Dostoyevsky remains one of my favorite writers. I have remained fascinated with a question posed in *Crime and Punishment* and also *The Brothers Karamazov*: What happens if a person murders someone and is not found guilty in the eyes of the law?” (Rash, “On Writing to Bring Out the Dead”).

Memory, Exhilaration and a Mermaid

Between the lines, *The Risen* develops a reflection on the pervasive quality of memory, on how it insidiously threads its way into the present:¹³ “Some memories are heard before envisioned,” Eugene remarks, “so I sit on a bench and listen. The first song is too recent for me to recognize, then ‘Black Water’ by the Doobie Brothers¹⁴. It is the third song that triggers memory, not of Bill but of the afternoon Ligeia brought the joint” (185). Smoking pot for the first time, the sour taste of bootleg whiskey, then sex in the river, soon trigger off images of “a carousel ride”: “The world swirled around me. . . . Sunlight dazzled the pool’s surface and for a few moments I believed that Ligeia’s lower body shimmered in silver scales, and that she was summoning me to follow her downstream, back to her magical ocean kingdom” (188). While Rash’s mermaid cannot but be reminiscent of the eponymous character, Ligeia, of a famous Edgar Allan Poe story¹⁵ who is similarly remembered by he who loved her, now a bereaved lover, the last part of the quote evokes another Poe female figure that also inspired Vladimir Nabokov¹⁶ in *Lolita*: “Annabel Lee,” whose “kingdom by the sea” turned into a “tomb by the sounding sea” because “[t]he angels, not half so happy in Heaven, / Went envying her and me” (Poe 89). Annabel Lee and both Ligeias are associated with water: respectively, the sea, the ocean or the Romantic Rhine; they are thus imbued with a mythical quality. Like Eugene, Poe’s speakers turn their mourned beloved into art objects, an endeavor that Rash’s Ligeia, aware of Eugene’s hope to become a writer, fully embraces and anticipates:

“And the book you write would have me in it.”

“Definitely.”

“You promise?”

“Of course.”

“Well, promise me something else,” Ligeia said, “that you’ll leave out these freckles and give me eyes blue as the ocean, not the way it looks up close, but like in a photograph or painting. And change my first name into something that’s not so lame and ordinary as the one I’ve got.”¹⁷

“Anything else?”

“And give me a happy ending,” Ligeia said, her smile vanishing, “because it’s not going to happen in real life.” (160-61)

After a short prologue in italics—one of several echoes to *Saints at the River*, which similarly starts with an italicized prologue—, *The Risen* splits into three parts that contain the novel’s twenty chapters. The three parts are of varying length, Part 2 being the

¹³ In her review of the novel, Emily Choate remarks that “*The Risen* is a novel preoccupied with a particular kind of summoning—moments when the past appears, seemingly from nowhere, to blur our vision of the present.”

¹⁴ *Doobie* is 70s American slang for pot.

¹⁵ As emphasized by Rodney Welch in his review of *The Risen*, “any reader of Edgar Allan Poe’s classic story in which a beautiful woman’s death sends her bereft husband into an opium fog will know this is not a good sign.”

¹⁶ Rash actually mentions Nabokov on page 135 of *The Risen*.

¹⁷ Her real name is Jane Mosely (10).

shortest.¹⁸ The novel's first part concludes with Eugene's growing doubt as to the circumstances of Ligeia's disappearance:

It is all so suddenly improbable—Ligeia falling in the water, hitting her head and drowning. A stream, a rock, a laurel branch. Improbable, but not impossible. To think otherwise, I have to believe my brother is a murderer. (94)

In its minimalistic evocation of a cherished place, this temporary conclusion contains another echo to the prologue of Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*: "... a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces" (Wolfe). Ligeia herself counts among the "forgotten faces" demanding to be re-membered and eventually inscribed in the timelessness of literature.

Part 2 ends with a climactic moment as Eugene and Ligeia have unprotected sex because Eugene only brought one condom, because "it should be safe" (161), as Ligeia puts it. Yet, as Eugene and Ligeia enjoy youthful, unfettered pleasure, the plot's crisis already looms in the last lines of the chapter: "No, not once, I lied when Bill asked me two months later.// But I had" (161). Fraught with revelations and peripeteia, Part 3 corresponds to the resolution of the plot and the elucidation of Ligeia's disappearance that summer. For fear of saying too much about the plot and spoiling the excitement of future readers, let me just suggest that the novel quite unexpectedly concludes with an elusive happy ending, as Eugene fulfills Ligeia's dream to become a character in a book: "As for Ligeia, I have given her the exotic name and blue eyes and clear complexion I promised that afternoon on Panther Creek" (252). The last lines of the novel consist in a series of assumptions as to what Ligeia may have become, each one erasing the previous, much in the way the sand absorbs waves, each new wave obliterating traces of the previous one. In the last of those lovely visions of Ligeia that correct and replace her conviction that things would not turn out well for her "in real life," "She rises once, glances toward shore, then turns and disappears, a mermaid finally home" (253).

Still, when Ligeia first appears in the novel (18), she evokes plural and somehow conflicting images: a mermaid, a hippie craving for drugs,¹⁹ an extraverted young girl, a snob too: "'Jesus Christ,' Ligeia said. 'This place is like going back in time. All I've heard on the radio is hillbilly music and preachers'" (64).²⁰ As pointed out in the Kirkus Review of the novel, "She is a miracle of exoticism, an in-this-place unprecedented representative of hippiedom, and the boys immediately sign up for training in free love." She unsurprisingly describes the commune she has lived in for some time as an ideal place, thus evoking her own experience with exhilaration:

¹⁸ [1: 1-94 (chapter 1-7; 7 chapters); 2: 97-161 (chapters 8-12; 5 chapters); 3: 165-253 (chapters 13-20; 8 chapters)].

¹⁹ "'And drugs, you can get anything out there,' Ligeia said, then smiled. 'But hey, what I'm feeling right now ain't bad. Valium is a good vibe anywhere. At the commune most people smoked pot or dropped acid, but I was into floating on downers. Still am'" (104-05).

²⁰ "[Ligeia] is from Daytona Beach but staying with the Moselys for the summer. She's seventeen years old and Mr. Mosely's niece. According to Tanya, Ligeia's been giving her parents all sorts of grief. She ran off to a commune last summer and it took them a month to find her. Tanya says the parents want to get Ligeia away from 'bad influences.' They don't even allow her to be in town except for church" (53).

"Plenty of drugs and music, nobody telling you what to do, that was the best part. If it feels good, you just do it. And you shared everything, and I mean everything. There was this abandoned farmhouse we all crashed in, and the ocean was only half a mile away so you could go there any time. One of the guys had lived in San Francisco and he'd rigged this far-out speaker system in the trees. That was so cool, because it was like the trees were making the music, and all day and all night. Quicksilver, the Dead, Jefferson Airplane." (63)

A prey to the peace and love way of life, Ligeia is nonetheless quite critical of its tenets and jargon, thus showing a clever sense of detachment rather than the blind faith of an impressionable follower. For example, evoking the peace sign she wears, she comments, "A girl at the commune gave it to me. She said just wearing it was good karma. That hippie-dippie dope talk. But what the hell, I figure wearing it can't hurt, right?" (104).²¹ As a consequence of her disreputable behavior, she was brought under the supervision of "Aunt Cazzie and Uncle Hiram" (107), who are meant to make her get back on the straight and narrow. Hence, after spending a whole afternoon with the brothers, she ominously comments: "'I'd better split or they'll think I drowned'" (107).

In keeping with the mermaid imagery with which Ligeia is constantly associated, one of her main features is her seductiveness (in which respect she is further reminiscent of Poe's sex and death maiden), as suggested by her inviting tone, full of sexual innuendoes, in the following scene:

"So how are you feeling?" Ligeia asked my brother.

"Very good," Bill answered, and set his can by the tackle box.

"Me too," she said, her voice as dreamy as her eyes, "though being a mermaid I'd feel even groovier in the water. How about you? Feel like getting wet with me, Bill?" (65)

While the "druggy dreaminess" (148) of her eyes echoes her own dreamlike, evanescent quality, her saying "If I don't return to the ocean I'll just die" (159) defines Ligeia as a temptress. At the end of Chapter 5, as Bill and Ligeia go to the downstream pool together and Eugene witnesses "Ligeia reach[ing] behind her and the green bikini top [falling] free" (66), he still adopts the position of the mere observer. Indeed, as the eldest, the more talkative and experienced brother, Bill has a taste of Ligeia first; but, despite what seems like a promising beginning, things between Bill and Ligeia fall short. Eugene soon takes the upper hand:

The alcohol became an expanding glow, first encircling the two of us, then widening to include the sheltering woods. Ligeia leaned her back against the quilt and beckoned me with her index finger.

"Come lay down with your mermaid."

I did as she asked. Ligeia freed her bikini strap and peeled the cloth away, revealing the pale breasts. I'd always imagined sex as a dim, slow exposure of

²¹ In that respect, Ligeia is a very different girl from another country girl that appears in a Rash short story that takes place in the sixties, "The Magic Bus," first collected in *Nothing Gold Can Stay*. Sabra somehow appears as a naïve, gullible and easy-to-impress female version of Eugene.

bodies. Even here in the midafternoon, I'd expected a more subtle unveiling, a turning away, breasts covered with arms and elbows.

"You can look at them," Ligeia said. "I'm not uptight about my body." (100-01)

While she is rather unabashed and obviously quite knowledgeable for her age (she is soon to turn eighteen—see 103), Ligeia, the beckoning temptress, is very nice and helpful with Eugene. Through their first time together—which is also Eugene's first time with a girl—, she guides him, reassures him and praises him in a way that certainly helps him gain self-confidence: "FOR YOUR FIRST TIME," she tells him after an ellipsis that replaces the evocation of their intercourse, "you were out of sight" (102). Eugene's newly acquired self-satisfaction sharply contrasts with the sheepishness he tends to show as a result of Bill's complacency towards him:

The beer and sex, the warm afternoon and the stream's murmur, induced in me a dreamy satedness. I was quite a fine fellow, I told myself, one who wanted nothing more than to be here looking through green leaves at a now-cloudless sky. I was no longer who I'd been, and I'd never be that person, that boy, again. (102)

That Eugene is transitioning between two eras of his life through rites of passage involving various toxic habits can be interpreted as a variation on the Blakean innocence to experience trope. In just a couple of pages, he shifts from "[d]rinking Pepsis" (20) to the temptation of "some whiskey, or pot" (21).

Meanwhile, his sense of elation is enhanced by an omnipresent rock and roll soundtrack: "Then 'Good Lovin'²² came on and I sang along. *Baby please squeeze me tight*. Yeah, I know what that's about, I thought, and sang louder" (109), the lyrics of sexy songs now making full sense to him. What's more, Eugene's newly acquired self-confidence is soon strengthened by Ligeia's suggestion that he is a better lover than Bill, cunningly playing on the innate sense of competition between them.²³ Tellingly, after having sex with Ligeia, Eugene stops being "the shy brother" (105). In other words, herself an object of competition, Ligeia is also a catalyst in the brothers' inevitable emancipation and separation from one another: "'The first time I drank beer,' Bill admits, 'I did three and hugged a commode for an hour.' // *Maybe I can hold my alcohol better than you*, I thought, smiling to myself as Bill cranked the engine" (108). Bill still is the one who drives the truck and gives advice, as is his birthright; but Eugene is obviously making quick progress in various domains: "'THIS IS THE LAST TIME William's getting beer and wine for us,' I told Ligeia the last weekend in July. 'He says it's not right, but I think it's because I can outdrink him. He can't stand not being the best at anything'" (171). Part of Eugene's sense of achievement certainly comes from his impression that he has supplanted his brother, surpassed him: "'like Ligeia says, I'm a lot better at screwing than you'" (178), and eventually made him resentful, as he makes it clear at the end of Chapter 13: "*My brother is jealous of me. My brother is afraid of me*" (179).

²² The song is a 1966 hit by The Rascals. The omnipresence of music is evoked on page 154-55. At some point, it is the Doors' "Light my Fire" that Eugene sings along to (175).

²³ This will actually be confirmed later in the narrative: "'Hey, but you're the one who wasn't too chicken to get my head candy . . . Yeah, you've got your brother beat in the balls department, no doubt about that Eugene. Bill wouldn't dare wear these beads you have on either, would he?'" (115).

From Inebriation to Addiction

The conflict and tension between Billy and Eugene recalls Cain and Abel. As Rash puts it in "The Story Behind the Book," "[t]here is a powerful, almost mythic resonance between the brothers." Ligeia upsets the dynamic of their relationship forever: "Always the better brother. But now everything seemed helter-skelter" (72). The expression "helter-skelter" designates a state of disorder and confusion; in British English, it is also the name of a fairground amusement consisting of a tall spiral slide winding around a tower. Incidentally, it also refers to the title of the Beatles song from the *White Album* that is notoriously known to have inspired cult follower and murderer Charles Manson, who committed a series of bloody crimes in the summer of 1969, the summer Ligeia disappeared. Part of the wider picture, "the killings of Sharon Tate and her friends in California" (191), are alluded to in the novel.

"Another goal of the book," Ron Rash acknowledges in the Woodward interview, "is that I hope to accurately capture that time, particularly the dark turn in 1969 with Charles Manson and how things changed. It was the Love Generation, but it was also a time of great turmoil. I don't want that to be viewed at as a nostalgic era—there was the good and the bad." The carousel imagery, which resurfaces several times in the novel both in relation to the strong sensations engendered by drugs and sex, and to shocking news,²⁴ is to be related to the overall topsy-turviness of the novel.

Though Ligeia is careful to remind him that "flowers and boxes of chocolates aren't what turn this chick on" (119), Eugene cannot help thinking about her romantically; while, understandably enough, he appears to be quite smitten with Ligeia, she too appears to enjoy his company: "Ligeia's giggle turned into a harsh laugh, almost a barking sound. // 'You're really funny,' she said when she stopped. 'I like that'" (119). But the self-proclaimed "mermaid," who says that "'if [she] [is] not at the ocean, [she] [doesn't] feel at home'" (102-103), also clearly takes advantage of Eugene's sensitivity, somehow bribing him, let alone pimping herself, for drugs:

"I bet your grandfather has samples galore in his office."

"He has a lot," I admitted.

"He won't know and Bill won't have to know if you get your mermaid something to feel good, right?"

"I guess not," I said after a few moments.

"You could try them too," she said, moving closer, her breath in my ear. "So what do you say, Eugene? You'll be a real sweetheart if you do."

"Okay," I said softly.

She kissed me on the mouth. (106)

²⁴ The carousel imagery reoccurs when Ligeia verbalizes her condition in Chapter 16: "I'm here," Ligeia said, stepping out of the woods, her shoes in her hand. She wore long jeans and a loose-fitting T-shirt with DISNEYLAND on the front. "What is this about?" Bill asked tersely. "If it's drugs, you can forget it." Ligeia looked at me. "You didn't tell him?" "Tell me what?" Bill said. "That I'm pregnant." Hearing the word aloud made everything, including the creek itself, seem to halt for a few moments. . . . Then, once again, I heard the creek, and slowly, like a carousel starting up, time resumed its normal pace" (206). Ligeia is then supposedly quite efficient planning an abortion in Charlotte, after which she intends to return home "'where [she] belong[s]'" (212). To do so she needs "'fifteen hundred dollars'" (211), which she hopes to get from the brothers.

Right from the beginning of the novel, “Grandfather’s office closet” is described as a place worth “sneaking into” (8), a hint that is soon clarified: “‘I bet there’s plenty of sample packs laying around, something to mellow us out, like some Quaaludes or Valium. Bring some of those and I’ll show you how we party in the Sunshine State.’ Ligeia paused and smiled. ‘Like your little brother saw last week, I can let it all hang out’” (22). The kind of negotiating Ligeia is prone to appears clearly enough: the more pills she gets, the more of herself she’s ready to give. This pattern repeats itself, as having entered into a routine of Sunday dates, Ligeia keeps expecting more and more from Eugene, putting the time they spend together on the quilt by the river in the bargain:

“I need to ask you something,” Ligeia said. “My sis is coming up here Saturday and she’s bringing weed with her, a lot of it. There are kids around here who smoke pot, right?”

“Yes, some,” I said.

“Good, I need money for Miami, not just to get there but for an apartment down payment, that kind of thing. . . . Jimmy, the guy my sis is getting the pot from, he can get me as much as I can sell. You know, Eugene,” Ligeia said more softly, “I could deal more than pot. I bet there’s all sorts of goodies in that cabinet. Dexedrine, Obetrol, Desoxyn. We could split the profit, if you’re okay with it.” (142-43)

And when Eugene shows reluctance to enter that kind of business, she offers to “‘meet [him] downstream’” and to “‘do something new to [him]’” that “[he]’ll really dig’” (143). She keeps upping the ante: “‘Your mermaid needs a favor,’” she says in Chapter 13. “‘What is it?’ ‘I need you to get me some uppers’” (173). The bargain stops when, as Bill finds out that Eugene has been stealing from their grandfather’s closet every week, a lock with a single key is put on it: “Ligeia looked toward the stream, then spoke. // ‘I think it’s a sign.’ // ‘What kind of sign?’ // ‘A sign that summer’s over,’ she answered. // ‘Time for us to move on, right?’” (197). This is, indeed, the last time Eugene and Ligeia meet at the river:

I thought she might change her mind, so I went to Panther Creek at two o’clock the following Sunday. I sat by the pool and waited, the bootleg whiskey lowering in the bottle as did the sun in the darkening sky. It was my first time drinking alone and two epiphanies came to me. The first was that I was a tragic young swain fallen upon Shelley’s “thorns of life.” I outgrew that particular bit of sentimentality, but not the second epiphany: true intimacy with alcohol was best achieved alone.

Then school started back. (198)

And with school, disappointment, then worries. “On the Monday of our third week” (199), Ligeia, who ended up going to the same high school as Eugene, deigns to speak to him and tells him that she is in trouble and needs money;²⁵ but it again proves to be an attempt to exploit the brothers’ funds and gullibility. Yet, although she again tries to take advantage of him, Ligeia is quite nice and protective toward Eugene when she bids him farewell. On the

²⁵ The nature of her problem occurs to him as he suddenly remembers what she told him that one time they had sex unprotected: “‘Don’t worry. It should be safe. Should be, not will be, she’d told me that Sunday at Panther Creek’” (201). The pace of action suddenly accelerates as Ligeia asks Eugene to tell Bill about what is going on and meet her “‘at seven tonight, at the creek’” (202) with enough money to solve her problem.

one hand, she is unwilling for him to feel guilty: “‘I was certain it would be safe that day. It was safe. That’s the truth, Eugene’” (213). Her last gift to him therefore is a lie (within another lie) meant to help him live more easily ever after, which—as his present demonstrates—he has failed to do despite her good wishes. On the other hand, she urges him to remember “‘[his] own little summer of love’” (213) and once again reminds him that “‘[he] promised to put [his] mermaid in a book’” (213): “The next evening Bill took Ligeia to the Asheville bus station. So that was it. Summer was over, and on the surface, Bill and I and the town appeared unchanged” (215).

The main object of change in *The Risen* undoubtedly is Eugene himself: in the wake of his one and only summer of love, he ended up making a wreck of his life. With its straightforward—though not quite easy to interpret—religious connotations, the novel’s title cannot but be read ironically as far as two of its main characters are concerned. Eugene and Ligeia both fall from grace: she literally collapses from the heights of her drug-induced elation into the riverbank; he becomes an “indisputably knee-walking drunk” (174). The way he tries to deal with his alcoholism by going to AA meetings (he has been charged with drunk driving) in the present of narration highlights the similarity between the drunk and the drowned: “The long-term drunks are easily spotted—the gray-clay look of the drowned, short thin-ice steps learned from too many slips and falls” (181-82); hence between Ligeia and him. Both pay an extremely high price for their short-lived exhilaration.

After a short lapse into mermaidhood, Bill alone stuck to his design, ambition and high school sweetheart, and consistently became the reputed surgeon he was meant to become. Though his altruistic involvement with an NGO in Africa may be interpreted as a way for him to make amends with the past since he failed to save Ligeia from her terrible fate, his is the most conventional trajectory and, despite his secret, the most consistent with the hopes of the young man he was in the summer 1969. But for all his well-meaning protectiveness and charity, he may not be the most sympathetic character, though this is for the reader to decide: “One thing I wanted to do with this novel, perhaps more so than any other of my books, was that I really wanted the reader to be not quite sure about the characters, to have different reactions to the characters as far as their sympathies go. And also to have those sympathies shift as the book progresses” (Woodward).

Despite his uncontrollable drinking, his subsequent estrangement from his family and his thwarted ambitions—the wreckage of his life as a character—, Eugene is somehow redeemed by his talent as a narrator. As noted by Choate, “[h]is inability to manage his drinking does help his efforts to keep cool in the face of . . . peril. But it does help to make him a compelling narrator. From the start, his perceptions of events—both past and present—are clouded, either by intoxication or by his strain to control his cravings and symptoms of withdrawal.” Ron Rash gives Eugene, a romantic reader of Wolfe, then an aspiring writer, something more than a summer of love to remember forever and ever: he gives him the voice of a talented storyteller, a voice whose particular poetry is engendered by the inebriation of love and by the inebriation of grief.²⁶

²⁶ I want to address my grateful thanks to Randall Wilhelm for advising me so generously and pointedly on how to make my argument clearer.

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PART IV

RACIAL STRIFE

“The Celebration of a Gaudy Illusion”: Juneteenth and Black Texans after the Great War

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For African Americans in Texas, the 19th of June superseded all other emancipation observances in the nation. On that day in 1865, federal troops forced a recalcitrant Texas, the last state to surrender on the western edge of the Confederacy, to recognize the end of slavery (Barr 39). Beginning in 1866 and most years thereafter, African Texans have celebrated their freedom by marching down the main streets of Texas cities, praying in their churches, listening to impassioned speeches by black politicians, and celebrating Emancipation Day with community-wide festivities, including barbecues and picnics in nearby parks. By 1890, they called their day of freedom, Juneteenth. Historically, for the most part, white citizens applauded their enthusiasm and paternalistically blessed their endeavors. But World War I and the inclusion of African American troops in the Great War brought hostile reactions from some white southerners. Responses to African American military service led to stark differences between white Houstonians and the black community, and this ultimately changed the tenor of emancipation celebrations in Texas.

Although African Americans had served in the Spanish American War from 1898 to 1900, the United States' entrance into World War I involved bigger stakes. A crisis of civilization was at hand between the monarchical nations of Europe and those nations endeavoring to govern with democratic institutions. Soldiers, the moving living machinery of war, came to symbolize for the United States the American warrior ideal. Historian Jonathan H. Ebel characterized soldier sacrifice in religious terms, calling it part of the history of American civil religion. He wrote that the nation saw “its soldiers not simply as protectors and preservers of the nation and its ideals, but as incarnations of those values—the Word of the nation made flesh,” an expression that Christians would recognize. Soldiers who were willing to die for their nation became not only national heroes but also “Saviors” of a developing, evolving American democracy (2).

For white southerners, however, the notion that black soldiers should be equated with concepts of democracy incarnate, or as symbols of manhood and noble sacrifice were anathema. Indeed, as America's entry into the war loomed, Virginia-born President Woodrow Wilson initiated racial segregation in Washington, D.C., which had never before existed in government agencies (Weis 6). Subject to scientific racist theories prevalent at the time, Wilson stratified whites into superior Anglo-Teutonic types but deemed immigrants from Italy, Hungary, and Poland intellectually and culturally deficient. He considered “Negroes” as the least developed peoples of the world. They were good for digging trenches, burying bodies, and perhaps in combat, but for white southerners they could not be equated with the superiority of white soldiers (Lentz-Smith 31-35; Dotinga).

African American men thought differently, of course, but they would experience another round of discriminations before their manhood could be tested on the battlefield. In 1917, the War Department had considered drafting black men and volunteers to work on farms in the U.S. rather than as soldiers in the Great War. This caught the ire of the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and of Margaret Downs McCleary, secretary of the Jacksonville, Florida, branch. She foresaw the conditions under which black men would labor if the War Department report were not challenged by black activist organizations such as the NAACP; “civil war is directly before us,” she wrote, . . . ‘as our men will not submit to what would be, in these Southern states, virtually a convict life.’ Thus, she directly influenced the U.S. War Department to abandon its plan to use blacks as conscripted laborers rather than as soldiers (Sullivan 79-80).

The result was that 350,000 black soldiers, including 31,000 from Texas, fought with the Expeditionary Forces for democracy and freedom—concepts that in the South, frankly, had little resonance in their own lives (Berg 486; Barr 114; World War I and Postwar Society). Black troops represented 25 percent of all soldiers from Texas, but overall, they comprised only 16 percent of the state’s population (Barr 114-15). In other words, men from black communities were sent to war in greater proportion than those among the white populace. President Wilson claimed that the defeat of the opposing monarchies would represent a victory for democracy, but he meant this for the European nations and the United States. African Americans, nevertheless, took heart that victory could also represent an opening for their own claims to full citizenship, including voting rights in the South.

Black soldiers and civil rights leaders hoped that the Great War would bring about an integrated U.S. Army. Wilson, however, was influenced by two important events in 1917 that dissuaded him from that progressive plan. The first was the malicious July 2nd white-on-black race riot in East Saint Louis, Illinois, where 125 African American civilians died at the hands of whites, including U.S. soldiers (Christian 145). The second was the August 23rd race riot instigated by the 24th U.S. Infantry, 3rd Battalion, a black unit, bivouacked near Camp Logan in Houston, Texas. The battalion included 8 white officers, and 654 enlisted men, many coming from northern cities that did not practice *de jure* segregation (Haynes 40,60; Pruitt 141). These soldiers experienced severe racial prejudice from the white police force in Houston. In August, an incident highlighted the problem when white policeman, Lee Sparks, entered without a warrant the home of Sara Travers, a black mother of five children, in search of a suspect. She protested; Sparks, arrested her, and forced her into the street in her bathrobe. He cursed the woman, calling her a “nigger bitch,” and accused the “nigger soldiers” of “trying to take the town.” When Private Alonzo Edwards of Company L came upon the scene and protested, Sparks pistol whipped and arrested him. Later a member of the battalion’s military police (MP), Corporal Charles Baltimore of Company I, came to enquire about Edwards. Sparks then clubbed Baltimore and fired shots from his pistol as the soldier fled. The Houston police caught and arrested Baltimore as well. False rumors that the police had killed the MP reached Camp Logan and the soldiers retaliated by marching into town with loaded weapons. They shot indiscriminately, killed fifteen whites, including four policemen and a member of the Illinois National Guard, while wounding twelve others. Four of their own were killed in the melee (Christian 145-59; Haynes 94-99; Pruitt 144-46; Steptoe 33-35; Houston Riot of 1917). This brought about an investigation by the U.S. Army, and the 24th Infantry was shipped out of Texas to Columbus, New Mexico, but the consequences left Houston citizens of both races in a state of fearful anger (Campbell 354; Steptoe 31; SoRelle 52-65; Thomas 102). Secretary of War Newton Baker and President Wilson determined that the American armies were not ready for integration and black troops remained in separate units (Christian 151-67; Berg 482-83, 484; Houston Riot of 1917).

Black soldiers, therefore, served in the United States Army under segregated conditions; the majority worked in menial tasks burying the dead, loading and unloading ships, and digging trenches. Yet 40,000 saw combat, fought, trained separately under black officers, and many among them fought with French units (Berg 486). Fighting for the United States as armed soldiers changed the men who went to war, creating “an understanding of themselves as national subjects in an international world.” They identified with “subject peoples across national boundaries,” and this was especially true as they came into contact with black troops from Africa living under French colonial domination (Lentz-Smith 6, 37). Chad L. Williams writes: “France’s use of African soldiers as combatants in the war captured the attention and admiration of the [American] black press,” suggesting that the French were committed to racial equality and challenging Americans to live up to the same ideals (153). No doubt the French infused their justification for the use of black troops with racial overtones when they claimed that black Africans were more warlike, but the military would make them more “civilized” (Williams 151). France profited from the deployment of soldiers from its northern African colonies—the *Tirailleurs Marocains*, *Algériens*, and *Tunisiens* plus French colonial subjects from West Africa (*Tirailleurs Sénégalais*). France and its colonies, after all, were fighting against a German juggernaut, and they argued that as “beneficiaries of French civilization and freedom, subject Africans had a reciprocal obligation to provide service in defense of the nation” (Williams 151). Thirty-four thousand Moroccan soldiers—ultimately five battalions in the Sixth Army—fought in the Battle of the Marne. Algeria sent nearly 206,000 troops, motivated in part by the advancement offered by military service and concepts of French republicanism (Williams 151).

The Great War led to a rise in expectations that race relations could be addressed in a national forum. In Washington D.C., Ida B. Wells, vocal American anti-lynching advocate, spoke before the National Race Congress in December 1918, where she invoked the memory of white discrimination in Houston and the attendant race riot in 1917. The National Equal Rights League [NERL] organizers called for a National Colored Congress for World Democracy in Paris (Treaty of Peace with Germany, 685-92). From February 19 to 22, 1919, black activists W.E. B. Du Bois and Ida Gibbs Hunt, among others, organized a post-war Pan-African Congress with fifty-seven representatives of “the Negro race” in Paris. Believing that “Wilsonianism” was fraught with platitudes for democracy but with no actual plan toward racial equality, members of the Pan-African Congress voiced the opinion that all subjected peoples in the United States should be granted equality and that colonial claims by European nations in Africa should be dismantled. Four months later in June, Du Bois and President Wilson met with victor nations in the mirrored halls of the Palace of Versailles (Berg 528; Heung; Williams 181). Du Bois carried his message of racial justice to Versailles, but he was only a guest at the proceedings, whereas Wilson was a leading delegate. Wilson’s Fourteen Points did feature a provision for colonial claims, but in the end, the signers mostly ignored that aspect of Wilson’s proposal just as Wilson ignored race discrimination in the United States.

The repercussions of these events during and after World War I strengthened the resolve of African American soldiers and their supporters to fight Jim Crow at home. One Texan voiced this when he wrote, “We believe that our second emancipation will be the outcome of this war. If the world is to be made safe for democracy that will mean us also” (Muraskin 220). They embodied the warrior ideals touted by Americans fighting for freedom, and they died

in greater numbers in proportion to their white cohorts (Ebel 2; Barr 114-15). They were entitled to expect a hero's welcome when they returned to the States.

Undoubtedly, the Harlem Hellfighters, or the 369th Infantry Regiment (formerly the 15th New York Colored Regiment) was the most celebrated African American regiment in the nation. Known as the *Trois Cents Soixante-Neuvi  me*, they constituted the first black soldiers to land on European soil and the only ones to serve alongside French troops. Upon arrival in France, their famous band, under the leadership of James Reese Europe, played a jazz version of the Marseilles, which French soldiers hardly recognized. For six brutal months, they fought exclusively with the French army, and they earned the sobriquet, "Hell Fighters" from their German enemies. The French were heartened by their ability to throw hand grenades accurately and by their ferocity in bayonet and hand-to-hand combat. Their valor earned them the French Croix de Guerre (Lentz-Smith 215; Williams 124-27). In July 1919, the French celebrated black participation in the Great War, according to the front page of the *Houston Informer*. Two headlines blared "France Honors Black Race with Mammoth Fete" and "French Nation's Big Heart Shown in Recognition Given to Democracy's Black Defenders" (*Houston Informer* 26 July 1919).

At their homecoming on February 17, 1919, 3,000 black soldiers marched up New York City's Fifth Avenue, bands blaring American jazz. These same soldiers and others had popularized jazz for the war-weary French. With crowds cheering, they reached Harlem where the spectators went completely wild (Gates, "Who Were the Harlem Hellfighters?"). For exactly these reasons, white southerners chafed at the idea that celebratory homecomings should include armed black men (Berg 486; Muraskin 220; Watkins).

Indeed, an important testing time for the meaning of American citizenship came after the soldiers returned to Houston. For many white southerners allowing dark troops to fight for democracy could prove a degradation of white supremacy. The voice of Mississippi Governor James Vardaman echoed this warning: "One of the horrible problems that will grow out of the war... is the training as a soldier that the Negro will receive." In Vardaman's opinion, paraphrased by historian Adriane Lentz-Smith, "Treat a Negro like a man and he will think himself a citizen" (37).

For African Americans, hopes were high that military service and defense of the nation would bring them closer to the civil rights they deserved. As black troops began their return to Houston in 1919, they found a well-organized community of African Texans ready to receive them with an honorable homecoming. By 1920, the population of Houston had reached 138,276. Nearly 34,000 African Americans comprised 25 percent of Houston's populace, the largest minority group in the city (SoRelle, iv; "Texas—Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities"). On April 22, 1919, a brief article appeared in the *Houston Post* announcing that an "Excellent Parade"—several blocks long—had been "Staged by Negroes," and that uniformed soldiers and sailors, marched beside "War Mothers" through Houston's streets to Emancipation Park. Bystanders noted the floats, decorated cars, and banners with compliments to the "excellent appearance" of the marchers. Veterans were treated to a superb dinner and "plenty of smokes were distributed" ("Soldiers, Sailors and War Mothers March Through Houston Streets").

The following day, April 23rd, white Houstonians celebrated a three-fold event, the opening of a Victory Loan drive to help defray the costs of the war, the return of Houston's white soldiers, and the celebration of San Jacinto Day when Texas won the final battle in its fight for independence from Mexico in 1836. The streets were filled with tanks, soldiers,

floats, and signs, but there is no evidence that black soldiers participated in that parade ("Victory Loan Campaign Opens with Enthusiasm"). It appears that there were no integrated celebrations for American soldiers in Houston.

By June, good will between the races deteriorated. The next opportunity for honoring Houston's veterans came at the end of May 1919 with Decoration Day, a national holiday, now called Memorial Day. It has been celebrated on the last Monday in May since 1868 and serves to honor all fallen American soldiers. In Houston, rather than hold a parade respecting all the veterans of the Great War, which would have included black and white troops marching on the same day, city leaders ignored Decoration Day. Instead, on June 3, Houston closed its banks and businesses to observe the birthday of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States. Clifton Richardson, editor of the black owned *Houston Informer*, responded, "Here was a man [Davis] who sought to destroy the Republic and because he failed in his endeavor does not palliate his offense or extenuate his crime." Richardson griped that the banks stayed open on Decoration Day but were closed in honor of Jefferson Davis's birthday. In his mind, it was "a reflection upon such a species of patriotism and Americanism" held by white Texans ("A Peculiar State of Affairs"). By ignoring Decoration Day—a tribute to all soldiers—Houston leaders had disregarded national norms of observance. Richardson reminded his readers that despite such actions, Texans, including African Texans, were American citizens.

Adding to the discrimination, city leaders relegated the annual Juneteenth parade to the margins of the city. By 1919, Juneteenth had become firmly established as a holiday for African Americans in Texas. White employers routinely gave their workers the day off; white families that depended on black cooks generally ate out on Juneteenth—the well-off went to the country club for dinner while others went to the Rice Hotel for a "rescue party" (Cook; Steptoe 36-37).

Black Texans' celebrations were so large that the annual parades ended with festivities in parks all over the state. Even though 1919 proved to be a fateful year for all African Americans, public Juneteenth festivities represented the greatest black cultural event in the state. Thus, it was with increasing resentment that blacks noted their celebration pushed increasingly to the edges of the city under the control of powerful white forces. An angry C. F. Richardson wrote that since his arrival in Houston the emancipation parade had been routed over Main Street to Emancipation Park, founded in 1872. But the police department, which waited until June 18 to give Juneteenth organizers a permit, refused to allow the parade to go down the city's main thoroughfares.

For the first time in the city's history the colored citizens of this community were refused a permit to route their Juneteenth parade over either Travis or Main Street, . . . but [were] shunted . . . from Milam to San Jacinto, a route never before employed by any parade. . . . The parade by all means could have used Travis Street, where quite a number of race men operate places of business, but we were black and that meant shunting us off to a back and out-of-way street Every time a detachment of white soldiers reaches the city, Main Street can be used for a parade. . . . but now comes the police department and refuses to permit us to parade even on Travis Street. We pay taxes here and constitute no small part of Houston's citizenry. We are citizens of Houston and as such shall not be discriminated against . . . (Richardson, "19th Parade Victim of Prejudice").

To add to the insult, the *Houston Post* ran an editorial that stunned the black community: "Considering the patriotism shown by the negroes in the war and the splendid record they made, . . . Every Negro soldier who fought in France should have been rewarded with a watermelon on Juneteenth for his individual use" ("Considering the patriotism"). Richardson shot back this response while accusing the editors of the *Houston Post* of ridiculing the race:

. . . the above utterance . . . shows the average white Southerner's idea of what our race deserves for its unparalleled and unprecedented record in the late world war. . . . the black man responded to the call, firstly because he was an American citizen; secondly, because he knew that the world could not be made and maintained safe for democracy without at least bursting asunder some of the fetters that bound his race in 'democratic' America. . . . The black soldier fought for democracy—and not for a little measly, mushy watermelon. (Richardson, "Is Watermelon To Be Our Only Reward?")

The ridicule exhibited by the editors of *The Post*, masked a more sinister intent to subdue black aspirations for equality after the war at any cost. Indeed, the summer of 1919 became known as "Red Summer" with twenty white-on-black race riots in the nation, resulting in hundreds of deaths (Gibson). In Longview, Texas, on July 10 race rioters killed four people, necessitating intervention by the Texas National Guard and the Texas Rangers. On July 28, Washington D.C. exploded into a four-day race riot that ended in thirty deaths, while on July 27, white Chicagoans rioted against blacks in their own communities. In Tulsa, in 1921 after rumors floated of a black on white rape, whites attacked the black neighborhood of Greenwood, leading to 250 deaths and the burning of \$1 million worth of property. All of the riots were instigated by whites against blacks (Williams, "African Americans and World War I").

Across the South lynching increased, especially with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The impact of the war, notably arming black soldiers trained to kill white men, instilled in white southerners an unreasonable fear. Fortunately, in Houston, the violent 1917 rampage by black soldiers against an overbearing white police force was not repeated in the war's aftermath. Yet the violence that led to both an intense desire on the part of African Americans for justice and a fear that seeking it would result in more deaths, had an impact on emancipation celebrations and the meaning of freedom. Somewhat like Frederick Douglas's essay, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852), African Texans were forced to examine their own Juneteenth celebrations since few civil liberties were furthered, segregation remained in place, the threat of violence escalated, and the ability to vote in Texas declined. Indeed, the Texas legislature in 1923 and again in 1928 decided to allow the political parties to exclude people of color from voting in the state's primary elections (Zelden;Hine). Nonetheless, black Houstonians established a chapter of the NAACP in 1919, in the same year of national riots and a year before Ku Klux Klan members marched down Houston streets during a Confederate veterans' parade (Steptoe 41).

In this atmosphere of hatred and violence against African Texans, Juneteenth celebrations that had long included political orations evoking the ideals of American freedom, the benefits of citizenship, voting, and civil rights gave way to less threatening activities. The danger of white revenge and the power of white southerners to bind African

Texans to racial segregation and its rules of violence, led instead to Juneteenth gatherings filled with commercialism and entertainment. "Grand Juneteenth Sale of Diamonds" shouted an advertisement in the black-owned *Houston Informer* ("Grand Juneteenth Sale of Diamonds"). In the same newspaper, The Crown-All Hat Company advertised Juneteenth straw hats for \$3.00 ("Get One of These Crown All Hats for Your Juneteenth"). Buying for Juneteenth celebrations created profits for black shop owners. The *Houston Informer* could not resist imploring its readers to buy from "The Race's Advertisers." Even Clifton Richardson, whose voice was among the most strident in favor of civil rights, wrote: "Wouldn't it be a fine thing if that same spirit were injected into the commercial and economic life of the colored race?" ("Colored People Should Buy from Race's Advertisers"). The festivities, once based almost exclusively on parades, fishing contests, foot races, and barbecues, changed to include stock car racing, swimming exhibitions, beauty pageants, and air shows performed by trained aviators. Jazz concerts replaced the old-time fiddler contests. Baseball teams competed against one another on June 20, 1929 ("Plan Big Juneteenth Celebration at Ball Park; Game Features," *Dallas Morning News*). Included among these events was also a humanitarian celebration. Doctors Rupert O. Roett, Charles Jackson, Benjamin J. Covington, Henry E. Lee, and F. F. Stone on June 19, 1926 dedicated a site donated by the city of Houston in Third Ward for the construction of the Houston Negro Hospital (Zimpfer).

As Juneteenth began to take on characteristics of mass entertainment, amusement events superseded the barbecues and picnics of older simpler times. In 1928, in keeping with the rules of segregation, Juneteenth celebrations were given over entirely to black citizens at Dallas's Fair Park, the city's largest venue for entertainment. An advertisement in the *Dallas Express* promised free music, entertainment, and roller coaster rides. Nothing was said about emancipation ("Celebration June 19th, Fair Park").

The Great War brought more than American victory on a world stage or idealism in nation building. In Houston, as in Dallas, it led anxious whites to suppress civil rights that led to a change in the way blacks celebrated emancipation. By establishing the poll tax and the white primary in 1902 and 1903, white Texans had succeeded in disfranchising approximately 94,000 black voters (Barr 79). At the end of World War I and with the return of black soldiers, nothing had changed regarding voting rights. Racial segregation was established in all facets of public and private life in Texas. In Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, public transportation and accommodations, schools, and, eventually, neighborhoods were segregated by law. African Americans in Houston and San Antonio challenged segregation on public transportation by forming their own bus and jitney companies. Although Dallas African Americans had won a legal case in 1916 that overturned a residential segregation ordinance, nothing, succeeded in stemming the tide of segregation and violence that restricted the rights of African Texans. The harshest form of violence used to enforce racial oppression was lynching, whose systematic application did not end until the 1940s. Brutal and vicious acts of violence against African Americans, such as the "burning at the stake" of Jesse Washington in Waco in 1916 (called the "Waco Horror" by the NAACP), occurred too frequently for African Americans to live without some fear for their lives (Dulaney). The result was a shift in the way African Texans symbolically viewed their emancipation and their service to the nation during the Great War. Ralph Ellison, in his novel of the same title, called Juneteenth, "the celebration of a gaudy illusion" (115).

How could it be otherwise? The dangerous 1920s, filled with violence from the Ku Klux Klan left little choice but to celebrate freedom in ways that did not threaten the status quo—with parades, picnics, barbecues, red soda pop, watermelon, dances, games, entertainments, sports, and all manner of good things to eat. After all, these pleasures were denied slaves, so it was fitting that the festivities should include them. Ralph Ellison knew too well the obstacles African Americans faced in realizing true equality after the Great War. Thus, Juneteenth participants did their own celebrating to project identification with ideals that countered the racism implied in everyday life. They enjoyed African American beauty pageants, strength in sports, as well as proficiency in jazz and dance. Even if Juneteenth celebrations were converted to include more entertainment and fewer political speeches, they remained joyful events that served as an antidote to the overt racism exercised by a white populace fearful of black equality in the postwar age.

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The Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 through the Eyes of Freedom Summer's Northern Clergymen

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Accounts of the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 largely focus on the experience of the 650 student volunteers and the local people they sought to assist.¹ However, another perspective on the summer and Mississippi is found in the experiences of nearly three hundred Christian and Jewish clergymen and lay adults who spent anywhere from a few days to the entire summer in Mississippi under a National Council of Churches (NCC) program designed to support the civil rights movement. Their presence raises many questions. What motivated them to volunteer? What was their relationship with and assessment of civil rights workers, African American and white Mississippians, indigenous clergy, and police and local authorities? What impact did the NCC volunteers have, and what impact did the Summer Project have upon them? Although the NCC volunteers were in Mississippi to help the civil rights movement and the African American community with their experience and pastoral skills, in many cases the volunteers learned as much, if not more, than they imparted, and sometimes in ways that not only enriched but changed their own lives.

Even before the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), consisting of the major civil rights groups in Mississippi, announced plans in 1964 to bring student volunteers to assist in a summer program of voter registration, freedom schools, and community centers, the NCC had sent clergy volunteers to support voter registration efforts in Hattiesburg, Canton, and Greenwood, Mississippi. The National Council, which comprised thirty-one Protestant and Orthodox denominations with forty-two million members, subsequently cosponsored orientation programs at Western College for Women, Oxford, Ohio, LeMoyne College, Memphis, Tennessee, and Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi, for student volunteers who participated in COFO's Mississippi Summer Project. The NCC also appealed to the religious of all faiths, including Jews, to assist and join the Summer Project under its auspices. Nearly three hundred people, clergy and laity, volunteered in response to the NCC's call during the summer. Most of the volunteers were self-funded and came during their vacation leave, although some clergymen had financial support from their churches or synagogues.²

¹ Dittmer, *Local People* 242-71; Nicolaus Mills, *Like a Holy Crusade*; Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White*. An exception, although celebratory in tone, is Findlay, "In Keeping with the Prophets: The Mississippi Summer of 1964," *Christian Century*, 8-15 June 1988, 574-76, which is incorporated into his broad study of the National Council of Churches and racial equality, *Church People in the Struggle*.

² "Summary Report Commission on Religion and Race, June 5, 1964-December 3, 1964," 3-4 December 1964, 2, RG 6, box 47, folder 31, National Council of Churches Archives, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereafter NCC Archives); "Churchmen and the Challenge," *Commission on Religion and Race Reports*, 1 no. 4, unprocessed Alfred R. Winham Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter Winham Papers); *The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. What it is, What it does*, box 1, folder "Constitution, brochures, press releases, 1963," John D. Humphrey Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial

Most of the volunteers were nonsouthern white Protestant clergy. Episcopalians, with thirty-one ministers (and nineteen lay people), formed the largest single group among them, followed by the Disciples of Christ with twenty-three pastors (and fifteen lay people). All the major white Protestant denominations were represented, except the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) which was not a member of the NCC. Even if any Southern Baptist clergymen had wanted to serve in the Summer Project, which seems unlikely given the SBC's criticisms of the civil rights movement, they knew that their congregations had the power to fire them at will under Southern Baptists' congregational polity. The preference of most southern whites for segregation and the existing form of race relations, and their opposition to the civil rights movement also helps to explain the meager representation of other southern white denominations among the NCC's summer volunteers in Mississippi. There was only one southern-based Methodist, the Reverend George D. McClain of Nashville, Tennessee, and only one Southern Presbyterian, the Reverend Jeffrey Smith of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, among their number.³

There were a few African American volunteers, but as the NCC did not maintain records of the volunteers' race, their exact number is indeterminate. Most of the African American volunteers belonged to predominately white denominations such as the Episcopalians, but there were also two clergy volunteers from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, both from Cleveland, Ohio, and four Christian Methodist Episcopal clergymen from Tennessee, one from Nashville and the others from Memphis.⁴

Overall, the largest groups of volunteers came from New York, Ohio, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. There were also fifteen volunteers from the border states of Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri, and Washington, D.C. Fourteen volunteers came from among the states of the former Confederacy, specifically Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.⁵ Clergy, all but two of them male, formed a little over 70 percent of the volunteers. Most of these clergy were pastors, but they also included Paul Moore, Jr., the Episcopal Suffragan Bishop of Washington, D.C., and some staff from denominational agencies. Of the lay volunteers, 60 percent were female. Many of the women accompanied their clergy husbands, while some others were denominational staff members. Most of the

Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi; letter from Bill Brison to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Robert L. Beech Papers, in possession of Beech, Bovey, Minnesota (hereafter Beech Papers); "Participants in Greenwood, Mississippi Freedom Days, March 25 and April 9, 1964," box 15, folder 18, Delta Ministry Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (hereafter DM Papers).

³ "Ministers, Adult Laymen Recruited by National Council of Churches for Work in Mississippi Summer Project – June 15 to Sept 1, 1964 Listed by Denominations," box 2, folder 38, DM Papers; Newman, *Getting Right with God*.

⁴ "Ministers, Adult Laymen Recruited by National Council of Churches for Work in Mississippi Summer Project – June 15 to Sept 1, 1964 Listed by Denominations," box 2, folder 38, DM Papers; Pat and Rick Haynes, "August 23-31, 1964 Jackson, Mississippi," 1, attached to letter from Pat and Rick Haynes to Warren McKenna, 30 September 1964, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

⁵ "Ministers and Adult Laymen Recruited by NCC for Work in Mississippi Summer Project (Participants listed by State)," box 8, folder 21, DM Papers. Some of the southern- and Washington D.C.-based participants were emigrants from the North. Letter from Everett W. MacNair and Irene T. MacNair to Warren McKenna and Graede Poulard, 19 August 1964, 1-2, box 15, folder 1, Delta Ministry Papers, Atlanta; Paul Moore, *Presences* 3, 9, 164, 169, 177-80.

volunteers were in their forties or fifties, but a few were in their twenties, thirties or sixties, or even retired.⁶

The NCC's attempt to reach beyond its Protestant and Orthodox membership by appealing to people of all faiths to go to Mississippi had little success. While nine rabbis and three lay Jews participated under NCC auspices, the National Council's appeal brought only two Catholic volunteers, a layman from Pomona, California, and a lay woman from Washington, D.C. Although the Second Vatican Council, which met in Rome between 1962 and 1965, encouraged ecumenical ties and activities, and urged Catholics to become involved in addressing social problems, its impact was only just beginning to be felt and, even then, it produced opposition from some lay Catholics and clerics.⁷

With the exception of the March on Washington, D.C. in August 1963, few Catholic clergy and nuns had participated in civil rights demonstrations, and they did not become involved in the civil rights movement on a large scale until the Selma, Alabama, demonstrations of 1965. Furthermore, a Catholic priest who wished to enter another diocese required permission from his own prelate and was also expected to obtain the consent of the prelate in the receiving diocese. Bishop Richard O. Gerow of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Natchez-Jackson, which encompassed the state of Mississippi, opposed clergy participation in voter registration work and sent six priests back to Oklahoma after discovering they had served as COFO volunteers.⁸

Approximately 235 of the NCC's volunteers spent from a few days to two weeks in Mississippi in July or August 1964, serving with COFO or in established NCC voter registration projects in Hattiesburg and Canton, and, from August, in a third NCC project begun in Batesville. Another sixty-one ministers and rabbis served as minister-counselors for two to four weeks, or in a few cases for the entire summer. Expected to be adaptable, the National Council instructed them to assist the twenty-seven COFO projects as needed. In practice, this included "chauffeuring, teaching, counselling, 'spreading oil on troubled waters' in a project, visiting people in jail, going to jail, interceding with white members of communities where projects were located, talking theology, listening, building community

⁶ "Ministers and Adult Laymen Recruited by NCC for Work in Mississippi Summer Project" (Participants listed by State), box 8, folder 21, letter from Everett W. MacNair and Irene T. MacNair to Warren McKenna and Graede Poulard, 19 August 1964, 1, box 15, folder 1, DM Papers; Moore, *Presences*, 164, 169, 177-80; Letter from John R. Warner, Jr., "Report of Work Done," to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers; *Delta Democrat-Times* [Greenville, Mississippi], clipping dated 13 July 1964, box 1, folder 25, Charles Horwitz Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi (hereafter Horwitz Papers); *Holyoke Transcript-Telegram* (Holyoke, Massachusetts), 8 July 1964; Newman, *Divine Agitators* 70.

⁷ "Ministers, Adult Laymen Recruited by National Council of Churches for Work in Mississippi Summer Project – June 15 to Sept 1, 1964 Listed by Denominations," box 2, folder 38, DM Papers; McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries* 155-73.

⁸ Hite, "The Hottest Places in Hell: The Catholic Church and Civil Rights in Selma, Alabama, 1937-1965," 11-12, 60-396; *Mobile Register* [Mobile, Alabama] 18 March 1965; Joseph Fiorenza, "Nuns in Selma: A New Role for Sisters," *Texas Catholic Herald* [Houston], 25 March 1965; "Priests are Halted in Voting Drive," *Alamo Messenger*, 19 June 1964; "Outside Priests Called Off in Mississippi," press clipping dated 19 June 1964, series 33, box 11, folder 11, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Records, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (hereafter NCCIJ Records); Newman, "The Catholic Church in Mississippi and Desegregation, 1963-1973," 337.

centers, playing with children, participating in Freedom days, getting villified, [and] getting beaten.”⁹

A mix of motivations, some of them held in combination, drew the NCC’s volunteers to Mississippi. Some of the volunteers had long been sensitive to or attentive to racial discrimination. One of them recalled “I was reared in a Christian home where racial equality was taken for granted.” The Reverend Al Winham, who went to Mississippi with his wife Margery and the support of his deacons at Grace Congregational Church in Holyoke, Massachusetts, explained: “For thirty years we have been shuddering at the History that was written in Nazi Germany. I’m not [the] only one to ask, ‘Where was the Church through this horror?’ I do not wish History to record in the next generation that there was a similar horror in America and the Church did nothing.”¹⁰

A few volunteers had previously been involved in civil rights activity. Born to a wealthy East Coast family in 1919, Bishop Paul Moore became aware of racial discrimination when he witnessed its effects in his first pastorate in Jersey City in the late 1940s and 1950s. After sending a large donation to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s Legal Defense Fund, Inc., Moore agreed in 1951 to accompany NAACP lawyers who were defending three blacks facing a retrial for the alleged rape of a white woman in Groveland, Florida, after the U.S. Supreme Court had overruled their initial conviction. The local sheriff shot two of the men, killing one, *en route* to the second trial, claiming the accused had been trying to escape. Moore remembered: “This was a turning point in my life. Never again would I trust the American system when it was dealing with African Americans.”¹¹

The Reverend Winham also had prior exposure to racial problems before becoming an NCC volunteer. He had helped organize a Council for Human Relations in Holyoke in 1960 and participated in a United Church of Christ Mission on Understanding survey of race relations in the United States in 1963. In some cases, volunteers had been sensitized to racial discrimination by assignments in developing countries or by working with minorities in the United States.¹²

Some of the NCC volunteers expressed their admiration for civil rights workers already in Mississippi and felt an obligation to assist them. The Reverend James F. Quimby, pastor of Bethlehem, New Hampshire’s Durrell Memorial Methodist Church, recalled: “I went to Mississippi because I had preached the principles of human freedom; this involved others and they were doing something about it. It was no longer feasible for me to enjoy the comfort of stained glass windows. Men were dying for freedom in Mississippi.” The Reverend Winham told his congregation: “We will not have it said while our youth went off in what they thought was a crusade, ‘Where was the Church.’ More than that, we think

⁹ “Summary Report Commission on Religion and Race, June 5, 1964-December 3, 1964,” 3-4 December 1964, 2-3 (quotation on p. 3), RG 6, box 47, folder 31, NCC Archives.

¹⁰ Findlay, “In Keeping with the Prophets,” 576 (first quotation); Alfred R. Winham, “Each as He is Able,” 28 June 1964, 3 (second quotation), Winham Papers.

¹¹ Moore, *Presences* 3-4, 7, 9, 106, 119-124 (quotation on p. 122); Hemmingway, “The Rise of Black Student Consciousness in Tallahassee and the State of Florida,” 65-66; Kluger, *Simple Justice* 561. In his memoir, Moore mistakenly claims that all three men “were shot dead in cold blood” (*Presences* 122).

¹² “Appendix A Biographical Data—Delta Ministry Staff,” box 2, folder 39, DM Papers; Findlay, “In Keeping with the Prophets,” 576.

that if our youth are willing to take these risks and sacrifice one or two years of schooling—or more, it would probably be a good plan to have some mature adults to help them.”¹³

Specific acts of violence against civil rights workers or NCC volunteers in Mississippi led some clergymen to volunteer for service in the state. Although Chicago-born Rims Barber, a United Presbyterian minister in Davenport, Iowa, already sympathized with the civil rights movement and supported its activities, it was the murder of COFO workers James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County, Mississippi, in June 1964 that spurred him to join the NCC’s program in the state. Rabbi Rav A. Soloff of Beach Haven, New Jersey, volunteered as a minister-counselor after learning “of the shocking news that one of our members [of the Central Conference of American Rabbis], Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld, had been brutally beaten without provocation, when he was serving as a Counsellor in Mississippi.”¹⁴

For some NCC volunteers going to Mississippi offered a sense of excitement and involvement outside of their normal experience. Mary Lou Pettit, secretary for summer mission personnel at the United Church of Christ’s Stewardship Council in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, admitted that “[a] part of my motivation was pure selfishness in the desire for an experience ‘in the world,’ after such a long period of working for the Kingdom behind a desk.”¹⁵ The desire for involvement by the volunteers also reflected a deeper, religious conviction that God was present in and working through the civil rights movement. Robert F. Klepper, a United Church of Christ minister in Prospect Heights, Illinois, explained: “We feel that God’s hand must certainly be in the inspiration and undertaking of the [Mississippi Summer] project, both in the secular and religious aspects of it, and we pray that God will continue to accomplish much through whatever effort continues now that the summer has passed.”¹⁶ Some volunteers expressed the view that racial discrimination in Mississippi was a denial of American values of freedom and democracy, and a violation of the U.S. Constitution they felt duty bound to defend. The Reverend Winham declared: “Just as I would not make a mockery of the tenets of my faith, no more do I welcome hollow words in the revered documents of our country. I take the inspired language of the Declaration [of Independence] and Constitution, including all its amendments, to mean precisely what they say. I cannot be an outsider where churchmen go to church gatherings where the same American convictions are at stake.”¹⁷

The first NCC summer volunteers and minister-counselors attended the orientation sessions given to COFO volunteers at Wesleyan University, Ohio, in June 1964. Later NCC volunteers, who continued to arrive as replacements throughout the summer, took a slimmed down one-day orientation program in Jackson from COFO workers and the

¹³ James F. Quimby, “Behind the Cotton Curtain,” n.d., 1 (first quotation), box 4, folder 35, James F. McCree Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College; Winham, “Each as He is Able,” 28 June 1964, 2 (second quotation), Winham Papers.

¹⁴ “Oral history with Rims Barber,” interview by Charles Bolton, 21 August 1997, 1-3, Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi, consulted 18 April 2002, at <<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/barber97/trans.htm>>; “Rabbi Rav A. Soloff Arrested In Mississippi,” n.d., 1/(quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

¹⁵ Letter from Mary Lou Pettit to Warren McKenna, 11 August 1964, box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

¹⁶ Letter from Robert F. Klepper to Warren McKenna, 2 September 1964, box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

¹⁷ Winham, “Each as He is Able,” 28 June 1964, 3, Winham Papers.

Reverend Warren H. McKenna, based on the Ohio sessions. McKenna, a forty-five-year-old Episcopalian minister in Roxbury, Massachusetts, ran the NCC's Mississippi headquarters from an office in Jackson during the summer. The orientation NCC clergy received in Jackson described COFO's activities, the philosophy of nonviolence, and the realities of racial discrimination and police oppression in Mississippi. The program also gave the volunteers guidance about appropriate conduct in the white and African American communities, and ways to protect themselves nonviolently if attacked. After orientation, McKenna assigned the ministers to projects around the state, with the aim of providing a minister-counselor for each COFO project, and volunteers for COFO and NCC projects as needed.¹⁸

Some volunteers had specific tasks assigned to them, including working in freedom schools and community centers; canvassing the African American community for voter applicants; assisting voter registration applicants; and meeting with local white clergy and officials in an attempt to open channels of communication and ease racial discrimination. Volunteers sometimes undertook several tasks according to local needs and their length of stay. This was particularly the case for minister-counselors whose role was deliberately made open-ended, conceived by the NCC as making "themselves available to the projects in the most meaningful way possible."¹⁹

Despite their orientation exercise, some volunteers experienced shock and even disbelief when they encountered the realities of discrimination in Mississippi first hand. After spending a week in Mississippi, Mary Lou Pettit wrote to McKenna: "I could hardly believe I was still in the United States of America!" The Reverend William H. Henderson, a United Presbyterian minister from Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, who spent nine days in Hattiesburg with his wife Kathleen, wrote: "It made one feel like being in another country." However, Rabbi Gerald Engel of West Lafayette, Indiana, was able to effect a staged transition to Mississippi. He wrote: "Coming to Mississippi by bus made it possible to adjust 'gradually' to a police state. At Mobile[,] Alabama[,] the segregation was absolute. It grew i[n] intensity as we went on to Mississippi."²⁰

Although Donald E. Poston, a Disciples of Christ minister from Palo Alto, California, reported that "All during my stay [in Gulfport] I was carefully protected by the Sheriff and his deputies," many of the NCC volunteers and counselors experienced harassment from the police. Barbara Woodard, an Episcopalian who went to Canton, recalled: "At all times during the week there was police harassment. The night before we left some of us were tailed home by the police and then kept awake all night by their car going by with a siren and someone shouting in a 'bull horn,' 'nigger lover, go home' or 'get out of bed, nigger

¹⁸ "Appendix A Biographical Data – Delta Ministry Staff," box 2, folder 39, DM Papers; "Summary Report Commission on Religion and Race, June 5, 1964-December 3, 1964," 3-4 December 1964, 1-3, box 47, folder 31, NCC Archives; Kathleen W. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 2, box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers; *Holyoke Transcript-Telegram*, 7 July 1964; Findlay, *Church People* 91.

¹⁹ "Summary Report Commission on Religion and Race, June 5, 1964-December 3, 1964," 3-4 December 1964, 2-3 (quotation on p. 3), box 47, folder 31, NCC Archives; Robert L. Beech, "Report from Hattiesburg September 1-October 20 [1964]," no box, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers; *Holyoke Transcript-Telegram*, 7, 8, 10, 18, 28 July 1964.

²⁰ Letter from Mary Lou Pettit to Warren McKenna, 11 August 1964 (first quotation), "Report by Rabbi Gerald Engel General Evaluation of Stay August 18-27 [1964]," (third quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers; William H. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 3 (second quotation), box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers.

lover.”” Like many other NCC church people, Woodard also reported regular police harassment of COFO workers.²¹

Usually, police hostility to the NCC contingent did not extend beyond harassment and lectures that Mississippi race relations were fine and outsiders should address problems in their home communities. However, in July 1964 police charged Bob Beech, director of the NCC’s Hattiesburg Ministers’ Project, with attempting to obtain property under false pretenses, although the county later dropped the charges. That same month, an Indianola policeman pulled out his gun and threatened Rabbi Allen Levine of Rochester, New York, a minister-counselor in nearby Ruleville. In August, police arrested and jailed Rabbi Rav A. Soloff and five COFO workers who were canvassing African Americans in Canton. Soloff wrote subsequently of the “sense of disbelief which I still feel at having been arrested for no cause on the basis of an unconstitutional local ordinance in a city in the United States of America.”²²

In some instances, NCC volunteers established contacts with local white authorities, which lessened tension although producing little or no change in patterns of discrimination. NCC volunteers also cultivated white moderates in towns such as Vicksburg and Hattiesburg, and, in some cases, facilitated interracial contacts between white moderates and African Americans. That charges were dropped against Beech in Hattiesburg, where the NCC had made considerable efforts to work in the white community, was partly a result of complaints made about his arrest by some local whites to the mayor, sheriff, and district attorney. The Hattiesburg Project also fostered interracial contacts, but it failed to break the segregationists’ hold on power in the city.²³

Often, local authorities and white clergymen rebuffed approaches from NCC volunteers. The Reverends Robert C. Gregg and Robert T. Hall, Episcopalians from New England who served in Cleveland, observed: “The white clergy with whom these issues [race relations] were discussed showed no inclination to depart from the general viewpoint of white laity.... There is substantial resentment of the white clergy volunteers working in the Mississippi Summer Project, and hostility towards the National Council of Churches is intense.”²⁴

²¹ Letter from Donald E. Poston to Warren McKenna, 12 August 1964 (first quotation), Barbara Woodard, “Mission to Mississippi,” May 1964, 2 (second quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers. Although Woodard described a visit made in May 1964, her comments anticipated the experiences of many NCC volunteers in the Mississippi Summer Project.

²² Pat and Rick Haynes, “August 23-31, 1964 Jackson, Mississippi,” 7, attached to letter from Pat and Rick Haynes to Warren McKenna, 30 September 1964, “Rabbi Rav A. Soloff Arrested In Mississippi,” 1-2 (quotation on p. 2), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Bob Beech, “Report from Hattiesburg, July 1-14[,] 1964,” 1-2, Robert L. Beech, “Report from Hattiesburg, July 24-August 3 [1964],” 3, no box, folder “Reports and Reactions,” Bob Beech, “Report from Hattiesburg[,] August 12-19, 1964,” box 1, folder “Reports and Reactions,” and “Synopsis of conference between Rev. Robert L. Beech and Robert H. Janover regarding ‘false pretenses’ charge against Rev. Beech – Hattiesburg, Miss. – July 16-17, 1964,” box 1, folder “Business Correspondence Hattiesburg Project The Delta Ministry Part II,” Beech Papers; *Hattiesburg American*, 10 July 1964; Bob Beech, “Notes for reference on testimony before the U.S. Commission on C.R. August 15, 1964,” box 6, folder 49, DM Papers.

²³ Dick and Nancy Williams, “Vicksburg Mississippi Ministers’ Project – Evaluation August 3-17 [1964],” box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers; Newman, *Divine Agitators* 54.

²⁴ Robert T. Hall and Robert C. Gregg, “Report: Observations Regarding Cleveland, Mississippi,” 2 September 1964, 4, box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

In McComb, only Colton Smith, an Episcopalian minister from Vicksburg, Mississippi, responded positively to efforts by visiting NCC clergymen to establish relations. Smith put Don McCord, a white Disciples of Christ minister from Stafford, Kansas, in touch with Albert Heffner, a moderate segregationist. But harassment forced Heffner to leave McComb with his family after he had met with McCord and a COFO worker. Some white clergymen in Mississippi felt bound by segregationist sentiment among their congregations, while others were as hostile to the civil rights movement as many of their parishioners. The Reverend Windham reported that an unnamed Moss Point pastor shared his views but would not air them publicly. By contrast, the Reverend Poston visited a fellow Disciples of Christ minister in Gulfport who “told me I was an ‘insult to the state of Mississippi’” and “to get the hell out of Gulfport while I was able.”²⁵

The threat of violence was real for civil rights workers and those who assisted them. The summer of 1964 saw an outbreak of racist violence that included at least six murders, thirty-five shooting occurrences, and the deliberate destruction of sixty-five homes, churches, and other buildings by fire or bombing.²⁶

Nevertheless, although the NCC volunteers lived in the African American community and most worked in COFO projects, with few exceptions they did not suffer violence even though the possibility hovered over many of them. Rabbi Soloff reported that five NCC ministers who arrived in Canton by bus “were verbally assaulted by a group of hostile whites and, when they entered a car, the car was trapped between two other stalled or supposed disabled vehicles for something close to an hour and a half. Fortunately, no violence took place, the FBI was informed of the threatening situation and finally a local police officer convinced one of the blocking cars to move and let the ministers proceed.”²⁷

However, a few ministers suffered violence during the summer. In early July, two white men badly beat Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland, Ohio, and two COFO workers after they had been canvassing in Hattiesburg’s black community. An attendant pulled a gun out of a drawer when Rabbi Allen Levine of Rochester, New York, tried to make a telephone call from a service station in Indianola later that month. In August the Reverend Edward K. Heininger, a United Church of Christ pastor from Des Moines, Iowa, and a COFO volunteer were beaten by a mob in a doctor’s office in Madden.²⁸

Living and working in the African American community, NCC volunteers gratefully acknowledged, offered some degree of protection from white harassment and violence. Kathleen W. Henderson, in Mississippi with her clergyman husband, stayed with a black family in Hattiesburg. She reported that “People have had their homes burned for less but

²⁵ Newman, *Divine Agitators* 70-71; Carter, *So the Heffners Left McComb* 9-142; *Holyoke Transcript-Telegram*, 29 July 1964; letter from Donald E. Poston to Warren McKenna, 12 August 1964, 2 (quotations), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

²⁶ “List of Negro Churches and Church Buildings Burned in Mississippi,” box 48, folder 15, DM Papers; Dittmer, *Local People* 251.

²⁷ “Rabbi Rav A. Soloff Arrested In Mississippi,” 1 (quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

²⁸ *Milwaukee Journal* 3 August 1964; *Clarion-Ledger* [Jackson, Mississippi], 29 March 1966; Bob Beech, “Report from Hattiesburg July 1-14, 1964,” 2, box 1, folder “Reports and Reactions,” Beech Papers; Bob Beech, “Notes for reference on testimony before the U.S. Commission on C.R. August 15, 1964,” box 6, folder 49, DM Papers; letter from Robert W. Spike to “Members of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches,” 4 August 1964, 1, RG 11, box 6, folder 21, NCC Archives; “Cleric Recounts Mississippi Clash,” press clipping dated 3 August 1964, box 1, folder 25, Horwitz Papers.

you'd never have known it from the warm welcome I received." Furthermore, she wrote: "We were told that the Negroes sitting on benches along the street weren't just sitting—they were watching to see that our office and the COFO Office across the street were safe."²⁹

NCC volunteers frequently commented on the welcome, friendliness and thankfulness of many African Americans toward them, an acceptance eased by the respect many Mississippi blacks had for clergymen. Dr. Everett W. MacNair, a United Church of Christ minister and Dean of Chapel at Talladega College, Alabama, wrote: "The appreciation of the Negro people of Greenville, for our work, especially because we were ministers, was more than we deserved," and he found "great gratitude that we were willing to come down here without pay and at some risk, to help them get their freedom." The Reverend Henderson wrote of the black community in Hattiesburg "We were treated courteously everywhere. Most places express a warm appreciation for our presence to help them get their freedom." In Moss Point, the Reverend Winham reported "The [African American] people of this community were glad to see us and they said so—with their faces and with their words; best of all, by their actions."³⁰

The volunteers, for their part, recognized and praised the fortitude and resilience of the African American community in the face of white oppression, but they did so without romanticizing African Americans or overlooking fear and divisions within the black community. Kathleen Henderson reported "Very real fear, based on real burnings and loss of jobs has had to be reckoned with—and real suspicion of white faces—and fear of their own 'Uncle Toms.' But the local Negro leadership emerging seems to hold a tremendous hope for our nation."³¹

The NCC's visiting clergymen approached local African American ministers but found that, although often cordial, few participated in civil rights activity, often because of a realistic fear of white retribution. The Reverend Bill Brison of Bethany, Connecticut's Christ Episcopal Church, wrote McKenna: "The ministers, and teachers, were conspicuous by their absence in the front ranks of the Civil Rights movement in Cleveland." Nevertheless, the visiting NCC pastors occasionally enjoyed success. The Reverend Harry J. Bowie, a black Episcopalian minister from New Jersey, succeeded in getting an African American church in McComb, where he spent a month as a minister-counselor, to host a freedom school and civil rights rally.³²

Welcomed by most of the African American community, if not necessarily by their ministers, the NCC volunteers also had a good relationship with most of the COFO workers and summer volunteers with whom they worked, based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to racial equality. The clergymen frequently expressed admiration for the

²⁹ Kathleen W. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 2, box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers.

³⁰ Letter from Everett W. MacNair and Irene T. MacNair to Warren McKenna and Graede Poulard, 19 August 1964, 1-2 (first quotation on p.1; second quotation on p.2), box 15, folder 1, DM Papers; William H. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 3 (third quotation), box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers; *Holyoke Transcript-Telegram*, 9 July 1964 (fourth quotation).

³¹ Kathleen W. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 3, box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers.

³² Letter from Bill Brison to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964 (quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers; Dittmer, *Local People* 251; "Appendix A Biographical Data – Delta Ministry Staff," box 2, folder 39, DM Papers; Newman, *Divine Agitators* 71.

students and for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality members who headed the COFO projects which the NCC assisted. The Reverend William Henderson reported: "I have never been exposed to a more uniformly superior group of young people." The Reverend Henry L. Bird, an Episcopal minister from Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, wrote McKenna that: "I can't speak highly enough of these [COFO] volunteers—a rich diversity of backgrounds, personalities, training, etc.—'varieties of gifts'—in one Spirit." The MacNairs commented:

We loved the COFO volunteers we met. Some were religious and some were not. Yet I suppose the real heroes of the movement are the seasoned Negro 'Snick' personnel, w[h]o faced the worst dangers, and took more than their share of the violence that occurred out in the state.... Sometimes they seemed bitter. Always they were intent on helping anyone threatened. Always they took har[d]ships as a matter of course. These were the real leaders, and that is as it should be. It was a privilege to work with them.³³

The NCC volunteers frequently commented that many of the COFO staff and volunteers were either alienated from organized religion, nonreligious or antireligious. The Reverend George H. Phelps, a United Presbyterian pastor from Delmar, New York, who served as a minister-counselor in Shaw, wrote "Some of them [COFO volunteers] are loyal to the church and understand its shortcomings, most of them are rebelling from the church and Christian faith as they understand it, and a few are outright atheists confessing to be so." The Reverend Donald A. Gall, a Congregational pastor from Whiting, Iowa, was more blunt. After serving in Indianola, he informed McKenna: "Most of these kids think the Church is a bunch of crap and that most ministers are finks, simply because we talk so much about love but seldom do anything about it."³⁴

Yet, the ministers still admired COFO people and some favorably contrasted the young activists' behavior and dedication with that of many Christians outside the movement's ranks. The Reverend Dick Williams and his wife Nancy, Methodists from Naugatuck, Connecticut, assigned to Vicksburg, reported:

The minister-counselor should keep in mind that the vast majority of COFO workers are deeply committed to their task, highly moral and ethical in their own way, widely evangelical, and firm in their faith. Some have given up regular outward practices of sectarian religion, but all are dedicated to God's way in the world—much more so than the average regular Church-goer.

³³ Letter from Frazer A. Thomason to Warren McKenna, 26 August 1964, 1, Henry L. Bird, "Minister-Counselor Report to NCC Office, Jackson, for period July 21-31 [1964]," 2 (second quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," W. Ransom Rice, Jr., untitled report, n.d., no box, folder "Freedom Democratic Party Hattiesburg," William H. Henderson, "Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964," 2 (first quotation), box 1, folder "Reports and Reactions," Beech Papers; letter from Everett W. MacNair and Irene T. MacNair to Warren McKenna and Graede Poulard, 19 August 1964, 2 (third quotation), DM Papers.

³⁴ "Report to Warren McKenna from George H. Phelps on work as minister-counselor in the project at Shaw, Mississippi," 23 July 1964, 1 (first quotation), letter from Donald A. Gall to Warren McKenna, 22 August 1964 (second quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

The Reverend John R. Warner, Jr., a Methodist from Livermore Falls, Maine, attached to a COFO project in Laurel, was even more impressed. He wrote McKenna:

I was constantly amazed at the perception of the kids on the project. Though most claimed no connection with the church, what a church we would have if the Christians had such faith, such love, such hope, such freedom of action as these kids have. In my presence they did discuss some religious questions, showed real understanding of the meaning of sin, recognized the very real way in which they were participating in "if I may use such a cliché," one said, "the Cross."³⁵

In most cases the NCC volunteers reported they had enjoyed good relations with COFO. The presence of the clergy and their obvious sincerity and commitment to the Summer Project militated to some extent against the feeling of many COFO people that the Church, or at least mainline white denominations, were irrelevant to the civil rights struggle or aloof from it. The Reverend Poston noted of COFO people in Gulfport: "Some of them seemed amazed that ministers were involved at all." The Reverend Arden Clute, an Episcopalian from Mountain View, California, assigned to Columbus, observed that "the civil rights workers . . . discovered by the NCC's action that the Church can and does concern itself with great human problems." The Reverend Warner recalled that in Laurel: "Most of the kids on the project claimed to be atheists or agnostics, or just nothing at all. They have some real hostile feelings towards the church. It was not enough that they should call me 'John.' They wanted to know if a minister could really be a person. I found it extremely easy to talk with them."³⁶

Most NCC volunteers adapted themselves to the needs of project to which they were assigned and, in so doing, won ready acceptance from COFO staff and volunteers. An unnamed COFO worker wrote to the Reverend and Mrs. Williams: "The times when a minister's role is going to be that different from that of other project workers aren't going to be that frequent. And I think the best way to act is to try to be one of them, as you have done."³⁷

Not all ministers succeeded, like the Williams, in establishing a good connection with COFO. The Reverend Warner wrote McKenna:

The minister before me was a middle aged man. He had had some trouble relating to the kids, and they felt that he was naïve. Because I am not much older than these workers, because I am still enrolled in a university, and mostly because I have lived and worked a good deal with peace movement and civil-rights' movement kids, I found it very easy to relate to these kids, and to enjoy them as persons. This, basically, was the task that I chose for myself.

³⁵ Dick and Nancy Williams, "Vicksburg Mississippi Ministers' Project – Evaluation August 3-17 [1964]" (first quotation), letter from John R. Warner, Jr., to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964 (second quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

³⁶ Letter from Donald E. Poston to Warren McKenna, 12 August 1964, 1 (first quotation), letter from Arden Clute to Warren McKenna, 10 September 1964 (second quotation), letter from John R. Warner, Jr., to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964, 2 (third quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

³⁷ Untitled anonymous report (quotation), attached to Dick and Nancy Williams, "Vicksburg Mississippi Ministers' Project – Evaluation August 3-17 [1964]," box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

However, age differences seem to have been no barrier between NCC and COFO people in most projects, providing ministers had good interpersonal and pastoral skills. They also needed to possess a willingness and ability to immerse themselves in a project and to demonstrate initiative, rather than waiting for instructions that seldom came given the decentralized manner in which many COFO projects operated.³⁸

NCC people frequently reported that being a good listener was essential since COFO people often felt a need to unburden themselves to someone from outside their peer group. In these circumstances, a minister's pastoral skills could be ideal for the task, and his different age and status an aid, rather than a barrier, to communication. The Reverend Poston explained:

My relationship with the workers in Gulfport was most satisfactory. Being considerably older than they, response to my presence was good and it was immediately so expressed. They had problems which they gladly brought to me. Most of them had to do with internal misunderstandings [*sic*] and inability to communicate and contests for leadership within the group. Lines of authority were somewhat blurred. There was a lot of lonesom[e]ness for home. A good listener can do wonders for all of them.³⁹

By contrast, the negative experience in Greenwood of the Reverend Carroll Lemon from Lincoln, Nebraska, is instructive regarding the difficulties that a few NCC people had in adapting to their new roles, and also indicative of the qualities needed in a successful NCC volunteer. Lemon wrote McKenna:

I was trying to ask all whom I met if I could help them do what they were doing or if they had something I could do. What a story! Not a bit of activity or suggestion . . .

I saw we would have to plan our own time. I hoped to be sometime called on by showing myself available.

I guess I seem to complain—I am sure I have no right to do so. It probably was mostly my failure to relate; or an impossible situation; or, surely to some degree, some mistakes in the organization.

You must be sure to assign them [NCC ministers] where they can be given pretty specific guidance at pretty specific tasks . . . or maybe it is only a matter of bringing only the out-going, imaginative, creative person here.

Many ministers also complained that they had been given no specific tasks either by the NCC or COFO, and some did not find the counseling role they sought. The Reverend Phelps reported to McKenna:

It has been hard to avoid the feeling that I am a fifth-wheel in the various functions of the project. This is understandable inasmuch as each of the volunteers has his own assignments and is busy going about performing them. It is natural that the

³⁸ Letter from John R. Warner, Jr., to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964, 1, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

³⁹ Letter from Donald E. Poston to Warren McKenna, 12 August 1964, 1, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

leadership should feel reluctant ever to ask me to specifically do anything. I also have attended all staff meetings, but my counsel at these is assiduously avoided, which is also understandable.⁴⁰

But whatever their complaints or frustration about lack of instructions or leadership, most NCC volunteers reported a positive experience, although sometimes tinged with the regret that they had not done more. Even Phelps concluded his report positively, writing: "I thoroughly believe in the M-C [minister-counselor] idea even though I myself do not feel that in 10 days I have been very effective. However, I do feel that just my friendship . . . , and just being here is more helpful to all than can easily be seen. I'm sure my presence helps in keeping up the general morale of the group."⁴¹

The most successful NCC ministers and counselors quickly learned to create roles for themselves, if none had been assigned them. The Reverend Frazer A. Thomason, a Disciples of Christ pastor from Des Moines, Iowa, lamented "the absence of central leadership" in COFO's Clarksdale project but had quickly become proactive. He wrote McKenna:

Because our roles as Minister-Counsellors were always nebulous, my wife and I have pitched in at specific areas to make ourselves useful to the project. Mrs. Thomason worked daily at the Community center, teamed up with the Volunteer staff. I have worked on Freedom Registrations, and in the last week on Voter registrations, carrying people to the Court House. . . . I made my car available for errands and missions alike, and thus we feel we made some little contribution to the cause.⁴²

Many NCC people, like the Reverend Thomason, discovered that ownership of a car quickly brought them much needed chauffeuring duties, and helped them to get to know and establish good relations with COFO. The Reverend Brison found that in Cleveland: "I did a great deal of plain chauffeuring but I was glad to do this since it was a real service and because it made the more important parts of my tasks easier." The Reverend Warner argued that "Driving was a very good task. To drive them [COFO] meant that I was constantly talking with one to three kids at a time when they had nothing to do but ride. Within 48 hours I knew all [of] them by name."⁴³

Despite their admiration and respect for COFO workers and volunteers, NCC volunteers also discerned their shortcomings. Despite SNCC's commitment to developing local leadership, the Reverend Thomason noted that in Clarksdale, "[t]he [COFO] staff and

⁴⁰ Letter from Carroll Lemon to Warren McKenna, 14 August 1964 (first quotation), "Report to Warren McKenna from George H. Phelps on work as minister-counselor in the project at Shaw, Mississippi," 23 July 1964, 1 (second quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

⁴¹ "Report to Warren McKenna from George H. Phelps on work as minister-counselor in the project at Shaw, Mississippi," 23 July 1964, 2, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

⁴² Letter from Frazer A. Thomason to Warren McKenna, 26 August 1964, 1, box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

⁴³ Letter from Bill Brison to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964 (first quotation), letter from John R. Warner, Jr., to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964, 1 (second quotation), box 3, folder "Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers' Experiences across Miss.," Beech Papers.

volunteers were in a subtle contest with the local people for spheres of responsibility.” Some NCC people expressed concerns about the psychological stress under which COFO workers operated. After visiting Meridian, Kathleen Henderson reported: “The students are hot and tired—there are frictions between those of vastly different backgrounds—they can never relax and just be young people—but they have a real sense of mission and we’ve never felt so proud!” Irene Tinker Walker, an Episcopalian from Chevy Chase, Maryland, assigned to Canton, suggested McKenna ask NCC volunteers to provide sports and recreation activities for COFO people in order to relieve tension. “In Canton,” wrote Walker, “the project nearly blew up over the clashes resulting over bottled feelings of the intense youngsters and the affected puritanism of the [COFO] staff toward the [student] volunteers.”⁴⁴

The Reverend Richard and Nancy Williams noted internal strains in the Vicksburg COFO project that were also commonplace in many other COFO projects. They reported: “Counseling took the form of providing a cushion for tension, escape valves for built up hostilities, or a buffer foil for religious or social discussions. Tensions evolved from almost continuously relating to each other, from depressing phone calls from parents, frustrations with transportation conflicts. Yet workers are always ready to rally to register voters, teach those hungry for knowledge, an[d] to help the threatened and harassed.”

The Williams seem to have practiced equality within their marriage, which made them conscious of sexual discrimination in COFO that other NCC volunteers, most of them men, did not question because they accepted such discrimination as part of the American social norm. The couple reported with regret:

In this group, dedicated to the equality of races, there is much maintenance of sexual inequality—the males tending to ignore the females and attempting to relegate th[e]m to the stereotyped roles of housemaid and secretary. The presence of a married couple in the role of minister-counselor could (given more time) offset male-female conflicts. The girls found no hesitation in appealing to us for help in this area.

With disapproval, the Williams also noted other forms of discrimination among COFO people. “In a group unusually tolerant racially,” they observed, “there is noticeable intolerance of other differences, i.e. age differences, social ineptitudes, naïveté in dealing with the Negro community, etc.”⁴⁵

Evaluating their experiences, NCC volunteers who, like the Williams, had spent no more than two weeks in Mississippi often believed that they and the NCC needed more time to be effective, and some also believed that the National Council needed to provide a more thorough orientation program. The Williams suggested that “[a] minister needs to be in the project longer than two weeks. Ministers should be given more specific orientation in

⁴⁴ Letter from Frazer A. Thomason to Warren McKenna, 26 August 1964, 2 (first quotation), Irene Tinker Walker, “Memo on the Role of Ministers in Mississippi,” to Warren McKenna, n.d., 2 (third quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Kathleen W. Henderson, “Mississippi – August 2-10, 1964,” 1 (second quotation), box 1, folder “Reports and Reactions,” Beech Papers.

⁴⁵ Dick and Nancy Williams, “Vicksburg Mississippi Ministers’ Project – Evaluation August 3-17 [1964],” box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers. On sexual discrimination in SNCC see Carson, *In Struggle* 147-48.

the assigned project and less general and generally useless philosophy of nonviolence (which is probably assumed by most volunteers). Projects should play a larger role in defining the job of minister-counselor.” Irene Tinker Walker observed: “Too often it was clear that the minister had made a commitment to equality but knew nothing of the political activity, the efforts of civil rights groups, or Negro history. All volunteers ought to be told to read a few books.”⁴⁶

COFO shared these concerns. George Robbins of COFO’s Shaw project praised the minister-counselor program as “a very good idea” that gave the Church an opportunity “to become vitally socially conscious” and “the project a needed tone of conciliation which it often needs as personal animosities [*sic*] rise in the mosquitoes and heat of the summer.” But he argued that ministers should stay more than two weeks in order to gain “a thorough grasp of the situation,” and that they needed “[a] more thorough orientation before coming to Mississippi.” Robbins further suggested that “continuing a program of concern after the summer is imperative.”⁴⁷

Some NCC volunteers regretted beginning work that they knew they had left unfinished and which they could not be sure could or would be continued by their successors. The result, they feared, might be disillusionment and frustration among those they sought to help. But if the NCC had insisted on ministers committing themselves to a longer stay in Mississippi, far fewer might have been either able or willing to participate, which would have undermined the National Council’s aim of assisting every COFO project during the summer. Both as counselors and as volunteers in Freedom Schools, community centers, and canvassing and voter registration drives NCC people provided a useful service to the COFO, in addition to their chauffeuring contribution. Many African American Mississippians appreciated the contributions the NCC volunteers made. Expressive of this view, a black mason who built the shower used in the Hattiesburg Ministers’ Project wrote on its base: “We will never forget you ministers for what you have done for us.”⁴⁸

Those who went to Mississippi under NCC auspices also found their experience equally memorable. The Reverend Thomason wrote: “This was a never-to-be forgotten experience, to be remembered all our lives.” The Reverend Klepper, part of another husband and wife team, informed McKenna: “We feel that it was one of the primary experiences of our lives and wish only that we could have put more time into it.” When they returned from Mississippi, the volunteers related their experiences to their home congregations, thereby performing an educative service and often rallying support for the civil rights cause. The Reverend Bill Brison wrote that in his Bethany, Connecticut, church, “[t]here was considerable opposition voiced to my coming,” but “I have found that the people here in the

⁴⁶ Dick and Nancy Williams, “Vicksburg Mississippi Ministers’ Project – Evaluation August 3-17 [1964]” (first quotation), Irene Tinker Walker, “Memo on the Role of Ministers in Mississippi,” to Warren McKenna, n.d., 1 (second quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

⁴⁷ Letter from George Robbins to Henry [McKenna], n.d., 1 (quotations), attached to H. L. Bird, “Minister-Counselor Report to NCC Office, Jackson – for period July 21-31 [1964] Shaw-Cleveland-Mound Bayou Projects,” box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

⁴⁸ W. Ransom Rice, Jr, untitled report, n.d., no box, folder “Freedom Democratic Party Hattiesburg,” Beech Papers.

parish feel that they have had a real share in the Mississippi [Summer Project] and I feel that they have.”⁴⁹

However not all nonsouthern congregations rallied behind their ministers and responded positively to their involvement in Mississippi. Lloyd B. Stauffer, pastor of Harper Woods, Michigan’s First Church of the Brethren, lamented: “My only regret in this program is that my congregation wasn’t fully behind it, and it appears that there will be no further support from other people of my congregation for this project.” Southern congregations could be even more unforgiving. Participation cost the Reverend Leslie Eugene Bogan III his Episcopal pastorate in Graham, Texas, after complaints from a Hattiesburg parish to his home church.⁵⁰

Many ministers regretted having to return to their congregations after only a week or two in Mississippi. In some cases, such feelings reflected the transformative effect that participation in the Summer Project had had upon them. The Reverend Gall wrote to McKenna in August 1964: “It was going to be hell to leave those kids to carry on the struggle which was and is just as much ours as it is theirs. I want to get out from behind the four walls of the Institutional Church and minister to people in areas where the need is most great and most urgent. I want to work in the area of Race Relations, full-time [emphasis in the original].” The sources do not reveal whether Gall succeeded in his ambition, but a few of the NCC’s summer volunteers, including Rims Barber, Harry Bowie, Warren McKenna, and Al Winham, remained in or soon returned to Mississippi and joined the Delta Ministry, a long-term project of voter education and registration, economic development and community building, launched by the National Council in September 1964 to help the poor and disenfranchised in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, Hattiesburg and McComb.⁵¹

Even if they did not return to Mississippi full time, some NCC veterans of the Summer Project devoted themselves to poverty and racial issues, or became involved in interracial ministries. The Reverend Donald Fletcher, a United Presbyterian minister in Austin, Texas, and his wife joined Stillman College, a largely black institution in Alabama, in 1965 as a result of their service in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. More than twenty years later, a summer veteran now engaged as a social worker in Zimbabwe, explained: “My life has been dedicated to issues of justice ever since. I learned much about what faith and faithfulness mean, about what commitment entails, about how to follow, about sensitivity to others.” Many of those who did not devote themselves full-time to social issues nonetheless remained deeply and permanently affected by their experiences in Mississippi. The Reverend John Raines, a Methodist and former minister-counselor in Hattiesburg,

⁴⁹ Letter from Arden Clute to Warren McKenna, 10 September 1964, letter from Frazer A. Thomason to Warren McKenna, 26 August 1964, 2-3 (first quotation), letter from Robert F. Klepper to Warren McKenna, 2 September 1964 (second quotation), letter from Bill Brison to Warren McKenna, 18 August 1964 (third quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers.

⁵⁰ Letter from Lloyd B. Stauffer to “Mr. Schroeder,” 1 September 1964 (quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers; Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle* 98; “Ministers, Adult Laymen Recruited by National Council of Churches for Work in Mississippi Summer Project – June 15 to Sept 1, 1964 Listed by Denominations,” box 2, folder 38, “Ministers and Adult Laymen Recruited by NCC for Work in Mississippi Summer Project (Participants listed by State),” box 8, folder 21, DM Papers.

⁵¹ Letter from Donald A. Gall to Warren McKenna, 22 August 1964 (quotation), box 3, folder “Letters + Papers Re 1964 Summer Volunteers’ Experiences across Miss.,” Beech Papers; “Appendix A Biographical Data – Delta Ministry Staff,” box 2, folder 39, DM Papers. On the Delta Ministry see Newman, *Divine Agitators*.

perceptively observed: "My suspicion is that the most permanent change was not in the South as such, but in the minds and hearts of us northerners, who received a mighty 'education in reality.' All of my teaching and writing about our society since these years have been deeply shaped by my experience among the black poor and oppressed of the South."⁵²

The NCC people who came to Mississippi during the summer of 1964 played a supportive role in the civil rights movement. Most of the NCC ministers and their wives adapted suitably to the roles assigned them or, in the absence of instructions, carved out roles for themselves. A small minority of the contingent the National Council brought to the state were naïve, unsuited, or simply unable to adapt. A more thorough preparation by the ministers and in-depth orientation and screening of them by the NCC might have alleviated some of these problems. But the crucial factor in limiting the effectiveness of the NCC ministers and lay volunteers was that most stayed two weeks or less, leaving their replacements to start over. Nevertheless, the efforts of the NCC people were invariably appreciated by COFO and almost uniformly welcomed by indigenous African Americans, and both local blacks and COFO workers benefited from recognition that the Church nationally supported their struggle, as well as from the practical assistance NCC people provided in voter registration, freedom schools, and community centers. Many of the NCC contingent gained as much or more personally from their involvement than the people they were seeking to help, and for some clergy and lay volunteers participation marked the beginning of a lifelong commitment to and involvement in addressing racism and other social problems.

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⁵² Findlay, "In Keeping with the Prophets," 576 (quotations); "Ministers, Adult Laymen Recruited by National Council of Churches for Work in Mississippi Summer Project – June 15 to Sept 1, 1964 Listed by Denominations," box 2, folder 38, "Ministers and Adult Laymen Recruited by NCC for Work in Mississippi Summer Project" (Participants listed by State), box 8, folder 21, DM Papers.

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“It took an old woman and two children for that”: Minority in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*

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Intruder in the Dust, written by William Faulkner and first published in 1948, is the story of a young boy, Chick who, with the help of his black friend and an old woman, Miss Habersham, manages to prove the innocence of Lucas Beauchamp, a black man accused of murdering a white man. With such a plot, the reader understands quickly that minorities are at the heart of the story. Yet, in this context, the word “minority” will not be used in its usual meaning, defining a “small group of people within a community or country, differing from the main population in race, religion, language, or political persuasion” (English Oxford Dictionary); instead it is the notion of “minority” as defined by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that will be considered: minority is linked to the relation of subordination of one group of people to another group, whatever its numerical power. Minor literature is literature a minority makes in a major language, literature in which everything is political and has a collective value. This essay will try to show how, in *Intruder in the Dust*, minorities can undermine the majority through creative metamorphoses. It will first focus on the majority that dominates the minorities, then show how the minor characters disrupt the codified society. Finally, it will study the political and collective value of this novel.

According to Deleuze, society is organized in fixed, rigid territories separated by hard, molar lines: you are either male or female, adult or child, young or old, black or white... For him, majority has nothing to do with the size of the territory or the number of elements involved but corresponds to a model you have to conform to. For instance, in the South of the United States, the majority corresponds to white men, even if they were outnumbered by black men and women, white women and children. *Intruder in the Dust* describes this majority on which Southern society is founded, through the figure of the mob, the description of Beat Four and its inhabitants and through the character of Gavin Stevens.

The importance of the *territorialization* in the South is explicitly demonstrated in the novel, as it is the basis of the plot itself. Indeed, there would be no such story if a black man had been killed by a white man, if a black man had been killed by another black man, or even if a white man had been killed by a white man. The starting point of the diegesis is that a black man has crossed a line and has challenged the majority by attacking one of its own. That’s why the community lashes back through the figure of the mob waiting outside and threatening to lynch Lucas Beauchamp. The following extract figures the territorialization which is at stake in this novel:

Then suddenly the empty street was full of men. Yet there were not many of them, not two dozen, some suddenly and quietly from nowhere. Yet they seemed to fill it, block it, render it suddenly interdict as though not that nobody could pass them, pass through it, use it as a street but that nobody would dare, would even approach near enough to essay the gambit as people stay well away from a sign saying High Voltage or Explosive. (41-42)

What is striking here is the paradox between the small number of men present and the massive sense of power they give off. These white men belong to the majority, whatever their number, and their domination is clear to everyone. The line they form on the street is the figuration of the boundary delineating their territory. As a black man has allegedly overstepped the implicit bounds of Southern society, the reaction of the majority is to reaffirm its control and the simple presence of the men constitutes a threat as it is intended to be a reminder of white supremacy.¹

Although composed of individuals, when faced with their vulnerability, the majority will unite and become one, as Chick Mallison notices: “he remembered again the faces myriad yet curiously identical in their lack of individual identity, their complete relinquishment of individual identity into one We . . .” (135). The community in Jefferson is what Cleanth Brooks defines as “an organic society that shares basic assumptions. The proof of its organic unity is that its members can, without thinking or prior consultation, suddenly move together in a concordant action” (291). The basic assumptions mentioned by Brooks are unspoken yet clear for everyone in that society, the most important one being that black people should never forget the White Man’s superiority—this White dominance is symbolized in the previous extract through the capitalization of the pronoun “We” referring to the white community. What these men reproach Lucas for is not only killing a white man, it is also, and maybe more importantly, refusing to act like a black man, namely refusing to acknowledge his inferiority. This recalls Faulkner’s novel *Light in August*, in which Joe Christmas, who is supposedly black, is accused of killing a white woman and in which one of the characters says “He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made folks so mad. . . . It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too” (350). The Southern society could thrive only if the minorities complied with the tacit rules—something Gavin Stevens explains to his nephew Chick when talking about a grocer, Mr Lilley:

All he requires is that they act like niggers. Which is exactly what Lucas is doing: blew his top and murdered a white man—which Mr Lilley is probably convinced all Negroes want to do—and now the white people will take him out and burn him, all regular and in order and themselves acting exactly as he is convinced Lucas would wish them to act: like white folks; both of them observing implicitly the rules: the nigger acting like a nigger and the white folks acting like white folks and no real hard feelings on either side (since Mr Lilley is not a Gowrie) once the fury is over . . . (48)

The first thing the reader notices in this extract is the repetition of the verb “act like,” which is used four times. This highlights the theatricality of the relationships between blacks and whites, as their interaction is described as role-playing. The distance taken by Gavin Stevens through the irony of “all regular and in order” and through his assumption about Mr Lilley’s point of view (“he is convinced”) gives the impression that he is the stage director of these theatrics, especially as it contrasts with the “fury” mentioned. He aims to demonstrate his own superiority but also to paradoxically rationalize a violent

¹ This pattern is recurrent in Faulkner’s work, as it can also be found in *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, and “Dry September.”

behavior he himself does not partake in. By doing so, he defends the majority he belongs to even if he does not condone all of its brutality. Indeed, members of the majority need to remain united if they do not want this majority to be subverted by minorities.

If the Southern structure is built on the hard molar lines of territorialization, encasing each social group in different rigid segments, some elements from the minorities break free and undermine the constraints established by the norms. Such is the case of Lucas Beauchamp, for instance, who is defined in the novel as “the Negro who said ‘ma’am’ to women just as any white men did and who said ‘sir’ and ‘mister’ to you if you were white but who you knew was thinking neither and he knew you knew it but was not even waiting, daring you to make the next move, because he didn’t even care” (18). Lucas Beauchamp refuses to consider himself or be treated as a black man because he is a descendent of Carothers McCaslin, a white planter. His pride in his white ancestry puts him in a position in which he feels he does not belong to the Black community, although he is rejected by the White community. This makes Keith Clark, in his article “Man on the Margin: Lucas Beauchamp and the limitations of Space” wonder: “Why does Faulkner find it necessary not only to turn Lucas into an imitation *white* man, but also to place him at such odds with the people with whom he shares the common bond of race?” (18). I would argue that Lucas is not at odds with the other black people, but he feels neither entirely white nor entirely black and he refuses to abide by the rules of a Southern society based on the separation of these two communities.

Lucas Beauchamp could thus be assimilated to what Deleuze calls a *line of flight* which is an abstract line of forces that runs through the territorial segments, severs the other lines and transforms the codified territory through creative metamorphoses. Despite his incarceration, Lucas Beauchamp can be seen as a line of force that courses through the fixed divisions of Southern society and deterritorializes racial segmentations. He does so not only by refusing to acknowledge his race but also by forcing others to treat him with the respect he wants from them. The examples that would warrant a closer study are when he refuses the money Chick Mallison wants to give him after he saves him, or when he refuses to be scared of or submit to white men or when he insists on paying his due to Gavin Stevens at the end of the novel so as not to be beholden to anyone. So not only does Lucas refuse to be classified as a black man and so to be looked upon like one, he also creates a metamorphosis in others, since he manages to change some white people’s perspective on blacks.

One of the characters that are transformed by their encounter with Lucas Beauchamp is obviously the young Chick Mallison, and this occurs the first time they meet. Indeed, their first encounter, four years before the murder of Vinson Gowrie, when Lucas brings the boy home to warm him after he fell into a creek, is a moment that will affect the boy’s whole life, as the following extract demonstrates:

So he stripped off the wet unionsuit too and then he was in the chair again in front of the now bright and swirling fire, enveloped in the quilt like a cocoon, enclosed completely now in that unmistakable odor of Negroes—that smell which if it were not for something that was going to happen to him within a space of time measurable now in minutes he would have gone to his grave never once pondering speculating if perhaps that smell were really not the odor of a race nor even actually of poverty but perhaps of a condition: an idea: a belief: an acceptance, a passive acceptance by them themselves of the idea that being Negroes they were not

supposed to have facilities to wash properly or often or even to wash bathe often even without the facilities to do it with; that in fact it was a little to be preferred that they did not. But the smell meant nothing now or yet; it was still an hour yet before the thing would happen and it would be four years more before he would realise the extent of its ramifications and what it had done to him and he would be a man grown before he would realise, admit that he had accepted it. (11-12)

The turning point which is alluded to in this passage is the moment when Lucas refuses the money Chick tried to give him as a compensation for the food offered and the young boy throws it to the ground. The humiliation he felt then and its scathing memory in the years afterwards bring him to reassess the Southern value system he belongs to. The incident merges with the smell of the quilt he was curled up in at that time: an odor he knows well and associates to blacks. This fusion leads him to what Deleuze would call *becoming black*. This obviously does not mean that Chick Mallison is literally turning black or that he is fantasizing that he is black, but that he experiences an awareness of another sensitivity mingled with his own. To put it differently, this new consciousness within him distorts his own and changes it, so that he feels both different and the same, with a new perspective on things, namely on the culture of White supremacy in the South. Therefore, the encounter with Lucas has transformed Chick, who, although still a child, is the seed of a future white man, belonging to the majority. Although he is still proud of “his people his blood his own with whom it had been his joy and pride and hope to be found worthy to present one united unbreakable front” (190), the deterritorialization he has undergone makes him consider black people differently. Even if he tries to remain within the Southern norm by buying Lucas and his wife gifts to compensate for the tactlessness of the payment, he cannot let go of “the grief and the shame” (22) he feels afterwards. These two feelings, which are the sign of his new awareness, eventually prompt him to help Lucas when the latter asks him to, despite the predicaments he will have to go through.

Intruder in the Dust does not only stage the interactions between the majority and the black minority, it also sheds light on the other minorities of the community: children and women. If Lucas asks Chick to help him get out of jail instead of relying on his lawyer Gavin Stevens, it is for the same reason Ephraim waited for Chick to get his mother’s ring instead of telling his father directly,² which is: “Young folks and womens, they aint cluttered. They can listen. But a middle-year man like your paw and your uncle, they cant listen. They aint got time. They’re too busy with facks” (70). What he means is that in their Southern society, white men are so engrossed in their own superiority that they refuse to listen to those they deem inferior to them, namely minorities. Conversely, children and women are not as imbued with prejudice as men and are therefore more receptive to others. Ephraim adds “*If you got something outside the common run that’s got to be done and cant wait, don’t waste your time on the menfolks; they works on what your uncle calls the rules and the cases. Get the womens and the children at it; they works on the circumstances*” (110-11). Men are portrayed as abiding by and enforcing the rules, that is maintaining the molar lines of the majority which ensure them to keep their superior

² Chick recalls an incident that happened five years before the murder: his mother had lost a ring and an old black man, Ephraim, offered Chick to find it in exchange for a half dollar. On his return from camp, one week later, Chick learned that the old man had known where the ring was for a few days but had waited for him to return as the mother would have needed help to retrieve it and he did not want to tell a white man.

rank whereas the minorities that are women and children are presented as corresponding to what Deleuze called molecular lines, namely lines that are more flexible, and that escape social classes, gender, races. For that reason, they are ready to do things that appear nonsensical or even outrageous to men, like believing in a black man's innocence, although he was found with a gun in his hand near a dead body. They are also willing to go dig up a corpse in the middle of the night to prove Lucas's innocence. Those are the events that allow Lucas to be saved. If it weren't for those minorities, an innocent man would have been convicted, or lynched and a guilty man would have gone unpunished. So, once again, the minorities, as for Lucas Beauchamp, undermine the majority and alter it.

Minority is not only at work through the characters, it is also represented in the text itself. Indeed, *Intruder in the Dust* can be assimilated to Minor Literature. According to Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance" (18). In one of his essays, "Literature and Life," Deleuze writes: "As Proust says, [literature] opens up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois but a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system" (5). This deterritorialization of language is at play in many instances in *Intruder in the Dust*, as often in William Faulkner's work. The following example, when Chick is talking to Miss Habersham about his plan to dig up the body, is interesting both for its metalinguistic dimension and for its deterritorialization of language:

...and now Miss Habersham in her turn repeating and paraphrasing and he thought how it was not really a paucity a meagerness of vocabulary, it was in the first place because the deliberate violent blotting out obliteration of a human life was itself so simple and so final that the verbiage which surrounded it enclosed it insulated it intact into the chronicle of man had of necessity to be simple and uncomplex too, repetitive, almost monotonous even; and in the second place, vaster than that, adumbrating that, because what Miss Habersham paraphrased was simple truth, not even fact and so there was not needed a great deal of diversification and originality to express it because truth was universal, it had to be universal to be truth and so there didn't need to be a great deal of it just to keep running something no bigger than one earth and so anybody could know truth . . . (88)

The deterritorialization of language is perceptible in this passage through a number of elements: first, the use, or rather non-use, of punctuation. There should be commas between the lists of nouns or verbs. Hence there is no separation, no natural pauses where there should be, inducing a form of imbalance which the reader finds unsettling. Also, the text seems at times to stutter, because of the juxtaposition of synonyms, and at other times it seems to create tension, with for instance the use of the word "adumbrate," which means both to reveal slightly and to hide. The phrase "there was not needed" looks strange, not very idiomatic. All these elements are the signs that another language, a minor language, is created through the distortion of the major language. What is particularly significant is that this minor language is used to describe the condition of Lucas, a man belonging to a minority that has its own minor language. The African American dialect that is used is vernacular and stems from the major language and its oppressive power; it also

detritorializes this very language so that the oppressed minority empowers itself through the creation of its own within the major one. Through the asyntactic, agrammatical use of the oppressive language (for instance: “You aint fell in no more creeks lately, have you?” [235]) and the alteration of its pronunciation (“I’m gonter pay you,” Lucas said. “Name yo price at anything in reason and I will pay it” [71]), the African American dialect tends towards the limit of language which, according to Deleuze and Guattari is “not outside language, it is the outside *of* language” (v). Once again, Lucas could be seen as a line of flight as his language interferes with the major language and undermines it, when for instance, Gavin Stevens repeats Lucas’s words: “nemmine that now,” Lucas said. ‘What I needs is— / ‘Nemmine that!’ his uncle said. ‘Tell the Gowries to never mind it when they bust in here tonight’” (60). Even if he is reproducing Lucas’s words, the exclamation point shows that it is not merely an imitation of Lucas’s language, but that Gavin is making it his own for now.

The other two characteristics of minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari are the connection of the individual and the political and the collective arrangement of utterance. Indeed, they write that in minor literature, everything is political and has collective value. Such is the case in *Intruder in the Dust*, as it explores race relations in the South. The main protagonist, the young Chick, who will soon belong to the majority of white men, listens to and believes a black man. He perceives himself as:

not just a man but a specific man . . . : even among a kind and race specific and unique (according to the lights of most, certainly of all of them who had thronged into town this morning to stand across the street from the jail and crowd up around the sheriff’s car, damned unique) since it [the earth] had also integrated into him whatever it was that had compelled him to stop and listen to a damned highnosed impudent Negro . . . (148)

Although he feels part of his community and has integrated the inherent prejudice (“damned highnosed impudent Negro”), Chick also is different from the other white men as he is ready to forego his preconceptions to see the man under the black skin. As Joe Karaganis writes in “Negotiating the National Voice in Faulkner’s Late Work,” “[t]his notion of being, in effect, a minority within a race is one side of the novel’s argument about racial authenticity. Reflecting Faulkner’s own situation as the civil rights crisis grew, it is rooted less in a search for racial essences than in a concern for the internal dynamics of individual adherence to a racial community” (116). Because of his first encounter with Lucas Beauchamp and the bond it created between them, Chick is able to have and to voice his own perspective on race relations and, more importantly, to stand by his point of view. This ability to free himself from a set frame of mind could be considered as a sign of his being a component of a molecular line, as Deleuze and Guattari define it, as he can be viewed as a particle that escapes from the racial community to which he belongs. He is not the only one, as Miss Habersham acts in the same way. These characters send a socio-political message as they figure another racial approach, which eventually sways Gavin Stevens as he accepts to listen to them and to follow them to the gravesite.

Many critics see this novel as a *Bildungsroman*, and according to Cleanth Brooks, “[t]he progress of Charles’s initiation is chartered very largely in terms of his rejection of his original motives, which derived in large measure from the racial difference between Lucas

and himself, a favor of a positive and even passionate awareness of the need to preserve human dignity and avert the shame of mob-violence” (220). Indeed, *Intruder in the Dust* is the staging not only of Chick’s new understanding of himself but of his own society. Showing a young man’s comprehension of social issues and of his own obligations is a way for Faulkner to present the premise of the need for a new regional social conscience but also the necessity for the majority—in this case the rest of the United States—to take into account the specificity of that minor region. His enunciation here is not an individual one but a collective one as he is not doing it for his own sake but for that of an entire region. As John E. Bassett asserts: “Finally, however, Faulkner the writer believes that the value of what he writes cannot be that of the personalized statement but must come from its diffuse impact on its culture. It must ‘be anonymous else it was valueless’” (193).

Minority is at the core of *Intruder in the Dust*, be it through the characters or the text itself. As a Southern American writer, Faulkner was at the crossroads of two cultures. In the South, as a white man, he was part of the majority, but at the scale of the United States, as a white man living in a segregated South, he was part of the minority. Being part of a majority within a minority allowed Faulkner to have a dual vision of social hierarchy. Thus, *Intruder in the Dust* shows how complex and ambiguous social domination can be. In this *Bildungsroman*, what Chick Mallison and the reader come to comprehend is the importance of a sense of national consciousness. Through the deterritorialization of language, Faulkner manages to stage the collective enunciation of two opposed minorities: the black community dominated by whites, and whites from the South dominated by whites from the North. In *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner proves himself to be a major minor writer of the South.

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Revisiting the Mammy Image in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*

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Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* was first published in 2009 and it was an almost immediate commercial success: in a year it was translated into three different languages and published in thirty-five different countries. Two years after its publication the novel was adapted for the big screen by Tate Taylor, and the success of Taylor's movie, which was nominated for four US Academy Awards in 2012 and won one of them,¹ contributed highly to the popularity of Stockett's rendering of a series of domestic events in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early sixties, when racial tension was patent in the public sphere but only latent in the domestic one.

In *The Help* the apparent racial harmony characteristic of the domestic world is suddenly shaken when Skeeter (Eugenia Phelan), a fresh graduate from Ole Miss, starts interviewing a group of black maids who, after overcoming their original reticent attitude in front of a white woman, start exposing the injustice, cruelty and fear which characterized the experience of the black help in this period though these features were usually hidden under layers of fake interracial affection and gratitude. Among other things, Skeeter will find out that even those black domestics whose behavior fits to perfection the image of the loving mammy unconditionally devoted to her white charges, have a life and a family of their own away from the white home and the white charges, something which, according to Rebecca Sharpless, white employers usually tried to disregard (110); consequently she will also learn that it is their devotion to their black families rather than their affection for their white children that is uppermost among the motives behind these women's decisions and actions.

Skeeter's encounter with the truth behind the mammy mask mirrors Jean Louise's shocking but enlightening glimpse at Calpurnia's true affections in *Go Set a Watchman*, Harper Lee's long awaited second novel, written in the mid-1950s and published in 2015. Both Stockett's and Lee's novels became the focus of controversy, not only for their content but also for a series of circumstances related to their process of creation and publication. Although in Lee's novel Jean Louise's unveiling of the truth behind Calpurnia's mammy role is secondary to her confrontation with Atticus's true racist feelings, the wide readership of both texts and the controversy around them somehow prove the ongoing and complex fascination still awakened by the mammy image among twenty-first century readers.

In spite of their many points of departure, both novels share several features: the two novels are set in the South, though in two different states, Mississippi and Alabama, both well-known for the virulence of their segregation laws and practices; both novels recreate the atmosphere of a period of time characterized by the early effects of the onset of the

¹ The movie was nominated for Best Picture, Best Actress (Viola Davis) and twice for Best Supporting Actress (Jessica Chastain and Octavia Spencer). Octavia Spencer won the latter.

Civil Rights Movement; and, broadly speaking, both depict similar situations. Eugenia Phelan (Skeeter) and Jean Louise Finch (Scout) are two young southern white women with similar social backgrounds who travel back home to their respective families and to the places and the people that witnessed their childhood experiences, after a period of time away. Although both are expected to behave as true descendants of the former planter class ladies,² which in the mid-twentieth century implied finding a respectable husband, getting married, having children and thus becoming decent middle-class housewives, neither of them sees this prospect as desirable in contrast with the white women around them, who have unquestioningly modeled their lives to fit the social expectations placed on them. The gap that separates Eugenia and Jean Louise from this gender role model is closely connected to their response to a series of realities involving race and race relations which will eventually expose the fallacy of their original anachronistic stand as adult advocates of a racial innocence which in the South was allowed only to children.

As already suggested, the segregation period at the onset of the Civil Rights Movement provides the main historical background in both novels, and evidence of the racial tension pervading the public sphere in the South at this stage of the twentieth century abounds in both texts. Still, the lessons that Skeeter and Jean Louise learn about themselves derive rather from their personal experiences in the domestic sphere of their childhood white homes, since it was there that white children had the opportunity of intimating with a black person—most of the times an African American domestic—in the Jim Crow South, which according to Grace Elizabeth Hale made white homes “a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity” (94). As Hale also argues, during the segregation period “the white home continued as a site of racial mixing through the employment of African American domestic labor,” and thus remained at least apparently “a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world” (94), a space purposely planned to perpetuate “the fiction of continuity” between the old plantation South and its romanticized version of integrated race relations, and the new southern universe (101). Jacqueline Jones has observed that in this period “[black] domestics and their employers daily lived out the paradoxical southern system of public segregation and private integration” (150). The figure of the black mammy represented the main embodiment of this “fiction of continuity,” but it existed just as a mask, as an image designed to conceal the real conditions of life and work of black domestics.³ This situation is evident in *The Help*, which focuses on the portrayal of the dynamics of racial power that characterized the domestic order in the South of the segregation period, where white middle-class housewives and black domestics were expected to keep alive the old southern myth of racial harmony and mutual affection embodied by the mammy image. In contrast, in *Go Set*

² In *Making Whiteness*, Hale describes the transition from the old plantation households of the antebellum period to the middle class homes of the Jim Crow South (88-93) to explain how in the segregation period “White southern men and women of the rising middle-class . . . insisted on conflating the plantation household and the post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power . . . of the plantation-based planter class” (87).

³ After the publication of Trudier Harris’s *From Mammies to Militants. Domestics in Black American Literature* (1982) and Deborah White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), several scholars have devoted their efforts to deconstruct the mammy image. For a more detailed analysis of the pernicious effects of the mammy image, the real conditions of work of black domestics in the segregation period and their relationship with their white employers, see Hale 85-119; Jones 124-150; Manning 1-34; McElya 74-115, 160-206; Sharpless 129-72; Wallace Sanders 1-12; White 46-61.

a Watchman the role of this image incarnated by Calpurnia is secondary and subservient to that of Atticus. Even so, Calpurnia's brief encounter with Jean Louise triggers the latter's awakening to her own unconscious participation in the southern charade of domestic race relations, since the old black woman's words force Jean Louise to focus her attention on her own attitude rather than that of her father. Thus, Calpurnia plants the seeds of a terrible doubt in Jean Louise's mind, a doubt that eventually exposes not only the artificiality of the domestic racial harmony epitomized by the mammy image, but also Jean Louise's contribution to it.

Both Skeeter and Jean Louise proudly set themselves apart from the other white middle class women around them. Those women make efforts to fit in the role model designed for them by the southern order: they are expected to be the successors of the old plantation mistresses and the fundamental supporters of the ideology of white male supremacy. From the very beginning Jean Louise acknowledges her divergence from these women by showing that she shares no interest in common with them: she does not seem to have a single friend among Maycomb's women and the mere prospect of becoming one of them and sharing company with them figures prominently among the many objections that refrain her from accepting Henry's marriage proposal. In contrast, at the beginning of Stockett's novel, Skeeter has a place among the white ladies in Jackson despite her professional aspirations and her lack of concern for getting a husband at whatever cost: her lady-friends as well as her mother just tolerate Skeeter's "eccentricities" hoping that she will forget them as soon as she meets "the right man." Yet everything changes when her determination to pursue a professional career outside the home propitiates the beginning of her relationship with Aibileen and, as a consequence, she starts meddling with the black help.

By setting themselves apart from the respective groups of ladies in town, Skeeter and Jean Louise make evident that they do not feel comfortable within the ideology of white male supremacy that these women represent. During the coffee reunion that Aunt Alexandra organizes to celebrate her niece's annual return home, Jean Louise tries hard to conceal the scorn she feels for most of the attendants, but she cannot help taking advantage of the opportunity of ridiculing Hester's absurd subordination to her husband as well as her blind acceptance of his ideas in defense of segregation as a protective means against "mongrelizing." Such a stand as Jean Louise's is somehow evoked in *The Help*, when Skeeter sacrifices the good marriage prospects represented by Stuart because she cannot blindly accept his ideas and decisions. Early in the novel, Skeeter's long friendship with Hilly and Elizabeth does not prevent her from showing her distance from them by objecting to Hilly's overt endorsement of the ideology of segregation through her (in)famous Home Help Sanitation Initiative.

Hilly's Initiative ultimately represents an attempt to bring home to the domestic sphere the same segregation that dominated the public one. Skeeter, in contrast with the other white women, sees in this measure a violation of the intimacy and affection that supposedly characterize race relationships in the white home as embodied by the bond between mummies and their white charges, a bond exemplified in this novel by her own relationship with Constantine, as well as by Mae Mobley's dependence and reliance on Aibileen. The parallelism between these two relationships suggests a dangerous temporal dislocation in Skeeter's attitude: although she belongs to Elizabeth's generation—namely the generation of the white middle class mothers rather than that of the white charges—

her interpretation of race relations in the white home seems closer to that of children like Mae Mobley than to that of the other adult white women like herself, who in fact do not object to Hilly's Initiative.

Within the socioeconomic context of the Jim Crow South, where there were black domestics working even in non-affluent white homes (Tucker 168), Skeeter's refusal to accept the fate of the other white middle class women keeps her safely away from adopting the role of the white mistress, and this in turn allows her to remain under the protective wings of the racial innocence characteristic of southern childhood and epitomized in the relationship between black mammies and their white charges. Referring to Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* and Katharine Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner*, Hale concludes that in the Jim Crow South the white home was the place where white children gradually learnt the meaning of race (94-98), but Skeeter does not seem to have completed this racial training and consequently she has not reached the stage of racial awareness which transforms white charges into white masters or mistresses by assuming their racial superiority. As Hale observes,

With the end of childhood, whites learned the meaning of segregation. African Americans could not really be loved. Integrated feelings, integrated living, then, must be packed up with the baby clothes, pulled out and nostalgically caressed perhaps but never taken seriously, not incorporated into adult white ways of being. (117-18)

This is the stage which has been traditionally associated with the loss of mammy and which Aibileen significantly identifies in the novel as a sign that she must depart from each of her nursing jobs. Although Skeeter has literally lost her mammy when the novel starts, Constantine's leaving was so sudden, so unexpected and so inexplicable for her that it seems to have left her symbolically suspended in an anachronistic state of childish innocence, which apparently keeps her blind to the reality of race dynamics in the white homes of the South and thus to the performative quality of what Katherine Henninger, quoting Robin Bernstein, calls the "holy ignorance" or "not-noticing" of racial hierarchies (602) in the domestic sphere: unconsciously clinging to her childhood innocence Skeeter is certain that her love for Constantine is plain, simple, genuine and mutual, thus frankly ignoring (rather than willingly "not-noticing") the actual extent of the intrusion of racial paternalism, performance, dissemblance, masks, etc. in their relationship.

Skeeter seems to perceive in Hilly's Initiative a manifestation of the same contradictory feelings that Virginia Foster Durr describes in her autobiography *Outside the Magic Circle*: "We grew up with such contradictory feelings. 'I loved dear old Suzy. She raised me from a baby and she treated me like a mama. She is the sweetest thing in the world.' But, 'Of course, I wouldn't sit by her son on the bus'" (122). When the other ladies of the Jackson League simply overlook the paradox or contradiction implicit in the Home Help Sanitation Initiative, they are putting into practice their performance of the "holy ignorance" and the "not-noticing" attitude, but significantly neither Skeeter nor Mae Mobley can do so. Mae Mobley's stubborn insistence on using Aibileen's toilet replicates Skeeter's objection to the Initiative, and this parallelism suggests on the one hand that both characters are inspired by the same naïve childhood racial innocence, and on the other that this does not allow them to join the performance of the generalized "not-noticing" attitude by ignoring the

contradictory nature of Hilly's proposal, understood as an attempt to keep black domestics separated from the white families for whom they cook and clean and whose children they take care of.

Henninger analyses Jean Louise's attitude at the beginning of *Go Set a Watchman* in similar terms: "*Watchman's* adult Jean Louise arrives on the page fully formed by Atticus's performance, though apparently without the slightest consciousness of its performativity" (609). As in Skeeter's case, Jean Louise's voluntary withdrawal from the group and the ideology of the white middle class women of Maycomb keeps her away from the role of white mistress to the black help, so her experience of race relations within the domestic sphere is reduced to her relationship with Calpurnia, the black domestic who raised her after her mother's death when she was two. In other words, Jean Louise's perspective on race relations in the domestic sphere is that of a white charge rather than that of a white mistress/employer. For this reason, like Skeeter, she exposes "a strange 'innocence' [which she] has apparently carried forward into adulthood" (Henninger 612). Their innocence is strange because it results from an anachronism: as adults they are aware of the racial tension caused by the prominence of the ideology of white male supremacy and segregation in the public sphere; but since they refuse to fulfill the expectations which this ideology places on adult women, they can still deploy childhood strategies to face race relations, and thus they can still feel innocent and safeguarded from the surrounding outburst of racial violence through their devotion to mammy. In other words, both Skeeter and Jean Louise unquestioningly assume the sincerity and genuineness of their respective relationships of mutual affection with Constantine and Calpurnia, and take shelter in these relationships to avoid any serious exercise of true self-exploration of their own racial attitudes.

Using the mammy image as a device to avoid facing the reality of race relations is just another example of the performance of the "holy ignorance" and the "not-noticing" of racial injustice which is at the basis of southern paternalism. Yet, in contrast with most of their contemporaries, Skeeter and Jean Louise do not consciously pretend to ignore the persistence of racial violence and injustice caused by the ideology of white male supremacy. Their innocence may be strange but it seems genuine, and it ultimately consists in their naïve ignorance of the performative essence of domestic race relations in the South and in their blindness to their own role in the staging of such a performance; in other words, their "strange 'innocence'" does not prevent them from participating in the paternalistic performance of race relations at home, but prevents them from being aware of the part they have played and still play in it. Once they are given a glimpse of the reality behind the performance, their frank determination to search for the truth in order to deconstruct the ongoing charade, and their unwillingness to keep contributing to it further evince the authenticity of their otherwise anachronistic childhood innocence in contrast with the surrounding attitude of "holy ignorance" or "not-noticing" among their contemporaries.

At the beginning of both novels Skeeter and Jean Louise describe the black domestics who raised them as stereotypical mummies. In Skeeter's memories, Constantine is the perfect mammy who has provided her with love and with the warm comfort of a relationship of immediacy and affection: she used to cook and keep the house clean for the white family, she took care of Skeeter and her brother, and, apparently, she applied the rules of the white world to perfection. In Skeeter's childhood memories Constantine's devotion to her was such that in contrast with the traditional mummies who, as Manning explains, were expected to "make ladies out of white women" (40), Skeeter rather

remembers Constantine's reiterated efforts to reinforce her self-esteem by supporting her and even praising her unladylike virtues and attitudes in front of her mother's desperate attempts to make her fit the established model for white girls—again the parallelism with Aibileen and Mae Mobley is evident. Thus, Skeeter's image of Constantine at the beginning of the novel is simply that of a perfectly loving mammy figure, and when she starts asking after her she cannot even conceive of the possibility that she was not exactly so, or that she may have had a life and an identity beyond that "of the white [family] for whom [she] had spent most of [her life] working" (Harris 37), that is, beyond that of mammy. In fact, when she first asks Aibileen about Constantine her sole purpose is to find out her address so that she can get in touch with her and thus symbolically recover her mammy: like a lost child, she is both literally and symbolically searching not for Constantine but for her mammy. At this point in the novel, Aibileen despises Skeeter's blindness and naïveté, and thinks that she will easily bring her search to an end by unveiling the reality that Constantine had a white-skinned daughter. With this answer, Aibileen expects that as a white lady Skeeter will stop asking questions because the answers to these questions threaten to break the ongoing illusion of domestic racial harmony. In other words, instead of helping Skeeter recover her mammy, the answers to these questions threaten to destroy this image by laying bare the truth behind the mask, thus displaying its illusory and representational essence. However, Aibileen is wrong and her words propitiate just a deviation in the nature of Skeeter's inquiry, gradually turning what started as a search for her mammy into a search for the truth behind this image.

Significantly, the first surprising thing that Skeeter learns about both Constantine and Aibileen is the fact that apart from being the mammies of their white charges, they were also the biological mothers of their own children. Skeeter's ignorance of Constantine's and Aibileen's motherhood illustrates the pervasive disregard of the fact that black domestics had a life away from the white homes where they worked, a disregard justified on the false premise that black mammies loved their white charges better than their own children.⁴ Learning about Constantine's status as a mother gives Skeeter a decisive hint of her utter ignorance of the real life, feelings, joys and suffering of her otherwise beloved mammy. Aibileen's answer exposes a disturbing crack in Constantine's mammy mask, but instead of ignoring it and pretending it is not there—that is, instead of "not-noticing" it—as her friend Elizabeth symbolically does when she hides the L-shaped crack in her table, Skeeter tries to learn more about this crack, thus proving that her compliance with the dissemblance game is not deliberate at all. Eventually, she will have to face the truth that Constantine disappeared from her life because, when forced to choose between her white charge and her black daughter, she followed her own daughter to Chicago.

Skeeter's process of discovery of the true feelings and the reality behind Constantine's mammy mask is accompanied by a parallel process of self-knowledge that causes not only changes affecting her self-perception, but also public scandal. In *Go Set a Watchman*, there is no public scandal, but Jean Louise's self-awareness is dramatically shaken by a similar discovery, which affects her perception of both the present scene and the past one, and sets

⁴ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders pays special attention to the double role of mammies as surrogate mothers of their white charges and biological mothers of their own children, and concludes that generally a mammy's "devotion for the children she [cared] for [was] best illustrated by her disregard for her own children" (8). Referring to Thomas Nelson Page's *The Old South*, Manring also observes that "Page especially emphasized the mammy's loyalty to white children, even if that loyalty was at the expense of paying attention to her own" (24).

her already fragile stand as “simultaneous embodiment of, and resistance to” (Heninger 599) the present changes in Maycomb upside down. Jean Louise is exposed to two shocking discoveries in the novel: the first one happens when she finds out Atticus’s segregationist affiliations as a member of the Town’s Council, which brings to pieces her image of her father as a champion of racial justice; the second one happens when she visits Calpurnia and unexpectedly finds herself expelled from the old domestic haven symbolically represented by the black woman; this eventually forces her to interrogate herself about her blind collusion with the state of affairs concerning race relations. Although the first shock is essential for the development of the second one, Jean Louise’s confrontation with Calpurnia is especially intense because it complements her realization of Atticus’s true racist stand by forcing her to turn her attention from her father to herself. Calpurnia’s stubborn insistence on performing the role expected from her as a black domestic in front of Jean Louise—acting now as an adult middle-class woman—will eventually force the latter to become aware of her own position on the southern stage and of her own role in the ongoing drama of race relations in the South. This eventually deprives Jean Louise of the possibility of finding an alibi in the mammy mask, which was precisely what she was searching for when she started her errand to the Negro Quarters in order to visit the old family cook.

Having witnessed Atticus’s ominous betrayal of racial justice when she spied on him at the Town’s Council meeting in the Courthouse, the next morning Jean Louise is farther disappointed when she learns that her father’s betrayal also affects race relations in the domestic realm: Atticus is ready to accept the legal representation of Calpurnia’s grandson not because of any honorable feeling of gratitude, loyalty or affection for his old cook, but rather as a strategy to keep the NAACP away, that is, as a strategy to keep blacks “in their place.” In this highly revealing episode, Atticus’s stand exposes the dynamics animating southern paternalism both in the public sphere, where it determines his job as a lawyer, and in the domestic one, where it conditions his role as Calpurnia’s master: he behaves as the epitome of the benevolent white ready to offer help and support to the poor blacks apparently out of generosity and affection, but actually it is just a stratagem to assert his superiority and keep blacks in “their (inferior) place.” The aim of his behavior is reminiscent of what Susan Tucker describes as the complicated purpose of the practice of gift-giving: “to keep [domestics] employed at a subsistence level and at the same time to let employers feel both generous and superior” (146). Jean Louise is thus brutally exposed to the ugly truth that her father’s outward attitude of kindness and respect for black people—even in the case of Calpurnia and her family—has nothing to do with racial justice or equality; quite on the contrary it constitutes a paternalistic means to perpetuate white supremacy.

Suddenly confronted with such a traumatic disappointment, Jean Louise first “sees herself as the unprejudiced hero of racial justice, completely separated from the community, which she now sees as having a nightmarish underside” (219), as Robert Brinkmeyer has pointed out, and literally she runs to Calpurnia and her reassuring arms and hands, symbolically in search of her mammy and the apparently solid relationship of intimacy and affection between them. In *Go Set a Watchman*, this relationship of warm affection is usually linked to references to Calpurnia’s hands and fingers, which significantly preside over Jean Louise’s childhood memories of the black woman. Whether overtly mentioned or not, in her flashbacks Calpurnia’s hands are always indispensable and perpetually active in a thousand different ways: cooking, preparing lemonade, bathing and

dressing Scout, sewing, or simply “adjust[ing] Henry’s tie” and “pick[ing] invisible lint from Jem’s coat” before Scout attended her first dancing party (210). Hers were the “rough hands” that Scout felt “kneading her shoulders and back” (136) when she desperately “flung herself into Calpurnia’s lap” before confessing her suspicion that she was going to have a baby, and they were also figuratively present when Scout had her first period: “Atticus and Jem looked helplessly at Calpurnia, and Calpurnia took her *in hand*” (116; emphasis added). Calpurnia’s hands and fingers condense the image of the mammy that Jean Louise sees in her: when she was a child, they provided her with daily comfort through their endless domestic work designed to fulfill the white girl’s most immediate bodily needs; they were ready to discipline, but in them Scout could also find the warmth of affection when she most needed it.

Calpurnia’s first reaction on seeing Jean Louise in the present promises the fulfillment of the white woman’s expectations and thus the reaffirmation of the mammy myth:

Her big hands were resting in her lap, and she raised them and spread her fingers when Jean Louise entered.

Jean Louise’s throat tightened when she caught sight of Calpurnia’s bony fingers, fingers so gentle when Jean Louise was ill and hard as ebony when she was bad, fingers that had performed long-ago tasks of loving intricacy. Jean Louise held them to her mouth. (158)

Calpurnia’s hands are raised and her fingers spread in a gesture that suggests her welcoming of her “baby” Scout, but Jean Louise cannot help being moved at the sight of the “bony fingers” evincing the passage of time, Calpurnia’s old age and the subsequent loss of the strength that characterized her in her role as Scout’s mammy. Even so Jean Louise does not seem to be fully aware of the symbolic implications of this limitation and of the effects of time on herself. When she holds Calpurnia’s fingers to her mouth she is expressing her devotion to her old mammy in an attitude not dissimilar from that of Skeeter when she starts asking questions about Constantine: both are searching for the sheltering and reassuring comfort provided by their mammies. Tucker has noticed that only few white writers have offered portraits of black domestics in their old age probably because this would undermine the myth of the black mammy as an exceptionally strong woman (107-08): in her encounter with Calpurnia, Jean Louise clings to mammy even in the face of the black woman’s old age and infirmity, and Calpurnia’s first reaction raising her hands, spreading her fingers and calling Jean Louise “baby” seems to promise the renewal of the old mythical bond. Still, the promise is cut short by the black woman’s sudden change of attitude after Jean Louise offers first her help and then Atticus’s.

The change in Calpurnia’s tone going from “Sit down, baby” to “Thank you, ma’am,” is somehow anticipated at the end of Jean Louise’s account of the episode of her fake “pregnancy”: “Before she dozed off, it occurred to her that for the first time in her life Calpurnia had said ‘Yes ma’am’ and ‘Miss Scout’ to her, forms of address usually reserved for the presence of high company” (Lee 139). In Jean Louise’s memory of this past scene, Scout could easily dismiss the fact by simply (but significantly) thinking “I must be getting old” (139), as noticed by Henninger (616). Yet, the complexity of the present scene does not allow Jean Louise to simply dismiss the fact. What happens between Calpurnia’s previous statements addressing Jean Louise as “baby” and then as “ma’am” is the latter’s

simple offer: “Cal, I came to tell you—I came to tell you that if there’s anything I can do for you, you must let me know” (158). Although there is probably genuine generosity, kindness and affection in Jean Louise’s offer, the patronizing and paternalistic attitude which has characterized adult race relationships in the South inevitably resounds in her words. Within the historical and sociological context of the racially segregated South, by offering her help Jean Louise is unconsciously adopting a position of (racial) superiority to Calpurnia similar to that associated to gift-giving: “Giving is traditionally considered an act of concern, care, and even love for another person. However, it is also an assertion of one’s own superiority, as well as a compensation for another act” (Tucker 145). Similarly, Rebecca Sharpless quoting sociologist Mary Romero explains that “unilateral” gift-giving “conveys ‘a message that domestics are needy and further serves to maintain class differences between domestics and their employers’” (Romero 333; quoted in Sharpless 77). Although Jean Louise may be offering her help as “an act of concern, care and love,” she is at the same time affirming her superior status. Moreover, the situation significantly implies that Jean Louise feels pity for Calpurnia, a feeling sometimes identified as marking the end of the period of childhood racial innocence.⁵

Unaware of all these implications, Jean Louise keeps on talking and makes a reference to Atticus’s help:

“I want to tell you that Mr. Finch got word of it early this morning. Frank had the sheriff call him and Mr. Finch’ll... help him.”

The words died on her lips. Day before yesterday she would have said “Mr. Finch’ll help him” confident that Atticus would turn dark to daylight. (158-59)

In contrast with the situation two days before, when she would have confirmed Atticus’s intention to help Calpurnia’s family with sincere honesty, Jean Louise now knows the racist reasons lurking behind her father’s determination to help Frank and her voice falters; even so, she chooses to keep the southern racial charade going and thus reveals her own contribution to it. Paradoxically, she has run to Calpurnia to confirm the ongoing validity of her childhood racial innocence and the mammy image, but her knowledge of the racist truth behind her father’s façade keeps interfering in her mind and forces her to pretend—that is, to perform a role—in front of Calpurnia. Ultimately, Jean Louise sees herself occupying a place on the southern stage, and she is forced to assume the performative quality of her present interaction with the old black woman. Jean Louise struggles to cling to her childhood racial innocence by minimizing such performativity, but her faltering voice does not go unnoticed as Calpurnia reacts significantly, adopting the erratic grammar associated to her “company manners,” thus revealing that there is no turning back from the knowledge to which Jean Louise has been exposed and which has made her voice falter, signaling her awareness of the artifice behind her own words.

When analyzing the origins of the mammy myth, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders identifies speech as one of its stereotypical features: “Mammy speaks the ungrammatical ‘plantation dialect’ made famous in the 1890s by popular white southern authors like Joel Chandler

⁵ One of the white women interviewed by Susan Tucker recalls with sadness the moment when as a child she started feeling sorry for the black children with whom she used to play freely until then; it marked the end of the period of childhood innocence and bliss (66).

Harris and by subsequent minstrel shows" (6). In *Go Set a Watchman*, the ungrammatical speech of Calpurnia's "company manners" is reminiscent of this situation and implies her conscious adoption of a role of racial inferiority to comply with the demands of the southern order. Jean Louise witnessed such a performance several times in the past, as illustrated by the episode of the dinner with Reverend Moorehead and his wife, but always in front of adult representatives of the white community, not in the domestic intimacy of their personal relationship as mammy and her white child. Now Calpurnia's adoption of her "company manners" completes Jean Louise's exposition to the paternalistic visage implicit in her own feeling of compassion and in her promise of help by laying bare the performative nature of her own attitude: Calpurnia's behavior makes evident that Jean Louise is no longer Calpurnia's—or mammy's—innocent white charge but a white middle-class adult woman—or mistress—in front of her old cook. Horrified, Jean Louise realizes that this actually means the loss of mammy and the end of her stance of racial innocence. Assuming the victim's role, she desperately blames Calpurnia by asking her "What are you doing to me?" (159). When Calpurnia in return answers this question by asking Jean Louise "What are you all doing to us?" (160), she is evidently shifting the focus from their personal relationship to race relations in general, and positioning herself among the black community in front of Jean Louise and the other whites, thus stressing her allegiance to the black race and to her black family rather than to the members of the Finch family. At the same time Calpurnia's retort shifts the blame for the destruction of their affective bond from herself—who is the target of Jean Louise's original accusation—to Jean Louise and the whole white community—who have used and abused this bond to the detriment of the black community and the black families for more than a century.

As a side effect, attention is also shifted from Jean Louise's affections to Calpurnia's: facing the evidence that Calpurnia takes sides with her community, her family, her son and her grandchildren, Jean Louise realizes that her blind assumption of Calpurnia's devotion to her and her brother Jem in the past, and her subsequent—though probably unconscious—dismissal of Calpurnia's true anxiety for her own family were utterly mistaken. Her question "Did you hate us?" (160), shows Jean Louise's awareness, or at least her suspicion, that the performative quality of race relations not only conditions her relationship with Calpurnia in her present stance as an adult white woman, but also determined their affective bond in the past when she and her brother were the two white children under the black woman's care. Calpurnia makes Jean Louise wait a few seconds for an answer that eventually consists in a simple shaking of her head, which does not seem to sound convincing enough to the white woman since she keeps ruminating on the sincerity of Calpurnia's past affection for the rest of the novel: "She loved us, I swear she loved us . . . She never wore her company manners with one of us . . . when Jem died, her precious Jem, it nearly killed her..." (161); "She could not have hated us, and Atticus cannot believe this kind of talk" (177). The first of these two quotations shows Jean Louise's identification of Calpurnia's "company manners" with the fakeness and artificiality characteristic of racial etiquette, which from her perspective had never interfered in her relationship with the black maid in the past probably because Calpurnia displayed this attitude only with white adults. Jean Louise uses these words to introduce her account of an episode illustrating Calpurnia's painful suffering after Jem's death, her pride in him and her thankfulness for his gift of an electric coat. At the end of this memory, she recalls asking Calpurnia to go back to the white home from which she had disappeared

after Jem's death, a promise which the black woman never fulfilled (29). On this occasion Jean Louise, blinded by her identification of Calpurnia as mammy, did not seem to realize on the one hand that Calpurnia could not go back to the white home to work because she was no longer strong enough to perform housekeeping tasks, and on the other, that she could not go back there as home because the Finches' home was not and had never been Calpurnia's home.

Apart from the illusion of intimacy, affection and domesticity that Jean Louise associates with Calpurnia's role as the Finches' old cook, the analepses otherwise evince the racialized segregation of the Finches' white home: in Jean Louise's memories Calpurnia is most of the time working in the kitchen, or in the bathroom, or on the back porch, or simply "sticking her head out of the back door" (59); she dares entering the dining room only to serve food to the white folks, and in the episode when the Finch children are in the living room with Henry, Dr. Finch and Atticus ready to start for the dance, Calpurnia keeps outside of the room "standing shyly in the hall, giving her grudging approval to the scene" (210) until Dr. Finch asks her to come in. Almost immediately she summons Jean Louise to the kitchen seemingly taking shelter there, since as Sharpless observes, "[for] a cook, the kitchen sometimes became the least hostile place" in the white home (142). In spite of whatever delusion of familiarity and affection devised by white southerners to obliterate the reality of injustice governing race relations even in the domestic realm, Calpurnia like other black domestics before and after her did not experience the white home as home, but as a professional space: "The black woman is presumably at home in her own environment; but when she enters the white woman's kitchen, she enters into a culture which is at least apart from her own, if not alien or openly hostile" (Harris 14). Mildred's words to one of her employers in Alice Childress's *Like One of the Family* are eloquent enough in this sense:

"In the first place, you do not *love* me; you may be fond of me, but that is all. . . . In the second place, I am *not* just like one of the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen. Your mama borrows your lace table-cloth for her company and your son entertains his friends in your parlor, your daughter takes her afternoon nap on the living room couch and your puppy sleeps on your satin spread. . . . and whenever your husband gets tired of something you are talkin' about he says, 'Oh, for Pete's sake, forget it. . . . So you can see I am not *just* like one of the family.'" (2)

Calpurnia's shaking her head as an answer to Jean Louise's question "Did you hate us?" as well as Aibileen's recollection of Constantine's sincere excitement at the prospect of a meeting between Skeeter, her white charge, and Lula, her white-skinned black daughter, simply prove the complexity of these women's feelings: as some of the black women interviewed by Tucker manifested, black domestics could feel affection for their white employers, but this feeling never surpassed the love which they felt for their own people (Tucker 119, 140). In fact, contradicting the delusory devotion to the white family expected from the mammy image, it was primarily for their black families' welfare that these women worked hard, not for the wellbeing of their white employers. Skeeter's ignorance of Constantine's motherhood, and Jean Louise's partial dismissal of the true extent of Calpurnia's family concerns through her unquestioning assumption of the commonly

accepted interpretation of Zeebo simply as a source of trouble for her mother, are evident manifestations of their lack of awareness of this reality and consequently of the masquerade which was daily performed in their own homes.

Although in the past both Skeeter and Jean Louise experienced the same racial innocence as most southern children, they showed something atypical even in childhood, a tomboyish attitude that made them different from the other girls. This attitude, which prevented them from learning the meaning of gender by behaving as stereotypical white ladies-in-the-making in childhood, still prevents them as adults from blindly embracing the male supremacist ideology deeply embedded in their hypothetical future as middle-class housewives. Significantly, the same attitude seems to have kept them partially deaf to the gradual learning of the meaning of race at home in the past and still prevents them from blindly embracing the white supremacist ideology also embedded in their hypothetical future as white middle-class mistresses of their black help in the present. In *The Help* and *Go Set a Watchman*, Skeeter and Jean Louise learn that racial injustice is everywhere in the South, not only in the public sphere, but also in the domestic one, hidden behind the sacrosanct but illusory performance of mutual devotion daily staged by black domestics to comply with whites' expectations modelled on the mammy image.⁶ Once this performative essence is revealed to them as well as their own participation in the southern double consciousness, they are not willing to resume their part in the ongoing performance of racial paternalism to justify the perpetuation of the ideology of white male supremacy. Significantly, Skeeter's and Jean Louise's marriage prospects are ruined, somehow symbolizing their triumphant resistance both to the gender expectations and to the racial attitudes attached to the traditional role of married white women in the South: the immediate reason for the end of their respective engagements is their opposition to the racial stand their male partners held, which suggests that they are resisting not only the normative subordination of women to the male authority, but also the performative implications of their role in the southern domestic masquerade as white middle-class mistresses of their black help.

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⁶ Micky McElya explains that "black domestic workers . . . faced a white popular culture that persistently conflated or compared their work and their lives with the fictitious mammy figure" (208).

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PART V

VISIONS OF THE SOUTH

“The only earth we will ever have”: Early Twentieth Century Southern Women’s Clubs as Forerunners of Environmental Reforms in the Contemporary Globalized World

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PART I

Urban and rural environmental issues were widely discussed during the movement of reforms that characterized the widespread activism of white elite women in the former Confederate States from the 1890s well into the twentieth century. Those women did not have the right to vote and neither to speak in public spaces. As historian Elizabeth Turner Hayes explains, with very few exceptions, the first generation of activists could not attend colleges because in the South few Universities were open to women’s enrollment by 1912 (151). Therefore, at the beginning, the clubs were mainly literary clubs for self-improvement as Anne Firor Scott observes in her path breaking book *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History*.

In the present article, the monthly newspaper *The Keystone* will be used as a primary source. Published from 1899 to 1913, it was the official organ of the South Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs and, later on, of the Federated Women’s Clubs of Mississippi, North Carolina, and Florida, and of the South Carolina Division of the United Daughters of Confederacy. In its pages, clubwomen could, for the first time, express their ideas about the needs of their society. The newspaper also became the mouthpiece of the General Federation of Women’s Club. The Director of Public Information, Mary I. Wood, explained how women moved from private homemaking to municipal housekeeping: “they began to realize that one calling in which they were, as a body, proficient, had its outdoor as well as its indoor application. . . . It was this knowledge, the extension of the homemaking instinct of women and the broadening out of mother instinct . . . that led them into paths of civic usefulness” (79). With the optimistic attitude that was typical of women’s movements and of the New South creed boosted by politicians, in the first editorial of *The Keystone* we read that the newspaper planned to be at the same time the clearing house of the achievements of women’s clubs, and the defender of womanhood and motherhood.

In order to understand the relevance of women’s activism in civic improvement, both in large cities and in small villages scattered in the rural countryside, one must keep in mind the kind of urbanization that had taken place below the Potomac. Post-Civil War urban environment, according to urban historians, reflected the social and economic crisis of a system based on one crop staple agriculture and the collapse of the plantation system. David Goldfield argues that “in order to understand a Southern city (and its distinctions), one must understand cotton” (29). It was in this environment where agrarian values continued, well into the twentieth century, to determine the urban lifestyle and landscape

that the Civic Improvement clubs movement started the process of reforms. Southerners living in the years of the transition from the Old South to the New, witnessed not only the end of their economic system which caused soil erosion, but also suffered for “the long standing fealty to extraction economies” (Farris 74) and deforestation. As Teresa Parker Farris argues, “the South has repeatedly conceded to the plunder of its resources, a tragic pattern that arguably lies at the heart of its identity” (74). Southern clubwomen, although without suffrage, adopted new strategies such as petitions and “indirect influence,” to make their voices heard by the politicians and entrepreneurs who, as we can see in one of their most influential newspapers, *The Manufacturers’ Record*, were more interested in promoting modernization through encouraging industrialization and boosting the New South creed. Historian James Cobb has stressed how “industrialists and promoters of economic development,” being cheap and abundant, “assumed that the South’s natural resources were there for the taking” (121). Cobb also argues “that concepts of conservation and environmental protection were too esoteric to stand up against the region’s seemingly insatiable desire for more industrial payrolls, and rivers, trees, the soil were taken for granted” (122).

Women, on the contrary, knew better the needs of everyday life in towns and villages, in the fields of public health, food protection, education, housing, and environment, because they witnessed the infant mortality in their homes, and suffered diseases and epidemics caused by the lack of urban infrastructures such as the sewage systems. Starting from self-improvement programs, clubs soon became community improvement endeavors in a post-war society where corruption was widespread and prevented inspections and supervisions of public buildings like schools, hospitals, streets, saloons.

Jennie June Croly, during the First Biennial Conference of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (1891), set the agenda for future field work and environmental reforms with provocative questions: “Is there not room in the clubs for outlook committees, whose business should be to investigate township affairs, educational, sanitary, reformatory and all lines of improvement, and report what is being done, might be done, or needs to be done, for decency and order in the jails, in the schools, in the streets, in the planting of trees, in the disposition of refuse, and the provision of light which is the best protection for life and property?” (qtd. in Wood 46). This was the task facing clubwomen—they had to protect the environment and natural resources, create playgrounds as part of the new southern urban cityscape, care for the state of school buildings and the land around them, clear vacant lots in cities and villages, clean and improve cemeteries and Church grounds, and restructure the garbage disposal and the sewage systems in connection with the severe problems of public health. The planting of trees and the preservation of forests, along with the protection of fauna and flora encouraged women to start educational programs in schools because “overzealous deforestation and imprudent farming practices” which depleted southern land “created a devastating widespread erosion” (Farris 74). Education and social work became mutually dependent in the project of encouraging women, men and children to work together toward the common goal of creating a better world for future generations. Southern school buildings were indeed in disrepair. Historian William Link maintains that “the physical structures containing schools were no better built than farms and homes around them and public education blended into an environment of poverty, isolation, and inertia” (49). Quite often isolated and out of the way, those buildings were, as a Sanitary Survey declared, “more unsightly than corn houses or tobacco barns” (qtd. in Flannagan 22).

Located far away from good roads, those little and precarious buildings made of rough logs and without glass windows, were at the mercy of changing weather conditions and therefore unhealthy, effectively discouraging attendance. Although from the 1870s to the beginning of 1900 some improvements were achieved, the task of women to make rural schools more livable was surely difficult.

The Keystone columns and articles provided comments and solutions. If the walls of the one room buildings were unpainted, the advice was “to have the walls painted or white washed if feasible. Moreover to ask pupils to keep the classroom clean because cleanliness is next to godliness.” Committees were organized to teach people to embellish the walls of their home and schools by “hanging good copies of the best pictures and statuary of ancient and modern times to show pieces of art to children by using those reproductions (which could be purchased at a very low cost or cut from papers and magazines and mounted)” (*The Keystone*, March 1901). As an indefatigable promoter, Serena Moffit, the Secretary of the Wake County Branch of the Woman’s Association for the Betterment of Public School Houses in North Carolina, led the campaign for the improvement of cityscapes and the maintenance of public school buildings in Raleigh (N.C.) after 1900.

An example of how even a cemetery could become a source of income for a city because it attracted people, is the renowned Bonaventure Cemetery a few miles outside the city of Savannah (Georgia). As environmental historian William D. Bryan explains, “it captivated tourists because it featured a landscape that could not be found in any other cemetery in the United States” (50). When in 1869 scientist and conservationist John Muir visited the South and Bonaventure graveyard, he considered that it was “a living ecosystem,” of trees and birds and insects. According to Bryan, “[w]riting about Bonaventure’s oaks and tillandsia back into historical narratives can tell us a lot about the evolution of tourism in the South, how memories of the past are intertwined with the landscape, and it can make us more aware of our own assumptions about what is ‘wild’” (52). In his studies on nature and business, Bryan examines how nature conservation shaped the American South after the Civil War. Women’s Clubs insightfully understood the importance of connections between economic progress and environmental reforms in saving natural resources.

One of the constant issues in *The Keystone* was the need to start a process of reforestation during the three decades before the ecological woes of the Dust Bowl tragedy, as pointed out by Teresa Parker Farris (75). *The Keystone* was detailed in reporting every new project concerning the preservation of natural resources and saving trees throughout southern states. In Charleston, South Carolina, women organized a program of “Talk on the trees”: they aimed at learning more about trees values and qualities in conversations titled “Midwinter Pines,” “Wood and Wood structures,” “Woods in Autumn.” The South Carolina Federation established a Department of Civic and Forestry whose activities were reported in the pages of the newspaper (*The Keystone*, September 1903). In order to improve the surroundings of school buildings, clubwomen suggested to instill the love for trees in little pupils: “If the school yard is known to be shadeless a great revolution can be started on *Arbor Day* . . . are there not spots where trees could be taught by name? . . . and the pupils given a first lesson in forestry? Let us invite each child in the South Carolina schools to plant a native tree this year on *Arbor Day* and to become the policeman of his own efforts” (*The Keystone*, October 1903). A year later, an editorial expressed pleasure and pride in the way *Arbor Day* was celebrated in South Carolina: “the care for the woods

of one's native country is what is being aimed at by all the organizations who are enjoying the *Arbor Day* in every State and Territory of this land of ours" (*The Keystone*, November 1904). The tree planting was mentioned also in the Greenville (Mississippi) *Daily Democrat* "the chief civic work of the present year was an effort to arouse general interest in treeplanting. Calls were made at many homes for this purpose and good results followed" (24 March 1915, qtd. in Sommerville-Howorth Papers). The *Arbor Day* had already started in the newly formed Nebraska Territory in 1872 with the settlers J. Sterling Morton and his wife, so that clubwomen were able to convince the Legislative Assembly of South Carolina to establish a day of holiday also in their state to encourage school children to plant trees.

The idea of beauty and order permeated the projects of clubwomen who directed their philanthropic efforts against poverty, disrepair, ignorance and disease in the perspective of motherhood. Mary C. Waterhouse wrote that "even a humble village can be a place of beauty and order if weeds are kept down and vines are planted on unsightly places and buildings" (*The Keystone*, October 1903). Protecting the natural environment was a way to improve the quality of life of southern population. L.W. Jordan, the President of the Village Improvement and Floriculture, focused on the need to plant flowers. "What do I owe to my City?" she asks and lists the ways to use plants and flowers around homes and schools. First of all, cut all the weeds, clean the streets (with a special reference to shopkeepers), plant vines and Cherokee roses on the walls of unpainted homes (*The Keystone*, February 1907). Clubwomen were able to convince railroad managers to contribute to their programs and to refurbish the unadorned railways depots. As an answer, The Seaboard Railroad offered to plant trees and flowers in every station and asked every employee to take care of them. Belle Williams, in an article entitled "Beauty in everyday life," announced that "[a] Bill will be introduced in the next Session of the Legislature for the improvement of the State House grounds," and invited the Trees and Parks Commission to work "in complete harmony" (*The Keystone*, January 1907). In order to raise funds and finance their programs of garden clearing and also for the care of cemeteries, clubwomen often organized flowers festivals and claimed that they wanted to transform South Carolina into "a veritable garden" (*The Keystone*, February 1900).

In Athens (Georgia), the first Garden Club was founded in 1891; since then, Garden Clubs have given a large contribution to the programs of saving flowers and plants, and they are still very active. The by-laws of its Constitution were intended "to promote love for the gardens, to protect the trees, the flowers and the birds of Georgia," encouraging Civic Planning. Flowers, indeed, needed protection like trees. The abundance of native flowers in the Southeast was impressive even to the earlier explorers and colonists and the early reports and letters sent back to Europe often referred to the variety of plants and flowers in the New World. "During the past century, however," as William S. Justice and Ritchie Bell write in their book *Wild Flowers of North Carolina*, "the tremendous increase in the population and the more rapid clearing of the forests and other changes of the surface of the earth by man, has had a profound effect on our native vegetation In this changing of balance of nature, some native species of plants, once relatively frequent, are now quite rare" (ix). The risk of extinction of flowers and wild birds and the changing of biodiversity were already part of the discourse of the women's club movements and they were significant for the future of our earth. A century later, we are still discussing, in our global world, the themes of biodiversity and of strategies to save endangered species.

In February 1900, The Audubon Society joined the General Federation of Women's Clubs and from then onward, *The Keystone* provided space for articles on the invaluable ornithological patrimony of southern states. In 1905, The National Association of Audubon Society for the Protection of Birds was incorporated and it consisted of societies in many states, in the District of Columbia and Oklahoma Territory. The society grew out of the American Ornithological Union (AOU) founded in 1883. In the biography of its founder, Thomas Gilbert Pearson, Oliver H. Orr explains how Pearson was a leading lobbyist for the protection of birds in the South, raising funds especially in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The Keystone opened a monthly column to encourage the study of wild birds, to teach children about the ecological impact of the destruction of species, and to inform readers of the real dangers faced by the natural environment when birds were killed for ornament or by indiscriminate hunting. The Florida Federation suggested the creation of a *Bird Day* "for arousing interest in birds and stimulating efforts for their preservation," also offering prizes to school children "for the best declamation on the subject of birds and for the best essays on the preservation of birds" (*The Keystone*, May 1907).

Interestingly, the programs of clubwomen reveal an innovative perception of space as a value in itself. They were convinced that "beautification of places fosters public spirit," and suggested measures and solutions. In *The Keystone* issue of October 1911 we can read: "This is what women can do: plan parks, plant trees and flowers, and make things generally attractive. Why not have a clean-up day in our cities?" In this area of activism, women were sharing a wider awakening of progressive spirit that swept southern states where a new entrepreneurial class showed interest in the well-being of the citizens. As David Carlton, in his studies on southern cities maintains, businessmen helped the development of urban reforms, that historian George Tindall defined as "business progressivism," which were in many cases started as a response by politicians to the requests of clubwomen (Carlton 1982 passim; Tindall 1976, passim). They were able to ask public institution, companies, and legislators to endorse the reforms they considered of the utmost importance for the progress of the South.

Insightfully, women reformers were able to connect the different fields of their activism and see the relationships between environment and public health, education and social work as a collective effort. On the assumption that women's opportunity was "to evolve harmony and color from chaos" (*The Keystone* October 1903), "organized womanhood could save the children today and save the Nation tomorrow."

In those decades Southern landscape underwent changes in many ways. If rural school children needed trees and better buildings, the pupils of urban schools needed land on which to lay out playgrounds. In this field, Kentucky reformer Madeline McDowell Breckinridge was a creative activist. In 1900, Lexington did not have a public park nor did schools have playgrounds. When the Lexington League was founded, Breckinridge was elected as its secretary. In this capacity, she wanted to create a park in Irishtown, a subdivision where streets were unpaved, where there was no drainage or sewage system, and drinking water was contaminated. Breckinridge showed deep interest in finding a more scientific method of administering charity. She was convinced that juvenile delinquency was the product of play energies gone wrong and that epidemics—a plague in the South at the end of nineteenth century—were widespread because of the lack of hygienic norms and good sanitation systems. On the ground of these ideas, she planned Summer

playgrounds with drinking fountains that would provide water from the city reservoir. In order to bring the Woodland Park into reality, she asked the City Council to hire the best architects from architectural firms in the country. Her successful campaign on behalf of the park and of the building of the Bluegrass Sanatorium—tuberculosis being tragically widespread—must be measured against the scant attention city councils gave to budgetary support for disease prevention and the lack of scientific knowledge on the causes of contagious diseases (Goldfield 41).

The awakening of interest in public health was in some cases supported by the medical schools, engaged in research on viruses and bacteria, in order to find measures to prevent or to cure tuberculosis, typhoid fever, yellow fever, pellagra, and smallpox—this last one having spread during the Civil War, kept killing civilians in the aftermath of the war. A pioneering institution was founded in North Carolina in 1877, The Board of Health, in order to promote inspections on drinking waters, the use of the quarantine, and the protection of the environment. The Board encountered difficulties because there was a sort of resistance of the population to accept the vaccines or other measures of hygienic and medical prevention. Madeline McDowell Breckinridge helped to found the Lexington Civic League and the Affiliated Charities Association, and became a member of the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs. She also was the founder of the Fayette County Anti Tuberculosis Association. She wrote articles in the *Lexington Herald*—her husband Desha Breckinridge was the Director—and from the “Woman's Page,” she could send her messages to promote critical reforms especially in public health, suggesting the cooperation of women's clubs with the Social Hygiene Societies. This would allow the schools to start new programs including how to prevent infections and epidemics. Women were aware of the need to pursue both medical and educational progress within the more general vision of environmental improvement. The Village Improvement Department of North Carolina, for instance, organized meetings “to offer the best sanitary conditions to the cities and make them more beautiful” (January 1903). The City Park system was a central issue of Breckinridge's activism because she was convinced that it was a way to protect children left alone, victims of poverty and ignorance. The playground of Irishtown was only the beginning of a system that led to the creation of five parks and three playgrounds within the school areas with assistants paid by the Lexington city government (Hay 56).

Another interesting example of how women's activism could transform a cityscape is the city of Galveston (Texas). After the 1900 storm that devastated Galveston, it was the Women's Health Protective Association that worked toward a rebuilding of streets and homes under the aegis of the National League for Improvement Associations. As Elizabeth Turner explains, women started to plant trees any time a new section of land flooded during the storm was filled. “As the grade raising commenced,” Turner writes, “they returned with oleanders, palms and oak trees to the east end of the island and concentrated on tree planting, especially palms, on Broadway and down the esplanade of Rosenberg Avenue” (207). In addition, public gardens and school gardens were created, with the help of agricultural experts; flower fairs and horse shows raised money, prizes to school children on Arbor Day were distributed, and many other projects were organized as a contribution to the campaign of municipal housekeeping, whose success was amply advertised by local newspapers. “This large appropriation of space and time by women on the island had never before been tried” (209).

The words of Mary Ritter Beard seem to summarize the enthusiasm that encouraged those elite women in their vast and complex programs of environmental reforms and of beautification of cities and towns. She wrote: "Women by natural instinct as well as by old training have become the housekeepers of the world, so it is only natural that they should, in time, become effective municipal housekeepers as well" ("Women's Work in Municipalities," 1915).

PART II

The mosaic of activities of Women's Clubs in the post-Civil War South as presented and discussed in *The Keystone* and in other newspapers where their messages were published, shows how wide and multifaceted their engagement was when it comes to public affairs in the first decades of the twentieth century. They moved from Victorian to modernist thought, overcoming the invisible barriers that were still established by old codes of behavior. The success of *The Keystone*—that in 1900 reached 2000 copies giving voice to some 450 clubs—was underlined in the 1913 last issue. Among other achievements, the monthly newspaper opened a new profession for women that was officially recognized. The South Carolina Press Association in its 25th Annual meeting presented a conversation regarding the future of women journalists in the South (see *The Keystone* February 1900). The Final Report of the fifteen years of publications underlined how it connected the activities of the affiliated clubs in the South and helped to maintain the unity of purposes. The hopes were that the contribution of Mary and Louise Poppenheim (associate editors) and Ida Marshall Lining (the editor) could continue in the future along with the dream of "Unity of Cause."

Today, a century later, many of the concerns discussed by clubwomen are the same in the global discourse on the future of our earth and some of the statements and warnings sadly resound in the media of the twenty-first century. We can see, for instance, that the Garden Clubs responded to the idea that beauty and order were their leading principles. Today, their programs are more complex. The interplay between Garden Clubs and Agricultural Societies aimed at promoting southern economy by preserving environmental resources in the Progressive Era and nowadays, the same principles—although adapted to the needs of a post-industrial society—are central to the club activities even if the piecemeal approach has been replaced by environmental and ecological national organizations. In their programs, we still find that roadsides can be improved by planting trees and shrubs; the cleaning of service stations, the disposing of litter, and the control of pollution remain central. Moreover, Garden Club members today volunteer in helping in hospitals and schools to promote garden therapy. There is undoubtedly a thread of continuity between the older movement of civic improvement and the contemporary needs because "the experiment of great promise," as Howard Odum defined rural and urban social work, is not finished (Odum 1926, *passim*).

When the 1930s financial and economic crisis along with natural disasters hit the United States, and even more the South, one of the first *New Deal* relief programs organized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to help rural America. The idea was the reforestation of public lands and the creation of national parks, along with programs of mitigating southern soil erosion. The dust storms of the Great Plains made more pressing the acting of a law (*The Soil Conservation Act*). Women's Clubs

programs had suggested, at the end of the nineteenth century, a reforming agenda that was somewhat carried out by the Roosevelt Administration. It used new media such as films, radio talks, photography and, interestingly, visual arts, to introduce environmental issues in school curricula (Farris 76).

The persistence of activism to organize public spaces in urban and suburban areas with a high rate of population growth is well analyzed in John H. Spiers' study of metropolitan Washington (D.C.) during the last decades of the twentieth century. He argues that space is still a problem in the development of modern cities. Spiers' case study of Washington explains how the role of the Federal Government can bring about programs, but it is at the local level that "activists applied principles of environmental stewardship to advocate a growth that was 'smarter'" (6), as the title of the book points out—*Smarter Growth: Activism and Environmental Policy in Metropolitan Washington*. This was the case when the citizens working together in the suburban areas of the capital city wanted to preserve the nearby open space of natural environment, considering natural beauty as a public good and, at the same time, as a way to make their properties and communities economically more desirable.

"Beautification of places foster public spirit . . . plan parks, plant trees and flowers, and make things generally attractive," we read in *The Keystone* in October 1911, as reformers were spearheading issues and solutions viable today in the globalized world. It is interesting to see that the clubwomen's suggestion to paint rural homes and school walls has its followers today. As an example, in Italy, the little church of Beata Vergine del Carmine, located right in the middle of vineyards around the small village of Coazzolo, near Asti in Piedmont, has been painted by the well-known British artist David Tremlett with different colors: olive green, yellow, and *terra di Siena*. Tremlett also painted *La via di Mezzo* of Ghizzano, a medieval little town in Tuscany. This street offers a view of colors matching the surrounding natural colors, such as brown, ochre and all the nuances of green, thus bringing into the town the colors of the countryside and creating a sense of belonging. Moreover, in cities around the world we can enjoy painted walls especially in metropolitan suburbia, which may become a tourist attraction and improve the social life. In Georgetown (Malaysia) or in Brussels, Mexico City and many other cities in the world, wall painting has become a new branch of visual art, with graffiti or other media, and, in some cases, an uplifting of suburban areas.

The person who seems to better embody the love for trees and forests is Felix Finkbeiner, born in 1997 in Munich, Bavaria. He planted his first tree in his school yard at the age of nine, thus becoming a leading example of ecological solutions to lower the CO2 emissions. Later on, Finkbeiner founded the *Plant for the Planet* Organization aimed at saving forests throughout the world, and in 2011 he presented a project at the United Nations General Assembly, when the number of trees planted had already reached the number of one million. Today the *Plant for the Planet* movement has developed worldwide and sends the message especially to children who will be the first victims of climate global changing in the future. The motto "Stop talking, start planting" underlines the pressing need of action and echoes the words of *The Keystone* "let us undertake it at once" (March 1902).

The dream of southern reformers to transform their states into "veritable flower gardens" also seems to announce, like a dream, some innovative architectural experiments in many cities of the world today. The metaphor of the garden is a fascinating theme through the history of humanity, and more so in the post-industrial era where the urban

green is in conflict with the need of space and the overgrowing of the population. Therefore the “vertical gardens” are innovative solutions to eliminate or lower the CO₂ emissions. As an example, Italian architect Francesco Bollani has built the largest Italian garden wall in a shopping Center at Rozzano (near Milan), with 1250 square meters of 44.000 plants of 200 different species. Another Italian architect, Stefano Boeri, has realized a “vertical wood,” in 2018, in Milan—it is a residential building on whose facades and balconies plants and flowers grow not only as a decorative element, but also to help the polluted air be regenerated. Since 2016, Boeri is also developing a project in China: a “forest city” in Liuzhou is planned to host thousands of trees and one million plants of more than 100 species. A self-sufficient city as far as the needs of energy are concerned, where green and biodiversity are created to lower the levels of pollution.

As a final reference to projects that echo the appeals of women reformers, I would like to mention the internationally famous scientist Stefano Mancuso, author of *Plant Revolution: Le piante hanno già inventato il nostro futuro* (*Plants have already invented our future* 2017), among many other thought-provoking books. Mancuso has been quoted in *The New Yorker* in a list of “world changers,” and he is a founding member of the *International Society of Plant Signaling and Behavior*. Mancuso’s message today is “Plant trees,” millions of trees, as politicians promise to do.

Today we are witnessing the new phenomenon of teenagers following the sixteen years old Swedish girl Greta Thunberg’s initiative of the Fridays for the future. Will their hopes be fulfilled by politicians? Like the clubwomen at the end of nineteenth century, teenagers do not have the suffrage but surely they know how to make their voices reach the legislators to whom they ask for solidarity and cooperation with the new generations. Today we may still ponder on the words of women reformers and listen to their voices, so vibrant, as they express “ideas that were burning in their hearts (*The Keystone*, August 1900): “Heaven and Earth help him who plants a tree . . . on this only earth we will ever have” (*The Keystone*, October 1906).

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The Absurd in the South: The Case of Flannery O'Connor

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The South has been considered by many to be a hotbed of the grotesque, in fact by so many that the term has gradually become degraded to a mere buzzword, and yet very little has been written about southern versions of the absurd, an aesthetic category closely related to the grotesque but at the same time unequivocally distinguishable from it. Among the reasons are connotations connected with the term "Theater of the Absurd," coined by Martin Esslin, a British drama theorist, in 1961. Besides the deceptive impression that the use of the term "the absurd" is limited only to drama, there was the non-existence of a consensual and stable definition. In the introduction to his book, Esslin emphasized that the absurd, both in aesthetic and philosophical contexts, did not "simply mean 'ridiculous,'" as when used in common speech, but returned to its original meaning related to music: "out of harmony," that is, disharmonious (23). At the same time, however, he cited the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "absurd" as "incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (23), which is paraphrased in all English dictionaries up to the present day; for example, *Merriam-Webster* characterizes it as "ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous," and, as a second meaning, even as "having no rational or orderly relationship to human life." Esslin, being aware of the huge gap between the terminological and everyday use of the word, turned to Albert Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942, translated into English in 1955 as *The Myth of Sisyphus*), the authoritative text for everybody dealing with the absurd, but Camus, despite his deep immersion into the phenomenon, made no attempt at bridging the gap, providing only one definition of the absurd as "lucid reason noting its limits" (Camus 49), which, despite its vagueness, further divorces the absurd from its stereotypical connections with irrationality and nonsense.

The scholars applying the concept of the absurd to fiction, including southern fiction, chose between two approaches. Those who preferred the existentialist approach of Camus explored the works of philosophical novelists who usually do not write in comic mode; one of those scholars, David D. Galloway, included in his monograph *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* (1966), focusing on writers who "can express despair without succumbing to it" (x), a chapter on William Styron. Those who tried to apply Esslin's concept of the Theater of the Absurd to fiction centered on experimental writers creatively employing comic forms, the writers who were later labeled as postmodernists rather than novelists of the absurd; the only southern writer ever cited in this context, for example in Charles B. Harris's *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (1971), is John Barth. The common denominator of these two approaches is the arbitrary use of the term "the absurd" and the unwillingness to define it. Galloway reduces "absurdity" to "the *bon mot* . . . of this decade [the 1960s]" (vii), while Harris, writing about the ironical and farcical employment of traditional novelistic devices, as well as "the use of burlesque and parody" ([v]), replaces "absurd" with "absurdist." In the former case the absurd is used

mostly as a theme, or rather a topic to be discussed, in the latter the workings of the absurd are presented by forms that deliberately exaggerate, conflate, and distort to demonstrate the futility of human existence, which, as I will try to show, makes them incompatible with the absurd.

My aim is to explain the difference between telling about the absurd and showing the absurd in Flannery O'Connor, who is traditionally and wrongly seen as a representative of the southern grotesque. I will turn to several of O'Connor's essays in which she renounces the label of a grotesque writer, points instinctively and spontaneously at basic characteristics of the absurd world, and explains its workings. Then, I will try to prove that the superior form for showing the absurd is comedy, my example being O'Connor's *Wise Blood*—in my opinion the quintessential southern novel of the absurd. However, before I start I need to provide my own definition of the absurd, and to do so, I have to briefly reflect and comment upon some theoretical problems and misunderstandings concerning this concept.

Defining the Absurd

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus briefly discusses the difference between two approaches to the absurd: those of a philosopher and a novelist. While philosophers use "reasoned arguments," novelists write "in images" (92). In this context, Camus speaks of writers of a special sort whom he calls "philosophical novelists" (92), whose works are, as in the case of philosophers, the outcome of a philosophy, but "often unexpressed" and presented not in lectures or tractates but in narratives through "illustration and . . . consummation" (93). Such writers are "absurd men," for whom the absurd "is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing" (87). He believes that such writers choose the absurd as their "creative attitude," which they prefer to other possible attitudes, even though he adds that if they do so, they must "remain aware of its gratuitousness" (93).

Esslin also distinguishes between two ways of dealing with the absurd but takes the difference one level lower. Not being interested in the explanatory mode of philosophers and scholars, he makes a distinction between the forms which use "highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning" (24) and those which "renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition" and, instead, present the absurd in "its being" (25, italics in the original). According to Esslin, the first approach is typical of philosophers who also write fiction or drama, including Camus, and who "express the new content in the old convention" (25), and the second one of the proponents of the Theater of the Absurd (and, hypothetically, their fiction-writing counterparts), who try "to achieve a unity between its [the absurd's] main assumptions and the form in which these are expressed" (24).

Esslin nevertheless does not provide the main assumptions of the absurd in his introduction and, instead, suggests in passing that, to express the "sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach," the authors emphasize "a radical devaluation of language" (26) and tend to the "violent and grotesque" (25). It is especially the word "grotesque" that arouses well-grounded

suspicion that the Theater of the Absurd has very little to do with the absurd but is primarily connected with the grotesque.¹

The grotesque was established as an aesthetic category by Wolfgang Kayser, in his 1957 volume *Das Groteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, published six years later in English translation as *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Kayser affirms that the grotesque fully meets the criteria for an aesthetic category, having relevance “in three different realms—the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception” (180), and acting “as a comprehensive structural principle of works of art” (180). He claims that the “grotesque world is—and is not—our own world” (37); the grotesque biases and exaggerates, adds to the unreliability of what we thought we knew, and instills in us, unlike the absurd, “fear of life rather than fear of death” (185). At the end of his volume, Kayser comes up with a breakthrough, claiming in capital letters: “THE GROTESQUE IS A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD” (187), a statement which supports my opinion that in grotesque works the absurd is reduced to an arbitrarily exploited topic.

By his theory, Kayser opened the door for humor and the absurd to receive by analogy the status of aesthetic categories as well. Yet he misunderstood the absurd when he relegated it to the realm of tragedy on the ground that, unlike the grotesque, which “must not and cannot suggest a meaning,” it includes “the possibility of a deeper meaning” (186).²

The classification of literature exploring the absurd became even more difficult when attempts at making the grotesque and the absurd near-synonyms appeared. In his book *The Grotesque*, Philip Thomson claims that the grotesque and the absurd have much in common, the main difference between them being that the grotesque “can be reduced to a certain formal pattern” (31), while the absurd has “no structural characteristics” and “can only be perceived as content, as a quality, a feeling or atmosphere, an attitude or world-view” (32). This is a grave mistake but a justifiable one when we take into account the direction of the research of his predecessors, most notably Kayser and Esslin, and it leads Thomson to the peculiar statement that some scenes in works of art can be “absurd . . . and grotesque at the same time” (31). They cannot, as a single scene must be structured according to the demands of only one aesthetic category, or at least shift from one category to another at a certain moment—the categories can never overlap, as they are based on different principles.

Thomson’s contribution to the theory of the absurd is nevertheless crucial, as many things he says about the grotesque are equally valid, or even more so, for the absurd. Returning to “the fundamental element of disharmony” (20), he correctly emphasizes that “the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework” (8), at the same time recognizing a disproportionate “mixture of the comic and the terrifying” in the grotesque (21).

In my opinion, the quantity of unsettling and terrifying ingredients put into comic narratives is decisive in labeling a work of literature as humorous, grotesque, or absurd, the absurd being a liminal category of the comic, and therefore containing the highest dose of such ingredients. Such a massive infiltration of comedy by tragic elements

¹ Philip Thomson even suggests that Esslin’s “Theater of the Absurd” should be called “the theater of the grotesque” (30), a suggestion I subscribe to.

² Kayser’s misreading gave rise to the opposition between “the tragic absurd” and “the comic absurd,” the former being an oxymoron and the latter a pleonasm, like, for example, “vegetable carrot,” as the comic is an umbrella term for the absurd.

requires both a realistic context and a realistic method of writing. As Thomson wrote, even the grotesque can be made more effective if rendered “in a realistic way” (8), but for the absurd realism is a vital necessity.

However, there is also a qualitative difference between the grotesque and the absurd. While Thomson warns against seeing the grotesque as mere “exaggerated buffoonery,” he emphasizes the use of the disgusting and the monstrous in grotesque works (14) and finally defines the grotesque as “*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*” (27, italics in the original), suggesting that in all other comic forms, which are also based “on some notion of incongruity, conflict, juxtaposition of opposites, etc.” (21), such a clash is always solved.³

The solution in an absurd work always has a paradox at its center. Thomson considers paradox as one of the most useful tools to deal with incompatibles, side by side with irony (21), but while irony can be used in all categories of the comic, paradoxes, which may be occasionally found as literary means within the grotesque, become true building blocks in the absurd. Paradox, “a statement which seems on its face to be self-contradictory . . . , yet turns out to make good sense” (Abrams 126),⁴ helps connect the absurd of existentialist philosophers with that of aestheticians and authors of dictionary entries: we can validate the dictionary definitions of “absurd,” as used in everyday life, for scholarly use by simply adding the adjective “seemingly” to them—the absurd world is only seemingly meaningless; in fact, it makes perfect sense.

So here, finally, is my working definition of the absurd: it is an aesthetic subcategory of the comic, the one nearest the border with the tragic, which is deeply rooted in realism, reflects the disharmony of the world, and addresses basic paradoxes of human existence.

Telling about the Absurd without the Absurd: Flannery O'Connor's Essays

In O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, the greedy preacher Hoover Shoats, who calls himself Onnie Jay Holy, takes from Hazel Motes, a veteran vainly revolting against Jesus Christ, his concept of The Church Without Christ, changing it into the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ. Nobody finds anything strange in this name and people gather to voluntarily pay the one dollar Shoats requires as a membership fee. The name of the *ad hoc* invented church is paradoxical. At first sight it seems to lack even a rudimentary logic but then it begins to make sense: the belief in Christ is so deeply imprinted in the minds and hearts of Christians that even the absence of Christ as a figure with the well-known Biblical life story is not needed any more. But what is more important, Shoats is aware of it and, knowing that people accept the new only when they find there what they already know or are used to, cashes in on it—in other words, benefits from one of the rules of the absurd world he acknowledged, emulated, and mastered.

Similarly, O'Connor herself wrote about the absurd without ever using it as an aesthetic or philosophical concept. In her essays and lectures collected by Robert and Sally Fitzgerald in *Mystery and Manners*, she refers to the absurd only once, if we do not count a

³ However, like Kayser, Thomson did not acknowledge the grotesque as a subcategory of the comic, claiming evasively and rather illogically that “there is almost always a comic element in the grotesque” (50).

⁴ In fact, M. H. Abrams considers paradox to be seemingly “self-contradictory or absurd” (126), providing evidence that the improper mix of the terminological and ordinary use of “absurd” even creeps into dictionaries of literary terms.

single use of the word “absurdity” as a synonym for nonsense. In “Novelist and Believer,” a 1963 lecture, O’Connor complains that modern novelists “have been more concerned with the processes of unconsciousness than with the objective world outside the mind” and in the following sentence she claims: “In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected” (*Mystery and Manners* 158). This statement, in which “meaningless” echoes standard definitions of the absurd in O’Connor’s era, implicates a coexistence of several worlds, with the possibility of choosing from among them. This is confirmed when, in the following sentence, she asks novelists “to create a world and a believable one” (158), something she never had a problem doing.

In another of her texts, merely three years older—her famous lecture “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960)—O’Connor mentions the works of writers who do not respect “a novelistic orthodoxy,” but “present something that is alive, however eccentric its life may seem to the general reader” (*Mystery and Manners* 39); such works should be taken into account and “be dealt with on their own terms” (39). O’Connor calls such works “grotesque” and characterizes them in the following way:

In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. . . . It is this kind of realism that I want to consider. (40)

Even though O’Connor considers the kind of realism used in grotesque works to be different from its usual version, she makes clear that a realistic method is the only one appropriate to grotesque fiction. The specific features of this realism of the grotesque are, in her opinion, the “strange skips and gaps,” which might be considered flaws but, in fact, show the disharmonious nature of the world. Requiring “an inner coherence” of characters nevertheless rules out dealing arbitrarily with incompatibles, and implies a proper closure and a solution of the conflict, which is, according to Thomson, typical of the absurd, not the grotesque. Therefore, when O’Connor complains that “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (40), she inadvertently gives the reader some credit for being able to recognize the difference I perceive between the realism of the absurd and the distortions of the grotesque. However, the same can hardly be said about other readers, again non-southern ones, mentioned in “The Fiction Writer and His Country” (1957), who label as grotesque the stories which, in the opinion of their writer, do not “have any grotesque characters in them at all” (*Mystery and Manners* 32). Still, they could hardly call them absurd, as at that time the term was not used in this meaning in the U.S. either by the public or by the critics.

My claim that in “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” O’Connor discusses the absurd, calling it the grotesque, can be further supported with her statement

that grotesque fiction deals with extraordinary experience most people never pass through and are not even able to recognize. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus calls the feeling of absurdity elusive; many people will never experience it during their lifetime, but still it “can strike any man in his face” at “any street corner” (17). Even though Camus never related it explicitly, his reasoning makes it possible to deduce three stages of the relationship of people to the absurd world, that is, its acknowledgment, a futile revolt against it, and its acceptance. The initial stage starts with a strike, a sudden realization that the world is absurd and there is no other world besides it, is the first stage: in Camus’s words, “the chain of daily gestures is broken” and “the heart vainly seeks the link that connects it again” (19); we recognize time as our “worst enemy,” and nature “is foreign and irreducible to us” (20). The acknowledgment of the absurd is followed by the second stage: a revolt against it. In the introductory chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus characterizes the absurd as “a confrontation and an unceasing struggle” (48), and therefore he rules out suicide as a solution and opts for life in the absurd world, “to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (17).

In her essay on the grotesque, O’Connor calls a person doing exactly what Camus asks for “a realist of distances,” who is a kind of prophet, for whom “prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (44). It is nevertheless interesting that shortly before her death, when she returned to the topic in a lecture that the Fitzgeralds made a part of the composite text called “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers,” she required from the realist of distances to use “the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth” (179). The conclusion is clear: while the 1960 realist of distances was a realist of the absurd, exploring life as it is, the 1963 one became a realist of the grotesque, not hesitating to use bias for the revelation of a mystery.

O’Connor already admitted her willingness to use bias for a higher purpose in “Novelist and Believer” (1962). Alluding to her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, then in progress, she wrote: “Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal” (*Mystery and Manners* 162). Such a statement is in opposition to what she wrote in 1957, when she asked the Catholic writer to reveal mysteries “by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is” (*Mystery and Manners* 150), mentioning distortion only as an excess directing, for example, to “an overemphasis on innocence” (147).

O’Connor’s turn from the grotesque, which is, in fact, the absurd, to the grotesque as such is described in her “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*,” finished in December 1960, only several months after she delivered her lecture on the grotesque in southern fiction at Wesleyan College in Macon. The change of mind came after she discussed the grotesque with some nuns who wrote a memoir describing the life and death of a little girl who suffered from a malignant tumor deforming the left-hand side of her face. After one of the nuns told her colleague, who asked O’Connor why the grotesque was her vocation, “It’s your vocation too” (*Mystery and Manners* 225), O’Connor began to think about the grotesque in a different way:

This opened up for me also a new perspective on the grotesque. Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not,

our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. (226)

O'Connor's preference for the grotesque which follows the incomplete or unfinished to the grotesque (read "the absurd") which, in spite of the "strange skips and gaps" (*Mystery and Manners* 40) it uses, always counts on the completeness of the world, tilted the focus of her post-1960 writings (with some exceptions) toward religious issues and, consequently, led her to reconsider her older works.

For Camus, religions are merely escape from the absurdity of the world. In religions, "man is freed of the weight of his own life" (122), and yet they are no option for him, as he is "not seeking what is universal but what is true" (122). O'Connor, an ardent Catholic, was also seeking truth but, unlike Camus, she did not see faith as an obstacle but as a certainty she could rely on. In "Novelist and Believer," she tries to convince young Catholic writers that "the Church does not restrict their freedom to be artists but insures it" (*Mystery and Manners* 151) and that a belief "in a fixed dogma cannot fix what goes on in life or blind the believer to it" but, instead, adds "a dimension to the writer's observation" (150). In another part of the essay, to make the advice more universal, O'Connor also claims that "fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them" (146). It is obvious that for O'Connor religion is not a refuge from the world of paradoxes but a revolt against it. For her, the Judeo-Christian tradition "formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed even the shape of modern atheism" and, therefore, she speaks "of the Church even when the Church is absent; of Christ, even when Christ is not recognized" (155).

The use of paradoxes which bridge the gaps between apparent contradictions makes, on the one hand, O'Connor very close to writers of the absurd, even though, on the other hand, it does not mark the level of her understanding of the absurd world, as she employs them in both periods, pre-Mary Ann and post-Mary Ann, in comparable manner and quantity. Paradoxes appear in her essays and lectures on a regular basis and they are not limited to matters of religion and creative freedom. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country" she says, when discussing the perspectives of good regional authors trying to go beyond their region, that "to know one's region . . . is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world" (*Mystery and Manners* 35), a paradox many southern writers take as their own. In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" O'Connor presents "a paradox that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction" (*Mystery and Manners* 73), a statement that could be challenged but that for O'Connor is valid without reserve. She particularly abounds in paradoxes when she comments on the poor state of the teaching of literature and creative writing. In "Total Effect and the Eighth Grade" she relates her opinion that the best way to teach students to appreciate modern literature is not to assign it to them at all and, instead, to expose them to classics (*Mystery and Manners* 139), in "Writing Short Stories" she gives an example of a Russian teacher of acting who does not allow her students to speak but asks them first to learn to see things properly (*Mystery and Manners* 93), and in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" she appreciates the lazy teachers of creative writing who do close to nothing more than those who overzealously try "to impose a way of writing" on their pupils (*Mystery and Manners* 86).

The paradoxes are O'Connor's means of revolt: against parochialism, an obsolete and insensitive education system, or the mass production of new writers at universities. According to Camus, revolt is nevertheless only one of three consequences of the absurd, the other two being freedom and passion (62). Unlike revolt, freedom and passion reach toward the third, highest stage of a person's relation to the absurd world: reconciliation with it and benefiting from its paradoxes. Through his central image of Sisyphus, periodically happy and free, even though only in the fleeting time when he is returning from near the top of the mountain to collect his boulder, Camus clearly suggests that life in the absurd world has some advantages. As the existence of the absurd world cannot be denied, people should be "breathing with it" and "recognizing its lessons" (86).⁵ Those for whom the absurd is not just a "climate" acquire, through understanding of the ways of the absurd, an "attitude of mind which lights the world with its true colors to bring out the privileged and implacable visage which that attitude has discerned in it" (18). However, the utmost manifestation of freedom and passion for those who took up "the heartrending and marvelous wager of the absurd" (52) is a creative activity, even though any work of art "is itself an absurd phenomenon" (88).

Camus, asking whether an absurd work of art is possible, comes to the conclusion that it is, provided that it contains "thought in its most lucid form," which, however, "must not be apparent except as the regulating intelligence" (89). I take this paradox even further, claiming that real writers of the absurd can be found only among those who are not aware that they are writing about the absurd. O'Connor, replacing the absurd with the grotesque until December 1960, is an excellent candidate, especially if she puts aside in her works her Catholicism, as, according to Camus, if a work of art "sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope, it ceases to be gratuitous" (93-94) and therefore also absurd; true absurd works should be exercises "in detachment and passion" (94) and, which is extremely important (even though Camus mentions it only parenthetically), their authors must "perform" them (93).

While in her pre-Mary Ann lectures and essays O'Connor is telling her audience, even though through what she calls the grotesque, about the absurd, her 1952 *Wise Blood* meets all of Camus's requirements for an absurd work of art and, in addition to this, has at its center some of the main paradoxes of the absurd world. To explain it, I must occasionally turn to psychology and sociology, especially to their branches influenced by existentialism.

Showing the Absurd: Wise Blood as an Absurd Novel

When Farrar, Straus and Cudahy bought *Wise Blood* from Harcourt, Brace and Company in 1962 and prepared its second edition, O'Connor was asked to write a brief introduction. Even though, in an earlier letter to Robert Giroux, she expressed hope that the book would return to print, as she got "letters from college libraries asking where it can be found" (*Habit of Being* 429), she originally dismissed the idea that she should comment on what she had written ten years earlier. In a letter of 10 June 1961 to Hazel Elizabeth Hester, an Atlanta file clerk known to readers of O'Connor's published correspondence as A.,⁶ she

⁵ There is no evidence that O'Connor read *The Myth of Sisyphus*, or any other works by Camus. In Kinney's *Flannery O'Connor's Library*, no work by Camus is listed, and neither does she mention Camus in any of her numerous letters.

⁶ A.'s identity was revealed after she committed suicide in 1998. For facts about O'Connor's enigmatic pen pal see, for example, Köhler's article.

rejected the suggestion that she should write an introduction “that announces the religious significance of the book,” but being willing nevertheless to state “that the book is seen from the standpoint of orthodox Christianity” (442). In the same letter, she confirmed her reluctance to interpret her own works: “‘Explanations’ are repugnant to me and to send out a book with directions for its enjoyment is terrible,” at the same time promising that if she did consent to write the introduction, “it will be very light and oblique” (442). In another letter to Hester, dated 14 October 1961, O’Connor writes that “there will be no introduction, as I can’t even read the book” (451) and she repeats it one month later in a letter to the novelist John Hawkes: “I just let it go as is” (457). When O’Connor finally had to compose a brief introduction, because it was supposed to help the new publisher to renew the copyright (471), she wrote to the Fitzgeralds, to whom she sent her text for inspection, on 7 May 1962: “I would just like to prevent some of the far-out interpretations” (473).

In the introduction O’Connor finally wrote, she violated her own rule that a finished work of art should stay alone without further interference from its author: “It is a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death” (*Mystery and Manners* 114). For a writer using the grotesque and, without knowing it, the absurd, her preference of comedy to tragedy in dealing with topics central to people’s life could be expected. However, the first part of the statement is more controversial, as it singles out Hazel Motes as the only protagonist of *Wise Blood* and reduces the novel to a story of his belief in Jesus Christ against his own will. This is a very important theme in *Wise Blood* but not the only one.

Even the title of the novel is not related to Hazel but to Enoch Emery, a lonely janitor in a city zoo, who inherited “wise blood,” an inclination to obsessive ritualistic behavior and, at the same time, a more or less effective warning system from his psychopathic criminal father. Enoch’s importance for the story is equal to that of Hazel, and O’Connor devoted three full chapters, and excellent ones, to his life habits, desires, and failures, giving him a prominent role in two other chapters. She made Enoch’s importance for both the story and its author obvious in two letters to her teacher at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Robie Macauley. In a 1950 letter to Macauley, she jokingly describes her life with Enoch as her fictional companion. Alluding to Enoch’s voyeuristic habit of watching women bathing in a pond from the nearby abelia bushes, she writes: “Me and Enoch are living in the woods in Connecticut. . . . Enoch didn’t care so much for New York. He said there wasn’t no privetcy (*sic*) there. Every time he went to sit in the bushes there was already somebody sitting there ahead of him” (*HB* 21). Still, in a February 1961 article based on several letters to Winifred McCarthy, written approximately in the period when she was working on the introduction to *The Memoir of Mary Ann*, O’Connor unjustly brushed Enoch off as “a moron and chiefly a comic character” (*Mystery and Manners* 116) whose psyche, as well as his motives, is not worthy of deeper examination: “I don’t think it is important whether his compulsion is clinical or not” (116-17). O’Connor seemed to have forgotten that, in a comic novel, comic characters are the most important ones.

When I read *Wise Blood* as a novel of the absurd, I read it against O’Connor’s post-Mary Ann sentiments—an absurd novel cannot be read simultaneously as a religious novel. What I say nevertheless does not rule out any theological interpretations, but only relegates religion in the book to the role of a background helping to see the world’s absurdity more clearly. Even though *Wise Blood* is firmly rooted in the South, the use of the absurd,

supported by the episodic structure of the book, elevates it into a succession of universally relevant comic narratives, very often parables, which help readers understand the seemingly illogical ways of the world.

Showing the absurd needs a distance and a lack of compassion from the author. Camus rightly said that art “can never be so well served as by a negative thought” (103) but it is necessary to add that if the absurd in the world is to be shown, not merely told about, it must be presented through the means proper for the absurd as a subcategory of the comic—or, to use a simpler, even though slightly misleading formulation given by Harris, “treat absurdist themes with . . . absurdist techniques” (v).⁷ Any work of fiction which lacks comedy can only explain the absurd. Linking the absurd with comedy, we can accept Camus’s claim that the absurd “depends as much on man as on the world” (26), and even that it “bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it” (33).

Wise Blood introduces characters in various stages of understanding the absurd world, as defined by Camus, and through their stories it explores two of its major paradoxes. The first of them states that the more people try to suppress or eradicate a cultural, social, political, or religious phenomenon, either in a society or in their minds, the more important it becomes for the society or for them. According to the second paradox, the more people wish for something, the less likely they are to achieve it.⁸ These paradoxes complement each other: the former is more visible on a public level but both have an equal direct impact on the private lives of individuals.

Hazel Motes is a perfect example of an individual who never acknowledges the world’s absurdity and is not able to perceive its paradoxes, yet everything he does illustrates the workings of the absurd. The more he tries to abandon Jesus, the more Jesus haunts his mind and influences his doings. The more he claims that he is no preacher, the closer he comes to becoming one. When he buys a car, instead of the home and shelter he longs for, he receives a moral barometer that, no matter how many holes it has in the tank, organizes the life of its owner. When he runs over an impostor who, in his opinion, was stealing his identity, instead of the dying man’s hatred he gets his confession. The Church Without Christ he advertises looks at first sight like a revolt against the absurd, and yet it is instead a futile rebellion against his late grandfather and the gospel he preached. The faith in Jesus was burnt into his mind during his childhood years and, despite all his attempts, he is not able to shed it, which augments his blindness toward the absurd. People like Hazel, who are the embodiment of the paradoxes of the absurd, but not able to recognize them, handle them, or use them for their benefit, are easy prey for those who understand the ways of the absurd better but need a mediator to benefit from them.

That is why there are always people near Hazel who pin their hope on him and see him as a means for the fulfillment of their wishes and plans. Enoch Emery, who meets Hazel for the first time at a street event advertising an automatic potato peeler, singles him out as the only one of the crowd to whom the seller speaks directly. When he finds out from Hazel’s

⁷ The absurd as a “content” cannot be reduced to a theme or a set of themes; it influences the whole structure of a narrative.

⁸ Methods used against the inexorable logic of this paradox are explored by reverse psychology, which came up with several possible strategies, for example, strategic self-anticonformity, when people wishing to achieve something rely on “contradiction, negativity, or disagreeableness” from the targets of their interest, suggesting the very opposite of what they want to achieve (MacDonald, Nail, and Harper 2).

replies to the seller that he is not married and his mother died, he comes to the conclusion that a lonely person might need a friend, and decides to address him. Enoch's attempt at communication stems from the inborn desire of every human being for harmony, yet it is doomed from the start. Shlomo Giora Shoham, the author of *Society and the Absurd* (1974, revised and expanded edition 2006), claims that "effective interpersonal communication is so unlikely that it borders on the impossible" (102) because "no cognitive systems can be alike, or even similar, although the individuals may be exposed to the same source of stimuli" (106). Apart from the inadequacy of language as a communication tool, which results in the impossibility of people saying exactly what they mean, the recipients of messages filter them through their "biological, personality and culture factors" (104) and, finally, have them censored by their "defense mechanisms" that make the message as close as possible to what they wish to hear (104).

Under these circumstances, every dialogue splits into two monologues in which both speakers ignore the needs and expectations of their communication partners. In *Wise Blood*, O'Connor provides several examples of such dialogues. In one of them Hazel talks with Enoch but each of them is pursuing a different goal: Hazel wants to get from Enoch the address of Asa Hawkes, a blind preacher (later revealed as faking his blindness), while Enoch, working in the city zoo, needs Hazel to join his everyday ritual walk past cages containing animals, through a hotdog stand called the Frosty Bottle, to a museum where a shrunken mummy that he takes as a sacred object is on display:

"I'm looking for those people," Haze said. "I got to see that man. Did she [Sabbath Lily, Asa's daughter] tell you where they lived?"

"I got to show you this thing," Enoch said. "I got to show it to you, here, this afternoon. I got to." . . .

"Did she tell you where they live?" he said again.

" . . . I got to show you this thing, then I'll tell you." (49)

An even more radical example is Enoch's "dialogue" with a waitress at the Frosty Bottle, who hates Enoch's regular attempts at bonding to such an extent that, when he enters the hotdog stand with Hazel, she looks at him but her words are directed exclusively to his companion:

The woman strode over to where Haze was. "What you come in here with a son of a bitch like that for?" she shouted. "A nice quiet boy like you to come in here with a son of a bitch. You ought to mind the company you keep." . . . She sat down in a straight chair in front of Haze but facing Enoch, and folded her arms across her chest. "Ever' day," she said to Haze, looking at Enoch, "ever' day that son of a bitch comes in here." (51)

Unlike Hazel, Enoch acknowledges the absurdity of the world but, even though his life is full of failures, he tries to ignore it, "usually thinking of something else at the moment that Fate began drawing back her leg to kick him" (100). Bad luck becomes an inevitable necessity for him and his occasional attempts at reversing his fortune are, as in Hazel's case, only instinctive acts fueled by his "wise blood," which opposes reason. Enoch's communication lapses can serve as examples proving the Least Interest Principle, which,

according to Shoham, states that “the keener the interest we display in a certain objective in dyadic/social relationships, the less likely we are to attain it” (92); this principle is nothing other than a sociological rendering of the second major paradox of the absurd world.

Enoch, unlike Hazel, does grow into a real revolt against the paradoxes of the absurd world that keep him lonely and deprive him of having a friend or a spouse. Finding out that people would rather shake hands with a man in an ape suit who is a part of the promotional campaign for the film featuring *Gonga the gorilla*, he decides to use violence, steals the *Gonga* suit, and literally disappears in the animal fur. As a psychological strategy it is a good idea because communication, which is impossible in real-life circumstances, is manageable if it gets a less realistic frame of a game or a performance that creates a distance, or at least an illusion of it. The use of this strategy needs a much more mature person, though, a person who understands that it cannot be practiced everywhere but only in a controlled environment inhabited by people who have the same goal; but in such a case it is logically not a revolt.

The revolting Enoch is at first happy in the gorilla suit: “No gorilla in existence, whether in the jungles of Africa or California, or in New York City in the finest apartment in the world, was happier at that moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it” (112). But it changes after his first attempt at communication, in which he extends his hand toward a couple sitting on a rock; it ends in disaster, as, instead of winning a handshake, he only witnesses a panicked reaction from the two young people. Surprised, he sits down, watching “the uneven skyline of the city” (112), and subsequently leaves O’Connor’s novel for good. As Camus said, a revolt “is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (54); an important remark, as resignation opens a road to coming to terms with the absurd.

Another person who is irresistibly drawn to Hazel is Sabbath Lily. The fifteen-year-old girl has rich experience with paradoxes, as her father, who announced years earlier that he would blind himself in public, lost courage at the last moment, and even though the event was faithfully covered by the press, he has been wearing black glasses, pretending blindness, from that day on. Sabbath Lily’s major mistake is an incorrect estimate of Hazel’s motives, taking what he says at face value. When she decides to seduce Hazel, partly because she really likes him, partly because her father, planning to leave town, pushes her into finding a man who would feed her, she stylizes herself into a woman she thinks Hazel wishes for. What follows is an absurd battle between two personality types, which, according to Shoham, are based on paradoxes: people who want to separate themselves from other people are always in someone’s company to control those who threaten their peace, while those who crave “melting back . . . into the object” of their interest to achieve “the pantheistic togetherness” (84) are constantly repudiated by others and remain doomed to stay alone.

Sabbath Lily pretends to be a participant, who, in Shoham’s words, “tends to ‘adjust’ his perception” of people “to his preconceived plans of its manipulation” (93), even though she is by nature a typical separant, aiming at “overpowering or ‘swallowing’ the object” of her interest (84). Hazel is, on the other hand, a participant of a Sisyphian kind, who can only “achieve congruity by effacing and annihilating himself” (Shoham 84) but, before he blinds himself, he acts as a separant, tending “to twist the incoming normative information so that it fits his own internalized normative configuration” (94).

Initially, Sabbath Lily, the only true believer in Christ in the novel, tries to be as honest as possible. After voicing her fears that as a bastard she will not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven, and confessing that she is a virgin, who recently asked a newspaper advisor whether she should neck, or even “go the whole hog” (67) with boys, she tells him: “I can save you . . . I got a church in my heart where Jesus is King” (68).⁹ When Hazel explains to her that he believes “in a new kind of Jesus, . . . one that can’t waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he’s all man and ain’t got any God in him” (69), she counters with a parable of an evil old woman allergic to the good, who ends her life by suicide after her tortured grandchild presents vivid images of hell to her. When no reaction is forthcoming from Hazel, she changes her strategy and pretends to be depraved but this turns out to be a wrong decision.

Hazel feels that he should find a woman “not for the sake of the pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn’t believe in sin since he practiced what was called it” (62) and his choice of Sabbath Lily is supported by his desire to show her father, whom at that time he still considers a serious preacher of the gospel, that “he was in earnest when he said he preached The Church Without Christ” (62). His plan counts with the innocent Sabbath Lily but, because of his dislike of sex, the only thing that can arouse his interest is her claim that her father did not believe in Christ in his youth but then he started to (67). The absurd dialogue that follows echoes the parallel monologues Enoch Emery is involved in throughout the novel, with the same comic effect:

“Why don’t you turn down that dirt road?” . . .

“How did he come to believe? . . . What changed him into a preacher for Jesus?”

“I do like a dirt road, . . . particularly when it’s hilly like this one here. Why don’t we get out and sit under a tree where we could get better acquainted?”

. . . “Was he a very evil-seeming man before he came to believe, . . . or just part way evil-seeming?”

“All the way evil . . . How I like to walk in a field is barefooted” (68)

The impossibility of a true conversation leads Sabbath Lily to a series of desperate acts. Whenever there is a chance, she creeps into Hazel’s car or follows Hazel into his flat but, in accordance with the Least Interest Principle, this only deepens his unwillingness to spend time with her; in a proper separatist way, he “abandoned the notion of seducing her and tried to protect himself” (82). One evening, Sabbath Lily sneaks into Hazel’s bed in his absence and when he returns she tells him she has nowhere to go. Then she starts to take on the role of her fake immoral self—that it is not her true self is obvious from her “quick change of tone” (95): “I said look at those pee-can eyes and go crazy, girl! That innocent look don’t hide a thing, he’s just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and he don’t. Yes sir! . . . I like being that way, and I can teach you how to like it. Don’t you want to learn how to like it?” (95). Hazel’s reluctant, yet affirmative “Yeah” (95) is no victory for Sabbath Lily, though. While she wants to live a quiet family

⁹ The majority of early reviewers of *Wise Blood* refer to Sabbath Lily as a depraved, promiscuous, and occasionally even feeble-minded juvenile delinquent. See Scott and Streight 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15. Even one of the most thoughtful readers of *Wise Blood*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., writes in his otherwise excellent monograph that Sabbath Lily is “given entirely to sense and pleasure, with no concern for any higher law or spiritual fulfillment” (106).

life, Hazel's only desire is to run away, even more so after he destroys the shrunken mummy he has snatched from Sabbath Lily's hands, the one which Enoch stole for him from the museum as a new "jesus." Paradoxically, in this scene both share the same illusion when they imagine that the mummy is a child, but Hazel behaves like an adult from one of Sabbath Lily's child-centered parables; even though his vision is blurred by his mother's prescription glasses, his violent reaction brings to the surface his evil streak, which he later repents.

Before this scene, which illustrates very well how tragic ingredients enter the comic base, both Sabbath Lily and Hazel believe in Christ; for her it is a choice, while his belief is based on negation. When Hazel flings the mummy out into the rain, Sabbath Lily shouts at him: "I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil, . . . I seen you wouldn't let nobody have nothing. I seen you were mean enough to slam a baby against a wall. I seen you wouldn't never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn't want nothing but Jesus!" (106-07). Sabbath Lily's understanding and exposure of Hazel's true nature shows that she came to the conclusion that it is not the belief in Jesus but the parting with him that makes a person better. From an ardent believer, such as O'Connor was all her life, the use of such a paradox is surprising but not unique: later, in her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," she made The Misfit, an escaped convict and murderer, admit that there is "no real pleasure in life" (153) after he abandoned his hope of seeing resurrection, which he would take as a final proof of God's existence, and therefore, as a resigned atheist, he had no further reason for killing people.¹⁰ Sabbath Lily's descent from what Shoham calls "the security of the tightly knit infallible dogmas" (77) that reconcile people's "struggles and ordeals" with their "physical surroundings and self" (76) would be a good initial step toward a better understanding of the absurd world and a rebellion against it, but before it can properly start, she is put away in a detention home and, like Enoch, never reappears in the book. The abrupt disappearance of both characters, besides signifying the futility of any revolt against the world's absurdity, also betrays O'Connor's reluctance, in the case of Sabbath Lily, to show her not bothering any more whether, as a bastard, she can get to heaven or not.

The person who calls the Welfare people on Sabbath Lily is Mrs. Flood, the landlady, who, against Hazel's will, turns into the first follower of his Church Without Christ and, as does Hazel himself with his enduring obsession with Jesus, becomes *de facto* an apostate of this church. When she meets Hazel, who asks for a room to rent in her boarding house, and hears from him that he is a preacher of the Church Without Christ, she is not surprised by the paradox the name includes, but only asks whether the church is Protestant or "something foreign" (60). Later, when Hazel answers her query about the reason why he is taking a bucket filled with quicklime and water to his room, she does not even get up from her rocking chair and only ruminates pragmatically about her own hypothetical reactions to the devastating event: unlike Hazel, she would never blind herself but "would simply have put her head in an oven or maybe have given herself too many painless sleeping pills and that would have been that. . . . If she had to be blind she would rather be dead" (119). At this moment, however, Mrs. Flood suddenly realizes that "when she was dead she would be blind too" (119), touching the central paradox of human existence: we will die one day, yet we behave for most of our lives as if we were immortal. Through the lucid realization of

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," see Arbeit 124-25.

her mortality, Mrs. Flood comes to an acknowledgment of the absurd world, from which she does not need any refuge, being “not religious or morbid, for which every day she thanked her stars” (119). At first she tries to revolt against the inevitable by covering its symptoms, making Hazel wear dark glasses in order not to see “the mess he made in his eye sockets” (120), but then she suddenly began “staring into his face as if she expected to see something she hadn’t seen before” (120).

Mrs. Flood’s leap into Camus’s third stage, benefiting from the absurd world, happens almost immediately but not in an expected manner. O’Connor characterizes Mrs. Flood, comically alluding to her name, as an extremely pragmatic and money-oriented person: “When she saw a stream of wealth, she followed it to its source and before long, it was not distinguishable from her own” (120). When she reads the sum on a government check that Hazel, as a veteran, receives every month, she raises his rent and board, and when she discovers money in his waste basket and finds out he calls it “left over” (124), she even plans to marry him for profit. Like Sabbath Lily before her, she nevertheless concludes that in spite of his anti-Jesus proclamations, he is an ardent believer. When she discovers broken glass and stones in his shoes and finds out he sleeps with barbed wire tied around his chest, she, “in the voice of High Sarcasm,” tells him: “You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church” (127), taking the “fine” Church Without Christ as her own. As her unanswered questions about Hazel’s motives cumulate, Mrs. Flood becomes obsessed, instead of money, with the mystery she thinks he must be hiding, the secret plan she believes he must have, and is willing to abandon money, give him absolute freedom, and follow him wherever he may go. Instead of a pragmatic benefit from the world’s absurdity, she finds a metaphysical benefit from it: “Who better to lead the blind than the blind, who knew what it was like?” Unlike Hazel, whose resignation leads to his death, Mrs. Flood becomes a living paradox, feeling “as if she were blocked at the entrance of something” and at the same time “as if she finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin” (131), growing into an absurd heroine, oscillating between disharmony and harmony. At that time, she becomes close to Camus’s Sisyphus in his fleeting moments of freedom (163).¹¹

The absurd highlights of O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* come in the passages where the former radio evangelist Hoover Shoats addresses the crowd. Shoats, even though he constantly has Jesus in his mouth, does not need the crutch of religion to escape from the absurd world. Through Shoats, O’Connor reveals the methods of non-violent brainwashing, widely used by politicians all over the world, salesmen of all kinds, and preachers of all denominations. Shoats is a perfect manipulator, a populist whose speeches are so universal that hardly anyone can disagree with them: “Why, friend, . . . not to have a friend in the world is just about the most miserable and lonesome thing that can happen to a man or woman!” (85). But he also knows that to accept the clichés, people need to receive them disguised as a personal experience: “And that’s the way it was with me. I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely. Not even my own dear old mother loved me . . .” (85). Then not only are people willing to follow him, but they also agree to pay him one dollar to

¹¹ My interpretation goes against Spivey’s understanding of Mrs. Flood as “a final symbol of the triumph of materialism over the attempts of those with spiritual callings” (119) and problematizes the endeavors of some of the scholars who take her as Hazel’s disciple. While I disagree with those who see her as a true convert to Christianity, I accept (even though with reservations) Richard Giannone’s opinion that she turns to “another Christian despite herself” (39).

become members of his Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, as he renamed Hazel's Church Without Christ. When Hazel raises the objection that membership of his church is free, Shoats immediately angles his words to meet his purpose:

"Listen!" Haze shouted. "It don't cost you any money to know the truth! You can't know it for money!"

"You hear what the Prophet says, friends," Onnie Jay Holy said, "a dollar is not too much to pay. No amount of money is too much to learn the truth!" (87)

Whenever people voice a different opinion or start a discussion, Shoats seemingly agrees with them but at the same time he immediately silences them:

"Do you know what it's like not to have a friend in the world?"

"It ain't no worsen havinum that would put a knife in your back when you wasn't looking," the older man said, barely parting his lips.

"Friend, you said a mouthful when you said that. . . . If we had time, I would have you repeat that just so ever'body could hear it like I did." (84)

Unlike Hazel Motes, who offers people only unpleasant questions, cries, and threats, Shoats harmonizes the disharmonious world and offers a simple system without taking into account the fact that in such a world no system can work for long. People accept his new church because "it's nothing foreign connected with it. You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it. No jokers in the deck, friends" (86). Shoats knows that nobody will ask why they should convert to a new church if it shares all their old beliefs and brings nothing new, and that they will even pay for it. It is Shoats and Mrs. Flood who are the real absurd heroes in the novel, those who came to understand the absurd world and now are cashing in on that knowledge. Shoats chooses a pragmatic, monetary profit, while Mrs. Flood grows out of her greed to prefer a metaphysical reward.

Comic novels showing the absurd are rare birds in world literature. It is mainly because writers are not able to communicate with their readers any better than two randomly chosen people with each other—inner protective mechanisms in the human brain are always at work and we are not able to judge others except through our own experiences, fears, and desires. Camus's statement that there is "no absurd outside this world" (34) implies the only certainty authors and their readers can share: the absurd is here and people are in different stages of understanding it. In this context, Shoham warns that the full understanding of the world's absurdity cannot be acquired second-hand: "Identification with the normative conflict of fictional heroes and personalities in novels, . . . is abstract and insufficient"—it is necessary to *á*live through "direct experience of normative incongruities" (10). It also suggests that it is not possible to believe in the absurd and make it a new religion.

In this light it is logical that many literary scholars refused to accept that the episodic structure of *Wise Blood*, as well as the layout of the novel's characters, was a deliberate decision on the part of O'Connor and not the result of her inexperience or even incompetence. In her 1973 monograph, Martha Stephens accused O'Connor of having "a very meager understanding" of "the ordinary, unsaved, and unsanctified people of the world" (65), on the basis that her characters are "hideous and ridiculous; they are stupid, mean, and brutish" (52). Even those few who recognized the absurd in the novel did not

make the necessary next step and contented themselves with putting *Wise Blood* into a tragicomic box. For example, Ted R. Spivey, who considered O'Connor to be rather a mystic and shaman, and noted that "[v]ery little in O'Connor's vision seems sky-pointed" (103), correctly discovered in *Wise Blood* "a strange element of the absurd," which "causes the reader to have a strong awareness of the isolation of individuals who are caught up in social situations beyond their control" (107), but then he proposed to label the novel as tragicomedy, which would erase the crucial difference between the grotesque and the absurd.

O'Connor has not been recognized as a novelist of the absurd so far and it is high time to recognize her as one. This late recognition might bring attention to the structural differences between *Wise Blood* and her short stories, which show the absurd only sporadically, and especially her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, written after her turn to the grotesque.

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Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable: The Supernatural in Reynolds Price's *Love and Work*

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O! all Shakespeare perhaps is simply in this
That Hamlet converses freely with the Ghost.

Pasternak

Most of the fictions in which ghosts materialize belong to or rather form a definite subgenre whose narrative paradigms have been analyzed by recent critics.² Yet occasionally writers will employ the supernatural in ways that depart radically from the conventions of “the fantastic.” Reynolds Price conjures up apparitions in both *A Generous Man* (1966) and *Love and Work* (1968) yet neither novel can be thought of as in the same category as, say, Dickens’ “The Signalman” or James’ *The Turn of the Screw*. Indeed, both *A Generous Man* and *Love and Work* create their own laws, fictive and narrative. That, in the latter novel whose surface is realistic, whose protagonist has been considered “if not altogether autobiographical . . . manifestly the same kind of person as Price” (Hicks 17), the suspension of natural laws should have drawn so little comment from reviewers and critics is a measure of the writer’s success, of his “reasonable use of the unreasonable,” as Flannery O’Connor would have said (117). But the employment of ghosts in the story is one of those “specific mysteries offered by works of art” that insistently dare us to ask the question “Why?” (see Price, “Dodging Apples” 3).

This question finds an echo outside the text. When, in a conversation which he had with Price in 1966, Wallace Kaufman wanted to know whether the ghost who appeared to Milo in *A Generous Man* existed only in the boy’s head, Price unambiguously stated that “the curious stranger had both physical and spiritual reality, objective and subjective” and went on to discuss his own relation to the supernatural—briefly, he said, because it is difficult to do so “without sounding fishy in the extreme”:

I do strongly suspect, even avow the existence and presence of forms of reality quite beyond those forms which we encounter in our daily routines. And whether or not those forms do manifest themselves—ever, in observable, sensually perceptible ways—certainly there can be no question that the dead linger, most powerfully, in

¹ This essay was found in the Reynolds Price Papers, “Writings by others,” Box WO 13 of 16. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, North Carolina.

Professor Vauthier most probably wrote this article at the beginning or in the middle of the 1970s. As one of the notes suggests, she intended to explore Price’s work further. She published two articles on *A Long and Happy Life*—one referenced here, the other, “The ‘Circle in the Forest’: Fictional Space in Reynolds Price’s *A Long and Happy Life*,” appeared in the *Mississippi Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1975)—and also had in mind to analyze Price’s short fiction. When she passed away in 2004, many of her unpublished writings were lost but, fortunately, she had entrusted the present piece with Reynolds Price who included it in his papers.

² See Todorov; special issues of *Littérature* and *Recherches Anglaises et Américaines* both entitled “Le Fantastique”; and Bessière.

our lives; the meaningful dead, those people who by the time most men have reached the age of twenty-one stand as one's ancestors on the black side of death in relation to our present continuing lives. ("Conversation" 15-16)

And after quoting the example of Isaac Singer and James Agee, he concluded: "I do claim that the supernatural in the form of ghosts is still a possible, occasionally a necessary component of a serious novelist's vision" ("Conversation" 17). Even more clearly than *A Generous Man* to which, insofar as it can be called a romance, ghosts are in a sense more native, *Love and Work* makes good this claim of Price's, generally speaking, whereas in the earlier *A Long and Happy Life* (1962) he contended himself with what Peter Berger calls "signals of transcendence"—"phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our 'natural' reality but that appear to point beyond that reality" (53)³—in the later novels he employs spirits directly to introduce the supernatural as a meaningful reality.

In truth, the ghosts of *Love and Work* intrude upon the hero—and the reader—quite unexpectedly. For the greatest part of the narration the novel naturalizes, as it were, the numinous in the shape of dreams, outcroppings of the unconscious, visions which the protagonist knows to be "in his head, of course." And although the specter of death haunts the novel from its very first paragraph, revelation of the occult only comes with the final pages.

Nor is the hero, Thomas Eborn, a man specially accessible to things unearthly. A college professor who has published some fiction, he is engaged in writing a novel while drifting apart from his wife of seven years. The action begins with his refusal to be interrupted from his present work—significantly an essay on work—to take a phone call from his widowed mother. Out of guilt and apprehension aroused by a dream he had the night before, he drives to the nearby town where she lives. Finding the house empty, he rummages through her things, reads with disapproval an old letter of his father's and his mother's diary, kept during the last days of her husband's life: "Why had she dragged out these ancient lies now to block her path, when debris enough lay between her and death?—'brave and sweet,' 'you are mine, I am yours'?" (*Love and Work* 28). Soon a neighbor, Ida Nolan, tells him his mother has been rushed to the hospital. When she dies, out of his sight, from the ruptured aneurysm that had been threatening her life for years, her death seems the realization of his dream, in which he was incapable of assisting friends involved in a car-accident and taken to the hospital. Back home, he finishes off the essay, then, falling asleep, has another dream—of three vans driving into his yard, of children milling about and being taken away by his parents, "sure-footed, unblinking" while he sobs "abandoned, violated" (43). On Jane's return, he keeps his loss to himself, lets her feed him (and, we shall learn later, makes love to her). What was the mother's news, which she refused to convey to her daughter-in-law, remains unknown.

Before he can be entirely freed by this death, Eborn has to "clear" his parents' house. Tearing a shoot of ivy that has entered through a crack in the wall, he feels "exultant, his throat free from all the hands that had held it" (55). With the family papers, which contain "no secrets, of course" (55) yet coil to become "his own lethal past" (58), he deals even more ruthlessly. He burns them in the yard. "A simplifying fire." He locks the house "now safe" and leaves "a lighter man, stripped by force of will, scraped clean as a keel, aimed for

³ For "signals of transcendence" in *A Long and Happy Life*, see Vauthier.

his work" (59). But as he drives with "the entire centerpiece of his novel" pleasurably filling his mind, he comes across a wrecked car. Afraid to hurt further the injured boy behind the wheel, he stands helplessly by until a patrolman arrives in three minutes. Though nothing indicates that he could have saved the boy, he thinks "'I have stood and let him die. All my dreams are true. They do not fail'" (64); and he feels "'trapped again'" (69). Later that day his mood turns to "clenched terror" and he escapes from his wife and from the couple they have invited to dinner, to the safety of his bed. The wreck he sees as an "emblem of [his] own cruel waste": "In an ashcan fire I destroyed all I had of my parents' lives, denied them the dignity of their passions. The boy is my parents, may also be me. Mistakes can be permanent. Perhaps I've destroyed what cannot regrow; hacked all of us—Father, Mother, me and therefore Jane—loose from our only tether, the past; our proofs of a constant need and use for love, however less strong, less lasting than our skins the love must be" (74). "In his head" he has a vision of his parents "gaunt, mainly eyes and mouths": they are "the hungry dead." Remembering Odysseus' meeting with his mother in Hell—and quoting Homer to himself—he thinks it is "a fatal error in the truth of the scene that the dead should speak for sheep's blood only." What they want is "heart's blood," his own. "But how, short of literally cutting his throat?—and then what use would the dead's news be? (Most of the world's rites and monuments were efforts at answers—food for the dead, so the dead would speak. Speak of what?—their knowledge, plan for our future, hold on our present, which they easily steer)" (75).

A way out seems to offer itself when the poem, "piercing" but "thin" which a friend has composed on the occasion of Mrs Eborn's death, prompts Thomas to prove that "[his] mother's life was larger than this," providing the germ for a novel that "will anchor his own flapping life, repair his parents' he had tried to destroy," that will be "food for the dead so the dead might speak, be spoken to" (79). Out of this new awareness, he is even able to see his wife "steadily"—"a girl not sure she was not alone" (79). But a "blockage of tenderness" prevents him from reaching to her although he knows that she has been deeply hurt, the day before, to discover that his conception of work denied all value to hers. Immersing himself in the story of his young parents' courtship, he writes a score of pages, "as if transcribing not inventing at all." But when he reads them to Jane, her response is shattering: to her it is all "easy lies." His reaction would again be flight, but before he can leave for a drive, he has to take a phone call from Ida Nolan, who tells him there is a light on over at his parents' house.

When he and Jane go and investigate the situation, it turns out that the housebreakers have taken nothing away, have rather added an excremental memento of their own. Ida, dismissing this as "just a coincidence, a bad boy or two that needs a good smack," tells who she thinks the visitors are—Eborn's parents. Seeing Thomas' incredulity, she reveals to him his mother's "secret." On the night before her death, Lou Eborn saw her long-dead husband sitting in his chair. "Sandbagged," the hero does not "doubt Ida's truthfulness, or deeper beyond his mother's truth" (142). The next minute in his turn, he sees his parents standing in a corner of their kitchen.

Partly because the apparitions are perceived on two occasions by two different people, partly because the hero easily accepts the reality of his ghosts, the story asks for the reader's credence. It does not involve him in that fascinating hesitation as to the rationality/irrationality of the uncanny event which constitutes the essence of the fantastic. The text programs the "willing suspension of disbelief" which is the effect of fiction in

general not, it would seem, “the intellectual uncertainty” of which Freud spoke when discussing the *Unheimliche*.

Consequently, the reader must be concerned not with the nature of Eborn’s encounter but with the meaning or rather the meanings it assumes for him. For the sight of his parents is not a simple perception but a complex experience. In a first phase, he sees his parents dimly as “looking to him,” which implies that they have a “message” for him, “delivered at last.” The message he interprets as corroboration. “What he’d already known—the hungry dead—and worked to help” (142-43). It is a confirmation of his role as writer-savior (and indirectly a rebuke to the devastating comment of the destructive wife): “So his work, his *knowledge*, was true not lies. That at least could continue. He could not keep off a smile. It spread” (143). The dead need him and their need justifies him. In a second phase he becomes aware of the room filling. “Filling with what? Light. Theirs. There, pumping from them like arterial blood till they showed quite clearly, in their perfect youth, years before his birth. He still smiled—to be their one product, their hope, the agent now of their rehabilitation.” He still sees them in their relation to himself. But the reader, for his part, becomes more distant from the character, prepared to give another interpretation to what is taking place. Because *he* perceives the parents as bleeding light/life, not as feeding on blood, as the hungry dead are expected to. Because he is troubled by the hero’s conception of himself as the agent of their rehabilitation. The word, while chiming in with some of Tom’s previous thoughts, for instance that he “must save them somehow” (53), brings out more clearly that the older Eborn must not only be redeemed from time, oblivion, but must be restored to something, whatever we call it, good name or value, of which they were only deprived in their son’s judgment. In fact, we may be tempted at first to read their apparition, which guarantees some existence beyond life as we know it, as a sign of hope, of restoration for *him*. May not they have come back to disapprove his belief that love is “less lasting than our skins” (74) and to show that it can be transfigured? But the final revelation is more searing than we anticipated:

But they did not smile. Nor look at him. They do not move! He sees that, always, from the first, they have faced one another only, static in ecstasy, sealed in their needlessness, one another’s goal—won at last and for good. Oh won at the start—gift not reward. Only *light* moves—their effortless product, only product; bilges around him, his eyes, cracked lips. He must shut against it. His eyes, lips refuse—even ears; it is audible the roar of light. He knows he must stand in it all his life—and, worse, beyond—in full sight of them, their atrocious joy; but separate, lidless, scalding in their trail. He thinks that he speaks the worst he knows, means to say aloud to the bursting room, “The dead have their own lives.” (143)

While his novel, his precious product, was meant to rescue his parents whose lives were “now at his mercy” (79),⁴ he discovers that they are “sealed in their needlessness.” In their

⁴ *Love and Work* takes as its subject, and plays on, the creator’s desire to be *causa sui*, to become independent from his genitors: “L’artiste, en s’identifiant à ses personnages, dont il se sent le père, par identification à son propre père, devient lui-même son propre père, indépendant de ses géniteurs; tout se passe comme si dans sa transcription d’une scène originaire, l’artiste voulait nier la scène primitive: la mémoire de l’art vise à raturer la présence réelle du père, elle est originairement mensongère parce qu’elle dissimule un meurtre. Or être à soi-même son propre père n’est-ce pas vouloir en dernière analyse, donner

new dimension, he is no longer even their product, since only light is; he is superfluous, additional, “separate.” He thought himself the master of words and of desire, the namer at the creative center of the universe, however threatened he might occasionally feel (as when the phone’s ringing is the “threat to be flung again, whirled at the sick circumference of loss” [109]). He now discovers himself *eccentric*, expelled from the radiating focus, his identity dissolving. His dependence on his parents, which he had attempted to project as their dependence on him, is at once unmasked and doomed to eternal frustration. Not doubting the reality of his dead, Thomas acts out his name by doubting himself, his existence as a self-autonomous and free from the parental images. The overall meaning of his experience—to state it tentatively—is that our world is larger than we suspect and awareness of the supernatural can radically alter our perspectives and sense of proportions.

Unexpected as it is at the level of the action, the apparition nevertheless enters into resonance with a number of narrative and thematic elements. Obviously, the ending reverberates the motif sounded by the epigraph. Unmistakably—unobtrusively, too, because we tend to pay little attention to these texts outside the text—the epigraph from *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* foreshadows the return of the dead, though not necessarily in terms of the supernatural: the parent couple, who have lovingly lain in one another’s arms, are invoked as the bridge which spans the abyss and enables the dead to come back to us; a blessing is called on their “love work.” The Eborns, at the end, leave the bridge, “their bridge,” on which an old photograph has fixed them, forever young (81); they cross the bridge that overarches the gulf of death but then the myth turns sour since their offspring finds the sight of their joy “atrocious.” Moreover, the return of the parents is to some extent the actualization of Eborn’s second dream when he saw them leading off a troop of children, confident and oblivious of him (43). And had not Thomas, while consciously wanting to free himself from the burdensome past, been all the time looking for his parents—until they materialize? On one occasion, Tom takes a metaphor of Jane’s literally; speaking of woman’s work which is “for dying things,” Jane tells her husband: “‘Look at your mother—’ He actually looked toward the dimly-lit door. Open door, empty” (51). This empty space in the doorway where an apparition is (almost) expected creates in the narrative a vacuum which is going—surprisingly? predictably?—to be filled at the end. Besides the manifestation also transposes the imaginary visions, quite “natural” though they lapse into the surrealistic, which Eborn has of his parents. Once he sees them “locked to a bed, their joined hips hacking out signals of love as they worked to unite their lovely skins; but as he watched and they worked on happily sure of success, he saw what they could not—their skins deserting, crusting, then rapidly shrinking inwards till they both swung suspended, dry husks still pumping, though they touched nowhere till at last they dissolved into separate directions and only stains remained” (53). Then, as—to a lesser extent in the other vision (74)—his imagination still works towards his own subconscious purposes—to destroy the parents’ love, to separate them, empty them, annihilate them. But the “pumping” “dry husks” of the vision will become the ghosts regenerating from murky forms to glorious bodies, “pumping” light like arterial blood with reckless generosity.

un enfant à sa mère, l’œuvre d’art?” (Kofman 170). In *Love and Work* the combinatorial possibilities of the universal *donnée* are greatly increased by the fact that the hero is himself a novelist and the novel within the novel is about his parents. The subject cannot be pursued here but we can say that *Love and Work* dizzyingly reflects and refracts the desire to write, which is “au fond désir impossible d’écrire sur le désir impossible” (Mannoni 105).

In addition, the climax echoes the allusion to Odysseus' encounter with his mother and Circe's instructions for questioning the dead which Tom recites to himself (75). Or rather the ending enters into relation not only with the literary scene but with the fictive experience which the quoted scene originates. And the knot that ties all these threads is not easily entangled. Troubled by the Greek legend and the implications he reads into it, Thomas takes it metaphorically when he decides to *evoke* the dead, to make them talk, give them the life of his words, thus indeed rediscovering for himself the fundamental connection that exists between food and language. (And characteristically, the metastory relies much more heavily than the framing story on reported discourse.) Seeing his parents "in their starved humiliation" can cause no anxiety; the horror, on the contrary, proceeds from the realization that "the dead have their own lives" and want nothing more from the living. But we have to take this confrontation with the Greek myth both metaphorically—though to us the metaphor may have a somewhat different meaning—and metonymically, as a narrative figure caught in the narrational mesh of contiguity, extending and modifying previous developments and likely to generate new ones. In this respect, the episode reworks the theme of loss and death in two ways: it stresses that rites have indeed been established to speak to the dead and it superimposes on the destructive impulses of the living—Eborn's burning "all he had of his parents' lives," his regression to magic thinking, his "'I am willing these deaths, and my will is obeyed'" (69)—the idea that the dead may actually claim "heart's blood." So the narrative unit, which is placed roughly in the middle of the novel, casts a long shadow over the fourth book. (The third is devoted to the inset story, its construction and swift destruction by Jane's comments.) This shadow emphasizes the suggestions of a descent into hell, which the scene builds in many other ways, but also throws into relief the special opacity of the moment. Even when faced with Eborn's despair, we wonder: Is that really all? For we dimly apprehend a secret event which escapes the consciousness of Thomas, though it cannot fail to affect it.

Of course, at this point, the use of the uncanny also comes into play. For the supernatural does not merely function thematically as a self-reflexive gesture: it also directs attention to the shape of the story, retroactively designating its inner design. Until then we thought we were made to witness the random sequence of events during a few weeks of the hero's life and if the weeks seemed crucial, bringing about death, estrangement, moments of creative power and intense self-searching, the importance was in the events narrated and not in their order. But with Ida's revelation of what was hidden, we understand that the story begins with the mother's "ungiven message," ungiven because untaken, unwanted by the son. And the message concerns, *is*, the father's apparition; it sends us back to the death of the father, whose absence/presence is what gives the narration its secret shape. When we hear about his materialization, everything falls into a pattern.

The unfrightening appearance of Todd Eborn is, as Ida points out to Lou Eborn who agrees, "a message from God," and, as she tells Tom Eborn, "a warning," "a call" which Lou Eborn could not refuse (142). Having received the warning, she dies; nor is her death unexpected by her son who had also been forewarned in his first dream—"approximate knowledge, parallel, metaphor." "The cave of dreams and the cave of the dead are the same cave," says Norman O. Brown after Geza Roheim, "Ghosts are dreams, and dreams are ghosts: shades, *umbræ*" (46). To this cave Tom returns by many paths: on the afternoon of his mother's death, he has a very curious malaise:

[H]e quickly sifted downwards toward sleep—two layers, three—then was met by something rising, stronger, which bore him with it to full consciousness. But he kept eyes shut through a moment of annoyance, then plunged down again. A solid lake—no entry, no dent. Eyes open, still prone, he felt the room fill with pressure around him. Walls, windows, door seemed instantly sealed; and the space (in which he was now mere clutter) was pumped full in regular strokes, as by a heart. Full of what?—he rose to his elbows to see.

Nothing of course. Hot sun slanted through the window as before. No paper stirred.

He looked to his arm—the curled hairs there were still as wire. Yet all his softness bore the brunt—the pit of his throat, groins, his temples, eardrums. He opened his mouth to draw a deep breath; and warm air rammed in—a solid column—before he had even begun to inhale. . . . “I must open the door,” he thought; then “Can I move?” He carefully planned to swing his legs from couch to floor; and when they obeyed and raised him, slightly tottering, he went in quick relief to the door, opened it outward and—grateful—felt the room behind him subside. (41-42)

Whatever its physical causes—traumatic shock, mild heart attack—the experience has a compelling ambiguity. Undoubtedly it connotes birth, with the *solid lake*, the rhythmic pressure, the air ramming into the hero’s throat. . . . But a few ominous notes (and signally that he feels superfetatory—“mere clutter”) remind us that the desire to go back to the place of origins is under the sway of the death-instinct. The part of this “birth” in the travail of the mourning process is not made any clearer when it is immediately followed by the second dream which with three vans, its maggots, tells not only of loss but of violation for the subject, warns of future death. Later, the protagonist ties up this dream with the first, when he sees in the boy’s fatal crash, one more proof that all his dreams are true. We may at first dismiss his reaction and the link established between dream and reality as a psychological clue—further evidence of his guilt feelings. But is not the boy’s death, or rather Eborn’s response to it, a screen which masks to character and reader alike another link, another hint that the dreams really do signify? Not that Thomas is without an inkling of what is involved. “The boy,” he thinks, “is my parents, may also be me.” But he is thinking emblematically. The ensuing vision of his parents will be imaginary, his remembering Odysseus an attempt to distance himself from his problem as well as to face it. The real test is still to come.

The phone call from Ida is experienced by him as a repetition but he does not know of what: “‘Long distance for you.’ ‘Again?’ he said, not knowing what he meant. ‘Who is it?’ ‘Personal,’ she said, ‘again’” (109). For the reader, made wiser after the event and rehearsing the novel in his head, the repetition is like a bell.⁵ The first pattern, dream/apparition—phone call—death—ambiguous birth, is being reproduced. Starting from the second dream, misleading us with the detour of the strange boy’s death, a

⁵ *Love and Work* builds up an elaborate system of parallels, duplications, reversals. Though the structural aspect of the narration is without the scope of this essay, one must however stress the importance of repetition in a story, concerned with the workings of the subconscious and with ghosts, whose hero is a double (however different) of the authorial *persona*.

duplication of events unfolds with Ida's call, prompted assuredly not by direct sight of their visit—the light on, the door open.⁶ The displacement of the linear, empty order of the narration, the reorganization of the elements into a rhythmical, patterned order produce new meaning. Or should we say that we are tempted to project a different signification on the supernatural phenomenon? For in terms of the pattern, to see a ghost is not immaterial. Just as in the fiction the mother has a message to deliver which being ungiven becomes her "secret"—but whose reception can only be delayed—just so the narration holds a signification which can be perceived or not at the end of the reading process, a secret at once hidden and revealed, the secret of the universal Father, Death.

To be sure, the hero does not seem to realize that he, too, has been served the final summons, the ultimate "message," although his wish, only a few moments before, as he sat on his mother's bed, was "never to move, to finish here, now" (117). But this unawareness is all according to the best psychological authorities who tell us that one cannot truly experience one's own death, and to the best rules of the fictional game, the reader being made to face or evade the meaning of the event, as he pleases (or fears). Because the narrative focus is internalized, we are trapped in the limited vision of the protagonist, left to puzzle over the traces of what is taking place. "By then, in the silence, Jane and Ida had looked—what was on his face?—They moved with help toward him. But he waved them back, his hand a slow oar in the hot thick air. The room was filling, being filled, in strokes. Again. He remembered the day of her death, his nap, the pressed room" (143). No more than he can we know what was on his face—beyond his smile. But *we* can seize on the metaphor of the slow oar and extend it to the image of Charon's boat. Or we can reduce the strokes that fill the room to the beating of his heart, to the signs of a stroke, a *second* attack. We can compare and contrast the pressed room of the birth scene, in which he was already dwindling to mere clutter but from which he could finally escape, to the "bursting room" of the end. We can hear the silence when Thomas thinks he speaks "the worst he knows." And we can be alert to the suggestions of the shift in tenses. The past of the narration suddenly metamorphoses into a present. (The tense, let it be noted, of the metastory inventing the dead Eborn's courtship.) The effect of this shift is not to "presentify" the action, bring it closer to us, but on the contrary to remove it from us, to arrest it in a timeless, *repeatable* time. The preterit conveyed the onward flow of things, the drawing nearer to the end, to death. The preterit *was* flux. The present is stasis, tableau. We are locked in our spectator's role but what is it we are given to see? Death is more present than it ever was in the narrated action but does it ever come? With the use of the perfect tense, the last line recreates a continuing time. And paradoxically it suspends the breaths of three persons suppressing the vital rhythm of inhalation/exhalation—whereas the ghosts are still pulsating with (sexual?) rhythm; in other words, it reintroduces death. "The room, though, is still. *No one has breathed*" (143, emphasis added). Was Eborn's response to the sight of the ghosts only an instantaneous flash of intuition, a fulgurant descent into the inferno of the heart? The loss, the vacuum against which the hero so carefully protected himself with his walls and his words suddenly confronts *us* in the silence on which the novel concludes—or opens. For the book finishes but the story does not finish: it freezes. We remain at the edge of it, of the scene, of time. We can only go back again

⁶ The supposition that the light was turned on by the housebreaker at the time when Ida saw it must be excluded since the "turd" is "dry," its smell "dead."

and again to the last paragraph, straining to solve its enigma, caught in the fascination of its abiding present, in the terrible spell of death.

Thus, while we readily give credence to the existence of the ghosts, we are left in doubt as to that of the hero. Reynolds Price renounced one of the effects of the fantastic—the upsetting of intellectual certainty as to the reality of the uncanny—only to displace it. (And this displacement is one of the reasons why we are seduced into accepting the existence of the ghosts: that the reality of the subject should be called into question is of more immediate, more ominous concern to us.) Our easy assumptions about life and death are in any case undermined. And whether life-in-death is mirrored by death-in-life or is counterpointed by deathless hell, what matters is our ability to accept the ambiguity of the climax, to exercise, in our role as readers, Keats’ “Negative Capability” of which Eborn speaks to his students: “*that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason*” (46, italics in the original). (The only thing which we can be sure of is that the experience of utter dereliction, of being at once excluded from what one has desired to see and condemned to have one’s voyeuristic desires eternally satisfied in lidless contemplation is in truth infernal torment and places the hero among those lost souls on whose fate Dante and D. G. Rossetti, among others, have reported.⁷) Death is the great reality/unreality which has been glimmering throughout, never more haunting than when unnamed, inscribed from the beginning in the name of the father—Todd Eborn. “Todd with a double d,” as another fictional Todd would say, “Todd is almost Tod—that is, almost death—” (Barth 16).⁸ Almost death, here too, but also all of life. The father’s name is emblematic of man’s fate, as indeed it is the role of the father to subsume life for the son. Todd Eborn, born for death. Doubly dead in his first name and his last, suggestive of “the undiscovered country from whose bourn/No traveler returns.” Dead to be reborn in his son’s fiction and/or be killed in his speech, in his “easy lies.” But also “not born for death”—dead to be not-dead. Doubly named to revert the normal cycle (since in German “Born” means spring, fountain, to go from death to (re)birth), to reappear with

⁷ There is no need to document what the motifs of burning, separation, and eternal repetition as hell can owe to Dante. It is more curious to note the parallels, verbal, situational and thematic between *Love and Work* and D.G. Rossetti’s sonnet “Inclusiveness”:

What man has bent o’er his son’s sleep, to brood
How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—
Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,
Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?

May not this ancient room thou sitt’st in dwell
In separate living souls for joy or pain?
Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;
And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell. (161)

⁸ Nor is John Barth’s example my only justification for this playing on connotations of the character’s name. First, as the epigraph in the original and a German quotation make clear, Price cannot be ignorant of German and of the denotation of *Tod*. Secondly, Price has commented on the “ancient and continuing magic of names,” adding “[f]ew readers, even editors, understand the importance of titles and names to most writers” (“News from the Mineshaft” 112). I have left aside here the question of the title which I hope to take up on another occasion.

Lou Attwater of the regenerative name in their apparition—both “static in ecstasy,” restored to “the perfect youth”—Eros triumphs of Thanatos, to the confusion of the son, the misguided Odysseus, who in his fight against loss and time has given in to Thanatos and let him overcome Eros.

The intrusion of the supernatural is what makes this new perception possible not only for the hero brought to a burning realization of his aloneness but for the reader whirled into a new novelistic dimension. The supernatural ending in a sense answers the question which Tom asks the nurse about his dying mother: “Where now?” (34); in the context it might pass unnoticed since it seems to refer simply to the hospital room into which the patient is being taken. But it is difficult not to hear in the question an echo of Stephen Dedalus’ query about his mother (Joyce 16),⁹ all the more so since *Love and Work* is centered on Odysseus’ propitiation of his dead mother, “Where now?” asks Stephen Dedalus/Thomas Eborn/the reader. Here—now—and forever and ever, says the novel in defiance (or should one say seeming defiance because the text is after all its own and only reality) of the physical laws. But not in defiance of the laws of the Unconscious. The return of the Mother is also the return of the Father, demonstrating the impossibility of what was all along at stake: the return of the Mother, the recuperation of the Mother’s body, the unreasonable, all-powerful desire to be the *tertium aliud* at the place of origins to which no traveler returns.¹⁰ (E)born irremediably are Thomas, Todd and the shadowy Jim who make up the three-generation pattern in the genealogical myth of *Love and Work*. We can only die/not-die; birth is irreversible, though death shall have no dominion. The glimpse of a larger, mysterious world beyond ours does not detract from the significance of this life and it highlights the failure of Thomas Eborn. Having failed to establish an autonomous relation to his parents, to make in depth connections with his wife and his friends, he cannot make of his work, however much he loves it, a work of love, he cannot be the bridge over which the dead will “come back.” One might consider that he does not succeed in playing such a role because he does not continue the biological chain of love, he and Jane being childless. But such an interpretation is, I think, explicitly challenged in the text, when Ida advises the young Eborns, to “make life,” which, she adds, does not mean having a child, since “people come in pairs, not three or five” (137). Ida’s words, of course, do not represent the whole truth. The failure of Eborn, in fact, suggests that patterns of life ought to be triangular: what condemns the hero is his incapacity to make his work the metaphorical child born out of a meaningful give-and-take relationship with Jane (or Ted or any of his other friends.)¹¹

⁹ If the *Odyssey* is one of the explicit frames of reference of *Love and Work*, *Ulysses* is an implicit one. Among the Joycean strands of the variegated intertextual warp across which Price passes his own unique woof, let us mention the threads which relate the two mothers: the illness of both and the feelings this stirs up in the sons, Lou Attwater’s surname summarizing, as it were, Joyce’s “bowl of bitter waters” and “glass of water,” her “few pins and beads” reminiscent of Mrs Dedalus’ “gaud of amber beads,” the former associated with a *Reader’s Digest* kind of motto the latter with a music hall refrain, the Eborn “debris” containing “no secrets” contrasting with Mrs D’s few relics “her secrets” and last but not least, the dream vision of Stephen: “In a dream, silently, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes. . .” (16).

¹⁰ As in all ghost stories, the *Unheimliche* is linked to the *Heimliche* the uncanny with the return of the repressed. See Freud.

¹¹ Let us note too that the failure of Thomas is not that of the author. Without going into an indiscreet rooting for autobiographical elements in the text, one can see in *Love and Work* not only an investigation into the problems of art versus life, art and love, but also a tribute to Parents (Whose?—Eborn’s? Price’s? Perhaps ours?) for all it reveals of the ambivalence of familial ties.

No matter what we call his condition, “this is hell nor are [we] out of it.” For we are confronted with our own self-centeredness and self-isolation, and our fears of loss, abandonment, death.¹² But somber as the novel is—and cold with the coldness of its protagonist, it achieves some sort of dark radiance through its reliance on the epiphany of a transfigured world, on the mystery of absence/presence. Lou Attwater and Todd Eborn appear literally in a new light: their lives may have been limited, thwarted, clouded with sentimental pieties and founded, as all lives are, on delusions; yet they had enough strength, *made* enough truth in their relationship to become witness to the timelessness of love. If after the hero, we tended to see them as pitiful, we now see them glorified. Like angels in Peter Berger’s thought, the supernatural, in the last analysis, functions here “to signal God’s concern for this world both in judgment and in redemption” (95). Reynolds Price’s ghosts however remain silent. Whether to converse with them or not is the reasonable possibility which *Love and Work* creates for us.

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¹² In his critical essays, Reynolds Price has insisted that works of art “come into existence in order to change something” (“Dodging Apples” 4); the reader of *A Generous Man* is asked “You realize of course that it [the novel] means to change your life?” (“New from the Mineshaft” 122). If *Love and Work* makes us want to change our lives, it is perhaps *more immediately* because of its delicate and ruthless probing into the relationship of love and work which calls into question our whole self, our way of being in the world (and no less this my way of relating to the novel). But as we all know in this post-Freudian age, love and work have everything to do with death and the reticulation of the three into the body of the novel would deserve careful examination.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and the Ghosts of Reconstruction

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"They shoot the white girl first" is the unsettling opening sentence of Toni Morrison's 1997 novel *Paradise*—a sentence that immediately arrests the reader's attention because, as Morrison herself asserts in her 2017 book *The Origin of Others*, that brutal opening "signals race, purity, and violence" (Morrison, *The Origin of Others* 65). That sentence reveals Morrison's own utopian aim of "reimagining paradise" as well as "disrupt[ing] racial discourse," while scrutinizing the lures and limits of utopian thinking, from John Winthrop's "city set upon a hill" to the all-black Oklahoma and Kansas towns founded amid Reconstruction's failures and the aftermath of racial violence accompanying those failures (qtd. in Dalsgard 244; Morrison, Foreword, *Paradise* xiii). The novel's opening sentence underscores as well the growing conflict between an improvised, lawless community of women, referred to as the Convent, whose own racial identities remain markedly unspecified throughout the novel, and the proud, self-consciously black towns of Haven and Ruby established as oases of safety in an era of racial turmoil and violence. Above all, that opening sentence reveals that the story of *Paradise*—evoking two all-black communities fiercely dedicated to their ideals of racial purity and community, as well as the historical grievances prompting those ideals of purity—is very much "a cautionary tale," in Morrison's words, one that reveals that even utopias with the best of intentions can replicate both the violence of exclusiveness and the entrapment of history from which utopias have always yearned to escape (qtd. in Jessee 85).

In an interview with James Marcus, Morrison frankly acknowledged her hesitations about the grand ambitions of utopia. The working title of the novel, she told Marcus, was actually "War"—in part because the novel, the third in a trilogy about the African Diaspora including *Beloved* and *Jazz*, is set against the turbulent backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s (Mayberry 223). "I was interested," she told Marcus, "in the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise. Our view of Paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people—chosen by God, that is. Which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people. That's the nature of Paradise: it's really defined by who is *not* there as well as who is" (Morrison, "This Side of Paradise").

Morrison discovered something of the conflicts and hidden histories of those black utopian towns founded in the late nineteenth century while researching collected primary and secondary accounts of African American life eventually published in *The Black Book* (Morrison, Foreword xii). Among the towns she discovered were some thirty all-black communities built in Kansas and Oklahoma, including Nicodemus, Kansas, in 1877-1878, Langston City in the Oklahoma Territory in 1890, and Boley in Indian territory in 1904 (Morrison, Foreword xii; Jessee, 83). Encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862, African Americans quadrupled their population in the territories over the second half of the nineteenth century, counting among a total of 80,000 migrants some 19,000 freed people

who had been enslaved by Native communities. Most of these new westerners had fled former Confederate states, especially after the Freedmen's Bureau was disbanded, followed by economic depression and accelerating anti-black violence (Jessee 83). By and large, these were migrants streaming into Kansas and Oklahoma who contributed to the Exoduster movement in the late 1870s and 1880s, aspiring homesteaders who had fled the failures of Reconstruction and the violence of its dismantling "in search of the sort of social freedoms promised them by the Emancipation Proclamation," as Holly Flint has argued (586).

In the Foreword of *Paradise*, Morrison notes that she was taken aback by the many black newspapers frankly declaring to potential migrants, "Come Prepared or Not at All" (Morrison, Foreword xii). That warning, coupled with old photographs of light-skinned town leaders, made Morrison wonder if even these latter-day utopian experiments were open only to a privileged few and just how those who were turned away would respond to new black towns replicating white racism (Morrison, Foreword xii and xiii). Those speculations in turn led Morrison to explore the literary possibilities of what she calls in *The Origins of Others*, "a reverse dystopia—a deepening of the definition of 'black' and a search for its purity as defiance against the eugenics of 'white' purity and especially the 'Come Prepared or Not at All' rule which would exclude many, many poor blacks escaping with nothing on their backs" (64).

What Morrison finds particularly worrisome about utopian exclusiveness in general—and about those utopian all-black towns in particular—are the injuries and wounds motivating searches for purity and paradise, the enshrinement of those injuries in idealized histories, and the multiple erasures required to maintain those histories. Her own utopian dwellers define themselves as refugees from the violence and demise of Reconstruction's end and the colorism of other black communities in Oklahoma. For the events of *Paradise*, set between 1965 and the early 1970s and beginning and ending with the attack of the men of Ruby, Oklahoma, on that Convent of women described as "misfits and fugitives," are shaped by the humiliations faced nearly a century before by a group of seventy-nine ex-slaves from Louisiana and Mississippi journeying toward their own promised land, a community named Haven, founded in 1890 (Morrison, *The Origin of Others* 72). These are refugees from failed Reconstructions in Louisiana and Mississippi who trace their ancestry in the Deep South back to 1755, who never worked in white kitchens or nursed white children, and who helped govern and transform Louisiana and Mississippi from 1868 until 1875, when they were thrown out of office by whites. Their own exodus is led by Zechariah "Coffee" Morgan, known as Big Papa, modelled after Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, an ex-slave from Nashville who established the Edgefield Real Estate Homestead Association to encourage black homesteading in Kansas (Christian 587). Their story of that epic journey shapes the thoughts, values, and present-day actions of the inhabitants of the two utopian towns, Haven and Ruby, which emerged from their efforts, and none more so than those of Zechariah's grandson Steward Morgan, who continues the tradition of patriarchal leadership and who measures himself, his family, and his community by the stern patriarchal standards exemplified by Zechariah.

For Steward and his fellow residents of Ruby, founded in 1949 in the wake of Haven's perceived decline, the defining event of their ancestors' journey into Oklahoma territory is the ominously termed 'Disallowing,' a public disavowal/repudiation that occurred when Zechariah's exhausted band of pioneers seeking refuge and aid were denied shelter because of their dark skin by the lighter-skinned inhabitants of a previously established black

utopian town named Early, Oklahoma. As late as the 1970s, when Steward contemplates with satisfaction the land he owns, the town he oversees and bullies, and the security his leadership and wealth provide, that defining “humiliation did more than rankle” (95). As the narrator tells us: “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). The memory of “the Disallowing” haunts the individual and collective memories of Ruby, defines their sense of self and identity, articulates their fears and anxieties of outside threats and change, and ultimately determines the way the town’s history is shaped, told, and retold. Pondering that event, one of the characters considers its lasting impact:

Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. (189)

Because of “the Disallowing,” Zechariah and his descendants tell the story of their repudiation, exclusion, and retreat from the outside world over and over again, and that story is enshrined in memories of their origin, in family feuds and quarrels, in school Christmas plays deliberately blending “the Disallowing” with Nativity scenes, in the enormous community oven symbolizing their own pride and exclusiveness, and in the establishment of their second town Ruby, named after the sister of the twins Steward and Deacon Morgan, who died after being rejected for medical treatment at a segregated hospital. Ruby itself was founded in 1949 at an even more remote location in Oklahoma after military veterans Steward and his twin Deacon returned after World War II to find themselves and their community confronted with racial violence and tenacious segregation laws that amounted by their lights to “the Disallowing, Part Two” (194). In *The Origin of Others* Morrison recounts that sense of facing mounting hostility in the late 1940s for all-black towns by listing twentieth century lynchings culminating in the 1955 death of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi. It is a list, she maintains, that is “representative . . . of the circumstances, the real danger for blacks (no longer slaves) in the twentieth century” (63).

These were injuries, Morrison declares, that “motivated the founders of many black towns,” as well as the utopians in her novel *Paradise*, to retreat to the comforts of what she calls “a reverse dystopia” defined by its own search for purity and exclusiveness:

So they fled to “free” land and established their own hierarchy of color, ranking the deepest black—“blue black”—skin as a definitive mark of acceptability. This is, anyway, the premise of my novel *Paradise*, concerning the remote (fictional) all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, where there is “nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital.” (*The Origins of Others* 64-65).

Having been “routed from office by whites, refused a homestead by coloreds” (*Paradise* 99), the original nine families founding Haven in 1890 resorted to what they thought

of as “a new separation: light-skinned against black” (194) dictated in part by the colorism and rejection confronting them in Early, Oklahoma, and by pride in what local teacher and historian Pat Best thinks of as the town’s “blood rule” excluding and ostracizing all but “eight-rock” blackness, akin to “a deep deep level in the coal mines” (195, 193). Hence the sense of exclusion and marginalization experienced by anyone of mixed-race background, including Pat Best herself and her father Roger, never forgiven for the “sunlight skin” of his late wife (197).

If anything, the stories the towns tell of their journey, the Disallowing, and the community’s founding reinforce that sense of exclusiveness by changing the details of the stories to accommodate their ideal of Eden—a peaceful community where unchallenged male authority ensures the safety of their womenfolk and where women uphold traditional ideals of domestic purity. As the town’s self-designated historian, Pat Best sees both that authority and those ideals as deceptive, hiding the erasures and often brutal measures required to preserve communal unity, history, and the “blood rule” of purity. Erased in those idealized stories of the past are decades-long feuds between families, secret abortions and love affairs linking Ruby and the Convent, humiliations and grievances, broken children, and rigidly defined boundaries between community insiders and outsiders. But so strong are the stories Morrison’s utopians tell about themselves that those secrets and erasures are seldom confronted, much less even acknowledged.

For Steward Morgan in particular those ideals of domestic and communal purity to be cherished and guarded are embodied by his memory of nineteen black ladies in summer dresses arrayed on town hall steps in one of those rival black utopian towns he visited in his youth. For his twin brother Deacon, that memory sums up everything he hopes for his family and community: “His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal” (110). Anything departing from that image—unruly young people in the 1960s and 1970s, Civil Rights activists, rebellious and disorderly women in the nearby Convent—threatens the sanctity of that image, the safety of Ruby as refuge, and the very sense of self for both the Morgan brothers.

That image is not strong enough, though, to allow the healing of wounds inflicted by that first and second Disallowing, which in turn constitute what Ron Eyerman in his study of trauma in African American history calls “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric” (2), that traps those who are wounded into endless repetitions of the past. Fleeing their own past, the men of Ruby ultimately become possessed by the past—and fixed in the racial gaze that they have tried so hard to escape by withdrawing from the world at large. Toward the end of the novel, one of the newer residents of Ruby, a minister skeptical about the town’s exclusiveness and intense veneration of their history, wonders about the townspeople’s resistance to change, their insistence upon their own purity, and their mythologizing their own origin. “But why,” he asks, “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” (161).

Most dangerous of all, though, is the wound that their venerated history requires them to forget—predating their epic journey and the humiliations of the Disallowing—and that is the humiliation their ancestors in Louisiana and Mississippi suffered with the end of Reconstruction and the promises it held for newly emancipated slaves. The utopians of Ruby and Haven pride themselves in the Reconstruction officeholders they count among

their ancestors even as they congratulate themselves on escaping the violence and heartbreak of Reconstruction's end in Louisiana and Mississippi. Theirs is after all the legacy of what historian Eric Foner has accurately called "a massive experiment in interracial democracy without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century" (xxv). Decades later that legacy still holds redemptive possibilities for the residents of Ruby and Haven. K.D., the reprobate nephew of the Morgan brothers, remains "their hope and their despair" despite his many failings precisely because he is "the last male in a line that included a lieutenant governor, a state auditor, and two mayors" (55). But not even K.D.'s proud family inheritance can fully erase the primordial wound predating the two Disallowings and underscoring the humiliation and deprivation suffered by the utopians' ancestors in Louisiana and Mississippi with the end of Reconstruction and the promises it held for a generation of former slaves.

As Steward's brother Deacon tells the story, their grandfather Zechariah, who also had a twin—named Tea—had changed his slave name Coffee to the prophetic name of Zechariah before he ran for Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana but was ultimately deprived of his office, ridiculed by blacks and whites alike, ostracized for his formal manners and driven into poverty. But his final humiliation lay in a confrontation that he and his brother had with "whitemen" who insisted at gunpoint that the two brothers dance as though to confirm their status as dehumanized commodities. Tea obliged the "whitemen," but Coffee refused, was thereby shot in the foot, and then repudiated his brother as he decided to seek a new life in Oklahoma with others also suffering from the losses of Reconstruction. To do so meant maintaining a certain ideal of himself and a sense of purity that required repudiation of his brother and a legacy to be bequeathed to his descendants. That ideal, though, also meant that he would be haunted thereafter by the ghosts of all that he had lost—his future and stake in the new world envisioned by Reconstruction—and haunted as well by the racial gaze that signaled his loss of self and belonging and finally his captivity in its glare. It is no wonder, then, that he felt compelled to follow a ghostly figure on the Oklahoma plains who appeared to lead the way out of that glare to a promised land that might well bear some faint resemblance to the world former slaves tried to make in the aftermath of Emancipation.

Rather than tell stories about themselves, then, the residents of Ruby retreat to endless retellings of past injuries, and it is through the lens provided by those stories—recording their establishment of "a peaceable kingdom" away from the dangerous world they had fled—that they interpret anything threatening change and disorder (276). That sense of being haunted by the lost possibilities of Reconstruction and the destructive reach of the racial gaze continues to linger on among Zechariah's descendants nearly a hundred years later. By the 1960s and early 1970s, in fact, the town's younger generation increasingly come to challenge the history handed down by their elders and to offer alternative interpretations of the trials suffered by the founders.

Those challenges in turn are if anything reinforced by the growing community of women at the nearby Convent who appear to represent, in the words of the narrator, everything that Ruby maintains that it is not—"disorder, deception and . . . 'drift'"—all with their own stories of psychic and physical injuries and all seeking their own refuge of safety and security apart from their disturbing pasts (221-22). They come from a wide variety of backgrounds—but in contrast with Ruby and its traditions of racial purity none of the women is identified racially, except for Consolata, rescued in childhood from a South

American slum by the original nuns at the Convent. Perhaps even more to the point, the women of the Convent discover a refuge of sorts from their own besieged histories, and because they seem to discover the possibilities of exorcising those pasts, they exert a special attraction to the women of Ruby and not a few men eager to free themselves from their own burdensome history.

Above all, the nearby Convent, which has offered refuge to homeless and seemingly raceless women fleeing their own ambiguous histories, appears to serve as the diametrical opposite of the carefully controlled paradise of Ruby. To the men of Ruby, jealous of their patriarchal authority, the women represent the chaotic and threatening world outside the boundaries of their town and even to a certain extent their humiliations over the years. To Steward Morgan in particular, "[t]he women in the Convent were . . . a flaunting parody of the nineteen Negro ladies of his and his brother's youthful memory and perfect understanding. They were the degradation of that moment they'd shared of sunlit skin and verberna" (279).

From the perspective of Steward Morgan and his fellow Ruby men, the Convent's violation of that ideal serves as ample justification for the attack on those unruly women that opens and closes the novel, but just what that attack entails remains to be seen, particularly when the novel draws to a close. By the lights of the men of Ruby, the Convent women violate not just the patriarchal prerogative of protecting sacred womanhood but the purity of their utopia's founding ideals. Haven and Ruby were established as a refuge from the history the towns' inhabitants had fled—from the difficulties of their journey from Mississippi and Louisiana, from the trauma of the "Disallowing" parts one and two, from frequent outbreaks of racial violence, and even from the losses of Reconstruction, which community leaders remember as their brief opportunity to remake the country in the aftermath of Emancipation. The five women of the Convent, all refugees themselves from burdensome pasts and free of any sort of patriarchal control, seem on the face of things to contradict the ideals cherished by the men of Ruby, particularly their determination to protect their womenfolk from harm. Even more to the point, though, the women evoke all the threatening changes underscoring the slow decline of both Haven and Ruby since their founding in 1890 and 1949, respectively. Just before the attack, as the novel's beginning recounts, the men of Ruby recall the "Outrages" revealing all those breaches in their utopian fortress: "A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day" (11). Linking all those events, from Ruby's perspective, are the women of the Convent, outsiders whose very existence appears to threaten the purity of those two patriarchal Edens and to require purging by violence.

Just what that violence entails, though, remains to be seen and to be recounted. The clarity with which the attack is evoked in the opening chapter, with the men of Ruby raising their rifles to fire at the Convent inhabitants, fades into the multiple and conflicting accounts of the attack at the novel's end. Afterwards, rumors fly that all five women at the Convent were murdered, although only one casualty seems to have been discovered and even then that discovery seems uncertain. Later Pat Best, the town historian, recounts "two editions of the official story," both of which suggest the narrative sleight-of-hand of magic realism: On the one hand, a fight between the Convent women and the nine men of Ruby who tried to drive them out; on the other, a struggle

between two groups of men, one determined to drive them out and one equally determined to stop any attack on the Convent. To those two stories Pat adds her own version: that nine men obsessed with their own blackness murdered the women in the name of maintaining the purity and exclusiveness of their utopia.

To those accounts of attacks is added the strangely inconclusive last chapter, which stresses the community's confusion over the putative violence, the almost magical return of at least some of the Convent women to safety elsewhere and their own origins, and above all the intense regret felt by many of the townspeople, fearful of the all-too-predictable consequences for a black community following the possible death of a white woman. Having fled the world and the history dictating those consequences in the post-Reconstruction South, they find themselves trapped by the very history their utopian towns had been founded to escape—at the mercy of white dominance and power and the myth of vulnerable white womanhood long wielded to justify racial violence.

Confiding in a local minister skeptical of Ruby's Edenic claims, Deacon Morgan acknowledges his own sense of imprisonment in the cycle of violence, racial purity, power, and finally history. As the narrator explains, he realizes in the aftermath of the attack on the Convent that he has become "what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different" (302). He and his fellow Ruby patriarchs have replicated the violence and obsession with racial purity that drove their ancestors out of Mississippi and Louisiana at the end of Reconstruction. Moreover, they have done so in the name of preserving an idealized notion of womanhood that ultimately defined their sense of patriarchal power and authority—eerily echoing a similar ideal of womanhood fueling the Cult of the Lost Cause mourning the losses and injuries of the defeated post-Confederate South, fueling the racial violence sweeping the region during and after Reconstruction, and finally culminating in Jim Crow segregation throughout a good deal of the country.

The attack on the Convent, in the end, seems to illustrate the dangers of mythologizing one's origins, especially if preserving those myths and injuries requires a replication of the violence and racism impelling flight from history in general and inspiring the making of would-be utopias free from those evils. Have the fears and injuries of the past, as Deacon Morgan laments, turned them all into "what the Old Fathers cursed"? Have they betrayed their ideal of Paradise, "a hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange?" (306). Toni Morrison herself leaves us with few answers for her characters or her readers. No bodies are found in the aftermath, and accounts of the attack inspire ever-multiplying narratives and interpretations among the residents of Ruby. Even more unsettling are the spectral appearances in the narrative of the supposed victims of the attack to those they have left behind.

Finally, the very last page of the narrative briefly poses an alternative Paradise to the rigid, change-defying ideal sought and fought for by Ruby. Shifting to an unspecified beach, a final scene evoking nothing so much as magic realism briefly describes a spectral Consolata being comforted by an old black woman named Pleidade, Portuguese for compassion or consolation. It is a fleeting glimpse of Paradise that seemingly offers a homely and even modest alternative to the ethereal perfection and exclusiveness of the Puritan city upon a hill—or even Ruby, Oklahoma, for that matter. In her interview with James Marcus, Morrison maintained that she wanted the novel to "move toward the possibility of reimagining Paradise. The thing is, if Paradise had everybody in it, there

would be no Paradise at all—that’s because we think of it in terms of seclusion. But if we understand the *planet* to be that place, then this is all there is. So why not make it that way?” (qtd. in Morrison, “This Side of Paradise”). In the end, then, *Paradise* offers the possibility of a utopia within reach to all, for all, dependent upon human efforts, one that aspires, she declares in her essay titled quite simply “Home,” “to develop nonmessianic language to refigure the raced community,” to imagine, she says, “a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place ‘already made for me by me, both snug and wide open’” (9).

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Minimal Maneuvers between Dystopia and Utopia in Two Stories by Breece D’J Pancake

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Picking up the small volume of stories simply entitled *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*¹ that the author left behind when he committed suicide on Palm Sunday, April 8th, 1979 at the age of only 26,² one is struck by the words of other people crushing in, as it were, on the twelve short narratives from both sides. Indeed, there are first of all two pages of praises, including passages such as: “The bleak poignant outer and inner landscapes of these stories are both a requiem for Pancake and a grace to the reader” (Harold Jaffe, *Newsday*); “Achingly felt and honestly rendered. . . I shudderingly urge on you the experience” (James R. Frakes, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*); “Simply first-rate . . . These words are Pancake’s last—read them with care” (David Bosworth, *Boston Globe*) or “Pancake’s vision was as generous as it was dangerous” (Raymond Nelson, *Virginia Quarterly Review*). These pages talk of “[a] territory never quite penetrated and laid bare in American literature as skillfully, honestly, and hopelessly . . . These stories have the polished, purged, hard-won qualities that will insure that they last far longer than the flesh that once inhabited them” (Bolton Davis, *San Francisco Review of Books*); they describe “the sort of geographical despair that could drive a person to self-extinction. . . . So much emotion is expended . . . that we can almost understand the inward intensity of feeling Pancake himself understood and, tragically, never seemed to outlive” (Gregory Morris, *Prairie Schooner*).

Other critical voices that go in the same direction could have been added here, such as that of Ellesa Clay Higher, in her article “A Lost Generation: The Appalachia of Breece D’J Pancake,” who sees in the author “a tired grief laced with bitter energy, a depression as pervasive as coal dust, embedding itself under the skin” (38), or that of Joyce Carol Oates, who writes:

the stories—tense, elegiac, remorseless in their insistence on the past’s dominion over the present—argue for a sensibility so finely honed, so vulnerable to the inexorable passage of time, that it is likely death appeared as a solace. As the stories make powerfully clear, Breece Pancake identified so intensely with the coal-mining and farming area of West Virginia in which he was born that he could not have failed to identify with its slow dying as well. (Section 7, 1).

¹ Pancake published six short stories in his lifetime, mostly in *The Atlantic*. The collection was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. The first hardcover printing sold over 15,000 copies in the first six months and received the label of American Library Association Notable Book for 1983.

² Pancake’s death—he was found in his garden shot in the face—was officially considered a suicide. Both McPherson (17), and Casey (175), express their uncertainty or disbelief. And as Jon Michauds puts it: “the circumstances of his death, which followed a sleepwalking incident, are decidedly strange and suggest that he might have been in a state of disorientation.” Certain family members and friends also still believe that his death was accidental. Others believe that they had received notes that in hindsight seemed to hint at suicide not long before his death.

In each and every one of these passages, a link is made, more or less explicitly, between the land—West Virginia—and Pancake's desperate, self-effacing, act, from the "bleak poignant outer and inner landscapes" that Jaffe talks about, to the "geographical despair" mentioned by Morris.

Apart from these words taken from various sources on the first pages of the book, there is the 17-page foreword by Pancake's teacher and friend James Alan McPherson, who explains to the best of his ability who the mysterious Pancake was: a lower-middle class West Virginian of poor social skills who had, deservedly but as if by accident, ended up in his creative writing class at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. He explains:

Ironically, the people who seemed most isolated and insecure were the sons and daughters of the southern lower and middle classes. They had come to the place their ancestors must have dreamed about—Charlottesville is to the South what Cambridge is to the rest of the nation—and for various reasons found themselves spiritually far from home. Some of them expressed their frustrations by attacking the traditional scapegoats—black teachers and students. Others began to parody themselves, accentuating and then assuming the stereotyped persona of the hillbilly, in an attempt to achieve a comfortable identity. Still others, the constitutional nonconformists like Breece Pancake, became extremely isolated and sought out the company of other outsiders. (8)

And in the first of the two afterwords that crowd in on Pancake's stories from behind—together coming down to another 17 pages—John Casey, also both teacher and friend, confirms this:

Breece didn't know how good he was; he didn't know how much he knew; he didn't know he was a swan instead of an ugly duckling. This difficulty subsided for Breece, but there was always some outsider bleakness to his daily life, a feeling that he was at the university on sufferance. (174)

Such varied types of "geographic despair" also form the overriding theme of the book *Apples on the Flood: The Southern Mountain Experience*. In this work, Rodger Cunningham—himself from West Virginia and of much the same background as Pancake—tells how, in the late 1960s, he "first became interested in the concept of Appalachia" as, what he calls, "an exploited 'third-world' region" (xvii). Consequently, in the 1970s—at roughly the time Pancake was writing his stories—he took up the study of Appalachian history, eventually publishing a book that concerns itself, in his words, with

the drawing of analogies between group and individual experience, and in particular between social, cultural, and ethnic boundaries (frontiers, borders, peripheries) on the one hand and intrapsychic boundaries (personal identity as boundary of ego, ego itself as boundary of selfhood) on the other. (xxi)

And he subsequently explains:

Hence I connect unstable frontiers with insecure ego-boundaries, cultural invasion with intrusiveness, cultural stereotyping with false and labeling interpersonal perception, and so forth. On the latter point, I particularly emphasize the parallels between false concepts of "civilization" and false concepts of "maturity." (xxi)

In this vein, Cunningham first of all reminds us that, throughout history, “civilizations” have projected onto “outsiders” their own “rejected, repressed, and unsublimated infantile impulses,” so that, as he puts it:

The result for the “savage,” even when the latter has been spared physical extermination, has been psychic and socio-cultural destruction. Again and again, a stable society of mature adults has been disrupted by “civilized” efforts (even, or especially, well-meaning efforts) to “raise” it from a state defined as “childish”—and these efforts have created a self-fulfilling prophecy of turmoil and dependency. (xxii)

Cunningham then argues that this well-known dyadic model of “civilization” versus “savageness” and “maturity” versus “immaturity,” reassuring as it has proven to be for people over the ages, must in reality be replaced by a tripartite, one along the following lines:

I distinguish *three* regions: a metropolitan core labeling itself as “civilized” (Rome, England, the East Coast); an “outside” region labeled as “savage” or “barbarous” (the Celts, the “wild” Highlanders, the “wild” Irish, the “wild” Indians) and, all important for my study, an intermediate region (the Scottish Lowlands, Ulster, Appalachia). (xxi-xxii, italics in the text)

This final, intermediate or liminal, region Cunningham calls “peripheral,” and its inhabitants “peripheral dwellers”—in contrast to the “core dweller” of so-called civilization, “and ‘peripheralization’—what it means to be looked on constantly as someone on the fringe of things” (xxii).

Cunningham’s book, then, traces Appalachian history back to Ireland and from there back to Scotland, this along the lines of a repeated process of “peripheralization” and its consequences for Appalachian character and identity:

They [the Appalachians] are encouraged to see themselves as the representatives of “civilization” against “savagery,” while the metropolitan in fact looks on them as little, if at all, better than savages themselves. And they are seen in this way precisely because of that violence which the metropole itself has instilled in them by undermining their sense of autonomous identity and independent self-worth. (xxiii)

Indeed, many observers have noticed the violence that Cunningham talks about: the extreme “roughness” of the Scotch-Irish, who “were not only prone to settle on Indian lands illegally, but also apt to make overreactive or totally unprovoked attacks on native villages” in contrast to other immigrants into the area, notably the Germans (84-85). According to Cunningham,

The basic reason for this aggressiveness is not far to seek, and has been pointed out more than once: the Scotch-Irish were simply transferring to the “wild” Indians the habits which they had formed in a hundred or more years of combat with the “wild” Irishman, and in centuries of combat with the “wild” Highlander before him. (85)

From a psychological point of view, then, the Appalachian—as “peripheral dweller”—being “identified with projected parts of the core dweller’s psyche” is not capable of developing secure ego-boundaries him- or herself. Cunningham sees this in terms of a disturbed process of coming of age, of distorted rites of passage of a “peripheralized people,” which “reinforce these insecure ego-boundaries and ego-foundations” (xxiii). These observations can throw a light on the plight of both the writer—Pancake himself—and his characters, and explain the dystopian, “bleak poignant outer and inner landscapes” and “geographical despair” that critics have mentioned.

First of all, the “peripheral position” of Pancake’s stories within the collection is obvious: the lengthy foreword and afterwords by Pancake’s teachers, physically crowding in on the stories from both sides—thus projecting views onto Pancake’s *imaginaire*—can be seen in this light. Not only that, these texts repeatedly illustrate how much Pancake—as a “peripheral dweller”—was not one the “core dwellers” of academia. They show indeed, how much he was always, to use Cunningham’s terms here, “on the fringe of things” (xxii). Mike Murphy, in “American Myth: The Short, Beautiful Life of Breece D’J Pancake,” confirms that Pancake did not fit in, stressing the aggressive stance that many felt in the writer:

At UVA, Pancake quickly came to despise the genteel class-snobbery he felt in Charlottesville, a town that has perfected it to an art form . . . Like many West Virginians of the great diaspora, however, Pancake’s feet were still planted firmly in the dark dirt and rock scree of his native State. Despite his modest but middle-class upbringing in Milton, he always felt himself an outsider in the much-tonier Charlottesville.

Each of the stories, in fact, represents the coming of age of a protagonist that is somehow botched or maimed. Just as Cunningham presents it in *Apples on the Flood*, what the main character learns—instead of some sort of maturity—is fear and avoidance, which in turn create in him a senseless violence. This is the case of Buddy, in the story “Hollow,” as he kicks aside “the unborn fawn” of the doe he shoots just because he can (52). That impulsive violence can also be found in Taylor in the story “The Mark”: he sees a mole “tunneling in the yard” and crushes its head, remarking, with a vicious sense of humor, that the animal “dug his own grave” (93). Buster in the story “In the Dry,” similarly takes pleasure in killing his dog, Beagle:

Bus grinned, made Beagle dance on his hind legs by holding back the collar. Then Bus shoved hard with his sickle blade, and Beagle stumbled, coughing, into a corner. First his bandy legs folded, then he fell to his side, did not breathe, and his flanks filled, swelled. (156)

While the men in Pancake’s stories indulge in such major acts of violence, his women characters perform their own small, pitiful acts of senseless violence. Sheila, in “In the Dry,” for instance, burns a wasps nest, perversely enjoying the suffering of the animals, with her grandmother watching and saying: “‘Please don’t, honey. A thing alive can feel.’ But Sheila held her paper-cone torch to another nest, careful to keep flames and falling wasps from her hand” (152). This act of violence is later remembered by the male protagonist, as well as “her laugh, a laugh high and happy at burning wasps” and “the nest in her hand, the fresh smile on her face, and the wasp worms popping from their paper cells under her fingertips” (157).

In this last story—"In the Dry"³—narrated in the present tense and one of only four stories that Pancake himself seems to have been totally satisfied with,⁴ the protagonist, Otto—or Ottie as he is known—ends up, more or less accidentally one day, at the farm where he grew up as a foster child and meets there, once again, the old couple of farmers, their daughter Sheila and her cousin Buster, or Bus. We feel immediately that Pancake turns the screw of the "peripheral" somewhat tighter still when we learn that Ottie does not belong, is "on the fringe of things," even there. Indeed, the narrator presents in free indirect discourse, the bitterness of feeling more "peripheral" than the "peripheral dweller":

This hill-country valley is not his place: it belongs to Sheila, to her parents, to her cousin Buster. Ottie first came from outside the valley, from the welfare house at Prunytown⁵; and the Gerlocks raised him here a foster child, sent him out when the money crop of welfare was spent. (147)

Ottie has, in fact, been able to escape in some way from this "peripheral place," through what might be called a Deleuzian *ligne de fuite*. But how liberating is it—in terms of rites of passage and coming of age—to escape from a place that you have never belonged to in the first place? And even within this escape—he is a truck driver and happens to pass by his old foster home on his way to pick up a trailer of molasses—he is "peripheral," as in this work he is for some reason excluded, "blacklisted," so he cannot "drive union" (154). Indeed, when he tells Sheila that he will get himself "a regular job with regular guys" in Chicago, she answers: "'You won't stick, Ottie. You don't know what it is to stay in a place, and there ain't any place you'll stick'" (154), thus designating Ottie as a sort of eternal "peripheral."

Even the linguistic nitty-gritty of the story, meanwhile, can be seen to emphasize this "peripherality," moving the protagonist to the edge of any shared reality. Indeed, critics have often mentioned the curious, dreamy tone of Pancake's prose without actually analyzing it linguistically, but this tone comes at least in part from the overwhelming presence of the grammatical form of the so-called *small-clause*. From the very first sentence of the story, this linguistic structure is used to put the protagonist, Ottie, into a "peripheral" position: "*He sees the bridge coming . . .*" (147, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clause*). First of all, the thought that invades Ottie's mind performs a personifying reversal of the action—it is not he who is moving but the bridge—and it thus reinforces the idea that a "peripheral" person, even if he is on the move, does not, in fact, advance. With this beginning, one would almost imagine that in Ottie's memory the bridge had slammed into Bus's car, rather than the reverse, but the text does not go this far into the reversal. As Ottie remembers it, in a passage that ends on another *small-clause*:

. . . Bus's Chevy slammed that bridge, rolled, and Ottie crawled out. But somebody told it that way—he only recalls the hard heat of asphalt where he lay down. And

³ Joyce Carol Oates, in *The New York Times Book Review* of February 13, 1983, remarks with regard to this title: "The New Testament line alluded to in the story's title—'For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?' (Luke 23:31)—is a lament that might well be an epigraph for the entire volume."

⁴ As Jon Michaud writes: "His teacher John Casey thinks that only four of the twelve stories in the book meet the high standards that Pancake set for himself: 'Trilobites,' 'Hollow,' 'The Mark,' and 'In the Dry.'"

⁵ It is significant that in real life, Prunytown is an unincorporated community in Northern West Virginia and the home of the Prunytown Correctional Center (formerly the West Virginia Industrial School for Boys).

sometimes, Ottie knows. Now and again, his nerves bang one another until *he sees a fist, a fist gripping and twisting* at once . . . (147, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clause*)

The attributive *small-clause*—one of the linguistic structures that is particularly fascinating—is a syntactic construction consisting of a mental activity verb (here the verb *see*), a predicate including an object that is the subject of the embedded clause (here the repeated noun *fist*) and an infinitive verb without the infinite marker *to*, or, as we see it here, the progressive form of a verb (in this case the verbs *gripping* and *twisting*), together forming the embedded *small-clause* complement (*a fist gripping and twisting*).⁶ What is special about this construction is that, with it, a narrator merges completely with the character whose mental activity he presents. Because of its non-epistemic dimension, presenting the experience without any judgment—“raw” one could say—the *small-clause* structure is habitually used by authors to depict all kinds of psychic, spiritual and dreamlike states, as is the case here.⁷ Indeed, it is the experience of the bridge coming towards Ottie that brings on the hallucinatory memory of a violent accident that had caused him never to come to his foster home again until this very day.

Soon after, when Ottie arrives at the farm, the cause of the violent accident reveals itself further, bit by bit, commencing once more with a *small-clause* and subsequently moving, with the help of another *small-clause*, this time in the past tense, to a memory of his foster sister’s behavior:

Ottie hears Sheila laugh, but deeper than he remembers. Her laugh was high then . . . She balanced on the banister, held the brace, and *he saw the curve of a beginning breast crease* her shirt. Then he looked to Bus, knew Bus had seen it too . . . Bus’s face comes back to Ottie: a rage gone beyond fear—the thought almost makes him know. (152, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clauses*)

As it turns out, the old couple had never understood what caused the accident involving their foster son Ottie and Sheila’s cousin Bus, who has been virtually mute and in a wheelchair ever since.⁸ Confronted with Bus for the first time this way—and seeing the powerless hands of the invalid—Ottie, who never knew what happened exactly, recovers part of the experience as if in a dream, again with the use of a *small-clause*:

With the lumber knuckles of Bus’s hand, he saw the far-hidden minutes of racing along the Pike. *He saw Bus’s face go stiff to fight*, saw the sneer before that hand twisted the wheel a full turn and metal scraped and warped against bridge sides. *Show you, you got some* Ottie looks to the hills . . . (158-59, first emphasis added to indicate the *small-clause*)

⁶ For a discussion of this linguistic form and contrasting attributive clauses, see van der Leek and Bockting.

⁷ A beautiful example of the *small-clause* that the text explicitly calls a hallucination is found in Henry James’s short story “The Beast in the Jungle”: “He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him” (383), with the *small-clause* “he saw the lurking beast rise.” See also Phelan’s discussion of the story (61ff.). This form of narration often moves seamlessly into what Dorrit Cohn calls “narrated monologue” (38), also known as free indirect discourse.

⁸ Curiously enough Joyce Carol Oates writes in her review in the *New York Times Book Review* of February 13, 1983 that the “former hell-raiser named Bus [is] now trapped in a wheelchair and evidently ravaged by cancer.”

In addition to the *small-clause* “He saw Bus’s face go stiff,” it is the stretch of italics in the last sentence that catches the reader’s attention. Indeed, the abrupt change from italics to regular print together with the lack of punctuation between memory and perception in the sentence—“*Show you, you got some* Ottie looks to the hills”—cannot but remind us of Pancake’s fellow Southern writer William Faulkner, drawing attention to the transition between Bus’s words in italics—uttered at the tragic moment when he impulsively decided to crash the car in which the two boys traveled against the rails of the bridge—that float through Ottie’s mind for a moment, before he abruptly, in a “Faulknerian” way, regains control by looking at the scenery around him in the present.⁹

To return to Cunningham’s views, we see clearly the rite of passage that first love represents, but here it is a dystopian one. Needing to escape Bus’s face, which—together with the “lumber knuckles” of his hands (158)—so tragically symbolizes this dystopia in all its complexity, Ottie hurries away into the field, with Sheila following him and catching his hand “to slow him” (159). At this point, two further *small-clauses* introduce and then expand a flash of memory: the ephemeral movement from the dystopia to the utopia of a religious experience promising a community that Ottie might have belonged to if things had been different:

He remembers standing in that creek with Old Gerlock. He almost knew again the cool sweep against his knees, *felt the hand cover* his face, then the dipping into a sudden rush. Only that once he prayed; asked to stay, always *live here*. Sheila’s arms go around his waist. (159, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clauses*).

Linguistically, it is the deictic projection of the adverbial phrase of time “live *here*,” which belongs to a deictic center in the present,¹⁰ instead of “live *there*”—which would have belonged to the deictic center of the memory that occupies Otto—that teams up with the hallucinatory aspect of the *small-clauses* “He remembers standing” and “[He] felt the hand cover.” Indeed, this scene of being baptized in the presence of a father figure—in a “cool sweep” of utopia—only represents a momentary vision of what life could never be, its tactile imagery supplanted immediately by visual and gustatory images of dystopia in the present:

The ground is thick with fruit: some ripe, some rotten, some blown by yellow jackets. Ottie pulls a knotted apple, bites into dry meal. Even the pulp has no taste, and he sees the trees need pruning. He tosses the fruit away. “We used to cut props for the branches.”

⁹ Many examples could be given, especially from Quentin’s section in *The Sound and the Fury*, here when his sister, Caddie, has lost her virginity: “*What else can I think about what else have I thought about* The boy turned from the street. He climbed a picket fence without looking back and crossed the lawn to a tree and laid the pole down and climbed into the fork of the tree and sat there, his back to the road and the dappled sun motionless at last upon his white shirt. *else have I thought about I cant even cry I died last year I told you I had but I didn’t know then what I meant I didn’t know what I was saying* Some days in late August at home are like this . . .” (Faulkner 123).

¹⁰ The deictic center of a linguistic utterance is the point to which all its deictics—temporal (*now, then, etc.*), spatial (*here, there, etc.*), social (*father, mother, son, daughter etc.*)—are linked. Deictic projection occurs when a deictic is used that belongs to a different deictic center. Deictic anchoring concerns the deictics that do not shift and that continue to anchor the utterance to the deictic center, here the tense of the sentence. See Fillmore 44; Levinson 664; Bockting.

“Mom worked me all week making apple butter, but it’s been a while.” She snorts a small laugh, holds the back of her hand to her forehead, mocks: “Oh dear. What *shall* we do in the dry?”

“Blow away, I guess.”

“Yes,” she says, pulls on him; “Asses to asses and bust to bust.” (159)

In this scene the title of the story becomes explicit, using not just the visual, gustatory and olfactory imagery of withered and neglected trees and of dried out fruit, but also the mock eroticism that comes from the dryness of passion. Indeed, Sheila’s utterance “asses to asses and bust to bust” can clearly be seen to represent a perversion of the phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,”¹¹ thus showing the link between Eros and Thanatos as a move from utopia to dystopia. And it is perfectly clear now how much this dystopia includes both Ottie and Sheila—both “peripheral people”—the desperation of the moment growing still when she avows “I aint never been loved.” Then, finally, she makes explicit the background of her cousin Bus’s violent act:

“He thought we was making it down at the creek.”

She claps her hands around his neck, smiles again. “I ain’t never even had man, but I wanted both of you. Didn’t you ever want to?”

He shakes his head.

She squints, and her hands slip from around his neck; she backs away, turns, hurries towards the house. Watching her go through timothy¹² and trees, he hopes she will not look back . . . (160)

Although he is invited to spend the night, Ottie now knows he cannot stay. When he goes to his old room to pick up his things he passes Sheila’s door and sees her there. Yet because of the hallucinatory mood of the *small-clauses*, the reader does not even know if she is really there, and so the story ends on a distinctly gothic feel:¹³

He sees her standing naked in the doorway; gray, waiting. He stops, waiting; he listens to her breathing. Slowly, he moves up his hand, touches her face, and *he feels the sweat of her cheek mingle* with the dust of his palm. He knows her better, and he knows her way of doing. (162, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clauses*)

In this final moment, the symbolism of all the many hands that the story presents comes together.¹⁴ Indeed, when he has finished packing his things, Sheila’s door is closed, and “Ottie knows what turned them all will spin them forever” (162), the tactile image of sweat and dust on his palm turning into a kinesthetic image, a spiral of eternal suffering. With this tactile image being finally replaced by the auditory imagery of the “awful noise” of ignition bells that “ring out” and of gears that “strain to whine into another night” when he drives

¹¹ The phrase is adapted from the Biblical text, Genesis 3:19: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (King James version); it is used in burial services.

¹² Timothy is a kind of mountain grass.

¹³ Jon Michauds calls Pancake’s work “an uncanny hybrid of dirty realism and Southern gothic.”

¹⁴ Sheila’s hands killing wasps; Bus’s hands turning the wheel of the car on the bridge; the powerless hands of the invalid; Sheila catching Ottie’s hand to “slow him”; Gerlocks hand on Ottie’s face at the baptism; the back of Sheila’s hand covering her forehead; Sheila’s hand clapped around Ottie’s neck; Ottie’s hand touching Sheila’s face, here, and many other instances (152; 158; 159; 160; 162).

off, the protagonist takes his distance. This represents again to the fullest his two-fold—doubly “peripheralized”—status.

The emphasis of this story is on the male protagonist, who does not find his place anywhere, staying on the periphery of things in any context. The main female character, however, even if she is less “peripheral,” having some family context at least, stays “on the fringe” of Pancake’s story. Critics have on occasion recognized this tendency, in Pancake’s writing, to give little serious attention to his female characters. Jon Michaud, for instance, mentions as Pancake’s “most glaring weakness—his portrayal of women”:

The female characters in these stories are almost always seen in terms of their faithfulness and sexual appeal (or lack thereof) . . . It’s the one facet of Pancake’s work where his youth is on display. Though likely an accurate reflection of the milieu in which his stories are set, there is a lack of sophistication and distance in Pancake’s writing about women. I can’t help feeling that his early death deprived us from seeing a more mature and nuanced approach in later works.

Michaud mentions as an example the protagonist in the story analyzed previously, Ottie, who “returns home after years away and, encountering a girl he once knew [Sheila], thinks, ‘At sixteen she was nothing to look at . . . Now he sees her an old maid in a little town.’” He gives several other examples of the presentation of female characters in stories in which the main point of view is with a male character as narrator or as protagonist, but he does not, however, mention the two stories that are special in this respect, in that their protagonists are young women: Reva in “The Mark,” and Alena in “The Way it Has to Be.” Of these, the story “The Mark” is also one of the four that Pancake is believed to have considered up to standards.

“The Mark” is the story of a young woman called Reva and her husband Tyler on the day of the country fair in their village. The story is narrated almost entirely from Reva’s point of view. Apart from this important difference with “In the Dry,” one is immediately struck by the overlap between the two stories—the accident involving the bridge over the river, the incestuous atmosphere and the linguistic characteristic of the *small-clause*—which makes a comparison even more interesting. Indeed, instead of the crash against the rails of the bridge—which maimed Bus and severely traumatized Ottie in “In the Dry”—there is the collapse of the bridge that killed Riva and her brother Clinton’s parents in “The Mark.” And to replace the sexual attraction of Sheila for her foster brother Ottie as well as between Sheila and her cousin Buster in “In the Dry,” there is a similar infatuation between the two siblings, Riva and Clinton, in “The Mark.” In both stories, the two issues are, in fact, related: in “In the Dry,” the accident is the result of incestual desire and, in “The Mark,” it seems the other way around, that is to say, incestual desire is the result of the accident. And more specifically, the reader immediately learns that Reva “felt thick with worry for her brother; working the same river that had killed their parents only eight years ago” (89). The deictic projection of the temporal adverbial phrase “eight years ago” instead of “eight years before” presents the immediacy of the experience in Reva’s mind and the adjective phrase “thick with worry,” replaces the more usual “sick with worry,” perhaps a link with Reva’s pregnancy before it is actually presented in the text. As far as the *small-clause* is concerned—even if the linguistic form is far less pervasive in “The Mark” than it is in “In the Dry”—its first occurrence is at the root of Reva’s awareness of the physical aspects of her closeness to her brother:

*She remembered her brother Clinton holding a litter of baby rabbits close to his naked chest while the mowing machine droned behind him in a dead hum. Was that the summer she began to want him? (90, emphasis added to indicate the *small-clause*)*

Interesting here, is not only the fact that the form of the *small-clause* makes this into an almost hallucinatory memory but also that this memory of Reva's brother, contrasting so forcefully with the gratuitous violence of male characters in Pancake's other stories, overrides the dystopian auditory imagery of death—the "dead hum" of the mowing machine—with a fleeing intrusion of utopian visual and tactile imagery of life, of bare skin close to bare skin. Pancake's internal focalization on Reva's feelings for Clinton, then, is many times more subtle and sensitive than the external focalization on Sheila's desire for Ottie and Buster in "In the Dry," and contradicts, in this respect, the criticism expressed by critics such as Michaud.

The link between this memory of Clinton holding baby rabbits and Reva's present situation—as well as, perhaps, her "thick" feeling of worry for her brother—is alluded to with "the sinkings in her belly," which had suddenly come on "too hard and frightening, too much like her worst month" (90), and she had thought of the rabbit that had recently been used for her pregnancy test, the results of which she is actually still waiting for.

She felt the spot where the baby should be, closed her eyes, and tried to imagine her blood in the rabbit's veins. It would pump into the ovaries, making them swell, the doctor had said, if she was pregnant. They were going to kill the rabbit and look for her secret in its organs . . . (90)

This seems like a curious thought in Sheila's mind, as her possible pregnancy is in fact not really a secret. Indeed, other members of the family await the results of the rabbit test together with Reva; her husband, Taylor, in a rather insensitive way, explains to his brother: "She stares 'bout all the time . . . I figured I'd give her a baby to keep her mind offa Clint. Boy, she was ripe the day he left" (92). These brief moments, together with the general incestuous atmosphere of the story, make it possible to think that the secret is that the baby is actually not Reva's husband's but her brother's. The story, in any case, continues to build on the closeness of the two, with as minuscule maneuver towards utopia, the memory of the old lockhouse on the river, its position emphasizing the peripheral region that the setting of the story represents:

The fog was gone, and she could see the hills beyond the river—hills that soon gave way to the plains of Ohio. On the eastern shore, nearly hidden in the vines and weeds, stood the ship-lapped wooden lockhouse where her grandfather once worked. Even as it stood empty in their youth, it had been her playhouse or Clinton's fort. . . . On the smooth gray bark of a water maple, its roots breaking the abutment of a lock gate, Clinton had carved their parents' initials on the cold December Friday the bridge collapsed. (91-92)

But the tiny tidbits of utopia in the imagery concerned with the lockhouse of their innocent games—here rising up out of the fog of time—are tempered by the memory of the accident

through which Reva and her brother lost their parents, and are soon replaced by the dystopia of Reva's present situation:

A small dusty breeze moved across the porch, and Reva shivered in its heat, closing her eyes to tears from staring too long. A tiny pain screwed into her back, and she tried to hate against being left here, alone. She tried to blame Clinton, her parents, even the river, but opened her eyes to the white knuckles of her tiny fist. (92)

These two passages emphasize the palimpsest of "peripherality" that Cunningham sees as the Appalachian condition. While the beginning of this passage underlines the "peripheral" position of Appalachia, and its middle connects this position with Clinton and Reva's identities, their "peripheral" status as orphans, the ending presents the further "peripheralization" of Reva's position: the disappearance of her beloved brother as well as the already threatening negation of her pregnancy—a triple *mise-en abyme*—going beyond even that of the foster child Ottie, in the story "In the Dry."

That the relationship between Reva and Clinton had not remained innocent like a child's playhouse and fort is further hinted at when Reva's face lightens up remembering how "her brother would come upriver, not in his boatman's clothes, but as a naked Indian hiding in the pawpaw tunnels" (96), and somewhat later a desire awakens in her to go to the lockhouse and "feel the chilly floor against her buttocks and shoulders" (97). Not long after, Reva receives the certainty that she is, indeed, not pregnant and, again, the impression is created that the child would not have been her husband's: "She felt her belly for the child that had never been, and almost wanted the deed undone, even forgotten" (98). Reva's minute maneuvers between dystopia and utopia are presented with much sensitivity, yet she ends it all in violence by setting fire to the old lockhouse—"orange blades of fire wav[ing] out from the lockhouse" (99)—in a similar, gothic, mood that appears in "In the Dry," with the apparition of Sheila.

The internal focalization on Reva, in "The Mark," is on the whole more satisfying than the external one—filtered through a male protagonist—of Sheila in "In the Dry," especially insofar as the small movements between dystopia and utopia that both stories represent are concerned. One nevertheless still senses a certain rudeness, which might be attributed to a "lack of sophistication and distance in Pancake's writing about women," as Michaud suggests. Yet it seems more likely that the blotched or maimed rites of passage that Cunningham mentions in *Apples on the Flood* do not limit themselves to the young men in Pancake's work, but include young women as well. Perhaps this is reflected in the title "The Mark," which comes from the passage where Reva and her sister-in-law Carlene watch a couple of male monkeys at the country fair: they are waiting in line to mount a female, her "empty face" looking back at Reva, "blinking" (97). Carlene warns Reva: "I knowed a woman to mark her baby thataway . . . That baby was born lookin' just like a monkey . . . Momma swears it's the mark of the beast" (97). It is right after this episode that Reva thinks of her naked "buttocks and shoulders" against the floor of the lockhouse. If this is not the most sensitive connection between ideas that one could think of, it could also be assumed that Reva tries to undo the rudeness of the country fair and her sister-in-law's thoughtless association as best as she can by focusing on a moment of bliss, a minimal maneuver towards utopia, even if it was shared with a brother who is lost to her now.

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The American South in Denmark: The Visual Art of William H. Johnson

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In the 1930s, residents of Kerteminde, located on the Danish island of Funen, were accustomed to the sight of painter William H. Johnson,¹ who had found his way to Denmark from the American South. One of Johnson's local acquaintances, fish exporter Niels Hansen, recalls seeing the artist at work, using a hollow mirror so as to have the roofs along the narrow, idyllic streets meet at the top. Interviewed before his death in the late 1990s, Hansen explains: "Well, he had this idea that whenever he saw something, he narrowed the perspective. When he painted a street, the roofs had to merge" (Meisl 14-15). Other people in Kerteminde would also remember the sight of Johnson painting about town. Mrs. Onni Fahrenholz explains to an interviewer: "If you imagine Langebro [a bridge] with its railing turning towards Lillestranden [small fishermen's beach], then he had his easel at the side of it and then he bent down and looked from between his legs through the railing. He had to see his motif this way. And we didn't think much of it; he was strange, after all. So nobody stopped to stare, they just passed by" (Meisl 15). These comments by locals position Johnson outside provincial communities and norms as an exotic outsider in their midst. Yet Johnson managed to carve out a precarious space for himself, both in the fishermen's town of Kerteminde and in visual art. He operated outside the American forms of the interwar period, in the space between genres, regions, continents, and races. Johnson invented a space for transnational artistic expression, though he lived and died without much recognition. He fused African American and local Danish aesthetics in his paintings from Kerteminde and thus laid the ground for the Harlem depictions of folk life that most audiences now associate with his choice of motifs and his work overall.

In a 1994 bibliographical essay on African American artists William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, Beth Anne Margolies writes that Johnson "remains something of a mystery" (13). A Johnson revival of sorts may have occurred since then, but the context in which he produced his work, and his sources of inspiration on both sides of the Atlantic, need further exploration. Especially the Danish period in Johnson's life and art has yet to receive the critical attention it deserves, though Richard J. Powell's *Homecoming*, published by the National Museum of American Art and the Smithsonian in 1991, and a few articles, began this work. In her otherwise complimentary review of *Homecoming*, Karen C. Chambers Dalton requests further explorations of the possible cross-fertilizations between Lawrence and Johnson, or between Johnson and the Harlem Center and the mural division of the WPA Federal Arts Project in Harlem (164). She also mentions Johnson's travels to "remote areas of Denmark and Norway" (163), but she does not allude to other aspects of his Scandinavian sojourns. In September 2014, a lecture on Johnson by Brinille Ellis at the Johannes Larsen Museum in Kerteminde barely touched upon his Danish phase. The micro-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the works of William H. Johnson are accessed online from the Smithsonian Institution of American Art, Renwick Collection.

exhibit of Johnson's art that occasioned Ellis's lecture ran from September 26, 2014, through February 1, 2015, but Ellis did not include in her presentation the works of art Johnson produced in Kerteminde, though she did mention the marriage that propelled Johnson to Funen in the first place (Larsen Museum). Mysterious or not, Johnson did not work, struggle, or think in isolation. He represented in his art his social and racial visions that often paralleled, or signified on, the motifs and perspectives of other artists. The Funen painters, a group of local Danish artists, inspired Johnson's themes and aesthetics, but he left his own touch, as a southerner of African descent, on his Scandinavian materials.

Born in Florence, South Carolina, in 1901, Johnson followed the migrants of the Great Migration, which Jacob Lawrence celebrated with *The Migration Series* (1940-41). Unlike the rural migrants who looked for factory jobs in the urban North, Johnson moved to New York City to fulfill his artistic ambitions. Though he started out working in Harlem as a substitute cook and a hotel receptionist, he enrolled in 1921 in The School of the National Academy of Design, where he won prizes both for his nudes and his still lifes. He did not win the Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship in 1926, and to make up for this disappointment, both to Johnson and to his mentor, Charles W. Hawthorne, the latter managed to raise enough money to send his promising student to Paris later that year. Like other visual artists and writers of his generation, Johnson accordingly found himself in the bohemian Paris of the 1920s, where in the artist colony at Montparnasse he experienced first-hand the newest developments in French art (Powell, *Homecoming*, 10-21).

To escape two grey winters in the French capital, he relocated to Cagnes-sur-Mer, where European artists had gathered for decades. Before he went South, Johnson had presumably studied the Province paintings by Chaïm Soutine, whose expressionism came to inspire his own works of art. In the Scandinavian circle of artists, which included Vilhelm Lundstrøm and Aksel Salto, he met Holcha Krake, a textile artist born in Dalby on Funen, just outside of Kerteminde. She was traveling with her sister and brother-in-law, the German expressionist sculptor Christof Voll. In 1930, Johnson and Krake, sixteen years older than her groom, were married in Kerteminde. The two artists spent most of the 1930s in Denmark and Norway, until the political climate in Nazi Germany caused them to move to the US in 1938 (Smithsonian, Meisl). Still, Johnson's work on Funen remains a significant African American contribution to Danish cultural expression, and the Johannes Larsen Museum in Kerteminde owns and exhibits a small number of the works Johnson created in the studio he shared with his wife.

The couple's pre-nuptial agreement, which mentions only Krake's assets, lists eleven of Johnson's paintings, along with lithographs by German expressionist Oscar Kokoscha and works by Christof Voll. Johnson may not have been entirely welcome in Krake's family, but she herself trusted the scope and quality of his art and included it among her valuables (Meisl 10). In Denmark, Johnson worked mostly on portraits of local people he encountered in Kerteminde, on the landscapes surrounding his town of residence, and on motifs from picturesque Kerteminde and its close-by villages, such as the old mill and the Dalby church. A self-proclaimed primitivist, a complicated term at best, Johnson felt a special affinity with the fishermen of Kerteminde, whom he saw as genuine and authentic. They seemed to interviewers fond of Johnson. Fisherman Niels Due remembers Johnson as a handsome, straight-backed and athletic man and recalls that "he preferred to spend his time with fishermen. Why, I don't know" (Meisl 12). Because he felt at home among them, these local fishermen became his favorite subjects.

A visit to the Johannes Larsen museum, which houses five or six works from Johnson's time in Kerteminde, does not initially reveal much about the foreign-born artist, whom critics have called "reticent," "primitive," and "obscure," but also "prolific," "original," and "evocative" (Meisl, Margolies). The museum shop, which functions as a point of entry, brims over with coffee table books devoted to the works of Johannes Larsen, the Danish artist who headed the group of Funen painters. This group also included Fritz Syberg and Peter Larsen—books on Syberg were lavishly exhibited in the Larsen Museum gift shop. Johnson is obviously marginalized. In July 2016, no books or postcards related to his Kerteminde period, or to the artist himself, had found their way to the gift shop. In May 2017, a museum employee working the counter needed special assistance to respond to questions concerning Johnson's whereabouts. The manager disappeared for an extended period of time until she had located somewhere a booklet about the Johnsons, titled *Closer to the Sun*. Inside the museum, numerous paintings by Johannes Larsen, Fritz Syberg and one by the prominent Danish painter P. S. Krøyer, who worked out of Skagen in Northern Jutland, dominated a visitor's steps and attention. Looking for Johnson became detective work of sorts. A special collection on birds, one of Larsen's favorite motifs, further complicated the search. Finally, in a remote corner on the second floor of the exhibition building, a few of Johnson's works were on display, though difficult to see and study in the unlit space.

But if Kerteminde did not remember Johnson, Johnson remembered Kerteminde. Approximately a year after Holcha Krake's death from cancer in 1944, he painted *Minde Kerteminde*, a title roughly translated into "Memory of Kerteminde" and in the Smithsonian digital archive titled, in incorrect Danish, *Min Minde Fra Kerteminde Fyn 1930*. With this interesting autobiographical oil painting on paperboard, Johnson introduced to his viewers the places and people from his time on Funen. In *Black American Literature Forum*, Powell calls it "unabashedly anti-style." He also finds this painting "distinct . . . in terms of its reliance on highly personal and, perhaps, enigmatic pictures" and points to the tension between the language of modern art and a "primitive" point of view ("Minde" 394). Johnson explains in a letter to his in-laws in Denmark, written in a mixture of English and Danish, that *Minde Kerteminde* consists of portraits and scenes produced in the early part of his days on Funen. It includes significant Kerteminde landmarks such as the old fishermen's site at Lillestranden (the beach where the fishermen gathered), the church in Dalby (the village where his wife was born), another signature Funen church located in the village of Viby, and the town windmill, which visitors to the museum will find on the Johannes Larsen property. The characteristic Draaby church from northeast of Aarhus, the largest city in Jutland, has also found its way in, in Powell's view, because it has merged psychologically with Kerteminde in the artist's recollection ("Minde" 396).

In the letter vacillating between Danish and English, Johnson identifies the figures in *Minde Kerteminde* with his Danish in-laws. At the center "little Mor," his mother-in-law, sternly returns the artist's gaze. Other figures represented with faces and upper torsos, forming a circle of sorts, consist of Mayor Hansen, fishermen Jon Dues, Nielsen and Jorgensen, the latter two identified with last names only, and old Mrs. Winters. Johnson explains that he painted "9 portraits against a cerulean blue background with Kerteminde landmarks" ("Minde" 394). This blue suggests, of course, the sea, with fish swimming in opposite directions at the bottom of the painting. *Minde Kerteminde* obviously shows that Johnson still cared. As Powell puts it in his article, "what was in 1934 a dizzy, gestural love

affair with Denmark has become, by 1945, a diagrammatic, psychic, yet still emotionally charged statement on his former home" ("Minde" 396).

Like the fish about to collude at the bottom of *Minde Kerteminde*, the painting suggests contradictory impulses. It might indicate a break-down of narrative in favor of vignette, an early connection between the fishermen and the Harlem folk portraits, or a conscious primitivism. Powell connects the work to the painter's waning linguistic skills in Johnson's letter of explication, and to his technique and form: "Apart from showing his fading ability to speak Danish, this verbal wavering also mirrors the artistic vacillations between naturalistic representations (implied shadows, highlights, and some use of perspective) and fantastic image making (floating subject matter, surreal juxtapositions, and unnatural human coloring)" ("Minde" 394). He also comments on the painting as a stream of consciousness—visual or oral, or both. What Powell identifies as "unnatural" skin coloring nonetheless invites other, more contemporary interpretations. Viewers of the painting will indeed note the blue eyes of Kerteminde's population, which in a realist painting would accompany a light-hued skin. Johnson highlights these blue eyes to suggest a connection to the sea below, the fishermen's Danish ethnicity, or what to him might have seemed exotic. But he paints the Kerteminde folk in *Minde Kerteminde* with a dark skin that not even weeks or months at sea would realistically have provided. This darker skin color suggests a bond between the African American southerner and his Danish friends and acquaintances. Only one person, the stern and centrally positioned mother-in-law, has retained a whiter skin. Obviously, she did not qualify as folk, or maybe even as a friend, or friendly. The love affair with Denmark looks complicated at best.

But Johnson's love affair with his wife does not. In a hand-colored woodcut on paper from the mid-1930s titled *Willie and Holcha*, now owned by the Smithsonian, the artist transformed his Danish wife into an African American woman. Krake wears a yellow hat that looks like a turban, and her features are similar to those of her husband. The two heads on display are close together, and they both have brown skin. No racial divides enter this woodcut, and the identical skin color—Johnson's perhaps slightly more yellow so as to match Holcha's headgear—suggests a strong union. The brown skin that Holcha Krake shares with the fishermen and townspeople in *Minde Kerteminde* suggests that Johnson uses this not-so-unnatural color to represent an emotional connection between himself and the dark-skinned figures in his portraits, a bond that, as I have suggested, did not extend to his Danish mother-in-law.

Johnson's largest painting at the Johannes Larsen Museum depicts Kerteminde rooftops from a bird's eye perspective. In *Closer to the Sun*, Meisl reproduces both the painting and its title: *Udsigt over Friheden*, in English "View of Freedom." It is unclear, however, whether this title is Johnson's own or has been added by a museum curator. Though the painting, as Meisl explains, is inspired by the small fishermen's houses with red roofs, Johnson blends southern, or African, earth tones in brown, ochre and red into the typical Danish townscape. A distant windmill, grey and blue sky, and cloud formations supply other recognizable Danish ingredients. But the unstable, slanted perspective suggests the tension that the transnational and transracial experience in Kerteminde provoked as well. The rooftops that local Danish painters found idyllic and cozy have in Johnson's painting merged in unstable constellations, as if to suggest discord and unrest, or a closeness contradicted by the unruly clouds and troubled sky. The painting speaks to issues of cultural transmissions and crossroads, and transnationality and its (dis)contents. One Kerteminde

fisherman, Niels Due, spoke before his death of Johnson's art: "One day he came with some pictures, a whole stack of big paintings, and they were all here from this town; but even though the town was not very big and I knew all of it, I couldn't see where any of it was from. I was really embarrassed" (Meisl 12). Johnson subsequently gave Niels Due a small sketch, clearly depicting the harbor and still hanging in the old fisherman's room at the time of the interview. Obviously, Johnson's so-called "View of Freedom" was entirely his own.

Johnson's paintings served as cultural bridges—as in the Due episode—but they also inscribed his difference, which Kerteminde intensified. One privately-owned Johnson painting, *Portræt af en Fisker*, in English "Portrait of a Fisherman" (Meisl 13), represents this cultural difference. It portrays an older man, with darkened skin, at least in patches, to signal the bond that also characterized the fishermen in the *Minde Kerteminde* painting. But the old man's eyes are missing, or covered over, in the portrait. They appear as hollows in a face that otherwise has a surprised, almost startled expression. This missing gaze might, at least to later audiences, suggest the lack of mutuality in Johnson's relationship with Danish fishermen: he saw them, but they did not see him. Also the background in "Portrait of a Fisherman" is worth noting, because it is divided by light and color—darkness dominates to the right, with rough patches of brown paint, while the left of the painting is lighter, dominated by green and beige. The color scheme, with the darker right background spreading into the left, indicates a double vision. The blind fisherman does not see it all, but Johnson did.

One Dane sitting for his portrait in Johnson's studio stands out. In *Portrait (Danish Boy)*, now in the Smithsonian and dated approximately 1930-32, Johnson represents a Danish youth with huge blue eyes, their color repeated for emphasis in his blue shirt and collar, where the frame cuts him off. The boy looks slightly, perhaps very troubled. His wide-open eyes look anxiously or fearfully not at the artist, but off to the side, slightly to the left. Something about the watercolor sketch and its young subject hints at a connection, as if the artist were familiar with the tensions within this Danish boy and the insecurity, or anxiety, he exudes. Also, the brown patches on the boy's light-colored skin indicate that the two share if not ethnicity, then some sort of violated innocence. The Danes did not meet the gaze of the southern artist among them, but Johnson had obviously studied the people who were now his neighbors or friends. He saw the nuances, the inner and exterior worlds, of his townspeople.

A little-known painting at the Larsen museum expresses most radically the tensions that an artist of color would experience in a close-knit, homogeneous town in Denmark in the 1930s. This painting, which sits in the corner of the second floor at the Larsen Museum exhibition building, depicts a signature Funen house, a *bindingsværkhus* or a half-timbered house, about to explode from within. In Danish culture the *bindingsværk* suggests provincial coziness or *hygge*; it is Danish peasantry as homogeneous and humble as can be—it is Hans Christian Andersen, who was born on Funen, and rural Danish culture (Porsmose and Truelsen 9-17). Fritz Syberg had drawn this type of house in Svanninge, where he and his wife Anna lived after their wedding. He sketched this type of farmer's house with flowers, sunshine and Hans Christian Andersen idyll; indeed, he would in this period illustrate some of the famous writer's important fairy tales (Voss, *Fynboerne* 27). By contrast, Johnson's painting in *Closer to the Sun* titled *Bondehus på Hirshold* ("Farmer's House at Hirshold") shows this type of house with irregular, fragile-looking walls and a

roof in turmoil, brought about with rough, disjointed knife strokes. The flagpole behind the house has a flag that is lowered as if a death had occurred, and the surroundings seem floating, as if the house were flooded or at sea. The sky above is whitish blue, contributing to the sense of the house situated in an unreal, airy, and unstable space.

Johnson's form in this painting relates to the "chaotic" or "disorganized" expressionism that some critics have identified (Larsen Museum). It relates to primitivism, and it also follows the line from the street scenes and houses of his Cagnes-sur Mer period, or Chaïm Soutine's dancing city art. As the Musée de l'Orangerie website states about Soutine's *Houses* (1921-22), "the buildings twist and undulate in a hallucinatory vision, reflecting the painter's inner turmoil." Johnson's farmer's house, as obscure in Johnson criticism as the corner in which it hangs, suggests the wish to transform the Danish soul and Danish society from within. The house communicates frustration, and not the celebration this type of house usually earns. To have this symbol of Denmark burst, as if from inside itself, would signal to his audience Johnson's impatience and social criticism. The house is full of pain, frustration, and tension, rather than traditional values, family, home, and tranquility. Johnson would pick the same motifs as his Funen colleagues working in Kerteminde—the harbor, the view of the roofs, the old fishermen, their houses and boats. The interplay of human beings and architecture suggests an influence from Peter Larsen, and from the Funen painters as a group (Voss, *Fynsk Malerkunst* 90). But Johnson added his own transnational and transracial touch, the outsider's perspective of a southerner in the North.

The Funen painters constitute an important, but largely unexplored context for Johnson's life and work. They do not figure beyond an occasional mention in the scant critical literature on the mysterious or marginalized African American artist. Even in 2018, Johnson makes no appearance on the Johannes Larsen Museum website or from online lists of the friends and colleagues of the Funen or Peasant painters, as they were also known. Officially, the group consisted of Johannes Larsen, Anna and Fritz Syberg, Peter Hansen, and Christine and Sigurd Swane, some of whom lived into the 1960s. Like these Funen artists, Johnson found his inspiration locally, among the ordinary folk. Two early paintings by Peter Larsen, *Høstbillede* ("Harvest Scene") from 1910 and *Pløjemanden Vender* ("The Ploughman Turns"), dated 1900-02, suggest their overlapping interests. In his summer scene, Larsen focuses on rural harvesters, almost hidden by large straw hats, cutting the large field with their scythes, cloud formations and a glimpse of the sea closing in the view in the upper right corner. His ploughman also typifies local field hands. Larsen paints him from the back, with only his blue jacket, white pants, his cap and heavy boots as identity markers. The size of his horse and his body posture nonetheless suggest his strength, and the dignity of his labor. In both paintings the figures interact harmoniously with nature, as in the harvest scene, where the glints of yellow in the workers' clothes reflect the sun-drenched corn field (Voss, *Fynboerne* 146).

The Funen painters found inspiration in nature (Skov), in the hills outside Kerteminde or at the northern point of the island, Funen's Head. Fritz Syberg, who now has a room of his own at the Johannes Larsen Museum, moved with his wife and children to Willow Farm, just outside Kerteminde. He would paint the surrounding countryside and the characteristic willow trees bordering the rural dirt roads, motifs that Johnson would also represent in watercolor sketches and oil paintings. Johnson also shared the point of departure of the Funen artists: to complete the work on location, when possible. He also experimented with limited perspective, facilitated by the hollow mirror Niels Hansen

described. Fritz Syberg's *Ved Frokosten* ("At Lunch") from 1906 suggests this technique. It depicts a plate with traditional Danish *smørrebrød*, rye bread topped with cheese, herring, boiled eggs and local sausage, a foaming glass of beer and a small glass of aquavit with a bottle for refill completing this Danish countryside lunch. A bit of the table shows, but the artist's lens has zoomed in on the food. In 1931 Johnson would paint *Still Life (with Book and Fruit)* (Powell, *Homecoming* 67), with local apples stacked on two plates dominating the still life, though two bananas—rare in Denmark at the time—and a colorful tablecloth added his own touch to the arrangement.

Like the Funen painters, Johnson used simple strokes and lines. In *Old Salt, Denmark*, dated 1931-32 in Powell's *Homecoming* (81), the fisherman's blue coat consists of rough strokes, which also make up the brown background and the old salt's red nose and cheeks—brought about either by rough weather or the aquavit that accompanied many a lunch—or dinner—in Danish fishermen's culture. Johnson's Norway paintings also employ the rough strokes that go with the mountains, rocks and pines in the Norwegian wilderness. Powell quotes a critic describing a painting from Johnson's stay in Norway, *Midnight, Lofoten* (1937), as "brutal," with colors about to explode and mountains resembling "Cyclopean blocks on the verge of tumbling over" (*Homecoming* 108). The dramatic landscape in Norway corresponded directly to the artist's state of mind. An anonymous Swedish reviewer noted that "the forceful power of this landscape has awakened in [Johnson's] artistic soul, something that has come out with an eruptive force" (qtd. Powell, *Homecoming* 108). But the undramatic Kerteminde and Johnson's Danish motifs also inspired his attacks on provincial comfort and complacency. In *Port in Gray Weather, Kerteminde* (1933-34), Johnson uses grey and black colors, irregular rough strokes and destabilized houses and ships' masts to create the dramatic effect and the intensity that his Norwegian landscapes inspired.

In Sweden, Johnson sold one oil painting to the Modern Museum in Stockholm, the only museum buying his work during his lifetime: *Pige i Rød Kjole* or "Girl in Red Dress" from about 1936 (Meisl 29). Powell describes this colorful portrait of Liv Baarstad, a young girl from Volda in Norway, whose looks drew Johnson to his canvas: "Johnson employs brilliant colors, anatomical distortions, and a few enigmatic pictorial elements (e. g., the window in the upper-right corner and the wisp of flower in the girl's hand), all of which foster an image more wooden and doll-like than flesh-and-blood." He concludes that "these same abstracting devices by Johnson work towards making *Girl in Red Dress* a more psychological and, essentially, a more expressive portrait" (Powell, *Homecoming* 235, 101). Powell does not mention, however, that *Girl in Red Dress* evokes the everyday motifs and stylized expression of the Funen painters and also points to the paintings of people of color that marked Johnson's later career.

After Johnson and his wife moved to New York City to escape the prejudice rising south of the Danish border and elsewhere, Johnson turned for inspiration towards African American folk and their culture, both in the South and in northern cities. His work at the Harlem Community Art Center from 1939 reflects his awareness of black folk culture, his resistance to existing racial arrangements, and his attempts to develop an African American aesthetics, often inspired by West African art. Dalton marvels at the scenes and topics of the "iconic, cartoonlike paintings and vibrant colors" that Johnson produced prior to his wife's death six years after their arrival in the US: "his Harlem street scenes; his rural southern pictures with African-Americans as archetypes, plowing, sowing, reaping, and

churchgoing; his tempera paintings of African-American soldiers and Red Cross volunteers; his Breakdown and Honeymoon series that depict African-American couples and families coping with collapsed vehicles and hard times; his images of jitterbugging in Harlem" (163). As Johnson himself explained: "In all my years of painting, I have had one absorbing and inspiring idea, and have worked towards it with unyielding zeal: to give—in simple and stark form—the story of the Negro as he has existed" (qtd. Dalton 164). But it is hardly a break with his Danish period that he turned to African American motifs and subjects after he no longer lived and worked on Funen. The painters belonging to the artist colony in Kerteminde simply painted their everyday surroundings in coastal Denmark: the town, the sea, the ships, the fishermen and the birds (Fabritius and Porsmose 95). Johnson's portraits of Kerteminde fishermen and their everyday lives led him to his new life and choice of material: the African American folk and their joys and hardships.

Wherever he worked, Johnson criticized inequality, traditionalism, and prejudice. His paintings of Harlem street life and his Breakdown Series, such as *The Breakdown*, and *Breakdown with Flat Tire* (1940–41), literally and metaphorically explore the struggles of African American life. The latter, painted with oil on plywood, depicts a family of four in a rural landscape, stuck on the road with their primitive vehicle, the husband on his knees so as to take off the broken wheel. Only the small cross on the front of their car suggests hope or direction. The works in the Breakdown Series run parallel in terms of techniques and narration to Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, consisting of sixty panels depicting African American experiences in the rural South and the urban North, both places marked by suffering, hardship, and communal solidarity.

Like Lawrence, Johnson celebrated Frederick Douglass, as in the "Fighters for Freedom" paintings, his 1945 series of prominent African American figures promoting racial equality. In *Let My People Free*, Johnson positions Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass standing across from each other at a table, while tortured, suffering slaves hover between them in nightmarish fashion. In *Three Great Abolitionists*, also from 1945, Douglass holds hands with John Brown and Harriet Tubman. Both works belong to a phase in Johnson's career when he focused on high-profile figures, including Dr. George Washington Carver, an agricultural researcher at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, who over four decades developed new uses for the crops of Southern black farmers. He also did a pencil and carbon transfer on paper of Mahatma Gandhi. These works from the mid-40s suggest the meeting of local and global perspectives in Johnson's art.

In *Twentieth-Century Art* (2002), Erika Doss briefly mentions Johnson by name in a section on "The New Negro Movement and the Harmon Foundation," which sponsored him in various contexts (93). In her essay on Johnson, Lawrence, and Bearden, Margolies finds that these African American artists are frequently "not considered mainstream" (13). She mentions, though only in passing, strong links between the three. These links include the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's role in Bearden's first exhibition, their Harlem addresses at various points, Bearden's and Lawrence's membership in the 306 group of African American artists, Johnson and Lawrence's work for the WPA, and travels to Europe. As for their work, they share an inspiration from cartoons, geometrical shapes, a bright color scheme and striking patterns, not to mention the African American experience itself as a subject of their art (13).

Soon after the death of his wife, Johnson returned to Scandinavia. He moved to Copenhagen, proposed to his widowed sister-in-law and was rejected, roamed the streets

with bundles of clothing and art, got picked up for vagrancy and released, and had seventy-eight works exhibited at Kunsthallen, a well-known gallery and auction house in the Danish capital. He then left Copenhagen, disturbed the peace aboard the ferryboat to Norway, and in Oslo lived in a workman's shack on the wharf. After another arrest, Johnson was transferred to Ullevål Hospital and diagnosed with an "advanced case of syphilis-induced paresis," though observers and relatives ascribe his irrational behavior as much to his bereavement and feelings of isolation and rejection. Johnson was moved to Gaustad Hospital and eventually deported to the States. On December 1, 1947, he entered Long Island's Central Islip State Hospital, a large mental institution, where he spent the last twenty-three years of his life. At first, the hospital staff found "some hope for recovery" and noted that Johnson had drawn a bit, but a friend from his Norway days with Holcha put this hope to rest in a letter to her sister: "Willie . . . is physically very well, but his mental condition is not good, and not likely to get better. . . . He is well cared for, and seems content, imagining himself in telepathic communication with someone. He likes doing outside work, but he will not attempt to paint. He asks for nothing" (Powell, *Homecoming* 219-21).

Had it not been for the intervention of Helen Harriton, whose letter is quoted above, and the Harmon Foundation, most of Johnson's art would be lost. The Foundation took over the content of Johnson's storage space, which consisted of "paintings, watercolors, drawings, prints, textiles, books, papers, and personal letters," all in a state of disrepair. Powell describes this neglect: "Many of Johnson's heavily painted oils on canvas (and burlap) were cracked and chipped beyond repair. Paintings on laminated wooden panels had buckled under countless temperature and humidity changes. And dozens of textiles and works on paper had been chewed down to shreds by vermin" (*Homecoming* 224). The Smithsonian houses most of Johnson's output from his New York period; his African American motifs, from southern roads and fields to Harlem streets and clubs, now constitute his legacy. But eighty-one sketches, paintings and woodcuts in the Smithsonian relate to Denmark: Danish houses, seascapes, fishermen and landscapes. These works show Johnson's debt to famous European artists and to local Danish ones such as Johannes Larsen and Fritz Syberg. In October 2018, however, no works of Johnson's were on display in the Smithsonian, though a few paintings were stacked in the top-floor storage area, in a corner as quiet and dark as in the Larsen museum. Johnson remains marginalized in African American art history, in Washington, D.C., and in Kerteminde. Powell notes that "we like to imagine that the sheer quality of fine works of art is sufficient to persuade audiences of their worth, but in truth we are all conditioned by the assumptions we inherit, and an 'obscure' artist is assumed to be less worthy of attention until his case is forcefully made" (*Homecoming* vii).

In Kerteminde, the fishermen Johnson painted have given way for sporty Danes, well-heeled Germans, luxurious sailboats and visitors to cherry festivals and gourmet markets. Yet Johnson belongs there, though the people he met in this corner of Denmark thought him weird and exotic. His difference, however, gave him a distinctive perspective on Funen, grounded in southern life and customs, European modernism and expressionism, and African American aesthetics. Johnson created peaceful, idyllic paintings and sketches from Kerteminde and the picturesque countryside surrounding it, as well as much darker, even ominous views of the life and motifs he found there. In one oil painting from between 1933 and 1936, called *Danish Houses*, the typical fisherman's homes along a narrow street are dancing, as in Soutine's dancing city works from Cagnes-sur-Mer, but

in Denmark it is a *dance macabre*. The red roofs have turned black and stand shoulder to shoulder, as if to keep out anybody from the outside trying to fit in. Above the rows of merging rooftops, the sky is dominated by fierce, unruly cloud formations: not a welcoming scene. A photograph of Johnson from this period shows him, nonetheless, in a fisherman's hand-knitted sweater, underneath the signature blue jacket still sold in maritime Danish shops. His hat, however, belongs somewhere else—it is suave, with a shiny band, and Johnson wears it confidently, in a devil-may-care fashion. As in his paintings and drawings, he blended the local with the global, in that he inscribed his own regional and racial identity onto Danish provincial life and expression. In his life, travels, and art, he represented a noteworthy transnational and transracial experience, as well as the cost of cultural exchange. The many pieces saved by the Harmon Foundation, now at the Smithsonian, and the scattered works in Kerteminde both celebrated African American visions and aesthetics but also recorded the struggles of a southerner of African descent going North.

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After some 15 years of teaching Latin and Italian Languages at the Junior high schools in Torino, **Valeria Gennaro Lerda** initiated her research in United States History. She received several important grants in the US (Fulbright Travel and research grants three times, the ACLS—American Council of Learned Societies grant [1978-1979], the Albert Beveridge grant, that allowed her to do research on primary sources and archival sources and to start publishing essays and books. Her first position as Assistant at the University of Genoa lasted from 1976 to 1981, the position of Associate tenured Professor from 1981 to 1996, and eventually the position of Full Professor of North American History from 1996 her retirement in 2007. Valeria Gennaro was Director of the *Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies* (University of Genoa) from 1997 to 2007; co-founder of the *Southern Studies Forum* of the EAAS (Berlin, 1998-), and currently member of the Advisory Board; she was a member of the Board of the *Italian Association of American Studies*, of the *Italian Association of Canadian Studies*, of the Editorial Board of *Southern Cultures* (1993-1995); member of the International Committee of the *Southern Historical Association (USA)*. She has authored or co-authored fifteen books on United States History and Canadian History, with a focus on agrarian and cooperative movements, and women's history. Her first book, published in 1981 and reprinted in 1984, was *Il populismo americano: Movimenti radicali di protesta agraria nella seconda metà dell'800 (American Populism: Radical Movements of Agrarian Protest in the Second Half of Nineteenth Century)*. The book was very well received in the United States and cited in the *New York Times Books Review*. On the American South specifically, besides many essays in Italy and abroad, she published "*Il suono delle nostre voci*" ("*The Sound of Our Voices*": *Southern Women and Social Reforms, 1877-1920*), 1992; *Dall'Arcadia alle Riforme. Studi sul Sud degli Stati Uniti (From Arcady to Reform: Studies on the United States South)* (1992); *The United States South: Regionalism and Identity*, ed. with Tjebbe Westendorp (1991); *Rewriting the South: History and Fiction*, ed. with Lothar Hoennighausen (1993). She also published on the Canadian North West: *La Frontiera del grano (1896-1918): L'Ovest nella storia canadese* (1992), and several essays on Irene Marryat Parlbay, a reformer in Alberta. in the early 1900s. She has edited, in her capacity as a Director, the series of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, for Greenwood Press/Praeger *Which "Global Village?" Societies, Cultures, and Political-Economic Systems in a Euro-Atlantic Perspective* (2002), and co-edited, *Canadian and American Women: Moving from Private to Public Experiences in the*

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This collection of essays brings together an international group of scholars who discuss various facets of the American South in popular culture, literature, the arts, and throughout history. It includes reflections on place, on the importance of memory in shaping individual identity, and on race, class and gender. All the contributions confirm Howard's Zinn's idea that the South "is not damnable, but marvelously useful, as a mirror in which the nation can see its blemishes magnified, so that it will hurry to correct them." This volume sheds light on the "marvelous" sides of the South though it does not overlook its darker ones, thus making it possible to better understand this peculiar region.

