

# Polish Journal for American Studies

Yearbook of the Polish Association for American Studies

Vol. 13 (Autumn 2019)

Special Issue

Other Souths on Page and Screen  
Edited by Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis



INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

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Yearbook of the Polish Association for American Studies

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Other Souths on Page and Screen

Edited by Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

Warsaw 2019

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*Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis*



## From the South as the Abjected Regional Other to Kaleidoscopic Souths

The American South has never been a homogenous concept yet there exists, according to W. J. Cash, “a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation, and exhibiting within itself a remarkable homogeneity” (xlvii). In the 1993 inaugural issue of *Southern Cultures* Harry Watson and John Shelton Reed claimed in “The Front Porch” that “although it may be said that there is one South, there are also many Souths, and many cultural traditions among them ... There is one South spawned by its many cultures” (1993). Yet, up until the late nineteenth century southern writers tried to evoke an image of their region based on “slavery, mocking birds, hominy grits and Bourbon whisky” (Lawson 47). By eliminating from literature any experience which contradicted their own (e.g. of poor whites, African Americans, women, immigrants, and others), white southern writers tried to create a monolithic image of the patriarchal South. Such a partial projected image was of course reductive in nature, as the South has always been a union of opposites – such as “calm grace and raw hatred, polished manners and violence, individualism and conformism” (Holman 1). Indeed, such opposites inspired various twentieth-century writers to reflect on differing dimensions of the region. Writers such as Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers and Barry Hannah employed alternative modes of representation (southern gothic, grotesque, irony, black humor, to name a few). Harry Crews and Dorothy Allison visualized the poor white existence in southern letters. Racial struggles and the issue of passing were memorably depicted by Charles Chesnutt. Tennessee Williams’, Reynolds Price’s, and Charles Nelson’s texts show how the South perceived and dealt with masculinity and homosexuality. Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full* depicted immigrants as the Other. Writers seek the Caribbean connection by re-positioning the South in the global discourse. Asian and Latino diasporas below the Mason and Dixon line are becoming more visible and vocal. The southern landscape has also lured television producers, and such varied TV shows as *True Blood*, *Treme*, *American Horror Story*, *Walking Dead* and *True Detective* have attracted huge audiences.

The present themed issue of *Polish Journal for American Studies* devoted to the study of “Other Souths on Page and Screen” does not seek a holistic image of the South, because, to quote Hugh Holman again, “[e]ach of these monistic concepts is true within its own limits, and each is false as a picture of the entire region. For each of these concepts has been an attempt to bind together a heterogeneous land and a varied people through the application of a Procrustean model made of monistic and simplistic – although often highly sophisticated – generalizations” (97). Keeping in mind the inexhaustibility and complexity of the South as a region, the special issue of *PJAS* aims to reexamine and reassess the image of Other Souths presented in literature, cinematography and popular culture. The contributors to this issue grapple with a land spanning from Appalachia to the Delta, from the Tidewater to the Sunbelt, a land which is equally fraught with history and as it is with mythology.



The relationship between the United States and the American South, its most exceptional region, has always been complicated. It was shaped by various economic, historical and political factors, but what

remains constant across U.S. history is the conceptual structure provided to us by our South: it is an *internal other* for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole. On the one hand, the United States simply never would have existed without the five southernmost of its original thirteen states ... On the other hand, our South in its most enduring associations – slavery, white supremacy, underdevelopment, poverty, backwardness – bluntly contradicts the national ideal. (Greeson, *Our South* 1)

The South looms as a projection of Northern imagining. The idea of the South was imagined in nation-building through various regional fantasies. The South became “the negative reference point” in the formation of a national identity (Cobb 4). James Cobb also explains that the “inclination both to make invidious comparisons between the South and the North and to see the latter as the normative standard for the entire nation dated back well before the civil rights era to the earliest days of American independence” (4). The South thus becomes the aberrant Other, while the Nation at large is the norm. Such “othering” of the South illustrates a discursive process by which, according to French geographer J.F. Staszak, “a dominant in-group (‘Us,’ the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (‘Them,’ the Other) by stigmatizing a difference real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination” (43). Such a process is clearly based on an asymmetrical power distribution: only the dominant group can impose identity, the out-group is at the receiving end of the othering process (Staszak 43). The choice of others tells us as much about the abjected group as about the identity of “Us”/the self, since “[o]therness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa” (Staszak 43). Thus, when “one understands the South as the negation of America ... one is also likely to understand more deeply what America is, and what it is (or ought to be), in particular, is the opposite of the South” (Griffin 67).

The American South was shaped by its economic dependence on chattel slavery, the cultural impact of Africans, the Civil War, Reconstruction, forced and voluntary Black migrations, the persistence of Jim Crow, and – most recently – shifting immigration patterns, and “the New Jim Crow” of mass incarceration, to use Michelle Alexander’s phrase. Despite those historical changes, “[o]n the one hand, the South is rightfully and naturally ours because it is part of the United States” claims Jennifer Rae Greeson; “on the other hand, it is ours in subjection or thrall because it is apart from the United States” (*Our South* 9). In each historical period the South became a screen onto which writers projected their various concerns about the nation.<sup>1</sup> Since the

1 “In the early republic, ‘the Plantation South’ serves writers negotiating nationalization itself; in the antebellum decades, ‘the Slave South’ provides the baseline against which industrialization and continental expansion are conceived; and in the latter part of the nineteenth century, ‘the Reconstruction South’ becomes the imaginative field for writers confronting the question of empire head-on” (Greeson, *Our South* 13).

South is central to the evolving idea of the nation, it has always been hailed by some and despised by others.

America's defining features, sentiments and fears found their most extreme manifestations in the South, which is a region blighted with unspeakable poverty and great wealth, gratuitous violence and devout piety, prevalent racism and benign paternalism. By projecting their anxieties onto southern culture white Americans, as it were, quarantined below the Mason-Dixon line their sentiments which could (not so) potentially harm their fragile self-image/ self-fashioning. At the same time Yankees could live vicariously observing the South from the distance of both their homes and the moral high-ground. Having whitewashed their own racist sentiments some Yankees could deny their own guilty conscience and detach themselves from the regional "Other." Through ascribing extreme manifestations of America's imperatives to the southern states Americans not only could distance themselves from the abjected regional "Other," but also they could, if they chose to, demonstrate that the backward region could be domesticated and integrated.

Jennifer Rae Greeson also argues that "[w]ith remarkable fluidity, 'our South' aligns with and diverges from 'the United States' writ large, creating a symbiotic *ideological juxtaposition* in which each term is defined by reference to the other" (*Our South* 1).<sup>2</sup> As a result of this "us versus them" dichotomy southerners "traditionally have had to define themselves in opposition to a presumed American norm," and consequently they became the aberrant version of the norm (Hackney 287). Yet with new analytical angles which encompass a multitude of theoretical approaches and methodological interventions,<sup>3</sup> the revisionist spirit broadens the analytical perspective of the South as the abjected Other to the South in relation to other regions in the USA (not just the North), to the Americas, or to the Global South. The act of imagining connections and disruptions repositions the South in configurations not pictured before. Recent theoretical reconfigurations of the South allow us to see new alignments, which open doors to multiple articulations of the South.

The present issue of *Polish Journal for American Studies* offers a critical voice in the debate about the American South and Southern studies. Contributors to this issue explore "Other Souths" which supplement, compete with, or even at times contradict each other. Such often overlapping cultural and symbolic contexts can inform us about the complexity of the region which in itself has become, according to Tara McPherson, "a point of condensation for various regional and national narratives

2 Jennifer Rae Greeson also argues that "the nationalization of the United States was built in part upon an intranational, regionally-inflected symbolic geography" structured on the "ideological juxtaposition" to the American South ("The Figure of the South" 210).

3 The most recent interventions of New Southern studies include, among many others, Jon Smith, *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*, 2013; Keith Cartwright, *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern Time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-Creole Authority*, 2013; Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner, eds. *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond*, 2015. Brook Thomas, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White*. 2017; Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree, eds. *Small-Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television*, 2017; Michele Grigsby Coffey and Jodi Skipper, ed. *Navigating Souths: Transdisciplinary Explorations of a U.S. Region*, 2017; and Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film*, 2018.

of place, race, and gender” (18). In a sense *Other Souths on Page and Screen* offers a critical reflection on kaleidoscopic Souths. Much like bits of colored glass in a shifting symmetrical geometric design, the topics analyzed on the following pages reflect the intricate design of the Southern imaginary.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly to a kaleidoscope, the ever-changing and shifting images of the South amaze scholars and readers of the region. Objects in the kaleidoscope – bits of colored glass, pebbles, or beads – are never arranged exactly the same way twice. With each turn of the kaleidoscope tube, these objects will never be perfectly identical. When we look at the South through varying lenses, the elements of the South under analysis are realigned to form new articulations. Thus, the contributions to the present issue of *Polish Journal for American Studies* – be they about Appalachian and/or African American presence in the South, Hollywood infatuation with the South, or about (internal) conflicts and tensions in southern culture and literature – discuss issues which are not alien to Southernists; yet the originality and novelty of these contributions result from the realignment of angles and methodologies which explore the analytical potential of the American South. The concept of multiple reflections, the key to a kaleidoscope’s patterns, also captures the complexity of the South’s shifting, multiplying images which are best activated when informed by different discourses (e.g. critical race studies, rhetorical, critical regionalism, or literary genre studies).<sup>5</sup>

A few words are in order about the contours of “Other Souths on Page and Screen.” The contributors to this special issue of *PJAS* are Americanists and Southernists from Europe. Most of us have made the South a continued object of our research. More than half of us belong to the *Southern Studies Forum* (of *European Association for American Studies*), whose biennial conferences give us an opportunity to converse about things southern at various European universities. The rest of us have devoted our academic careers to studying American literature and culture, while making occasional academic excursions into southern territory. This special issue of *PJAS* is a meeting ground for European literary and cultural studies scholars, both tenure-track and early career researchers, who want to reconceptualize the American South in the fields of fiction, film, and other cultural manifestations.

The first part of this themed *PJAS* issue – “Appalachia and Beyond” – is dedicated to mapping Appalachia, which has always been perceived as “the South’s South” (Reed, *Southern Folk* 42). This section consists of two articles, both of which capture a powerful image of communities and livelihoods from the hills of the Ozarks, the Appalachian mountains, and adjacent islands. In “Appalachia as Trumpland: Honor,

4 I use the word imaginary as a noun after Charles Taylor for whom the term social imaginary “mean[t] something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go in between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations” (*Modern Social Imaginaries* 23).

5 The theme of the Biennial Conference of *The Society for the Study of Southern Literature* in 2014 was “Other Souths: Approaches, Alliances, Antagonisms” (<https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2013/03/05/sssl-biennial-conference-march-27-29-2014>). Since there is a number of Other Souths, neither the present volume nor the papers delivered at the SSSL conference in Arlington, Virginia exhaust the analytical potential of the American South.

Precarity, and Affect in Literature from the Mountain South Appalachia,” Marianne Kongerslev and Clara Juncker analyze the Grit Lit novels which depict the destitution and devastation of this region’s communities. In a sense these fictional portrayals – Wilma Dykeman’s *Family of Earth*, Breece D’J. Pancake’s *Stories*, and J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* – illustrate Edgerton’s sarcastic remark that “[i]n the well-educated Northern imagination, the rural South is a vast, forbidding wasteland of poverty, prejudice, and despair.” Appalachia has been represented in national imaginary as the poorest, the most ignorant and the most preposterous community. It comes as no surprise that “critical stereotypes of Southerners [which] are (and always have been) part of the Northern DNA .... conflate a whole host of issues – white resentment, gun worship, religious fundamentalism, racism – and apply that uniformly to millions of people” (Edgerton). Indeed, Kongerslev and Juncker’s analysis confirms Appalachia’s legacy of disadvantage, but also points out the mountain folk’s particular relationship to the land and a distinctive sense of honor. Unfortunately, frustrated honor codes lead to anxiety, anger, and violence. Kongerslev and Juncker explain how rural folk mediate white liberal anxieties and contextualize why Trump voters were depicted as reactionary hillbillies. Interestingly enough, a few years prior to Trump’s election John O’Brien in his regional memoir *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia* captured the exploitation of Appalachia for political purposes: “One of my best friends told me that his father sometimes said that Appalachia had wheels on it. It rolled around the mountains, and like a traveling circus of hillbillies, stopped wherever the politicians wanted it to stop” (52).

In the second contribution, “Out of Eden: Old South, Post-South and Ur-South in Sara Taylor’s *The Shore*,” Marco Petrelli offers a stimulating analysis of Taylor’s harrowing debut novel through the prism of magical realism. The implementation of magic realist strategies in “Othered” cultures shows the experience of a threat of extinction and erasure in coastal cultures. Petrelli also sees the location of the novel – a group of lush, isolated islands off the coast of Virginia – as part of the aesthetic category of magical realism which gives voice to those silenced and excluded in the region but also in the family saga as well. Magic realism augments a southern “sense of place” in these offshore islands in a region long colonized and ignored. They are located at the edge of Appalachia – the already peripheral part of the South, the fringe space where nature is not only intimately connected with humans but also affected by them. Analyzing psycho-geographical and socio-historical dimensions allows Petrelli to arrive at the conclusion that the novel depicts “deep archetypal structure as an ‘Ur-South’: the most primeval and untainted (and therefore intrinsically regenerative) form of the southern pastoral myth.”

Part 2 – “The Hollywood South” – brings attention to the South’s richly documented flirtation with moving pictures.<sup>6</sup> For years now American and international audiences have been flooded with a tsunami of large- and small-screen portrayals of

6 Book-length representations of the South in American cinema include (listed chronologically): Edward Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981; Warren French, ed. *The South and Film*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981; Larry Langman and David Ebner. *Hollywood’s Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001; Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee eds. *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011.

the South. Even historians, who do not work with movies as a source of historical material, realized that “millions of Americans have had their vision of the South, race relations, and even the entire panorama of our past shaped if not wholly defined by the movie business” (Clinton 204). Movie makers conjured up the kind of South that would “construct and ... unsettle national narratives” (Barker and McKee 1). Hence, the Hollywood film industry participated in the process of “othering” the American South. Movies featuring the “moonlight and magnolia South,” so popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were the antithesis to encroaching modernity, while the post WWII movies whitewashed their racial guilty conscience by presenting a “South populated by pitiful poor farmers, sadistic rednecks, sex objects, and greedy, ambitious members of a corrupt upper class” (Campbell 143). Regardless of its image – the sugarcoated or backwards, violent South – the region’s identity was used as the already mentioned “the negative reference point” in the formation of a national identity (Cobb 4). This process of cinematic “othering” bears similarity to David R. Jansson’s term “internal orientalism,” which implies that “representations of a degenerate South inform an exalted national identity” (293). If this “internal orientalism” is used to explain Hollywood’s exploitation of South’s “tales, myths, culture, and sometimes the great talents,” then the moviemaking-business becomes a “colonizer” of sorts who imposes “its own language and concerns on the southern raw material, feeling no particular obligation to ‘get it right’” (Cheshire).

Hollywood created its own version of the southern imaginary, which Barker and McKee see “as an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, ideas, attitudes, practices, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographic region and time” (1).<sup>7</sup> The first contribution in this section – Marie Liénard-Yeterian’s article “Wither the South on Screen: Revisiting Some Recent Releases” – offers a contemplative look at the Other South on screen in the posthuman context. Her analysis of post-millennial films, such as *No Country for Old Men* (2007); *The Road* (2009); *Django Unchained* (2012); *The Counselor* (2013); *The Hateful Eight* (2015); *The Birth of a Nation* (2016); *The Beguiled* (2017), and *The Mule* (2018), demonstrates how Hollywood constructs the southern past and consequently how this imagined past shapes contemporary southern identity. Liénard-Yeterian’s informative analysis reveals that “contemporary aesthetics characterized by violence and human reification” rewrites the formulaic tropes of the southern imaginary. With the re-imagined plantation, the southern belle and gentleman, and historical events (Civil War), southern movies envision a better future through reworking of the haunted (racial) southern past.

The possibility of reworking the South’s past through Hollywood discourse about geography, whiteness and masculinity is also the subject of the next contribution. Peter Templeton’s article “James Stewart and the Changing Face of the Confederate in Mid-Twentieth Century Hollywood Cinema” analyzes two divergent depictions of the Confederate rebel, who synecdochally represents the Old South, in two movies

<sup>7</sup> The imaginary South does not necessarily overlap with the geographical region. In fact southern imaginary on the big screen “is not contained by the boundaries of geography and genre; it is not an offshoot or subgenre of mainstream American film but is integral to the history and the development of American cinema” (Barker and McKee 1).



*Winchester '73* (1950) and *Shenandoah* (1965). In an illuminating way Templeton writes about the changes in the presentation of the Old South and the Lost Cause in Hollywood cinema. He points out that Hollywood movies reach into the historical past for source material, an opinion which echoes C. Vann Woodward's claim that the key element in the development of the South's identity is its history, or "the collective experience of the Southern people" (16). Interestingly, Templeton does not search these two movies for historical evidence; he is, rather, interested in the general moods and anxieties which are indirectly revealed at a moment of historical changes, such as the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement. He concludes that Hollywood movies "bring with them contemporary interpretations and the concerns of the national political climate in which they are produced." Hence "the ugly portraiture of the white South" in the movies from the early 1960s (Kirby 121), which in itself represents animus the nation harbored towards the segregated, white supremacist South. This "ugly South" is emblematic of the trend Templeton identifies "for less sympathetic depictions of southern white men and for more manifest content relating to the politics of the Civil War and its legacies in twentieth century America."

The next article also offers a glimpse into the southern imaginary through the lens of racialized Others on the big screen. In "Appalling! Terrifying! Wonderful!: Blaxploitation and the Cinematic Image of the South" Antoni Górny interrogates the ways in which the Hollywood movie business, refracting and affecting American imaginary at the same time, constructs the historical memory of the nation. Górny demonstrates that Blaxploitation movies and "race problem films," which offer competing perspectives on race and the southern past, impact filmic depictions of southern racial history in divergent ways. Instead of analyzing movies through a neoliberal lens,<sup>8</sup> Górny explores the legacy of abolitionist propaganda and blackface parody in order to substantiate his claim that "the (proximate) presence of slavery provides the backdrop to a peculiar morality play." His analysis of two movies which achieved critical and commercial acclaim in 2013 – Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* – proposes that the latter "offers a more powerful and transformative means of addressing America's 'race problem.'"

Part 3 – "African American Experience of the South" – continues explorations of the interconnectedness of identity, race and the southern past. Despite that, the legacy of race and the heritage of white supremacy effect American society unequally, maybe because cruelty, ignorance and guilt, as Maya Angelou explains, are inscribed and accumulated in southern history (qtd in Joyner 25). Contemporary culture attempts to deal with (post)-plantation reality through various outlets: from Kara Walker's cut-out plantation burlesques (eg. *African 't*), a reboot of *Roots*, the comedy/history online show "Ask a Slave," to many "slave movies." The three articles included in this section are a timely intervention in America's racial landscape in the wake of the Paula Deen scandal, blackface incidents on college campuses, and the events in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston.

<sup>8</sup> Reed claims that through dehistoricization some recent productions sanitized the issue of slavery – notably *Django Unchained* – while others, such as *The Help*, trivialized Jim Crow. This allows Reed to conclude that dehistoricization allows for bogus happy endings and makes the movies entirely neoliberal ("Django").

Constante González Groba begins this section with an analysis of the award winning *The Underground Railroad*. In his article “Riding the Rails to (Un)Freedom: Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*” González Groba reads slavery and its contemporary consequences through the prism of the slave’s agency, which has so far been brought up by revisionist historians. Additionally, González Groba claims that the originality of the novel depends also on its departure from typical slave narratives. Setting his analysis within the context of African American literary history, González Groba explains that Cora’s travels through time and space are a means for the novelist to “deal with different racial terrors in different historical periods.” This special/spatial odyssey of the main heroine allows Whitehead not only to write about America’s evil past, but also rewrite it by transcending the predictability of slave narrative. By blending realism and imagination, González Groba elucidates, Whitehead can reimagine antebellum America and point to connections between slavery and American capitalism, and building an empire.

In her contribution, “The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” Patrycja Antoszek presents a different perspective on Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative. An interplay of approaches from affect studies, critical race theory, and African-American literature offers a useful set of theoretical tools with which Antoszek interrogates the issue of race and identity. Antoszek delves into the reworking of historical facts in the novel and into Cora’s embodiment of the losses “inherited” from one generation of enslaved women to another. In her provocative analysis Antoszek arrives at the conclusion that “Cora’s melancholia is a strategy of dealing with the horrors of slavery and a sign of a black woman’s failed entry into the Symbolic.” Looking at the prolonged mourning and collective memory through the perspective of affect studies combined with the twenty-first century postsouthern literary studies allows Antoszek to creatively read how the violent past still haunts black subjectivity: “Whitehead’s novel, while showing melancholia’s productive potential, is yet more proof that slavery and its terrible legacy remains America’s most excruciating trauma, which perhaps can never be adequately mourned.”

“Protecting the Spirit of the American South: Representations of New Orleans culture in Contemporary Children’s Picture Books,” the essay closing this section, moves the analysis of the representations of African-American’s sense of identity in the time of crisis from a dystopian novel to children’s literature. In her article Ewa Kłęczaj-Siara focuses on the fictional representations of the New Orleans spirit which was dashed by Hurricane Katrina of 2005 and eventually recovered from the trauma in *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) by C. Weatherford, and *Trombone Shortly* (2015) and *The 5 O’ Clock Band* (2018) by Troy Andrews. In her analysis of the interplay of visual and verbal elements of the books Kłęczaj-Siara proves that the discourse of children’s literature allows for a celebration of the transformative force of the storm (New Orleans’ culture kept people together after all) in contradistinction to scholarly research and journalistic documentaries which reveled in the depictions of the threat of obliteration of New Orleans culture.

The final part – “Southern Tensions and Contrasts” – deals with the residue of the region’s variance and frictions. Two articles here are interesting revisions of traditional southern tropes or literary modes of expression, while the third one will

introduce readers into the uncharted territory of southern forensic thrillers. In “Bataille in the South: James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Erskine Caldwell’s Depression Fiction” Joseph Kuhn argues that James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Erskine Caldwell’s Depression-era fiction used a discourse of the sacred connected with the taboo, repulsiveness and sacrifice to illustrate the strange otherness of the South ravaged by the Great Depression. Kuhn’s analysis is original in its discussion of Agee and Caldwell’s use of the sacred through the prism of Georges Bataille’s theoretical framework of the sacred. Offering a rich historical and social context, Kuhn explains Agee’s and Caldwell’s infatuation with the sacred through the discourse of transgression (the sacred was pitted against the profane – utilitarian and servile). The application of Bataille’s theories of transgression, sovereignty, and the need for wasteful expenditure sheds a new light on the Other South in the fictions of Agee and Caldwell.

“Form and Diversity in American Crime Fiction: The Southern Forensic Thriller” examines forensic thrillers, a mainstream American genre, as transfigured in southern literature. Elena Avanzas Álvarez provides an examination of the aesthetic and cultural contexts out of which the southern forensic thriller narrative emerged. Álvarez’s analysis of Karin Slaughter’s “Grant County” series, especially its first novel *Blindsighted* (2001), approaches the topic of the southern forensic thriller from a number of perspectives: those of literary studies, philosophy and feminism. Álvarez demonstrates that the “southern turn” in forensic thrillers foregrounds a coalescing of southern gothic and hard boiled traditions. The continued presence of the southern Gothic, the South’s cultural richness, and the tension between tradition and innovation has an impact on the study of social/regional identities in southern forensic thrillers. Álvarez envisions the importance of this new genre which “make[s] the past accountable while accepting social change and innovation in an area as historically and culturally complex as the South.”

In the final contribution to the issue, Michał Choiński explores the figurative contrasts between the bodily and the spiritual in Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke* (1948). His article, “Figures of Contrast in Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke*,” focuses on the tragic impossibility of a conflation of opposites which is illustrated using the example of a failed love affair between two main characters, John and Alma. Choiński’s article adopts the figurative approach to study how Tennessee Williams “constructs main characters in metaphorical terms, as contrastive macrofigures, and to demonstrate how this figurative perspective allows him to escalate the tragedy of their impossible romance.” Choiński concludes that the playwright frames the unfulfilled romance through “a metafigurative act of reversal, ... [a] changing of perspectives which generates the effect of a paradox.”

Just as the kaleidoscopic design may be changed endlessly by rotating loose elements, the South yields itself to a mesmerizing display of fascinating images which keep on changing with applications of various theoretical perspectives. Interestingly enough, each turn of the kaleidoscope tube reveals the reflection of only a portion of the objects, while others are hidden, waiting for their turn.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the present

<sup>9</sup> The present volume demonstrates that each turn of the kaleidoscope tube reveals the reflection of only a portion of the objects. The reoccurring themes of redneck South, child narrators, affect



issue of *Polish Journal for American Studies* affords only a selective insight into multiple Souths. The issue does not pretend to be exhaustive. A realignment of theoretical approaches and a different choice of analytical material may offer other fascinating reflections on the South in relation to other regions of the United States (notably including the West),<sup>10</sup> to the wider Americas (seeking the Latin American connection),<sup>11</sup> or to the Global South.

The Global South, the concept which replaced the “Third World” in postcolonial studies, world literature and comparative literature, frees the American South from a nationalistic historiography. Instead of concentrating on national literatures, scholars of the Global South think critically about race, ethnicity and culture using hemispheric methodologies and race/ethnic studies research to explore translocal and transnational histories, cultures and influences. The Global South challenges existing Western representations and narratives, and it decenters the English and the Anglophone world which used to dominate world literary networks (West-Pavlov, and McKee & Trefzer). If we adopt transnational and postcolonial perspectives to southern studies (as some scholars of the New Southern Studies have already done), then we open the field to new developments in literary humanities and cultural studies (Cohn and Smith). Reconceptualization of southern studies within the Global South is a paradigm shift which allows scholars to recognize the fluidity of geographical boundaries – the South is no longer a contained space, but rather a permeable construct affected and affecting the global.

The next turn of the kaleidoscope could provide us with a novel lens for reconsidering “interstitial” racial/ethnic identities below the Mason-Dixon line (especially Asian and Hispanic geographies),<sup>12</sup> or the extant, continuing Native presence in the American South,<sup>13</sup> both of which complicate the southern system of racial classification. Our understanding of the American South can be reshaped by the

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theories, tensions, and violence run through most of the contributions to this issue, while remaining latent in some. Each article offers a different constellation of kaleidoscopic beads and stones.

10 In his book *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. turns his critical eye to new developments in contemporary southern writing which looks westward. Brinkmeyer’s analysis of writers such as Doris Betts, Barry Hannah, Cormac McCarthy, Madison Smartt Bell, Richard Ford, Barbara Kingsolver, Dorothy Allison, and Clyde Edgerton, who expand southern culture and at the same time reconfigure the myths of the West.

11 See for instance: Deborah Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 1999; Deborah Cohn, “U.S. Southern Studies and Latin American Studies: Windows Onto Postcolonial Studies.” *American Literature* 78.4 (2006): 704-7; and Deborah Cohn, “U.S. Southern and Latin American Studies: Postcolonial and Inter-American Approaches” *The Global South* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 2007), 38-44.

12 The most recent book-length comprehensive publications about Asian geographies in the South are Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South*, 2010; and Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai, ed. *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Immigration in the South*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, 2013.

13 The most recent scholarship on indigenous South includes Tiffany Lethabo King’s *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, Duke UP, 2019.

exploration of the swamp South,<sup>14</sup> peripheral spaces of Texas and Florida, or the entire coastal American South. The latter even opens possibilities of rearticulating the South through the prism of pirate fiction.<sup>15</sup> Another turn of the kaleidoscope tube can reveal different alignments of southern elements: such as queer (black) South,<sup>16</sup> transgender South,<sup>17</sup> undead South,<sup>18</sup> tacky South,<sup>19</sup> Bohemian South,<sup>20</sup> and Speculative South,<sup>21</sup> and many more.

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- 14 Since antebellum times the swamp has had a status as the geographical "Other" in the Southern terrain. In his book *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (2005), Anthony Wilson examines the swamp South and explains that depending on the perspective the swamp was either an obstacle to agricultural development of the region (the perspective of the white aristocracy) or a shelter and sustenance for those who were excluded from the dominant plantation culture (that is African Americans, Native Americans, and Acadians, as well as poor and rural whites). Wilson charts a transformation of the swamp in Southern culture finding illustrations of his thesis in the fictions of Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner. Additionally, swamps and bayous are more than passive settings in more recent novels: Tim Gautreaux's *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998), Linda Hogan's *Power* (1998), Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011), or the first season of HBO's *True Detective* (2014).
- 15 A forthcoming edited collection of essays based on papers delivered at a panel at the 2018 conference of *Society for the Study of Southern Literature* is going to be devoted to the issue of piracy in Southern literature.
- 16 In recent years there has been a queering of the American South's cultural and literary imagination. The most recent queer studies of the region pointing out homoerotic forms of desire and/or identity include: Jaime Harker, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018; Darius Bost, *Evidence Of Being: the Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*. University of Chicago Press, 2018; Johnson, E. Patrick. *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*. Duke UP, 2019.
- 17 Poppy Z. Brite's novel *The Crow: The Lazarus Heart* or *Southern Comfort*, a documentary by Kate Davis, could serve as texts of transgender Southern reality.
- 18 Southern undeadness was comprehensively discussed in *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* edited by Eric Gary Anderson, and others. Riding the wave of academic success, a call for papers for the sequel to 2015's *Undead Souths* was issued in the spring of 2019.
- 19 A call for papers for an edited collection on *The Tacky South* was issued at the beginning of 2019, with the provisional publication date in 2020 (<https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2019/01/29/the-tacky-south>).
- 20 Shawn Chandler Bingham and Lindsey A. Freeman edited *The Bohemian South: Creating Countercultures, from Poe to Punk*, a book which celebrates the New South as an epicenter for progress, innovation, and experimentation (an image which clearly stands in opposition to the prevalent perception of the South as a cultural backwater).
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**PART ONE**  
**APPALACHIA AND BEYOND**



Marianne Kongerslev and Clara Juncker

## Appalachia as Trumpland: Honor, Precarity, and Affect in Literature from the Mountain South

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**Abstract:** Literary and cultural texts by southern poor whites in the hills of the Ozarks and Appalachia and southern migrants in Rustbelt Ohio explode with feelings such as hatred, desperation, and anger, resulting from the continual precaritization and marginalization of the mountain communities. In (auto)biographical texts as well as in literary fiction, the “hillbilly” community is represented as self-segregated, proud, and independent, with special notions of honor and loyalty. Exploring the (dis)connections between the literary emotions of the people of the Mountain South and the code of southern honor that has produced and sustained them, this article argues that the anxious and angry emotions that Donald Trump taps into as a political strategy are not new, but rather have been building throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The first manifestations that this precarious affective structure was forming can be seen in this regional literature, illustrating the potential in explorations of *literary* ugly feelings (Ngai, 2005) of marginalized southerners. Thus, the article uncovers how poor whites position their precarious existences in Trump’s USA and how they employ various affective strategies to articulate their whiteness and their anxiety.

**Key words:** Affect, Mountain South, Precarity, Memoirs, Masculinity, Southern Honor, Trump

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“Appalachia<sup>1</sup> is a perpetual invention, a sneaky dancer that finds a way to dance somewhere out at the edge of what we think it was, what we expect it to be” (Dodd White 7). Charles Dodd White writes in his introduction to the anthology *Appalachia Now* (2015). Similarly, the documentary series *The Appalachians* begins with an introduction to the region as it is often imagined. The voice-over explains that Appalachia is “a state of mind” and has “the face of a hungry child.” These representations of the region as peculiar and precarious are common, and they form the focus of much scholarly and popular work. Appalachians “are used to hard times” and “unique in their love for their fellow man” (*The Appalachians* ep. 1), the voice-over continues. In short: unique, tough, gritty, isolated, and unknowable, Appalachia is Other. This conception of Appalachian Otherness is not a new phenomenon and has been explored by scholars before us (see for instance Gray; Portelli; and Cunningham). Nonetheless, the articulation of this Other South to Donald Trump and reactionary politics, however imaginary the connection might be, is a new media favorite. During the 2016 campaign and after winning the election, Trump-voters were represented by many media outlets as reactionary hillbillies. Statistically, this representation does not match entirely with reality (Catte), but the notion persists, because the Mountain South continues to be the nation’s scapegoat (Gibbons).

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1 Although we realize the problematic nature of overgeneralization, we discuss Appalachia and the Ozarks here as if they were one community or landscape and not two separate mountain regions. We do so partly because they share inherent qualities, but mostly because in the dominant and public discourse, they are often construed as one and the same.



Like the cultural representations of the region, the literature produced by regional mountain authors rests on received notions of Mountain Folk uniqueness, a specific sense of honor, a particular relationship to the land, and a sense of gritty, hard-scrabble perseverance. Wilma Dykeman's *Family of Earth* (2016), Breece Pancake's *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* (1983) and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) belong in the Grit Lit genre,<sup>2</sup> "a genre largely shaped by white male authors who are from, or at the very least write about, working-class communities, usually within the context of the U.S. South" (Vernon 78). Anger, spite and violence are central to the genre, and these affects and themes permeate the texts on all narrative levels. As Vernon points out, the grittiness of the genre adds an aura of authentic roughness to the authors' image and provides fertile ground for strategies of resistance. Similarly, in the introduction to *Appalachia Now*, Larry Smith argues that, "violence enters these tales at times, whether unintentional or reactionary, yet inevitable" (Smith 9). This reactionary violence, especially with authors such as Pancake and memoirists like Vance, is enmeshed in affective language that complicates the "rough" and "gritty" image; it is not simply violence for the sake of violence or anger for the sake of anger, but a complex social commentary expressed affectively, despite the fact that the South of these stories "is often wholly fabricated" (Vernon 90). In this sense, these stories are part of an archive of ugly feelings, a collection of cultural artifacts that are politically charged (Ngai).

The political qualities of these Mountain South texts are further complicated by cultural mores and a particular historical context, especially as these relate to race and gender. These complex affective worlds are both the results of and the desire for perpetuation of what is known as the Southern Culture of Honor. In the South, honor is closely tied with emotions and their expression. Honor is not an affect but rather a shared idea and concept about a person's or culture's qualities and ethos. Although it contains within it, perhaps, a desire to be virtuous or a desire for an ideal, honor in itself is not emotion(al). Nor is it a psychological drive. However, within a southern literary and cultural context, honor becomes a catalyst for various shared and communally felt emotions – affects – that form the crux of the problem of poor, white southern mountain folks' sense of precarity and anxiety. Historically, southern honor entailed complex social rules and logics strongly tied to masculinity and aristocracy. In *Southern Honor* (1982), Bertram Wyatt-Brown distinguishes between two traditions of honor: "primal honor," from the Indo-European system of ethics, and a concept associated with "gentility" from the Stoic-Christian system that English humanists promoted. The latter code of conduct became central in southern evaluations of behavior. Thus, Wyatt-Brown explores the culture of honor as it relates to the aristocratic ideals adopted by the plantation owners and upper classes of the South in the antebellum period. Among these honorable values were valor, a readiness to take revenge, a ferocious masculinity, and a trust in oaths, values that had strong ties to racial superiority and "sexual honor," a troubled response to women, or as Wyatt-Brown defines it, "the

2 See Zackary Vernon (2016) and Brian Carpenter (2012), who distinguish between Rough South and Grit Lit as separate genres. As Carpenter states, Rough South, a subgenre of sorts to Grit Lit, is "unquestionably violent – Grit Lit's wilder kin or Grit Lit with its back against the wall and somebody's going to get hurt" (xxviii).

most curiously ambiguous aspect of the whole concept in the American South” (50). It may seem surprising that these ideals are found represented in the literature of the mountain region, as this region is largely absent of aristocracy and largely settled by Scots-Irish immigrants, who brought with them a stoic value system (Batteau; Nisbet and Cohen). However, this shepherding social system has been linked by some psychologists and anthropologists to the culture of honor, in which personal property and individual honor were highly valued qualities. In *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (1996), Nisbet and Cohen theorized that statistically higher rates of interpersonal violence in the US South could be explained by the culture of honor. Through various social experiments Nisbet and Cohen tested their hypothesis and concluded that personal affront experienced by southerners led to increased levels of stress hormones and perceptions of dishonor (Nisbet and Cohen).

The racial aspects of the culture of honor, however, may also explain why the more egalitarian mountain society shows signs of a culture of honor structure. In *White Trash* (2016), Nancy Isenberg links race and class and the stigmatization of both in the antebellum age to itinerant labor and landless white settlers in the mountains. This perception of poor whites as “trash” has racial overtones, as bell hooks also discusses in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000). The historical understanding of several races of whites, where the Irish or Celts were seen as inferior to the Saxons, for instance, transferred onto twentieth-century understandings, constructs the Scots-Irish mountain folks as an inferior kind of white (see also Painter). Similarly, Wyatt-Brown identifies strong traces of ancient stigmatization of the honorless in southern prejudice against enslaved people and their descendants and against poor whites, who, despite their “blood” disregarded community dictates and judgments (46).

More importantly for our focus in the present article, honor culture is closely linked with affect and affective social structures. Whether the honor that is challenged is real or imagined matters less than the affective responses to perceived insults or changes to the social fabric. In Wyatt-Brown’s account, honor is closely linked to a variety of shaky categories, adding to the sense of anxiety that people feel when mores and rules are skirted. This tenuous foundation for honor and the attendant fragility demarcate the emotional landscape of the South.<sup>3</sup> In the literature of the Mountain South, these foundations seem even more precarious, and the combination of loss of pre-war status for white men, the harshness of the land and the resilient people who settled there, and social and economic challenges contribute to constructing an affective landscape of malaise that permeates the narratives across genres and times. In his introduction to *Appalachia Now*, Smith writes about the common features of the anthologized tales that “all of these stories deal with some sense of loss – economic, land, family, age, relationship. Some surrender to that loss, while others find their way through strength and character, community building, or individual rebellion” (8). This sense of contemporary malaise that Smith expresses is central to the affective qualities of the literature from the region.

In an early representation of this Appalachian malaise, *Family of Earth* (2016),<sup>4</sup> Wilma Dykeman expresses this sense of unspoken or underlying loss, dread,

3 For further discussion of the Culture of Honor, see Nisbett and Cohen (1996).

4 According to the introduction to the memoir, Dykeman wrote the text while at college in the 1940s, but it was not discovered until after her death in 2006 and subsequently published in 2016.

and desperation. Despite being written more than 70 years before the inauguration of Donald Trump, the memoir speaks to something in our times, to the affective politics of anger, hate, and desperation that now permeate the political landscape. In politicians' speeches, on Twitter, and in the media, the underlying discontent and anxiety ascribed to the poor white American underclass bubbles forth and suggests a longing for a lost and mythical past in which honor and independence were guaranteed, albeit only to the deserving.

Some of the central events in Dykeman's life, and important structuring devices in the narrative, are 1920s consumerism and the Great Depression. Described as a catastrophe for the region, the Depression also functions as a kind of moral lesson for Wilma, when her father, Willard, reprimands her for crying because they lost all their money. "'Now look here,' Daddy said, and his tone was very quiet, 'there's to be no more crying over money in this house. We'll get along'" (55). The father personifies the stoic, hardscrabble, honorable southerner who takes pride in independence and perseverance. Simultaneously, he embodies the narrative's general critique of the mountain folk themselves. Through Willard, Dykeman shows the follies of rampant consumerism and critiques the superficiality that many in the community valued in the 1920s. She writes that Willard was disappointed as "He saw some of the men in the town grow rich and attain a long car for every member in their family," a useless performance in Willard's view, and more importantly for Dykeman, an element of consumerism only made possible through the exploitation of the mountains and their resources. With austerity well suited to the mood, Dykeman states: "We still had our old Dodge" (53).

Dykeman's memoir often slips into condescension about the mountain folk, but there is also a sense that despite the self-destructive nature of the people she grew up with, their inherent goodness and precarity make them worthy of sympathy. The father's austerity invoked in these criticisms functions as a contrastive device and illustrates simultaneously Dykeman's obsession with a lost (mythical) past. Thus, Willard becomes a disappointed and angry spokesperson for a form of conservatism that views certain people as worthy poor and others as unworthy. According to Dykeman, Willard "might speak of a common Southern fault, his chin firm with earnestness, 'Now you take people around here. They leave their tools and farm things out in the weather, free to all the rain and sun and snow. Then they wonder why they don't have anything'" (20). To some extent, the memoir seems to argue, Appalachian destitution is self-inflicted. Dykeman further portrays poverty and desperation as almost inherent qualities of the region. The people are Others, and even though the Depression may have been devastating, the precarious characteristics of the region and its folks seem to predate this catastrophic economic event. The school children are described stereotypically: "Children in the mountains are often deformed physically, or mentally and nervously impaired in some degree .... Much of it is due to frequent intermarriages" (74). When a neighbor's child stays for dinner, Dykeman is appalled by the signs of poverty on her body. "Her arms were thin and pinched, there was something ill about her whole physical frame. I, too, was thin and wiry because I was always active, but hers was a different sort of leanness. It was the leanness of lack of food and too much work, not the natural leanness of youth" (75). In scenes like this, Dykeman testifies

to “the relentless, deadening poverty and shame” (Allison 65) that often characterizes narratives of and from the region, and it adds to the notion of the region as Other, as gritty, and as hyperprecarious.

This hyperprecarity also manifests in the narrative more covertly as a mood or an “affective atmosphere” (Anderson) that comes naturally with life and growing up in the mountains. On the one hand, this precarity seems to be a result of the effects of the Depression, which, when it strikes the community, thrusts people into a sense of doom and desperation:

Despair rushed like a wave over the city. (Men jumped out of windows, and wives followed their husbands everywhere they went because of the dark threat of suicide which hung potent in the air.) The paper became one great obituary notice, and the main city graveyard had a suicide plot. With razors, from windows, by bullets, the men of fortune ended the whirling gyrations which had caught them up and carried them along to ruin. (55)

The “utter helplessness” of the situation leads Dykeman to wonder, “what utter defeat they must have felt to have figured that death could solve its riddle better than life” (55). But she also acknowledges that “the flimsiness of the scaffolding they had pinned to was made all too apparent” (55). The Depression is not the cause of the people’s precarity – it only reveals it. Precarity precedes financial disaster.

Furthermore, the sense of doom and hopelessness is an underlying phenomenon that the narrative makes use of – a *tone* to use Sianne Ngai’s term. Defined as “a literary or cultural artifact’s feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world” (Ngai 28), a text’s tone influences the affective expression and reception of a text. The tone of the memoir, then, can best be defined as anxious. As we argue elsewhere (Juncker and Kongerslev), the memoir’s tone manifests itself as an unstated and almost invisible sense of precarity and anxiety. As she writes, “From the darkness and warmth of my mother’s womb I had been plunged into a world where eyes and ears and hands were all needed in a struggle for existence and comprehension” (12). Her word choice is characteristic of the sense of doom that permeates the memoir, as both “plunged” and “struggle” indicate a hostile environment. Neither the source nor the cause of this hostility is ever fully articulated. It is a fact of life: “Nothing came beautiful and free alone; there was some element of worry, of sickness, death, or ruined crops, in every season and every day. The babies are into adulthood [*sic*] with this burden of unhappiness and responsibility heavy around them” (74). The harsh environment of the mountain region creates precarious existences that result in the people’s shared sense of desperation and melancholia. Dykeman may glorify her father as a paragon of virtue, but he is an honorable man despite the environment, rather than because of it. In the same vein, the land and nature seem to encompass and provoke the sense of melancholia that saturates the narrative, so that simply being in the mountains causes existential anxiety in people:

One is born with loneliness in the mountains; its cry is ever present. When the adult realization of every man’s [*sic*] innate aloneness comes, it is not so overwhelming if you have lived in the mountains, for something in your spirit, since

childhood, has whispered this was so. The unfelt wind howling behind the hill, the starkness of November rains, the call of nightbirds through the silence, all are testaments to the final realization of loneliness. (82)

Like other literary artifacts from Appalachia, Dykeman's memoir is preoccupied with a sense that nature and land are peculiarly precarious and Other(ing).

In this sense, she often mirrors stereotypes about hillbillies that flourish in US culture. An early cultural historian called Appalachians "some of mankind's most clannish and enigmatic folk" (Caudill, qtd by Batteau 5) and relates this community characteristic to the land that has "nurtured" them: an "entire region [that] was matted with an immense primeval forest, so dank and so dense as to amount almost to a jungle. Immense tangles of wild grapevine clung to the tops of these forest patriarchs and combined foliage of tree and vine was so dense as to almost exclude the light from the ground beneath, casting the hollows and valleys in a deep perpetual gloom" (Caudill, qtd by Batteau 5). The strangeness and singularity of the land determines the nature of the people who inhabit it, and cultural representations of the mountain folk have often relied on these characteristics to paint an often unflattering, not to mention very white, image of the region. In *The Invention of Appalachia* (1990), Allen Batteau describes "the miseries of Appalachia" (4) as a consequence of industrialization:

Sudden growth had its price: the mine wars of the twenties and thirties, the poverty resulting whenever the demand for coal went slack, the political corruption that seems to accompany rapid accumulation of great fortunes, the environmental destruction of strip mining, and the thousands of mining accidents left their mark in scarred hillsides, shattered limbs, uprooted communities, and a progressive decay of the bonds of kinship and trust that knit together the mountain men and women. (4)

Although writing several decades later, like Dykeman, Batteau touches on the same discourses of destructive progress leading to poverty, desperate precarity, and loss of community cohesion. The literary and cultural images of "decaying coal camps" (4) function as shorthand for all the ills of the mountain region. In numerous documentaries and fictional accounts, the precarity experienced by the people is directly related to the loss of mining jobs, a broader cultural trope Donald Trump also frequently employs.

From the melancholy anxiety and precarity of Dykeman's postwar times to the present, there has indeed been a shift in the ways in which Appalachians portray their worlds and lives; however, the sense of precarity of the community remains.<sup>5</sup> *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* (1983) depicts the traumatized landscape and its inhabitants in the Appalachian South, and it illustrates to 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers the fact that most change in the region seems superficial. In his foreword to the volume, which came out after the author had killed himself at 26, James Alan McPherson describes Breece Pancake as a "West Virginian, that peculiar kind of mountain-bred southerner, or part-southerner, who was just as alienated as I was in the hushed gentility of Wilson

5 Appalachian authors such as Barbara Kingsolver and Valerie Nieman, whose works seem more like descendants of Dykeman's ecocritical style, often significantly differ in affective tone, style, and genre from male authors such as Taylor Brown and Chris Offutt, whose fiction fits more neatly into the violently affective Rough South genre.

Hall” (7). Both newly arrived at the University of Virginia, one sat in a borrowed office as a creative writing instructor when the other walked in. Jimmy Carter was running for President and had introduced to genteel white southerners another South, including African Americans and Appalachians. Six feet tall, with straw-blond hair, faded blue jeans, a checkered shirt, and a US Army belt buckle sitting atop a slight beer belly, the emerging writer looked his part but did not, like other working-class students, take on the role of professional “hillbilly.” McPherson recalls that, “constitutionally, Breece Pancake was a lonely and melancholy man. And his position at the university – as a Hoyns Fellow, as a teaching assistant, and as a man from a small town in the hills of West Virginia – contributed to the cynicism and bitterness that was already in him” (9). As a writer, Pancake represented the bleak hills as well as the dark emotions of his native region.

The Appalachia of Pancake’s stories comes across as a landscape of death. His working-class characters inhabit Coal Country – what is left of mines, factories and farms – and their lives spin downwards. Sitting at a strip mine, the protagonist of “The Scrapper” looks at the houses of Clayton, “where the wives had planted flowers, but the plants were all dead or dying from the constant shower of coal dust” (102). Stagnant pools smell like rot, the sun “is a hardish brown,” and “the sky has a film.” A locust-tree post has “a few dead morning glories cling[ing] to it” (24-25). In “The Mark,” Reva remembers digging for human bones from a wooden lock house now overgrown with weeds and vines (91). The protagonist of “Trilobites,” Colly, sees his eyes sockets reflected in his coffee cup and hopes his mother will sell the family farm. He cannot enter the yard without seeing the spot where his father fell down: “He had lain spread-eagled in the thick grass after a sliver of metal from his old wound passed to his brain.” Colly recalls “how beaten his face looked with prints in it from the grass” (24). Poverty, loss, and trauma saturate the landscape. Garbage piles blend with plastic flowers; houses stand “rudely shingled in imitation-brick tar paper” (73). An ugly boardinghouse looms “three stories straight up from the flat hollow-basin.” As Bo of “Fox Hunters” enters it, “noise echoed through its walls, sounds of plumbing malfunctions and boarder disagreements” (66). The region is troubled.

In his introduction to Pancake’s collection of stories, McPherson describes West Virginia with houses in hollows, abandoned cars, discarded stoves and refrigerators, and narrow mountain roads. “And eyes in that region,” he writes, “are trained to look either up or down: from the hollow up toward the sky or from the encircling hills down into the hollows. Horizontal vision, in that area, is rare. The sky there is circumscribed by insistent hillsides thrusting upward. It is an environment crafted by nature for the dreamer and for the resigned” (11). McPherson connects landscape and emotion, which in Pancake’s native region – and in his stories – tend towards extremes. With dreams lost, what remains is what Hillary Clinton in *What Happened* (2017) calls “an epidemic of despair” (268). Pancake’s characters inhabit the darkest parts of the affective spectrum, where sadness, pain, rage, guilt, loss, loneliness, fear, and anxiety hold them hostage.

“Trilobites,” the opening story, begins as Colly steps from his truck to the brick side street and looks at the worn-down Company Hill. A concrete patch looks like Florida, where his former girlfriend, Ginny, now lives. His loss and melancholia



drench his every step and response. A brief sexual encounter when Ginny reappears illustrates the loss of connection: "The skin of her neck is almost too white in the faded evening. I know she doesn't understand." For a moment, he forgets her name and concludes: "Ginny isn't here" (35). Other characters worry about hospital bills, or about abandonment and murder. In "The Way It Has to Be," a title resonating with the resignation McPherson identifies, Alena finds herself alone in a hotel room with Harvey, who has just killed a man while his mother watched: "Alena wondered if she still sat there, her mouth open, her son dead in the yard" (129). As Harvey points his gun at her, she apologizes for being scared, while his own eyes, "wide with fear," watch her throw up yellow bile (130). Characters fall apart, or fear they will: "I see myself scattered, every cell miles from the others. I pull them back and kneel in the dark grass" (34). They try to alleviate tension with sex, with bar brawls, with cockfights and with violence. Bo in "Fox Hunters" confides in an older waitress: "Over coffee he poured out his roil of sickness, hate, and confusion" (73). But rage consumes Pancake's southerners, as the protagonist of "A Room Forever" notes, after he has tried – in vain – to connect to others with alcohol. A brief encounter with a prostitute provides only temporary relief, and his anger increases when he later finds her dead in the street, with sliced wrists: "I stop in front of the bus station, look in on the waiting people, and think about all the places they are going. But I know they can't run away from it or drink their way out of it or die and get rid of it. It's always there, you just look at somebody and they give you a look like the Wrath of God" (60). Rage and anxiety are systemic and inescapable.

Dark emotions twist minds and bodies both. Despair and malaise seep into the bodies of West Virginians, like coal dust into pores. In "Hollow" Sally cannot support herself with prostitution, because, as she is told, "Too much free stuff floatin' 'round" (46). So hopelessly she watches TV, "as the last grains of cocaine soaked into her head" (46). The protagonists become walking corpses, created by a system which does not value them as grievable lives, inhabitants of the mountains' toxic world.

This epidemic of despair has incubated in factory closings, in land erosion, and also in southern honor. The characters try to uphold their courage, their dignity, their reputation and their masculinity, but they mostly fail. The elderly man driving the snow plow in "Time and Again" takes pride in doing his job right – he smiles at "the pretties" he makes with his machine and knows about making the salt work (84). He enjoys his professional standing and honks at the other truck plowing the uphill side. He likes it that Mr. Weeks brags about him. But bones from accidents line the roads. He thinks about his time in WWII, when "it was snowing like this when they dropped us over France" (87). He tries to count the dead bodies in France, but gives up: "I never get farther than that night it snowed." He worries about his hogs: "I should have given them more slop, but when the first one dies, the others will eat him quick enough" (84). In "Fox Hunters," Bo wants to respect his dead schoolmates, and he wants respect from his employer, who has gone into the woods with him. But darkness and grief flip into something else: "Bo felt a baseness growing within himself, felt he knew the forest better than the man with the dogs, and, for a moment, wanted to run into the darkness" (78). Honor turns into violence, so as to hide the vulnerability inside.

The author of *The Stories* also walked the line between honor and darkness,

craft and compulsion. Andre Dubus III writes in the new afterword to the collection that Pancake's stories express "an almost desperate response to the world and one's perceived place in it" (185). As an oath-taker of sorts, since he swears to a strict moral code for his writing, Pancake found himself committed to his honor, materializing in his "fearlessness on the page" or in his "inherent willingness to go as deeply as the story and the characters require" (185). But he also surrendered to the world he knew and to his own negative emotions. McPherson speculates about his suicide, which cut short a promising writing career: "I believe that Breece had had a few drinks and found himself locked inside the secret room he carried around with him" (17). In this space echoes the venom of mountain-bred southerners. The secret room resembles the vulnerable space inside Wyatt-Brown's southern males, where they fought inner civil wars.

In *What Happened*, Hillary Clinton describes her meeting in 2016 with the Coal Country folk, after her remarks about putting coal companies out of business. The comment was widely circulated – out of context – and may have caused her defeat in West Virginia, though coal mining jobs declined further in the decades after Pancake's diagnosis of despair. Clinton knows the numbers: "Between 2011 and 2016, the bottom fell out. Nationwide, coal production fell by 27 percent. Nearly sixty thousand coal miners and contractors lost their jobs, 40 percent of them in Kentucky and West Virginia alone. Big coal companies ... went bankrupt, threatening the pensions of thousands of retired miners" (269). Like Pancake, Clinton focuses on emotional landscapes. She listens to people worried about their children's futures, to men embarrassed by their disability checks and furious about political indifference in Washington (271). But the rage of residents in Mingo County, "Ground Zero for the coal crisis," startled her. Angry protesters met her with chants for Trump and "Go home Hillary"; one woman had painted her hands blood-red and yelled about Benghazi. Clinton sums it up: "I knew I wouldn't get a warm welcome in West Virginia. That was the point of my visit, after all. But this level of anger took me aback. This wasn't just about my comments in one town hall. This was something deeper" (273).

Following the November 2016 presidential election, many flabbergasted Americans turned to J. D. Vance's memoir of a culture in crisis. His autobiographical account of family and community life in Rustbelt Ohio and Eastern Kentucky spoke to those trying to locate and comprehend the angry Trump electorate. Suddenly, Vance, who served in the Marine Corps in Iraq and graduated from Yale Law School, appeared on talk shows across the country with social analyses and discreet promotion of his timely publication of *Hillbilly Elegy*. Vance recounts his childhood among displaced southerners in Middletown, Ohio, and among relatives in the Appalachian South, addressing the issues that the election of Donald Trump brought to the forefront of contemporary analyses and discussions: the deterioration of cities, factory shut-downs, foreclosures during the financial crisis, racial divides, the collapse of family life, with erosion of patriarchal power structures, educational disadvantages, opioid addictions, the distance to Washington political elites and a nostalgic attachment to an elusive past. Three decades after Pancake's stories, Vance covers the same ground as the young writer, and he stresses that no single issue would explain the frustrations of white Appalachians, since the economy is intertwined with psychology in their at-



titudes and beliefs. The honor code they brought from the South no longer works in the Rustbelt, and this loss of a significant value system results in emotional toxicity.

The courage to destroy an enemy, as Wyatt-Brown describes it (34), survives with modifications. Vance's Uncle Pet reacts like a "hillbilly" when a truck driver delivering supplies to one of his businesses tells him: "Off-load this now, you son of a bitch." Uncle Pet defends his family honor by pulling the man from the truck, beating him unconscious, and running an electric saw up and down his body (14). Reputation and respect also matter in hillbilly communities, which never share local problems with outsiders. Vance mentions an ACC News report about Appalachian America, which highlighted a local "Mountain Dew Mouth" situation: dental pain and tooth loss among young children caused by too much soda and sugar. The report was watched in the region, but totally dismissed. Residents agreed, according to Vance: "This is none of your damn business" (19). Whites in the Rustbelt respect their own but may kill those who do not care for hillbilly loyalty. At twelve, enforcing Scots-Irish honor, his grandmother fired a rifle at two local men hoisting the family cow onto a truck. Vance concludes that Mamaw, as he calls her, "loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal" (14).

The physical aspect of southern honor continues in hillbilly culture, where a manly appearance goes with fury and violence. The Blanton uncles in Jackson, Kentucky, fit this bill. One older man in town is accused of raping a young girl and is found floating face-down in a nearby lake with sixteen bullet wounds in his back (16). The Blanton men enforce justice and act like predators in defending their women's so-called honor. They also leave behind what Vance calls a trail of "neglected children, cheated wives, or both" (17). The economic melt-down in Vance's world threatens masculine pride, and wounded masculinity results in domestic abuse and violence. Hillbillies belong in the aggrieved group author Michael Kimmel portrays in *Angry White Men*. "Seeing people insult, scream, and sometimes physically fight was just a part of our life," Vance writes. "After a while, you did not even notice it" (73). Loyalty to family, class and race comes first.

This toxic emotionality extends to the community as a whole. Vance recalls in detail the rage that propels his "Mamaw" to pour gasoline over the sleeping "Papaw" and strike a match after he returns home drunk. Hillbilly women also get out of hand. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam claims that female bodies can enact masculinity as perfectly as the "heroic masculinities" we recognize, fear, or trust. Female masculinity operates not as imitation, "but actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity." He finds that masculinities signified by women's bodies, "are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing. But what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies" (1-2). Articulating a female masculinity in *Hillbilly Elegy*, Mamaw picks up young Vance from school in "her uniform of baggy jeans and a men's T-shirt – with a giant menthol cigarette hanging from her lip" (137), in this context a substitute phallus. Halberstam argues provocatively that masculinity without men highlights the naturalized correlation between maleness and power. Masculinity, in short, becomes readable the moment it leaves the white, male, privileged body. Hillary may wear her jumpsuits and come

across as a phallic woman, but she represents only Halberstam's "rejected scraps of dominant masculinity." Trump's winning formula is to present voters with a choice between an alpha male or a "nasty woman" in the White House.

Both Pancake and Vance set their texts in a neglected, othered South and both see frustrated honor codes causing anxiety, anger, and violence. Like Pancake, Vance describes a region caught in an epidemic of despair, though the young writers leave their readers with different outcomes and solutions. Vance portrays with admiration his violent Blanton uncles and their unflinching sense of hillbilly justice and loyalty and has problems with rage himself. When driving in Cincinnati with his wife, Usha, he is cut off by another car and honks, but the other driver flips him off. At the next stop light, Vance unbuckles his seat belt and feels ready to demand an apology or fight the man himself. Usha helps him control his "raw emotions" and reminds him that "not every personal slight – from a passing motorist or a neighbor critical of my dogs – is cause for a blood feud" (246). Vance asks of hillbillies that they show similar discipline and solve their own problems: "I don't know what the answer is, but I know it starts when we stop blaming Obama or Bush or faceless companies and ask ourselves what we can do to make things better" (256). Like Dykeman many decades before him, Vance relates the precarity of the mountain folk to personal faults resulting from loss of honor and responsibility, rather than systemic issues. Like Willard Dykeman, Vance subscribes to an angry ideology of stoic independence that eschews notions of structural problems.

Pancake was angry as well. McPherson remembers his self-destructive ways: "he would get into fights in lower-class bars on the outskirts of Charlottesville, then return to show off his scars. 'These are stories,' he would say" (12). Unlike Vance, he does not serve up Republican opinions, but offers instead his readers a gift. McPherson describes Pancake as an over-the-top gift-giver, with nobody around knowing what he might want in return (13-14). His only collection offers a glimpse into life among West Virginians, with a sense of the beauty of both Appalachia and its population, problems notwithstanding. In the closing story, "First Day of Winter," Hollis takes care of his parents on a decrepit farm, since there is nobody else. He longs for escape and freedom, his frustrations reflected in nature: "The wind took his breath, beat on him, and the first light flecks of ice bounced from the fenders. The land lay brittle, open, and dead" (168). But Hollis stays on and retains his honor, and a measure of peace and hope, in the last lines of Pancake's only book: "The sun was blackened with snow, and the valley closed in quietly with humming, quietly as an hour of prayer" (169). Pancake did not find peace, but he did manage to present a gift – his stories – of southern difference. John Casey concludes in the original "Afterword" that "a good part of what he earned from struggling with his troubles remains" (178).

These authors' Appalachia – insulated, enigmatic, precarious – constitutes an Other South. The region stands apart, and the literature reflects its special status and concerns. Wilma Dykeman's *Family of Earth*, Breece D.J. Pancake's *Stories*, and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* communicate and endorse the distinctive sense of honor, the intimate connection to the land, and the harsh, unflinching persistence that characterize the region overall. The texts of these Grit Lit authors brim over with dark, often taboo emotions – hate, frustration, envy, anger among them – that find an outlet in

domestic, communal and linguistic violence. The notion of southern honor becomes a catalytic agent for the explosive emotions of mountain residents, seventy years ago and now. In the current US political terrain, the affective landscape of Appalachia has spread outside the mountain South, since it dominates as well the ugly feelings and discourses in Washington D. C. and in Trumpland generally. The 45<sup>th</sup> president speaks in an emotional register that hillbillies, so-called, recognize, understand and validate, and literature from the Other South might help Americans despairing of Donald J. Trump and his unruly presidency comprehend the present political scene. At the very least, Appalachians have gained a voice and a history, since Dykeman, Pancake and Vance – each in their own way – have written the region, and its multifaceted problems, values and emotions into existence in the American canon and beyond.

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Marco Petrelli

## Out of Eden: Old South, Post-South and Ur-South in Sara Taylor's *The Shore*

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**Abstract:** Sara Taylor's *The Shore* is ex-centric in many ways. As for the setting, it geographically and socially depicts a fringe of the already-peripheral Appalachian culture, shedding a new and interesting light on the Southern "sense of place" through the use of magical-realistic elements that actually connect characters and landscape. Geography, though, is but the palimpsest. The book's liminality is further reinforced by the fact that *The Shore*'s long and violent familiar history is chiefly narrated through the voices of six generations of women struggling not to be silenced by the all-embracing southern patriarchy. Considering both the psycho-geographical and socio-historical dimensions described by Taylor, this essay will show how *The Shore* stands as a counter-dynastic novel giving a voice to those who were excluded from the South's self-projected image-in-place. Also, through its comprehensive outlook on southern history, the novel chronicles the (frustrated) effort to overcome postmodern placelessness via an-other way of constructing southern identity.

**Keywords:** Sara Taylor; US South; Post-South; Southern Gothic; Pastoralism; Chronotope; Poor Whites; Postmodernism; Magical Realism; Patriarchy

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"But everybody's bones are just holy branches  
Cast from trees to cut patterns in the world  
And in time we find some shelter,  
spill our leaves and then sleep in the earth  
And when we're there we'll belong  
'cause the earth don't give a damn if you're lost"  
—Radical Face, "Holy Branches"

The question of the survival of southern literature in the post-modern age is still one of the most debated topics among southern studies scholars. This is hardly surprising. The literary culture that found its splendor through a strong connection with a specific history and locale during the Renaissance was inevitably doomed to re-think and re-place itself when the relatively solid monolith of the modern and late-modern eras gave way to the hyperconnected, fluid paradigms of contemporary times. The question, of course, remains open. It is impossible to trace a single mode in which southern literature responded to the ontological and epistemological challenges that post-modernity forced on it. The task exceeds my ability, and it would require far more than a single essay to find an adequate answer.

What I will try in this article is to describe how a contemporary novel by a young author, Sara Taylor's *The Shore* (2015), responds to these challenges by addressing some classic forms and motifs of southern literature through a more than two-century-long family saga (1876-2143). Set on a group of islands off the coast of Virginia, *The Shore* is a magical-realistic account of the South's troubled history from a peripheral point of view, mostly conveyed through the eyes of two tightly intertwined families' six generations of women. The novel's main concerns – time, space and family – firmly

belong to the Renaissance tradition and, by following them from the Reconstruction to a post-apocalyptic future, Taylor shows their alteration in correspondence with an evolving culture. But, in doing so, *The Shore* also reaffirms these motifs' substantial permanence through the centuries, leading to some conceptual ambiguities. In the long-lasting debate between those who oppose an essentialist vision of the South and those who see a seamless connection between the Renaissance and postmodern southern writers, Taylor seems to take a middle road between these alignments.

Reading a contemporary southern writer only through their alleged descentance from the established canon can lead to the aporia according to which, as Matthew Guinn wrote, "a contemporary author from the region can be southern or postmodern but not both" (x). On the other hand, by seeking only the points of discontinuity between an author and the southern literary tradition, one could easily overlook how many southern writers of the new generation are actively engaging in a conversation with their artistic mothers and fathers in order to expand the literary canon without necessarily cutting clean from the past. I will not touch on this delicate matter, partly because I feel that an either/or approach would not do justice to its complexities, partly because I do not want to engage in a strictly theoretical exercise. In other words, rather than to see if *The Shore* fits either stance, I will discuss some elements from the novel in order to see how some traditional tenets of southern literature are conserved or transgressed. By putting Taylor's book at the center, it is possible to trace a sort of micro literary history; to see how a quintessentially southern form like the "genealogical" novel survived the cultural trauma of post-modernity by re-inventing itself and keeping at the same time an open dialogue with its illustrious predecessors. In order to do so, I will analyze the novel chiefly through the lenses of a geocentric, Bakhtinian reading, grounding (no pun intended) my considerations on the quality of spaces, the kind of societal order they accommodate, and the way characters interact with them.

Since geography has a pivotal role in this study, placing the novel on the map of the US South is the first thing to do. *The Shore* is a group of small barrier islands "off the coast of Virginia and just south of Maryland, trailing out into the Atlantic Ocean like someone's dripped paint" (Taylor 6). This locale hosts a fringe of the nearby (and already peripheral) Appalachian culture, and its marginality is further reinforced early on in the novel: "people say that the government doesn't even remember we're here, that we get left off when they draw the maps" (7), one of the characters affirms. The otherness usually associated with Appalachia is then strengthened not only by the geographical element (after all, these islands are the last outpost of the South before the Atlantic Ocean) but also by the alleged governmental attitude towards the Shore and its inhabitants. If, as Michael D. Shapiro wrote in *Appalachia on Our Mind*, the Appalachian Mountains were considered a kind of "terra incognita" (5) for a long time, then the Shore is by all means a *terra obliterata*, a forgotten land. Erasure, considered in the general sense of a perhaps violent eradication (of a people and a culture), is indeed a major theme of the novel. The islands and their communities face a constant threat of extinction throughout the stories narrated, and much of Taylor's effort is spent in the description of these people's often desperate fight for survival and affirmation in a largely hostile environment. Moreover, since *The Shore* clearly takes sides with the



matriarchal, feminine element, the most important and tragic erasure it denounces is the one perpetrated by the South's patriarchal culture at the expense of women. I will return to this later on.

The novel's setting is then presented ambiguously. It possesses the characteristics of an almost virgin pastoral haven: its isolation is also a defense against the relentless advancement of modernity, the most frequent threat to the traditional Edenic-pastoral order. But the Shore can also be read as another representation of the classic garden-machine dichotomy. The contrast between the two, as described by Leo Marx's seminal study on the subject, is given great relevance in the novel's dynamics, as we see the islands and their inhabitants being swallowed by the ominous presence of industry in this otherwise untamed natural paradise. The potential of Taylor's idyll is marred by the proximity of three "chicken plants," a kind of spectral presence evoked only by their disgusting stench and by the soul-destroying debasement of the people that work there. The co-presence of a mythical-Edenic motif and the hellish (though indirect) depiction of industry that is typical of the South's agrarian tradition is perfectly clear in this description courtesy of Benny, a member of the large Slater-Day lineage narrating his share of the families' history in 1981:

I used to imagine I was King Arthur going to Avalon, and none of the city mess could follow me. It wasn't just the trip away in reverse ... It was all soft and green, and no one could tell me that the Shore wasn't the most beautiful place on the face of God's earth ... Then a few minutes later I smell it: not quite as bad as hogs, but it makes you want to never face a bowl of chicken soup again. The smell hangs with me for a few miles once I'm past the first chicken plant, and every bit of me knows I'm home. (Taylor 171-172, 173)

The plants' stench is a recurring element in the sections of the novel set in contemporary times, and it is usually paired up with bucolic descriptions of the environment, so as to maintain substantial ambiguity. But, judging from Benny's words, it is precisely the simultaneous presence of garden *and* machine that gives the Shore its sense of place (at least in the sections set in contemporary and near-contemporary times). As disgusting and debasing as they are, the plants are unequivocally part of the *genius loci* – Taylor's take on traditional pastoral nostalgia produces a spoiled environment rather than a prelapsarian Eden, a heterogeneous space in which the precarious balance between the conflicting elements of nature and technology is perpetually maintained in a kind of dynamic equilibrium.

Though framed in a condition of decline, the Shore's idyllic qualities are reaffirmed when we consider the novel's long timespan (from a pre-modern South to a post-apocalyptic one), but an entirely post-human perspective it is not applicable to the text due to its strong anthropocentrism. After all, in spite of the narratorial voice's continuous shifts between first, second and third-person, the facts presented in the novel are always filtered through a human conscience, with matters of family and blood firmly in the center. Yet, the suggestion to look beyond the narrow limits of the human lifespan in search of a bigger and better picture is not only implied in the novel's genealogical form, but also conveyed through the recurring symbol of oyster shells.

Taylor frequently writes that these fossil remains form huge banks on the

Shore and sometimes also function as roads – the first chapter alone, “Target Practice,” contains five mentions of this geographical peculiarity (4, 13, 20, 21), including the evocative “oyster-shell road” (4). Fossils, a typical feature of the nearby Appalachian region due to its marine-sedimentary origin, function in *The Shore* like they do in “Trilobites,” a short story by West Virginian writer Breece D’J Pancake. In this story an estranged young man seeks a deeper connection with and understanding of his surroundings by hunting the Appalachian hills for fossils. “It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I’ve looked all over it for trilobites,” writes Pancake, also adding: “I think how it has always been there and always will be, at least for as long as it matters” (21). Functioning both as a concrete and metaphorical link to the land, fossils may in a way reinforce the feeling of permanence rhetorically connected to the traditional southern pastoral mode and the sense of place it creates: they are literally part of the ground on which Pancake and Taylor’s lonely and alienated characters stand (and take their stand). But since *The Shore*’s space is often characterized by elements of heterogeneity and polysemy, the oyster shells can also and paradoxically be a metaphor for the opposite: the inevitable erasure of history. By forcing a focus on deep time (that is: geologic time) rather than on human life alone, they are a *memento mori*, destroying the illusion of timelessness associated with the pastoral ideal. As a matter of fact, and in spite of Taylor’s meticulousness in creating a complex family tree, the only enduring character of the novel is the archipelago itself.<sup>1</sup>

But, in spite of the subterranean dark side and meaning of the Shore, the islands are initially presented as an almost metaphysical paradise. “The Shore is flat as a fried egg; on a clear day from our upside porch it feels like you can see into tomorrow” (Taylor 6), says Chloe, first narrator of the novel and one of the few characters given more than a single chapter in the book – a description that hints at the dreamy atmosphere evoked by the place (that comes to resemble some kind of dreamscape in which the characters’ interiorities meet and mix with the locale), and that also represents another subtle expression of the desire for permanence that characterizes every southern pastoral reverie. The little girl goes on to say: “We take the force out of the hurricanes, grow so much food that a lot of it rots on the vine because there’s too much to pick or eat” (Taylor 6). Though Chloe’s story abruptly shows its hidden, darkest side, the Shore is by all means a self-sufficient, abundant simulacrum of the garden of Eden. Isolation from the chaotic mainland and the strong connection to the island that the inhabitants feel elicit a comparison with Bakhtin’s Idyllic chronotope, the one in which, as the Russian theoretician posits, we find

an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory ... Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers live, and where one’s children and grandchildren will live ... The unity of the life of generations (in general, the life of men) is in most instances primarily defined by the *unity of place*, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable. (225)

<sup>1</sup> As a curious (and perhaps frivolous) confirmation of the symbolic power held by the shells in the book, it is probably interesting to note that the first edition cover of *The Shore* depicts an assortment of sea shells barely hiding a bloody human tooth.



Even if the lives depicted in *The Shore* are more often than not only pseudo-idyllic, with grim and unsettling subtexts hiding right underneath the surface of things, the “fastening-down” mentioned by Bakhtin is nonetheless a strong motif. Also, the islanders’ intimate bond with their place is the element from which the magical-realistic elements of the book derives. As we come to discover, some members of the Slater-Lumsden branch of the family are able to bend nature to their will, functioning as keepers and defenders of the Shore. They are able to heal the ground, control the rains and stop potentially dangerous storms coming from the ocean. This is indeed an original take on the quintessentially pastoral “middle ground” as described by Leo Marx. Introduced by another typical motif of the mode – the “echo” (a metaphor for reciprocity between human and non-human) – the middle ground is defined by Marx as the “place” where the pastoral ideal is located, a space “somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendental relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (Marx 23). This interpretation reveals a metaphysical side of the connection between man and place that, in the case of Taylor’s novel, becomes a supernatural link that allows some of her characters (of course, the ones whose roots are firmly and deeply planted in the islands’ ground) to partake in the non-human. These people, directly descending from the witch-matriarch Medora Slater, symbolize the ultimate and utopian pastoral dream of a perfect continuity between people and nature; they are hybrid beings existing somewhere between the raw forces of the planet and civilization, a literal incarnation of Marx’s “middle ground.” But, just like the symbolic presence of the oyster shells, the magical-realistic vein of *The Shore* functions as a twofold rhetorical strategy, both strengthening and threatening the pastoral permanence that it suggests. As Rawdon Wilson writes in his essay titled “The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism,” one of the most interesting features of the genre is the way in which it brings together different kinds of literary spaces: the “actual” space of reality, the surrealist space of the unconscious and the mythic space of folklore (the latter being represented, in the case of Taylor’s novel, by the evoked pastoral realm). “Magical realism focuses the problem of fictional space. It does this by suggesting a model of how different geometries, inscribing boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, can superimpose themselves upon one another” (Wilson 210). As in Gabriel García Márquez, the author from whom Wilson’s analysis originates, this practice is inherently political because it aims at inscribing (or “superimposing,” as Wilson writes) the ex-centric onto an ideological center – which is precisely what *The Shore*, through its portrayal of a peripheral community and matriarchal society, does in relation to the monolith of southern male-dominated culture. But, as this ideological space gradually recedes under the pressure of the alienating forces of progress and patriarchal oppression, Taylor also clearly reveals its fragility, implicitly denouncing the possibility of a southern maternal Arcady as a figment of the imagination, or worse, a delusion. The novel’s strong southern gothic (and affectedly misogynistic) undertow clearly reinforce the suspicion that such Edenic equilibrium will not hold – and hold it will not.

As we progress through it, touching more and more on the contemporary, *The Shore* presents us with increasingly violent and desperate situations: physical and psychological abuse, rape, domestic violence, small-time criminality and homicide become a cruel leitmotiv for these characters. With few exceptions, the novel’s many

family nuclei are all dysfunctional in a greater or lesser degree. Plagued by drug abuse, depression and (above all) brutal masculinity, they sometimes resemble a bleak, overtly stereotypical (but not at all ironic) representation of the worst “white-trash” culture. Although the psycho-geographical premises seem to direct everything in this novel towards uniqueness and exception, these islands sometimes resemble more a synecdoche of the South as a whole than a hyperbole of the region’s agrarian identity. Or rather, in the real-and-imagined space of *The Shore*, we find an enhanced counterpart of both the South’s pastoral self-image and its darker social and anthropological aspects. The hybrid nature of this place extends far over the limits of the traditional symbolic struggle between nature and technology – it is as much a dreamscape as it is a nightmarcape, a geography of fear and violence where natural splendor and opulence are heightened, but so are the darkest corners of human possibilities.

Writing from the periphery (actually the edge) of southeastern culture allows Taylor to maintain a detached, if still schizophrenic, outlook on the region. The deep ambiguities recorded by the writer are clearly inscribed in the families’ history right from the beginning. In the fourth (but chronologically first, being set in 1876) chapter, tellingly titled “Out of Eden,” the onset of *The Shore*’s complex family history begins with the story of Medora Slater, the novel’s mythical matriarch. Medora, the bi-racial daughter of a highly-stereotypical southern planter (rich, racist, violent and alcoholic) plans her escape from the gothic decadence of his father’s mansion in Franklin County, Kentucky – a vanishing symbol of the decaying remains of the Old South. She teams up with an equally stereotypical carpetbagger from Boston, with whom she fakes a marriage proposal. But Medora does not just want to break free from her father’s oppressive authority; she seeks revenge. Just before leaving for the Shore with her faux-husband, she poisons one of the many bourbon bottles in Slater’s cellar, setting up a perfect murder. The ritual killing of the father as a symbolic repudiation of the imposed order of the traditional South will reappear again in the family lineage, but this violent act of emancipation also seems to carry a stigma, a kind of damnation. On the one hand, Medora’s parable is in a way a faithful re-enactment of the southern agrarian utopia: through landownership she finally crowns her dreams of freedom and independence; but, again, the pastoral realm she creates is destined to crumble. As the tension between the pretend spouses rises, she falls victim to male violence for the second time: after a particularly heated argument, her con-man husband throws her into the fireplace and Medora, in flames and screaming, disappears in the swamp that surrounds her home.

The pattern drawn by this character’s parable is both centrifugal and centripetal with respect to the traditional pastoral order. As a woman (and daughter of a Shawnee Native), her participation in the perfectly-engineered plantation life is only apparent. Everything in Medora is ex-centric, unable to conform to the rigid structures of the Old South: the narrator says she is “tortured into the form of a Southern lady much in the way a French gardener would shape a box hedge” (Taylor 64). It has been noted how “Arcadia at its most glorious is an entrapment” (MacKethan 6), and in Medora’s case, this sense of entrapment that from a traditional point of view is to be associated with the conservative romanticization of the past, becomes a concrete prison rather than just a retrospective psychological attitude. Running away from the gothic enclosure of her

father's home is but a step towards the re-creation of that same order, and as a result Medora finds herself an outsider once again. Too late she understands that, no matter what she does or how far she runs, she will always be fettered by the all-encompassing southern patriarchy.

It should then not come as a surprise that Medora will find her true freedom only in the recesses of the swamp where she hides after the fire incident. The Shore, although a peripheral and isolated location, is not enough for this character's metaphorical resurrection; to really escape, she needs to totally withdraw from civilization. Even if a swamp is a poor substitute for a new Eden, this apparently unwholesome place functions in the novel as a redemptive locale, preparing Medora for her finally triumphant comeback. Since the first woman of *The Shore* has all the characteristics of a quasi-mythic matriarch, her story replicates in a way the legendary path of the first Virginian settlers. In what is still today an exhaustive and concise analysis of the myth of the southern pastoral, *The Dispossessed Garden*, Lewis P. Simpson pairs up this mode with the motif of the errand, discriminating between New England's "errand of the covenant" and Virginia's "prelapsarian" errand. The second one, lacking the strict puritan ethic of the former, is defined by Simpson as "an errand into an open, prelapsarian, self-yielding paradise where [the settlers] would be made regenerate by entering into a redemptive relationship with a new and abounding earth" (15). Even if Taylor did not consciously build this mythic palimpsest for Medora (though I am sure she did), she stands in the book as a founding mother, an American Eve whose actions give birth to a new, different generation. Taylor writes how Medora would later remember the moment of her final liberation "as a turning point, another rebirth in a life full of rebirths" (Taylor 165), confirming that this character has escaped the fallen world and has been made whole again. Her quest for the Garden is finally over when she dethrones her abusive husband by castrating him (something she had already done before to her father's beloved stallion) and so depriving him of the possibility to have "pure-blooded children" (Taylor 90) – a physical and symbolical gesture of sterilization directed towards the male-dominated, whitewashed social order of the Old South. The Shore then ideally becomes another promised land, a haven for a different society made for those who had found the South's "self-yielding" paradise to be just another entrapment.

I have tried to present Medora's part of the story and its symbolical implications in detail because her parable is like a mold for the other character's lives. In greater or lesser degree, her descendants will be destined (or doomed) to follow her path of fall and (sometimes) ascension again and again. The narrative structure of the book as a whole tends to circularity, conforming to Bakhtin's description of the idyllic chronotope time frame. Thanks to the focus being on a particular, well-defined space, temporal boundaries tend to be erased – a feeling that is further reinforced by the non-linear fashion through which the events are presented by the author. But, as the stories approach the present day, and as is to be expected, things get more intricate. Modern southern novels have a notoriously complicated relationship with time (and hence psychic and ideological structures), and *The Shore* is not an exception. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the scrambling and rearranging of linear narration, far from being just a virtuoso exercise,

is a rhetorical hint at the author's metaphysics (66). The French philosopher poignantly defined Faulkner's metaphysics of time as a "vitesse glacée" (Sartre 67), a frozen speed at the heart of things, a notion that can also be used for Taylor's novel, although with some differences. On the one hand, the perpetual feeling of the "here-and-now" (the perception of an everlasting present caused by the weakening of time) creates something of a sense of déjà vu, a repetition of an already-established pattern – the never-ending circularity of the idyll that revolves but does not evolve. On the other hand, the backbone of the story as laid down by the first member of the family is not just passively re-enacted throughout the book. The mythic palimpsest is subjected to a set of variations just like in the musical meaning of the term: the original material is clearly recognizable, but changes are made as the score is played. Because of this, Taylor's speed is not congealed as is the case, according to Sartre, in Faulkner, but is, rather, a viscous fluid that seeps through the cracks of time.

This somewhat unpredictable movement of the mythic elements in the novel can be explained thanks to the different *milieu* in which the two authors live and write. If, as Sartre said, Faulkner's metaphysics is mainly concerned with time (and we can agree on this to a certain extent), Taylor's can perhaps be better described as a metaphysics of people-in-place, or a transcendental investigation of that hazy and ubiquitous southern letters' tenet that is the sense of place. By choosing to place her novel right on the margin, Taylor is undoubtedly following the southern tradition of the regional novel (and the permanence of some classic pastoral-gothic motives suggests some kind of continuity between *The Shore* and southern modernism). But *The Shore* cannot just be considered a sterile exercise in mannerism. A great deal of the novel's focus is on contemporary and near-contemporary times (more than half of the chapters cover the 1980s-2010s timespan), a demonstration that Taylor, as Walker Percy wrote, is interested in "a very concrete man who is located in a very concrete place and time" (*Signposts* 190) – or, better, a very concrete woman in a very concrete place and time. As Martyn Bone has demonstrated in his brilliant essay, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, the agrarian (or pseudo-agrarian) place and time of southern modernism was progressively left behind by novelists like Percy in order to embrace a different relationship with space and identity: one in which the fluidity and constant ontological uncertainties of the postmodern condition have a significant impact on the way people live and understand their socio-spatial connections.<sup>2</sup> Discussing the possible role of southern culture (and the literature it produces) in this postmodern world, Charles Reagan Wilson writes:

Postmodern regionalism, to state my argument, involves the reinterpretation of traditional American regions, based on understanding the operation of knowledge and power at the local level. It is based in the appreciation of local places, of how individuality is constructed, often using materials close at hand. In the process of this reinterpretation, regional identities are not rejected but reconfigured. (154)

2 Bone takes an historical-geographical materialistic approach in his essay, justifying the movement towards a post-southern sense of place through the displacement of traditional agricultural property. This economic process, although never openly addressed, is indeed a subterranean presence in the contemporary sections of Taylor's novel, in which the protagonists mostly belong to working-class or poor white sociocultural backgrounds.

This process of reconfiguration, through which old patterns are bent and rewritten to accommodate a new way of looking at a society-in-place, can again be described with the help of Walker Percy, whose *The Moviegoer* stands as a fundamental work in understanding the shift from a traditional to a post-southern sense of place. Binx Bolling, “man without qualities” and the novel’s protagonist, classifies the events of his almost-uneventful life through the categories of “repetition” and “rotation.” A repetition, he says, is “the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed” (Percy, *Moviegoer* 79), while a rotation is defined as “the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (144). These existential categories are particularly exciting for Bolling when they happen in conjunction, when, in other words, a rotatory movement brings with it some kind of repetition – sameness embedded in divergence. An example from Taylor’s novel is Chole’s re-enactment of her great-great-grandmother’s attack on patriarchy (she kills and castrates a young man who sexually assaulted her little sister). It is a courageous, although brutal, act of liberation just like Medora’s was. But this time everything redeeming is absent from the scene; there is no rejuvenating wilderness to hide in, nor a mythic, redemptive violence in action. The circularity that tended to accommodate every aspect of life to the safe rhythm of the idyll is frequently broken into a spiral that swallows the lives of these characters. In accordance with Bone’s thesis, being in the post-southern (dis)order<sup>3</sup> does not necessarily imply an exhaustion of the old myths and themes, but it often implies the inability to live up to these narrations, and be consequently riddled with loss and confusion.

This explains in a way the different trajectories that the stories draw on the existential map of the Shore in the contemporary chapters. Taylor’s characters are torn between the desire to re-enact the Edenic order established by the myth and the impossibility of doing so in a rapidly changing world that drifts away from the crystallized palimpsests of the South’s “dream of Arcady,” as MacKethan labels it. This creates a cognitive dissonance between the sense of place strongly conveyed by the novel and the postmodern placelessness that, according to Martyn Bone, characterizes southern literature from the 1960s on, further problematized by the novel’s eminently feminine point of view. This is surely one of the main reasons for the progressive deterioration of the pastoral ideal in the book: writing from the periphery, on a shifting “ground” created by the merging of a mythic-psychological landscape and the actual societal relations enacted in it, Taylor dramatizes women’s more or less complete inability to actively partake in contemporary southern identity by playing any role but that of the sacrificial victim. Women, who already had a purely symbolic role in a society characterized, as W. J. Cash wrote, by a strong but empty sense of “gineolatry” (86) – something that we can find, although largely adulterated, in Medora’s story

3 As Fredric Jameson writes in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “In that simpler phenomenological or regional sense, place in the United States no longer exists, or, more precisely, it exists at a much feebler level, surcharged by ... [an] increasingly abstract ... power network” (405). If the true value of place (and the sense of identity it gives) is to be rediscovered again and again in relation to the larger, “increasingly abstract” postmodern power network, the process of “reconfiguration” mentioned by Charles Reagan Wilson can be considered as a constant oscillation between order and disorder, depending on the individual’s provisional understanding of the aforementioned relations.

– fare no better (actually, they fare much, much worse) when that society is aloof, unhinged, paralyzed between the weight of history and the contemporary *unheimlich* induced by the corrosion of the sense of place. A famous southern authoress once wrote: “Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too” (Welty 54). In *The Shore*, the atomized, clueless and frustrated society that evolved from the almost-perfect idyll of the mythic forefathers gives vent to its rage, it is women who pay the highest price for it.

The violent paralysis in which post-southern culture seems to be trapped in this novel finds some correspondence in the works of other contemporary southern writers. Mary Miller’s *Always Happy Hour* frames a less gruesome but equally bleak picture of women’s lives in the South, and C. E. Morgan’s *The Sport of Kings* shows a similar “scapegoat logic” in dealing with the effects of a displaced society on southern women – I could add Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* to the list, but in this novel the mythic background buoys up the protagonist and her animal counterpart China, although the depiction of femininity is heavily tinged with gruesome undertones. A comparison worth making is with Cormac McCarthy, not only because McCarthy, like Taylor, is clearly devoted to the kind of postmodern regionalism described by Charles Reagan Wilson, but mainly because his latest novel, *The Road*, shares *The Shore*’s vision in that it places southern society in a post-apocalyptic setting. To my knowledge, this is one of the few southern novels to do so, together perhaps with Omar El Akkad’s *American War*, Frank Owen’s *South*, and Holly Goddard Jones’s *The Salt Line*. Moving from a post-southern to a post-apocalyptic setting implies a speculation about southern society’s destiny, and also an investigation into its inner workings. As McCarthy wrote in *The Road*, “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made” (274).

McCarthy’s novel possesses a perhaps more straightforward symbolism when we associate it with traditional southern pastoral motifs. The dying nature portrayed in *The Road* can be immediately linked to an overturning of Lewis P. Simpson’s “redemptive” power associated with the Virginian errand. The Garden has become a ghastly wasteland populated by “bloodcults” and survivors, a Hobbesian state of nature where people “make beasts of themselves,” to half-quote Samuel Johnson’s famous aphorism. But in this ultimate errand into the hyperbolic wilderness-wasteland of the world’s end, McCarthy shows a possible redemption (the boy as the last remnant of purity in an otherwise totally corrupted world), and, unlike many of his works, *The Road* actually contains a message of hope for the future. By “carrying the fire,” that is, keeping the memories of the old days alive, the father and son become post-apocalyptic pioneers bound to ignite a new light in the darkness of the present (a frequent trope in McCarthy). Arguably, the author suggests that the only way out of the radical placelessness of the post-southern condition, of which the barren landscape of the novel is but a geo-allegorical representation, is by actually going back to the prelapsarian pastoral myths. An act that fulfills Allen Tate’s final proposition in “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” in which the poet urged Southerners to go back to their traditions “to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life”<sup>4</sup> (175). As Chris Walsh rightly says in “The Post-southern Sense of Place in *The*

4 Michael Kreyling uses Tate’s statement (in which the poet himself seems dubious about his



*Road*,” in this novel the post-South is redeemed in the end through the evocation of a pristine, mythic South. According to Walsh, the post-apocalyptic (and thus entirely anti-pastoral in its appearance) locale of *The Road* is re-inscribed into the “most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier” (54) through the father’s “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy 41) and, more generally, through the protagonists’ quest for a “new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning” (Walsh 54). By substituting the western frontier with the deep South McCarthy not only re-enacts the journey of the people who set forth to reach the “Garden of the World,” but also rejuvenates the southern pastoral myth by re-connecting it to its most primitive form: the quasi-Edenic, redemptive frontier state of the pre-plantation South. Following a suggestion found in Scott Romine’s “Where is Southern Literature?” (7), I would like to define this deep archetypal structure as an “Ur-South”: the most primeval and untainted (and therefore intrinsically regenerative) form of the southern pastoral myth.

Something similar (and yet altogether different) happens in Taylor’s novel too. The last chapter, “Tears of the Gods,” set in 2143, describes the last remnants of the islands’ society after a sexually-transmitted disease has caused an epidemiological holocaust. Just like McCarthy’s, Taylor’s post-apocalypse portrays a future in which civilization has been brought down to a new frontier state populated by survivors and ravagers. Tidal waves have destroyed the islands’ frail connection to the mainland, and people live in a reborn primitive society in which the weather-controlling descendants of Medora Slater function as shamans and rhapsodists, keeping the memory of the old times alive. The story told is quite straightforward: Sim (short for Simian), a “halfman,” a word that publicly identifies him as a misshapen young man (and thus, because of the new social structure, a sort of pariah), conquers the girl of his dreams after gaining the respect he never had through the rediscovery of moonshine (the “tear of the gods”). It is a rather humorous way to come full circle with the forgotten traditions of the past South, but, judging from the result, a highly successful one.

Everything in this last section is unusually light-hearted for a novel so dark and violent, leaving us to wonder why Taylor chose this conclusion for a book that takes great pain in depicting the geography of systemic male violence on women through the centuries. If *The Road*’s ending is perfectly congruous with McCarthy’s primitivism and generally conservative position, it is surprising to see a young woman conclude such a hard novel with an amorous idyll. Even more puzzling is the fact that, despite this almost unbelievably happy ending (the final sentence of the novel reads: “our hearts feel so full they’re like to burst”), the tribal world depicted by Taylor is strictly and absolutely patriarchal. “A daughter will be cooing over you an’ baking’n’brewing over you till you die, whether or no she’s got a man t’home” (Taylor 284) says Simian, who later literally has to kidnap his future wife from her protective father. Cash’s gineolatry is in action again; in this world, women cannot be anything but daughters, brides and mothers. Still, there is not a hint of overt polemic from the author. *The Shore* finally finds its order and balance only when every ensuing transformation of southern society is wiped off and things are brought back to a simpler, stable, traditional organization. One could say that the author’s condemnation

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advice) to build his argument that southern literature is an artifact “invented” by the Agrarians. Whatever one’s position on this matter, McCarthy undoubtedly chooses to take Tate’s advice.

of toxic masculinity and southern patriarchy as a whole does not get in the way of a genuine affection for her southern heritage, but that would be a hasty and superficial consideration in my opinion. As a matter of fact, since the novel ends with one of its few male narrators, and in spite of the light, almost humorous tone of this chapter, I am afraid that Taylor is only depicting the comeback of southern patriarchy after all the past struggle enacted by her female characters. If, as McCarthy wrote in *The Road*, the world's undoing is the key to understanding its hidden machinery, *The Shore*'s bitter message is that it is virtually impossible for women to escape the omnipresent clutch of southern patriarchy, and that, although we are far from the psychological and physical abuses depicted in the previous chapters, the history of violence (subtle or not) of the southern patriarchal order is destined to repeat itself. Making a provocative reference to William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* through the character of Maureen, Taylor writes: "The past always exists ... I think I'm really f\*cked this time" (180). This is exactly the kind of blistering sarcasm that is probably to be found at the bottom of the happy-go-lucky closing chapter. Read in this light, the cheery atmosphere of the closing section is more of a disturbing silence than quiet pastoral bliss. Missing from this picture are the strong, antagonistic women that populate the rest of the novel. In spite of their hegemonic presence as protagonists and narrators, these women are in the end nothing but revenants, phantasmal presences that, like the shells on the Shore, exist only to testify to their erasure from southern society.

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**PART TWO**  
**THE HOLLYWOOD SOUTH**



Marie Liénard-Yeterian

## Wither the South on Screen: Revisiting Some Recent Releases

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**Abstract:** My article deals with the construction of a different South on screen in the posthuman context. It focuses on the way previous idealized embodiments of the South on film are being displaced to give way to an alternative South on screen informed by our contemporary aesthetics characterized by violence and human reification. The filmic South increasingly coheres with the historical South through the rewriting of formulaic tropes such as the plantation, the Southern belle and gentleman, and the staging of significant historical moments such as the Nat Turner rebellion and the Civil War. Recent releases perform national cultural work at a time when the demons of Southern history have come back to haunt the national imagination, as recent events such as the shooting at Immanuel church (June 2015) and Charlottesville (October 2017) have tragically shown.

**Keywords:** Southern plantation; Southern belle; Southern gentleman; the Civil War; *No Country for Old Men* (2007); *The Road* (2009); *Django Unchained* (2012); *The Counselor* (2013); *The Hateful Eight* (2015); *The Birth of a Nation* (2016); *The Beguiled* (2017); *The Mule* (2018).

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“A cautionary diamond”<sup>1</sup>

Film provides a unique way to transform reality into a narrative, and cinema often performs urgent cultural work, with an increasingly cautionary or parabolic dimension. The embodiment of the American South on screen has frequently departed from historical reality, and is used instead to voice certain national concerns and obsessions. The cinematic South has been associated either with a golden age and an idyllic land in keeping with the fantasies of plantation fiction, or with a corrupt land of evil degenerates; one version or the other is emphasized to perform cultural work within a national agenda. Staging the American South has thus traditionally involved proposing two contradictory depictions of the South – “Angel or Demon” as I put it in an earlier article<sup>2</sup> – while *constructing* different Souths on screen. The casting of the South as a decadent and fallen land came to dominate the movie production after the Civil Rights era when television images exposed a violent South to the national consciousness. They indeed revealed a form of societal madness – what Lillian Smith describes in *Killers of the Dream* as the “schizophrenia of a South pathologically sick with physical and symbolic violence” (Smith 22). The pioneering work done on the topic of the South on screen by scholars such as Edward Campbell, Warren French, and Jack Temple Kirby,<sup>3</sup> has been followed by an ever-growing body of scholarship

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1 The Amsterdam jewel merchant to the counselor in *The Counselor*.

2 See “Angel or Demon: Performing the South in Cinema,” in *Le Sud au cinéma*, p. 37-53.

3 Edward D.C. Campbell Jr., *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and The Southern Myth*, Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1981; Warren French, ed, *The South and Film*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1981; Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1978. See also the special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* 19.4 (1981) titled *The South and Film*.

dealing with the filmic South.<sup>4</sup>

Recent releases revolving around the American South (through biopics in particular) and/or its History are characterized by a form of rewriting of traditional tropes, characters and settings.<sup>5</sup> Instead of rehearsing well-known individual and collective stories, they create an array of new images closer to the historical reality than previous (idealized) images of the South on screen. In addition, they resort to graphic violence and the grotesque mode, illustrating the poetics of our posthuman context, in particular its aesthetics of fragmentation and distortion – an era of “organs without bodies,” to use Rosa Braidotti’s image.<sup>6</sup> The cinematic South thus increasingly coheres with the historical South while current releases continue to perform national cultural work at a time when the demons of Southern history have come back to pervade the collective imagination, as recent events such as the shooting at Immanuel Church (June 2015) and the eruption of violence at Charlottesville (August 2017) have tragically shown.

The political dimension of the screen South often engages with a discourse on gender, race and class. Icons of choice include the plantation and its attending representation of slavery/the racial question, the Southern belle and gentleman, and the topic of the Civil War. The filmic South is characterized by the enduring legacy of both the gothic script of the conflict between good and evil, and the aesthetics of the grotesque, in particular the mutilated and distorted body as a trope for dysfunctional cultural elements. The characters and situations feature degeneracy and corruption, decadence and collapse; the physical and/or mental distortions figure the societal distortions of a region haunted by a legacy of racial violence and injustice. Cultural aberrations find in natural aberrations the sign of their “monstrosity” – the realm of the abject – and horror: the signifier to a signified that is conjured up stubbornly and viscerally.

This article focuses on the way these formulaic elements have been revisited and rewritten in recent productions. Texas, in particular, has become the state of choice for the setting, perhaps ousting Mississippi as the preferred backdrop. What do these productions tell us? What do these choices reflect? We will analyze the aesthetic and cultural modalities of these film poetics through an analysis of the following movies: Ethan and Joel Coen’s *No Country for Old Men* (2007), Quentin Tarantino’s *Django*

4 See for instance Karl G. Heider, ed, *Images of the South: Constructing a Regional Culture on Film and Video*, Athens and London, The University of Georgia Press, 1993; Larry Langman and David Ebner, eds, *Hollywood’s Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2001; Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture Through a Transatlantic Lens*, Piscataway, Rutgers University Press, 2001. In France, the first book on the topic was *Le Sud au cinéma: de The Birth of a Nation à Cold Mountain*, Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taina Tuhkunen, eds, Palaiseau, Editions de l’Ecole polytechnique, 2009.

5 Numerous examples could be given in the post 9/11 era. Here is just a sample: *Cold Mountain*, *The Changeling*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Wild Beasts of the South*, *Mud*, *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained*, *The Counselor*, *The Hateful Eight*, *Loving*, *Mudbound*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, *The Beguiled*, *The Birth of a Nation* ...

6 See in particular her book *The Posthuman*, Cambridge and Malden, Politi Press, 2013.

*Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015), Ridley Scott's *The Counselor* (2013), Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), and Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled* (2017). Passing remarks will also be made to John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009) and its Southern mansion sequence, and to Clint Eastwood's *The Mule* (2018) and its handling of Texas as a significant backdrop.

### Texas Unchained: Southern Mystique and Western Myth<sup>7</sup>

The South and its "obscure intertwining of destructive and ineluctable forces" in Edouard Glissant's image in his book *Faulkner, Mississippi*, is increasingly symbolized by Texas, the New Old South. In an article titled "Big Dangers for the Next Election," Elizabeth Drew explains: "The Texas ID law accepted concealed-carry permits but not state-issued student ID."<sup>8</sup> She adds: "No sooner did the *Shelby* decision come down than a number of jurisdictions rushed to adopt new restrictive voting laws in time for the 2014 elections – with Texas in the lead" (Drew 21). As she stresses, "In 2013 the Supreme Court, by a 5-4 vote, gutted the Voting Rights Act. In the case of *Shelby v. Holder*, the Court found unconstitutional the sections requiring that states and regions with a history of voting discrimination must submit new voting rights laws to the Justice Department for clearance before the laws could go into effect" (Drew 21).

As a border between different Souths, and the site where global issues of drug wars and human trafficking are raging, Texas reprises the wild violence of the Frontier – a moving line of *un-civilization*. As a screen object, Texas is poised at the intersection of both the legacy of the South with its slave-owning past, and the Western myth. Current conflicts over power and territory, and their new players/outlaws, is explored as a way to probe into the topical issues of greed and exploitation in all its guises and forms. Texas constitutes a borderland between South and West where the foundational mythologies of the American experience are conjured up to expose the ills of deadly trades, including human trafficking.<sup>9</sup> Recent representations of the Texan South trail blaze new grounds for the terrors of our times – a landscape of human and natural disaster.

Therefore, films such as *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* (with a script by Cormac McCarthy), and *Django Unchained* (the opening sequence takes place in Texas before moving to the more conventional territory of Mississippi) testify to the creative encounter between images of the Western and iconic elements of the embodiment of the South on screen. These movies, to use Gary Helm Darden's phrase in a 2009 article published in *The Southern Quarterly* titled "The New Empire in the

7 A recent collection of essays *When the West Meets the South on Screen* has reprised the title of one of my conference abstracts *South meets West* and my inquiry into the generic encounters between Southern and Western (as already analyzed in my article on *No Country for Old Men* titled "No Country for Old Men de Cormac McCarthy: Des mots aux images"), it is published by the *Revue LISA* (vol XVI. 1, 2018).

8 In "Big Dangers for the Next Election." *New York Review of Books* vol. LXII. 9 May 21-June 3, 2015 titled (20-22), p. 20.

9 Cormac McCarthy explored the contradictory symbolism of the road in his eponymous novel: the road leads nowhere but to death.

‘New South’: Jim Crow in the Global Frontier of High Imperialism and Decolonization,” involve “connecting pivotal moments in the history of the South with a larger global narrative” (Darden 12) – in this case, the dystopian narrative of increasing internecine wars in the wake of what is now called the “global order.”<sup>10</sup> Such imagery provides new thematic and formal territories for the Southern gothic while chartering alternative forms of Southern decadence. They beget another South in and for the American cultural imagination. In the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *No Country for Old Men* by Joel and Ethan Coen, for example, the haunted space is the rugged and desolate ecosystem of the desert as opposed to the formulaic swamp or woods. This “survivalist landscape” as the Coen brothers call it, emblemizes the corruption of the environment under human encroachment; it is a battlefield for emerging forms of war and conflict over money and property waged by drug cartels who have replaced plantation owners as the cruel and ruthless masters.

In 2013, Cormac McCarthy returned to Texas land with a movie script for *The Counselor*. Some of the dialogues in *The Counselor* take on a prophetic or parabolic ring, such as the Amsterdam jeweler’s presentation of diamonds and their “cautionary” dimension, or the Mexican lawyer’s take on Antonio Machado’s poetry. Through such elements and characters, McCarthy illustrates what Richard Gray calls in his book *A Web of Words* the South’s “trademark theme” of the “compulsion to turn life into telling” (Gray 220). He tackles the theme of human regression he had already addressed in *The Road* by suggesting how bodies are items to be used, enjoyed (sometimes in a sadistic way), consumed (as in *The Road*) or discarded. Props such as the *bobino* (the collar that slowly tightens around the victim’s neck) or the DVD, and preposterous scenes such as the “lovemaking” to the car, function as sites of exposure: they address the fact that human beings are handled like commodities in a world where material goods are worshipped idols. In addition, the movie bodies forth the way women, like cars, are prized but disposable status symbols. Last but not least, the *bobino* death sequence interpolates the interaction between media and terrorism: the slow and graphic death caused by the collar slowly but relentlessly choking the human neck orchestrates a spectacular show of horror that evokes our contemporary world of terror mediated by images spread over our ubiquitous screens.

Clint Eastwood’s *The Mule* (2018) focuses on another axis – both border and frontier: the South/North route. This vertical trajectory evokes additional historical events associated with the legacy of the Antebellum South: the Great Migration or massive northward exodus of African-Americans between 1916 and 1970, the “Southern diaspora,” as James Gregory called it, which actually started at the turn of the century. Clint Eastwood stages the well-known drama of the drug trade through the portrait of a Korean War veteran turned “drug mule” and working for one of the Mexican cartels. His war record highlights the fact that drug trafficking involves novel and native forms of warfare, with equally numerous casualties and losses as a result of total violence. Like *The Counselor*, *The Mule* presents the female body as a desirable but disposable and exchangeable commodity, a status symbol and gift reinforcing male

<sup>10</sup> Such imagery was reprised in a recent movie by Algerian-born Rachid Bouchared titled *La voie de l’ennemi* where Texas is used as a trope to address the current state of Algeria torn apart by sectarian conflicts and deadly violence.



bonding. Some of the Texas shots show the barren and desolate landscape analyzed above; the fragile and beloved flowers grown by Earl's horticultural skills constitute a tragic reminder of a beauty that cannot survive in the scorching sun of Texas land – some expenditure of love that will die with Earl.

### The Southern Plantation Unchained

Screen representations of the plantation date back to the idealized vision narrated in the plantation novel, and the imagery popularized most blatantly by *Gone with the Wind* – a world where gentility and good manners prevail, along with peaceful relations between masters and slaves. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* proposes a full plantation “redux”: what had remained concealed in the other tales – the “powers of horror” described by Julia Kristeva in her eponymous book – is exposed in a merciless light. In the 2012 film, cameo shots such as the close-up on the cotton ball stained by blood, provide iconic texts that encapsulate the story of plantation life – the crimson color, like a scarlet letter, branding the South as cruel and murderous.<sup>11</sup>

Tarantino resorts to his trademark use of extreme violence to deconstruct the cruel mechanics of the plantation economy – physical and symbolic. The term “Unchained” brings the viewer back to John Boorman's 1972 movie *Deliverance* that so boldly engaged with the borderland between civilization and savagery, “unchaining” the Wild South for the screen. Moreover, *Django Unchained* engages with the theme of performance – and the theatrics of race, class and gender underpinning Southern culture. The trope of passing – which exposes the reversibility of the categories and their porous boundaries, and denounces their arbitrariness – is explored in its multifaceted reality: passing for a gentleman, passing for a slave merchant, and passing for a valet.

The script proceeds through a series of cameo scenes, revisiting iconic moments in the plantation story while probing into the logic of the plantation system. Tarantino skillfully blends gothic and grotesque elements, such as Django's blue costume, the temporal and spatial incongruity of which points to the fact that the kind of aristocracy upheld by the planters reprised former moments of historical cruelty in the “Old World.” The long quest to reach the plantation is a prelude to the initiatory journey on the grounds of the plantation – a rite of passage that includes the terrifying sequence of the Mandingo fight, and the ultimate alienation from human empathy and affect. The welcoming of Schultz and Django alludes to the fact that many foreign visitors toured the Antebellum South indeed, in particular from Germany. The guests were frequently shocked by what they discovered, and their stay on the plantations, however short, shattered their illusions about the “Southern way of life.”

Moreover, *Django Unchained* probes into other forms of cruelty that had not been addressed on screen yet, in particular the choreographed tearing of human flesh, and its attending horror supplemented by terror which Stephen King defines as “what the mind sees.” These graphic episodes provide a *mise en abyme* for the ubiquitous gore informing our contemporary imagination through our consumption of extremely

<sup>11</sup> *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) reprises some moments of the chilling staging of the ruthless plantation machine.

violent images through open access on the Internet and social media. The Mandingo fight to death and the destruction of the aging slave by the master's dogs not only constitute chilling examples of the handling of the slave's body in the Antebellum South but also perform the agency of the voyeurism involved in the practice of lynching. Lynching indeed entailed a choreographed ritual of violence that required a public: to become a spectator was the token of belonging. In addition, the grotesque aesthetics of the fragmented body speaks of the abjection attached to the lynched body; the breaking of the bone functions as a synecdoche for both the horror and horror of the breaking of humanity – then and now.

Tarantino uses the traditional elements of the plantation story, and their attending imagery such as the mansion and its porch, and the formulaic gallery of protagonists: the sophisticated master and his sibling, the overseer in the fields, the faithful and loyal butler, the slaves, the terrifying dogs. The script rehearses a lot of the conventional elements of the plantation narratives such as the fine distinction between house and field slaves, the female slaves' sexual enslavement, the institution of terror through the implementation of public spectacles of cruel punishments, and the importance of the kitchen as the space mediating between the slaves' world and the masters' world. The filmmaker also addresses the ideological framework of the "peculiar institution" by referring to the craniologists' theories about the races in the dinner sequence at the plantation.

Through and beyond his characteristically graphic sequences, Tarantino proposes a full exploration of the overall dehumanizing process induced by chattel slavery; the character of the butler, for example, illustrates the self-loathing figure who betrays his own race to hold on to the little power he has managed to establish in the household. The savagery of the dogs functions as an extension of the pervasive politics of terror, as the recent novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward also narrates in a powerful way.<sup>12</sup> The bond between Calvin Candie and his sister fits within the topos of incest as used by Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner for example, in particular as a sign of the endogamy perpetuated by the plantation class system. The violence within the household, and the burning of the house, also revisit previous representations of the collapse of such dynasties in literature, as narrated in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or *Absalom, Absalom!*, and, on screen, most famously in the crane shot of the city of Atlanta on fire in *Gone with the Wind*.

Another recent release – Ridley Scott's 2013 *The Counselor*, with a script by Cormac McCarthy – takes up in modern times the destructive logic of the plantation economy. McCarthy had already explored the topos of the Southern mansion as a way to address the legacy of historical violence and corruption in his novel *The Road* in a scene reprised in the 2009 film adaptation by John Hillcoat. The most gruesome sequence of the narrative takes place in the South, when the father and his son accidentally discover a human pantry in the cellar of a big house. The Southern home is haunted, like its formulaic models, by the legacy of murder and human reification that

<sup>12</sup> One of the narrative threads in Ward's 2017 novel involves the embedded story told by Pop to his grandson Jojo about his time at Parchman where he witnessed many killings of run away prisoners by dogs chasing after them; he also tells about how he tried to protect his friend Richie from such a fate.

is rendered literal through the trope of cannibalism. Terror and horror – the traditional ingredients of the Southern gothic in cinema and in literature – are mobilized to stage this chilling moment in the novel that breaks new ground in the embodiment of the South on screen through its overall science-fictional/apocalyptic framework.

In *The Counselor*, the Antebellum enslavement of the human body is addressed through its contemporary guises, in particular human trafficking and pornography. These current forms of abuse and slaughter evoke chattel slavery; its practice of torture as a mode of terror is intuited through significant elements such as snuff movies and the *bobino* collar. The body – female in particular – is the locus of violence, now as it was then. Worshipped and adored at the beginning (as shown in the opening erotic scene), it will be dumped later in a landfill – a frightening reminder of the legacy of other bodies dumped into the laborious machine of the plantation economy – anonymous or defaced cogs in a ruthless system. The numerous workers involved in the business (the truck drivers, the dealers, the cleaning ladies and the bikers carrying the money, to name just a few) form a modern cohort of enslaved labor that can be disposed of with the same impunity as in the Antebellum South. The purity of the diamond marred by a flaw tells an early parable which later functions as a cautionary tale, revisiting the moral dimension of the gothic mode that pervades the gothic mode.

By the end of the movie, however, the title sounds tragically ironic: the counselor and his legal world are powerless to uphold order in a lawless world of endemic corruption. The movie offers indirect but intense coverage of all drug-related activities, including mass graves in the midst of trash, inscribing the formulaic theme of haunting into the larger repertoire of twentieth century horror and imagination of disaster. Such imagery calls to mind one of the scenes of James Lee Burke's novel *In The Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead* when detective David Robichoux explains to General John Bell Hood as he encounters him in the Louisiana swamp: "The times you lived in were different general. This afternoon I watched a film that showed young women being beaten and tortured, perhaps even killed, by sadists and degenerates. This stuff is sold in stores and shown in public theatres" (Burke 317). The proper-counselor-turned-lawless outcast receives an emblematic prop from the cruel world he has compromised with: the DVD with the greeting *Hola* inscribed on it is all that is left of his "chivalric romantic life." But he is no Petrarch, and his purchase of an expensive diamond he could not afford has triggered a fatal curse and a chase. No *deus ex machina* will come to the rescue and bring closure to this tale full of sound and fury. Codes of interaction and survival dictated by greed and profit result in abnormal forms of human behavior and purpose; they work as reminders of how so-called "codes of honor" in the South perverted moral imperatives regarding human dignity and respect, and used Divine Law to justify abject practices such as slavery and lynching. The handling of the body in snuff movies recalls the transgression performed through breaking the boundary between objects and humans.

### **Southern Belles and Gentlemen: Performing Without the Mask(s)**

The representation of the body is situated at the intersection of the depiction of the plantation and the attending protagonists: the Southern belle and gentleman. In 1939,

*Gone With the Wind* set the paradigm for the representation of the Southern belle. Tara McPherson, in her book *Reconstructing Dixie*, analyzes the “staying power” of the belle in the literary and filmic imagination. The recent image proposed by Sofia Coppola in *The Beguiled* revisits, and rewrites, some of the features and dimensions of the belle’s persona. Coppola’s version (compared to the earlier adaptation by Don Siegel in 1971), with its bold exploration of female desire and sensuality, introduces the type’s repressed or silenced sexual dimension to stage a Lady who acts on her passions and longings. The script tropes the formulaic gothic dynamic of the male bully and the female victim, turning traditional gender power relations into a dialectic – a finely tuned but fragile balance than can be destroyed or reversed: like mushrooms, the belle can be nurturing or deadly.

The film has the compression and tension of Sartre’s *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*). The plantation house and its garden remind the viewer of the opening paragraph of “The Fall of the House of Usher” with the outsider ushered into a “house.” Violence is kept at bay even though it remains a threat and obsession, as the camera work indicates in the striking opening scene. At first, the viewer is lured into the script of men and women falling in love, relying on the conventional notions of gentility and seduction. The women showcase the paraphernalia of ladyhood, however incongruous the hoop skirt and fancy hairdo might have become in the war context, when ladies are required to do the hard work previously done by slaves.

Yet, the keepers of the Southern home welcome into their place and space the enemy that “their” men have been fighting, showing some disloyalty to the very cause they are supposed to support and uphold. Other forms of subversion appear: the ritual associated with the evening prayer is changed into a ritual of courtship, and attention is deflected away from the transcendent to the material level of the body. Gradually, the plot unfolds a deadly drama of jealousy, retaliation and murder. The final scene, when the camera moves away from the body bag on the other side of the gate, presents a haunting image of the ambivalence of the South towards sexual desire, and the uncanny effect of women’s gentility turned deadly.

An alternative image of the Southern belle undergoes further exploration in *The Counselor* in the context of another century and another type of war. Ridley Scott’s movie proposes two avatars of the formulaic figure set against the backdrop of what we can call a New Antebellum South. First, Laura’s character upholds some of the traditional features in terms of beauty and class, and the white color of the opening scene alludes to the purity associated with her idealized image. Like the diamond she is given, she becomes – in a long line of previous models in literature and cinema – an expensive commodity sacrificed to uphold a certain order: her body takes on symbolic value to reinforce a form of patriarchy (in this context, Cartel rules of retaliation and business ventures) – and she becomes material for the prized snuff movie industry undergirding cartel profit-making and rule of terror. A terrible warning that sounded like a bad omen had been issued early on by another protagonist, perhaps a repentant gentleman catering to the damsel-in-distress-to-be. But she had paid no attention, having fallen under the spell of her own romantic ideal and quest. Her beau, unfortunately, learns too late that she is not just an expensive piece of jewelry that can be traded but a human being who cannot be replaced. Like Blanche DuBois, she is

discarded in a cruel and tragic way; ladyhood offers no protection against the rules of the patriarchal game.

The second but perhaps more compelling avatar figure of the Southern belle in *The Counselor*, is Malkina, a paragon of treacherous beauty and deadly power who instrumentalizes desire to fulfill her agenda of greed and power, dismantling norms of female gentility and love. She exaggerates the features of the Jezebel figure through her hyperbolic lust for money<sup>13</sup>. Like her older models, she is haunted by the past, and mourns the loss of a loved one. But she refuses to surrender to grief: for her, “tomorrow is another day” indeed! Independent, fearless, and ruthless, she charts the behavioral course for the lady in a posthuman context informed by the darwinian agenda of the global order and its power dynamics. She takes matters into her own hands, refusing to abide by notions of loyalty to her love interest: “When the axe comes through the door, I will be gone” she tells Reiner in a detached manner – emulating Scarlett’s declaration of independence, but riding the horse rather than staying in the wagon... Her final lines – “the slaughter to come is beyond imagining” – constitute a chilling statement about our contemporary world, in keeping with current uses of the gothic mode as a tool to articulate topical issues and address the present rather than the past. This turn has become the norm in the post 9/11 imagination, as a recent issue of *Gothic Studies* demonstrated through a range of studies and insights into the corresponding cultural literary, cinematic, and visual production.<sup>14</sup>

The other protagonist on the stage of the plantation drama – the Southern gentleman – also undergoes revisionary work in recent releases which expose dimensions about the character that had been left implicit or concealed. The first avatar of the Southern gentleman characterized by a blend of refinement and violence in a modern context appears in Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2007 adaptation of McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*. Anton Chigurh, as a murderer, makes visible the deadly dimension of a code of honor that instrumentalizes others. Chigurh upholds his own logic, an economy of arbitrary moral cleansing that ends in an aporia: how to redeem humanity if you have already disposed of it? Before killing, he tells one of his victims “Would you hold still” in the incongruous balance between good manners and brutal acts to be performed, as in Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” In the scene with the gas station owner, the wrapper of the candy evokes the discarding of human beings undergirding the foundation of the South, making it “illegitimate” as Edouard Glissant shows in the aforementioned book. Chigurh’s perverse ethos resonates with the Southern mystique of White Supremacy and its attending practices of murder, torture and terror. Lastly, Chigurh ushers in a new kind of Southern gentleman: he himself has turned into a killing machine. This dimension of the character looks resolutely to the future, and inscribes the figure in our current aesthetics of terrorism and posthumanism which blur the boundaries between humans and machines.

Under Tarantino’s ruthless vision in *Django Unchained*, the Southern gentleman appears as a fraud. Calvin Candy’s refined ways conceal a sadistic mind

13 For more on the Jezebel type, see Taina Tuhkanen “Belles, Jezebels and Other Dis/reputable Ladies: Southern Women on Screen” in *Le Sud au cinéma*, op. cit, p. 55-73.

14 See Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, dirs. *Gothic Studies: The Gothic in an Age of Terror(ism)* 17/2. Novembre 2015.

“beyond imagining” to use Malkina’s image in *The Counselor*, in particular in his treatment of the old Mandingo fighter. His props – a hammer and a gun – implement an agenda of coercion and murder. The movie stages a theatre of cruelty that speaks to our contemporary addiction to violent images: the gentleman’s agreement involves witnessing horror, and silencing terror. The unflinching gaze ushers the observer into the club of the privileges and trappings of power. Indeed, what is the price of silence? Is it to become an accomplice? But to see *is* to understand... and Schultz’s refusal to shake hands breaks the spell – and the bond. He cannot turn the iconic gentleman agreement’s gesture into a complete mockery of the values it is supposed to enact.

His act of resistance, however, results in the sacrifice of his life. In the end, it is the German visitor, former bounty hunter and outsider, who upholds a new narrative for the Southern gentleman. But his death suggests that the prospect of displacing the master narrative is still a remote one: the New South abides by some of the old codes indeed. Django’s escape in the final scene heralds an uncertain fate for the survivors of the plantation collapse. His gallop into the night brings neither closure nor resolution; it is, perhaps, just a momentary respite from a form of chaos pervaded by contemporary interrogations about the uncanny future of the humanity in a world destroyed by fire (literal and symbolic) and hatred.

Another avatar figure of the Southern gentleman is proposed in *The Counselor* through the character of the lawyer who, despite the warning given to him, compromises with the world of “dirty money” in order to buy an expensive diamond for his beloved. In this ruthless economic jungle, the counselor’s act of mercy for his client – in keeping with the traditional vision of the gentleman as purveyor of justice and order – cannot be processed by the Narcos who never believe his story. The truth, like human emotion, has no currency in their referential world, and chivalric ideals cannot be sustained in the face of the warfare triggered by greed. The sequence with the Mexican attorney exposes how loyalties develop to undermine the very core of legal practices which are supposed to punish corruption. The lawyers are expected to uphold the order of the Law, yet they participate in its demise through their ties to the Cartel that resemble a *bobino*-like mechanism destroying their body and soul. Machado’s poetry looks like a temporary ornament – some entertainment on the Southern porch while, down below and far away in the fields, others toil away and die.

In addition, the Antebellum economy of commodities to be bought and sold haunts McCarthy’s script set in the modern context of drug and human trafficking that function as a palimpsest to the ghosts from a past where the transformation of human beings into material goods triggered the “Southern curse,” in William Faulkner’s image, that brought about destruction and loss. The chivalric tradition echoed in Machado’s poem tells a narrative of sorrow and grief: “I would give up everything to have one more hour with my beloved.” Yet the gentlemanly counselor fails to protect his lady; he even becomes accessory to the demise of her purity, and her death. It is impossible to trade “places with her at the wheel,” an arresting image of the violence done to women in the current context of drug cartels.

The film thus pries open the myth of love, and addresses the issue of free will and individual choice in our global economic and historic predicament. The contemporary Southern hero, like his elders, is plagued by the legacy of the collective



past. The Mexican attorney's final words utter the sense of an ending that brings no catharsis, but more chaos and disarray. The counselor inherits the tragic gift of the violence that he initiated by compromising with the cartel logic. The greeting *Hola* written on the DVD sounds like the tragic oracle of words trusted beyond revising, emotions damaged beyond repair.

### The Civil War: Old and New Figures of Conflict

As Louis Rubin notes, "History as a mode for viewing one's experience and one's identity remains a striking characteristic of the Southern literary imagination, black and white."<sup>15</sup> The South on screen revisits the foundational historical events informing the imagination of the South. For example, the poetics of blood – which features frequently in literary fiction – fits within the legacy of taboos such as miscegenation, and the obsession that it generates. Such figure is endowed with a spectral quality functioning on the denotative and connotative levels, and is staged in particular in movies that deal with the Civil War.

One such recent example is *The Hateful Eight* (2015) where Tarantino's trademark use of violence goes beyond visual pyrotechnics to articulate the destructive and tragic elements of Southern history. The film allows Tarantino to return to the question of slavery and race explored in *Django Unchained* to tackle the legacy of decades of violence, discrimination and hatred in both the collective imagination and individual memory. The filmmaker uses the resources of the grotesque mode, calling on a type of comedy that comes with the baggage of terror. Even though the movie takes place in Wyoming, the action revolves around Civil War events and its unfinished business. The frontier is that of the unresolved conflicts left in the wake of the so-called "War between the states." The end of the war – the "unconditional surrender," as it is called in the film – has brought no closure. The action is set against a blizzard (not the hot sun of Westerns) and the pristine landscape of the West is obfuscated by a blanket of snow which gets in the way of the characters' moves and plans: the snow freezes, hampers, covers or betrays, yet it keeps track of the blood that has been shed – a curse for some, a blessing for others – in another metaphorical twist of the movie's physical cast.

The film opens with a shot of a wooden cross, and ends with the last two protagonists on the verge of dying after having read a letter allegedly written by Lincoln, and stained it with the blood of their murderous deeds. The President's words, recontextualized against the backdrop of the miniature war that has just been waged in the cabin, sound both preposterous and tragic. Hope and vision do seem to have missed the last coach into the light. There is no Western-like happy ending – just missed opportunities and hateful acts giving the lie to the promises of the American experience and political project. The opening shot functions like a tutorial in watching and understanding. A puzzling close-up triggers certain assumptions about what we are given to see: wood? The camera moves slowly backwards to propose another vantage point: we gradually realize that the disclosed wooden texture belongs to an arm, a face, a body. The wooden parts finally cohere into a sculpture representing Christ on the

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<sup>15</sup> See his book *The History of Southern Literature*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985.



cross – a cross standing by a well-traveled track on the way to Minnie’s haberdashery.

Other associations come to mind, and the viewer feels compelled to review previous assumptions as the large view conflicts with the initial vision. Likewise, the characters are not who and what they seem to one another and to the viewer at first sight. The usual tricks used by Tarantino – sudden unleashing of gruesome violence, understated dialogues, puppet-like characters, repulsive acts – are inscribed within an alternative embodiment of the Civil War on screen. Again, Kristeva’s definition of the abject in *The Powers of Horror* is relevant to get the full measure of the spit, the vomit and the blood as we encounter them repeatedly and relentlessly. The gore pulls obvious and not so obvious strings about human cruelty and abuse, and about emotions such as resentment, revenge, pride, fear, and humiliation. The general is a convenient prop the murderers use to make the scene “more real” for the next episode of their deadly plan – a nod at Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” where she explores the issue of the questionable relics Southerners sometimes cling to in their cult of the past: there is an allusion to the whole ritual of battle reenactments in the film, another token of the worship of a dead past that will not be laid to rest. The narration features chapters, a voice-over, flashbacks, embedded stories, and a claustrophobic atmosphere akin to a classical dramatic structure (one action, one day, one setting) that turn the movie into some Southern morality play pervaded by the posthuman aesthetics of gore and violence.

The unflagging exploration of evil in the context of a past that continues to haunt the nation – poised between the demons of *Reservoir Dogs* and those of *Django Unchained* – raises the following question: Did reconciliation come about then? Where are we at as a nation? More than ever the current context of the “house divided” image hovers above the numerous references to Lincoln and his era, his project and vision, in particular through his “letter” – a prop transformed into a trope. Like Anthony Minghella’s 2003 *Cold Mountain*, the Civil War is used as a metaphoric narrative to discuss contemporary political divides in the wake of violent historical legacies – old and new.

*No Country for Old Men* presents the fratricide slaughter through the prism and trope of another kind of internecine war. The deadly conflicts entailed by drug cartels involve an alternative gallery of haves against have-nots, and the exploitation of the poor to fight the rich man’s war all over again. The battlefield features new protagonists: the average citizen and the drug lords engaged in a territorial conflict – a struggle of “another kind” in Sheriff Bell’s words. The suitcase that Moss has contains a device that connects it to Chigurh. The money, instead of ushering in a new life and opportunity, will soon become his death warrant. The piece of baggage literally comes with strings attached. This sense of destiny and doom resonates with the Southern notion of the curse. The contrast between refined manners and gruesome cruelty shown by some of the characters speaks to the paradoxes of the Antebellum world as we have analyzed them above. But the collapse into mad collective and individual violence, and its attendant, oblique reference to the Civil War (imagination of) disaster, bespeaks the horror and terror of the current world order.

A few years later, McCarthy’s script for *The Counselor* reprises the thematic formula of the Civil War in an interesting way: some have seceded from the rule of

law, creating a divided world, and their dominion is enforced through torture, terror, fear, mutilation, random kidnapping and killing – all forms of violence that resonate with the legacy of Southern history. The Civil War appears as a specter hovering above the contemporary forms of brutal warfare involving citizens of the same nation rather than inter-national conflicts, and provides an illuminating palimpsest to the posthuman imagination and consciousness.

The Civil War is thus ubiquitous in recent releases, under one guise or another, which bespeaks not only the current climate of political polarizing and cultural division over major societal issues, but also contemporary terrorist violence such as mass shootings. Moreover, recent releases have included alternative historical events to perform important cultural work in a context of heightened racial and gender violence. Nate Parker's 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation* rewrites the notorious Griffith movie that had set the standard for some of the most enduring imagery of the South on screen. It enacts a counter narrative about the "birth of a nation," and makes visible the deadly logic of a system turning others into property while uttering a topical caveat about the potentially destructive impact of rising anger all over the world ending in a blood bath. *The Birth of a Nation* calls forth the advent of a new kind of nation created in the wake of the global impact of inequality and poverty of our Anthropocene moment.

### Whither the South on Screen

The function of art is avowedly to disturb, displace, stir consciousness and trigger awareness. In the movies studied here, there is a blend of rawness through the use of gory violence, and poetry through the elaborate dialogues, that sketch the contours of a landscape of disaster. The Southern aesthetics of the grotesque frequently used in the films – in particular through the handling of the bodily in torture, or murder (as in the beheading staged in *The Counselor* through the motorcycle accident scene) – speaks to individuals' visceral and animal impulses alienated from their rational and creative powers – the process Rosi Braidotti described with the image of "organs without bodies" mentioned above.

The final speech by Malkina at the end of *The Counselor*, in particular her ruthless suggestion that "We have to get rid of our sensibility," resonates with current debates around the posthuman condition. Her prediction that "the slaughter to come is beyond imagining" hints at topical forms of warmongering between humans in the wake of growing inequality, or even at some potential warfare between humans and machines... The other South delineated in the recent releases – perhaps a premonition of a South of the machine "Other" – proposes the ontological exploration of mankind pitted against the catastrophic consequences of today's plagues. In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti depicts this current predicament in the following way: "The most salient trait of contemporary global economy is its techno-scientific structure. It is built on the convergence between different and previously differentiated branches of technology, notably the four horsemen of the posthuman apocalypse: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science" (Braidotti 59). The cultural work performed by these films testifies to the power of the South on screen to envision the future instead of casting a backward glance – shaping the Southern

tradition of storytelling into a cautionary tale, and negotiating the turn of prophecy instead of an oratory of anamnesis or amnesia.

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Peter Templeton

## James Stewart and the Changing Face of the Confederate in Mid-Twentieth Century Hollywood Cinema

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**Abstract:** Hollywood cinema offers multifaceted perspectives of the south and the southerner, guided as much by the time of production as by the personnel working on individual movies. This article will focus specifically on two films, fifteen years apart, featuring the same leading actor – James Stewart – in two similar yet distinct portrayals of southerners. The similarities and divergences between the protagonists of *Winchester '73* (1950) and *Shenandoah* (1965) allow us to explore (via a close reading of each text) specifically how the Confederate rebel was constructed for a national audience in the mid-twentieth century, and how that changed across a contested period that saw wide-ranging events in the battle for Civil Rights. Finally, the article shows how debts and divergences from the nineteenth century logics of white supremacy and secessionism factor into particular Hollywood discourses about geography, whiteness, and masculinity and retain an ongoing relevance in the current, fraught political climate.

**Keywords:** South, Confederacy, Hollywood, cinema, western, race politics, Civil War, Civil Rights

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Considering James Stewart's distinguished career in the United States Air Force, in which he served in both World War II and Vietnam and reached the rank of Brigadier General, it is perhaps surprising that a selection of his films offers us so much insight into the presentation of a culture that rebelled against the US. Born in 1908 and raised in Pennsylvania, his service beginning in 1941 was to a nation from which, a mere eighty years earlier, the southern states had seceded. However, once Stewart left behind the roles that he had become famous for in the 1930s and 1940s – generally appearing in romantic comedies or dramas as a male lead with an innate civic virtue, such as Martin Breitner in *The Mortal Storm* (1940) and, perhaps most famously, as Jefferson Smith and George Bailey in the Frank Capra directed *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) respectively – he teamed up with director Anthony Mann to create the western *Winchester '73* (1950) and began to take on roles that afforded him the opportunity to present very different leading men. In *Winchester '73* he played a former Confederate, while some years later he also portrayed a soldier who similarly took up arms during the Civil War in *Shenandoah* (1965). This recurrence of related roles allows one to consider through their respective treatments the change in the presentation of the Old South and the southern cause in Hollywood cinema during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the fraught political climate of the 1950s and 1960s affects the construction of both the southerner as “leading man,” and the South in Hollywood cinema more generally. The article will show that, while never being vilified, the trend is for less sympathetic depictions of southern white men and for more manifest content relating to the politics of the Civil War and its legacies in twentieth century America.

Stewart's first role as a nineteenth-century southerner came in the early 1950s, when the US was fighting the Korean War and, despite a prominent film career, Stewart

himself was still a military man. Even with the martial elements of his life and the charged political arena of the time, Stewart's first film of the decade seems, despite its historical setting, largely devoid of specific political nuances. *Winchester '73*, despite being set in the 1870s, bears little trace of the Civil War which had ravaged the United States for the first half of the previous decade. This conflict is absent from the film in any explicit sense, with on-screen clashes stemming not from political allegiances concerning either slavery or states' rights, but primarily from fraternal or racial causes. First and foremost, this is a family revenge narrative, a film about "Stewart's relentless search for [Stephen] McNally, the man who killed their father" (Loy 39). Stephen McNally plays Dutch Henry Brown, the patricidal brother of Stewart's Lin McAdam, and the plot of the film is principally driven through this brotherly strife. There is also peril in the form of Native Americans, but this is again a more strictly racialized enemy than a politicized one. Though reference is made to Crazy Horse and the Battle of Little Bighorn (1876) by the Native character, Young Bull – played by the distinctly un-Indian Rock Hudson – these figures are generally "othered" at every opportunity, and exist only as familiar Hollywood stereotypes. Young Bull in particular is, like so many other Hollywood representations of the Indian, "the stoic, silent, strong dark-skinned warrior always ready to kill" (Ono 104). What Hudson lacks in dark skin he makes up for in painted savagery, which is interesting in itself since although "Native Americans had grown accustomed to the film tradition of warpaint ... few would have predicted that this kind of depiction would persist into contemporary times" (Jojola 12). Besides this typical presentation of Young Bull, since after all he is the only Indian with any lines or a significant amount of screen time that we encounter, Indian characters are largely interchangeable. They are gunned down by McAdam and his allies without thought or sympathy, and seem almost to swarm over the heroic whites like insects. This troubling presentation continues when McAdam intentionally aims for Young Bull, and, with their leader killed, the rest of the Indians lose heart and fall back. This has unfortunate parallels with ants; queens must be neutralised in order to successfully manage a colony. There is, at any rate, no investment in a second character who might be considered a suitable leader, and – in a gesture that seems to re-inscribe the logic of white supremacy – with the head of the Indian 'snake' cut off, the rest of the swarm is demoralised and retreats, despite still maintaining huge numerical superiority. The role of the Indian in the film is solely to incite fear in the principally-white audience, at the thought of the technological superiority embodied in the Winchester repeating-rifle falling into their hands of an animalistic crowd. Again, the principle here is the connection between whiteness and manifest destiny, with the fear arising from the threat not only to the central characters, but to the project of Anglo-Saxon dominance of the continent of North America. This film, then, might be thought of as a particularly conservative representation of Native Americans even by the standards of the time, in which there was actually "a reconfiguration particularly marked in 1950s Hollywood" towards more sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans, including in another Stewart movie, *Broken Arrow*, released the same year as *Winchester '73* (Pearson 246).

It is at the point when the peril from this enemy reaches maximum intensity, however, that the veil falls and the United States of the film, as well as Lin McAdam, is shown in an explicitly postbellum context. McAdam and his companion, 'High



Spade' Frankie Wilson (played by Millard Mitchell), are travellers in the West with no obvious allegiance to anything greater than themselves. When they are pursued across the plains by Native Americans, they shelter in a US army fort. On arrival, they discover that the fort itself is the primary target of the tribe, and that attack will likely come in the morning. McAdam and High Spade predictably join forces with the US Army soldiers to fight off the attack from the racial other, and when the Indian chief is felled by a shot (predictably enough, from McAdam) the charge falters. In the aftermath of the assault, the sergeant in charge remarks to McAdam and Wilson that he "wished we'd have had you at Bull Run. We might not have run so fast." This reference to the first major battle of the Civil War in July 1861, a famous Confederate victory in the face of greater enemy numbers, is followed up by McAdam telling the obviously Unionist Sgt. Wilkes that they *were* there at Bull Run, before High Spade adds that they were fighting for the victorious Confederacy. Here McAdam fits with the Hollywood convention of protagonists in Westerns as "defeated Southerners taking their battle westward," participants in a logic of cultural geography that places freedom – in this case, from the invading North, reconstruction and racial egalitarianism – on the western frontier (Graham 133).

What is immediately noteworthy is the reaction to this revelation. There is no obvious residue of hostility despite the interlocutors having been on opposite sides of the bloodiest conflict in US history. Instead, there is nothing more than a smile and handshake, before the two heroes are on their way. Upon finding the Winchester '73 (from which the film gets its title) on the body of the slain Native chief, rather than keeping it for himself or giving it to one of his own men, the Sergeant bellows after McAdam in order to present him with a trophy for his skill and bravery in the recent engagement. This attempt at communication is unsuccessful, and the rifle is eventually returned through a number of plot contrivances to the villainous Dutch Henry Brown, so that much later in the film McAdam's search for both his treacherous brother and the rifle is unified. In the encounter between north and south, however, what is evident is mutual respect between Wilkes and McAdam, with no evidence of any more fraught feeling. There is also some sort of equivalency here, as the heroic fictional characters of McAdam and Wilson signify the valour and skill displayed by genuine Confederates in turning over superior numbers of Union soldiers. Through this one sentence the abilities of the two are given a firm historical foundation; the implication is that the south was triumphant at Bull Run because they had McAdam and High Spade, or at the very least other men of similar calibre. Each gains something by the comparison – the fictional southern heroes and their skills are inflated by mention of a famous victory, while the Confederates and their cause are romanticised, after the fact, by their connection with heroes of Hollywood. Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon (264) have argued that much Hollywood cinema focusing on the Civil War dramatized "a split in the white self," between northern and southern, antebellum and postbellum, tolerant and bigoted, and yet in this film it is clear that there is no such interrogation of the politics of whiteness.

Whether or not one wants to take this line of argument quite this far, it is clear that there is no evidence of these characters mirroring their real-world southern counterparts and being, to borrow James C. Cobb's phrase, "defeated and embittered"

following the conflict (Cobb 68). In reality, “the war and defeat took a terrible toll on the south. From the outset, both sides depicted the conflict as a holy war [and] from the white southerner’s perspective, their defeat was more than a lost war; they had evidently fallen out of favor with God” (Goldfield 17-8). Aside from this spiritual desolation, more material factors also conspired against the region: “as northern wealth grew by 50 percent during the 1860s, southern wealth had declined by 60 percent” (Cobb 67). It is hardly surprising, then, that “Southern bitterness ran deep” (Brogan 351), but the viewer of *Winchester ’73* would be forgiven for ignorance of any antagonistic feeling or southern hardship. Though in one instance the film acknowledges the existence of the war, but the consequences of the conflict are behind a veil that is never lifted, even temporarily.

It is interesting to note that, although viewers encounter a number of veterans of the Civil War, *Winchester ’73* has surprisingly little to say about the African American question. In racial terms there is a fear for much of the film that the repeating-rifle will fall into the hands of the “Natives,” but there is no mention of the Thirteenth Amendment, or the black slaves that had recently been freed. In the exchange mentioned previously, one might anticipate either a vindication of the white supremacist south by those who supposedly fought for it, or even a demonstration of the righteousness of the Union cause from those who fought in blue. Given the minimizing of the importance of emancipation here, might one see in this an example of “white southerners who had lost the war” seemingly winning the peace? (Cobb 80) The reality is that although southerners embraced the United States in the aftermath of war, they also romanticised rather than rejected their past. As James M. McPherson states,

their glorious forebears had fought courageously for what they believed was right; perhaps they deserved to win; but in the long run it was a good thing they lost. This Lost Cause mentality took on the proportions of a heroic legend, a southern *Götterdämmerung* with Robert E. Lee as a latter-day Siegfried. (McPherson 854)

Winning the peace involves reorienting the moral compass of the war in this way, so that the philosophical and emotional impact of defeat is lessened. “Southern romanticism had never vanished,” and it returned “with particular importance in sentimentalizing the Confederacy” (Wilson 38). The ongoing relevance of these questions is evident not only in the creation of subsequent southern heroes in reactionary movies like *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1975) – another film in which a southerner, this time one written by Asa Carter (speechwriter for Governor George Wallace of Alabama) heads to the West following the War – but also in the contemporary debate around the Confederate flag and civil war monuments. One can also see traces of this mythology in the tourism industry around former plantations since “the heritage of the period before the Civil War, often highly romanticised, is an important part of the South’s appeal for tourists, usually focusing on the plantation houses of the former slave-owners” (Boniface, Cooper and Cooper 609).

With the heroes of the film now identified not just as southerners, but as rebel soldiers, one must consider exactly what kind of hero James Stewart played in *Winchester ’73*, and what in turn one might infer about Confederates and the southern

cause. What is clear immediately is that, though he is heroic, there is a violent edge to the character of Lin McAdam. Some of the intense manifestations of his hatred (including the nature of the chase for his brother which causes Wilson to remark that McAdam was beginning to like hunting a man to death) led to “many viewers [being] stunned by the new Stewart hero” (Schoenke 103). At the film’s conclusion, McAdam finally avenges the murder of his father by killing his brother. A certain ambiguity surrounding the ending of the film, and the trajectory of the McAdam character once his white whale has been killed, has led to speculation by R. Phillip Loy that Stewart may well be portraying a type four hero (as postulated by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* [1957]): that is to say, one that is subject to the same weaknesses as other people around them. Frye writes that this type is “superior neither to other men nor to his environment” (Frye 34). He goes on to say that “on this level the difficulty in retaining the word ‘hero’ ... occasionally strikes an author” (Frye 34). The connection of this latter point with the monomaniacal McAdam is evident. He is driven first and foremost by anger – hardly a gallant position – and one must question both what will happen to the character once the outlet for that emotion no longer exists, and what implicit statements this film makes about this interpretation of masculinity.

Despite the obvious merit in recognising the ambiguous nature of McAdam’s quest for vengeance, it is nevertheless clear that the presentation of the central characters is still, essentially, heroic. While High Spade and McAdam are seen as virtuous, the two brothers are cast in a fairly simple binary opposition. Dutch Henry Brown is patricidal and cruel, and while McAdam gives way to some brutal impulses in his quest for revenge, the morality of the pursuit itself is never questioned. The south, with its emphasis on forefathers and “the blood of a self-regarding nobility [which] transmitted the appropriate qualities” of honour and duty (Wyatt-Brown 49), was an excessively patriarchal society even by the standards of the nineteenth century, and so the murderous actions of Dutch Henry Brown represent a particularly grave transgression for a southern male. Despite being seen in a more modern context than that in which it is set, the force of this transgression is still felt on screen as, though one may be discomfited by the intensity of Stewart’s chase, viewers are encouraged to empathise with his motives. Not only is the narrative centrality of Stewart’s character in the film important, but so too are the respective associations that a contemporary audience would have had concerning the other primary actors. Despite the dubious nature of some of his actions in this film, through his other roles Stewart still has a firm association with civic virtue and with upright morality. His only western by this time, *Destry Rides Again* (1939), saw him play a principled lawman who wins over a town despite his obstinate refusal to carry a gun. Conversely, the casting of Steven McNally as Dutch Henry Brown has the opposite effect. Stewart had a number of major credits to his name by this point, while McNally had appeared in several films without ever being given star billing. While Stewart had often been shown as a bastion of virtue, McNally was used to playing menacing or sinister characters, such as the rapist Locky McCormick in *Johnny Belinda* (1948). It is clear, then, that these roles have been cast so that the audience will support the quest for revenge and make the distinction between Dutch Henry Brown’s cold-blooded killing and the nobler, avenging bloodlust of Lin McAdam. This can be seen in the words and actions of other characters, too.

While Mitchell sometimes voices disquiet with the obsession, it is always a complaint about the ferocity of the search rather than any moral quandary regarding the desired end result. The film never questions Stewart's moral authority in his quest to gun down his brother; it is only his methods that sometimes shock.

McAdam's moral ambiguity only ever manifests itself in actions directed towards those characters who are themselves on the wrong side of the law. In other ways, Lin McAdam is an uncritical portrayal of the traditional southern gentleman. This is an idealised figure, one that reflects that "southern men in this period valued honor, martial qualities, and chivalry" (Creech 28). Not only can viewers discern McAdam's martial qualities in his pursuit of Brown, but the last of these characteristics is evident in his dealings with the film's most prominent woman. His attitude towards the character Lola Manners, portrayed by Shelley Winters, is never anything short of chivalrous, and since she is the only woman in the film with significant screen time or dialogue one must assume that this is typical of McAdam's manner towards women. Similarly, we have already seen how the interactions between the US army officers and the one-time rebel are courteous and bounded by honour and respect. Indeed, though the audience is disconcerted by McAdam and his deviations from the established Stewart persona, it is only by his relative ruthlessness in dealing with shady characters and his Ahab-like obsession with tracking down Dutch Henry Brown, and there is clear water between his interactions with those characters who are a force for good in the film, and those with shadier moral and legal alignments.

So although *Winchester '73* is set on the frontier and connections back to states in the east of the country are merely implicit, it is clear that Stewart is portraying a fairly typical image of the southerner that had been prevalent in popular discourse for decades. These chivalrous gentlemen had existed in southern plantation literature during the antebellum period, and appeared in greater number following the Civil War in novels by both Northerners and southerners, reflecting what Cobb calls "the apparent nationwide groundswell of sympathy for the New South's version of slavery and the Civil War" (Cobb 80). It is not surprising, then, that with such literary reconciliation during the decades following the conflict, the presentation in Hollywood initially seems to follow suit. *Winchester '73* in fact replicates Hollywood conventions of the aristocratic "Old South," that can be observed in films such as the silent-era *Cameo Kirby* (1914) or, perhaps most famously, the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*; however, an altogether different picture of the southerner can be seen in the most enduring picture of the South come in Stewart's other film *Shenandoah*, which came in 1965, fifteen years later than *Winchester '73*.

This dissimilarity might not be apparent at first. Filmed in glorious Technicolor, the picture shows the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia (or, more accurately, the California Santa Clarita valley which stands in for it) as a lush idyll, replete with the pastoral symbols that appear in uncritical southern presentations of the South through the nineteenth century and beyond. The weather is consistently splendid over the gentle landscape of the family farm, which itself is positioned at the quintessentially pastoral intersection between "the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and eviction" (Williams 17). At first glance, on encountering this presentation of the Shenandoah landscape, one might be inclined to see this as the continuation of

a postbellum tradition that presents the 'Old South' as Edenic, only despoiled by the coming of war. If *Shenandoah* were to fully follow this tradition, it would be drawing on a pastoral vision that "was quickly and firmly fixed in the postbellum historical imaginations of many white southerners" (Cobb 74). It is probably these tendencies in the film that led one contemporary reviewer to suggest that the film was "full of clichés and overdone sentimentality behind which at any moment the reviewer expected to hear 'Dixie'" (*New York Herald Tribune*, July 20 1965).

The politics of this film are not as reactionary as this reviewer implies, however, and above all other figures it is the character portrayed by Stewart that undercuts much of this conventional rhetoric. Indeed, in the film's expository sections the character of Charlie Anderson seems oddly atemporal in a way that suggests historical texts tell us more about their era of production, than the one in which they are set. When he remarks to the Confederate Lt. Johnson that "this war is not mine and I don't take note of it," he speaks not as a contemporaneous zealot on either side but as a man strangely distanced from the conflict. While his son, Jacob, suggests that "anything that concerns Virginia concerns us" and remarks to his father about incursions by both sides upon Anderson land, Charlie remains distant from the conflict, politically neutral so long as his family and lands are left alone.

In his relative neutrality the film might be accused of side-stepping the issue of slavery, though it does receive more explicit treatment here than in *Winchester '73*. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has noted that "apart from a few lonely dissenters, Southern whites believed (as most people do) that they conducted their lives by the highest ethical standards" (3). Charlie Anderson does offer a muted criticism of slavery, however, one that sets him apart as one of these lonely dissenters and implicitly places him into a dialogue about the nature of race and the interrelation between the races, both with other characters who offer an uncritical southern line and with the world of the mid-1960s. It is worth noting that although "President Truman submitted a civil rights package to Congress in 1948," his efforts initially met with little to no success (Goldfield 246), and the various acts which forced southern states to recognise the rights of their black citizens were all passed between the mid-fifties and mid-sixties, culminating in the 1965 Voting Rights Act which was passed by Congress in the same year that *Shenandoah* was released. It would be unwise, then, to imagine that social upheaval have had no bearing on the construction of this southern character, particularly in the distance between Anderson's brand of southern heroism and that of Lin McAdam, a character obviously constructed several years prior to that period in which Hollywood, "unable to sustain its romantic vision of the South in the face of graphic news footage from Oxford, Birmingham, and Selma, the studios ceded the territory to television" (Graham 125). Anderson is a different version of the white southern hero not just because we encounter him in the war rather than after it, and because he performs a different function in the narrative, but because discourses surrounding racial politics in America are undergoing significant upheavals at this time.

Few characters in the film are written with Anderson's wisdom, nor do many endorse his political position. Most, including one of his own sons, Jacob Anderson, exist not as detached figures speaking from the time of production but seem to speak with attitudes recognizable from the 1860s. For example, at one point Jacob confronts

his father, saying “Now you say it’s not our business, not our fight, but we’re Virginians and I believe that anything that concerns Virginia concerns us.” This is a view that we can clearly identify as existing around the time of the Civil War, typified perhaps in the character of Robert E. Lee. The Union colonel who resigned in order to lead the rebellious forces of his home state is an enduring myth. In an otherwise critical piece Gary W. Gallagher admits that this ‘idea that Lee’s Virginia identity, as displayed during the secession crisis, holds the key to understanding his life and career retains great vitality’ (Gallagher 10). Lee is emblematic of all Virginians, an idealised archetype; as Heidi Beirich and Kevin Hicks suggest, “white Southerners created a narrative around Lee as the perfect, chivalrous, Christian Southern gentleman” (Beirich and Hicks 86). Given the idealisation of figures like Lee, and their choice of region over nation, it is unsurprising that loyalty to the state drove Virginians to take up arms against the US Army. Loyalty to the Commonwealth of Virginia, rather than to the Union, is privileged in Jacob’s comment to his father, and this is reminiscent of much southern – and in particular, Virginian – thinking in the nineteenth century according to which the war was fought due to Northern aggression towards the southern homeland and way of life. Perhaps the clearest exponent of this position was the South Carolina firebrand John C. Calhoun, whose “basic message ... was that aggression by the government and the North against the rights of the South had reached a point that unless something was done to stop it immediately and decisively ... the South would secede” (Waugh 93). Stewart, however, rejects this militant interpretation, instead effectively declaring that the war is about slavery. After establishing that the family does not own slaves, Charlie Anderson coaxes another son, Henry, suggesting that “I don’t see any reason to fight for something I don’t believe is right and I don’t think a real friend would ask me to.” This again seems to be Anderson speaking from the sixties, not least because even Abraham Lincoln did not consider slavery as central to the aims of the war until the second half of the conflict. Lincoln’s letter to Horace Greeley of August 22, 1862, in which he states that “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it” surely both reveals and emphasises the contemporary nature of Anderson’s comment. The centrality of abolition to the war effort is an explicitly postbellum notion, and it is these philosophies to which Anderson gives voice here.

One can also see in this gesture a rehabilitation of at least some nineteenth-century southerners. While Stewart does seem to speak through the screen with a voice from the 1960s, it is unavoidable that he is in fact portraying a landholder from a century earlier. By intimating that none of the Andersons hold slaves, and by suggesting that they see the immoral side of slavery, this film reactivates some tendencies familiar to us from plantation literature and other apologetics for slavery in the nineteenth century. It was not uncommon for literature to play down the extent or the excesses of slavery as a defence of the institution. This was often done either by showing southerners refraining from holding slaves, or by showing benevolent owners, and texts themselves would often admit to the immoralities of slavery, as in Plantation literature or well-meaning “intersectional” novels of the antebellum period. Although it would be a mistake to too closely align the presentation of Charlie Anderson with the position taken by nineteenth-century apologists, one has to wonder whether one of the potential effects of putting a more modern argument into the mouth of Anderson is,



in fact, to make the two portrayals appear very similar. Perhaps the presentation of the southerner in *Shenandoah* is, through the unwitting insertion of Northern arguments into a southern mouth, susceptible to the same problematic tropes of representation.

Other southerners, and in particular Confederate troops, are generally not represented in the film in particularly positive fashion. Lt. Johnson, with his appeals to Charlie Anderson to sacrifice his own family for the common cause and suggests that “Virginia needs all her sons,” carries with him an aura of threat to the idyll and is, in the early portions of the film, representative of the war’s encroachment on the Anderson family farm. The Confederate soldier with the most screen time, however, is Sam – the suitor (and, later, husband) of Anderson’s daughter Jennie. Sam is portrayed by Doug McClure, an actor with an array of television credits who was most famous for his depiction of Trampas in the NBC western series *The Virginian* from 1962-71. To all intents and purposes, Sam seems worthy and devoted. With characteristics not unlike the rowdy Trampas, though, he is more generally a figure of fun for much of the film. While war seems to be educative at some level and he gains a kind of rudimentary wisdom after some military reversals, earlier in the narrative he appears to lack basic common sense. He struggles to understand the advice passed on by Charlie, and his methods of courtship (particularly his admission that he practiced his speech on his horse in order to hone it) are the subject of humour and surreptitious glances between Charlie and his youngest son. Indeed, when the father approves his marriage to Jennie, Sam rides off into the night yelling with delight, prompting Jennie (observing from the window) to note humorously that he will ride for miles before it occurs to him to come back and tell her the good news.

Union soldiers, however, often fare little better in *Shenandoah*. Again, the Anderson family remains neutral so long as they are left out of the war, but eventually it is federal intervention and the commandeering of the family’s horses that draw Stewart’s character into conflict with Union forces. Most of the subsequent struggle comes as the family searches for Boy Anderson (portrayed by Phillip Alford), who has been taken prisoner of war by an overly zealous northern patrol. The radicalizing of Anderson and his sons through the actions of northern officers and their allies seems to be suggestive of “the white southerner’s almost instinctive resistance to northern intrusion” (Cobb 188); despite any other shifts in characterisation in this respect Anderson’s depiction plays into an existing conservative discourse in which white southerners – both in the Civil War and through the civil rights period – are presented as defending the social order of their communities against interference from invading, meddling Northerners. Whatever problems the south faced, the people of the region believed “southerners alone could fix these problems, and they deeply resented Northern interference” in their affairs (Bernath 45). Anderson is content not to fight the Union until it encroaches on his lands; this bears a striking parallel with the attitude of those in seceding states towards northern and federal intervention, the aforementioned innate defiance to intrusion from the North.

Although the Union Army seems little better than the bumbling Confederates for much of the film, it is clear that Stewart’s character could be seen as a crystallization of Yankee traits. He seems to have little time for religion or loyalty to God (at one point telling the pastor that he only attends church services because it was his devout



wife's dying request), nor to his home state, eschewing both in favour of an extreme model of self-sufficiency. Note, for example, Charlie's attempts at saying grace: "Lord, we cleared this land. We ploughed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat, amen." There is no respect or veneration for the supernatural or the spiritual here; if thanks are given it is only to his fellow labourers, while reverence for the divine seems to be replaced at some level by self-congratulation. There is some geographical criss-crossing at work here, since, as Michael Hoberman says, "images of stereotypical Yankee hardheadedness and self-sufficiency abound, not only in New England folklore but throughout American storytelling and literary traditions" (Hoberman 68). Meanwhile, Anderson's attitude towards the Commonwealth of Virginia reflects the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian distrust of governmental authority. When Lt. Johnson attempts to recruit the younger Anderson men, Charlie reacts angrily, exclaiming "They don't belong to the state; they belong to me! When they were babies I never saw the state comin' around here with a spare tit!" The implication is clear: the family was raised by his hard work and by that of his wife, not by the state, and as a consequence neither the state nor an abstract southern cause had any claim on his family to compare with his own.

One might observe in Anderson's character some of the traits that would be incorporated in the New South ideology following the Civil War. Critics of the new creed "charged that it was actually motivated by the same 'mammonism' and 'money mania' that was the essence of Yankeeism" (Cobb 70). Whether we see Charlie Anderson as speaking to us from the 1960s, or as a somewhat *avant-garde* advocate for elements of the New South from the midst of the plantation idyll, is obviously a matter for individual viewers of *Shenandoah*. What is clear, though, is that somewhere between the films of 1950 and 1965 that have been considered in this essay, something happened to the way in which the figure of the southerner was rendered. While the southern system had gone on largely unimpeded by northern intrusion since the failure of Reconstruction, events such as the Freedom Rides of 1961 laid "bare the violence that had been there all along but had remained hidden from the glare of national publicity" (Goldfield 246-7). In the decades following the Reconstruction the romantic myth of the Lost Cause gained currency and, consequently, most in the northern states were largely unaware that any great social problem existed in the south. Finally, the huge success of the film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* "completed the job of wiping out of the public mind the 'northern' view of slavery, civil war, and reconstruction, replacing it with the traditional 'southern' view" (Reddick 14-5).

When *Winchester '73* was made, then, the southern view of history still held sway for much of the US. The south was a romantic place, filled with heroes like Lin McAdam. National coverage of the Civil Rights movement shattered this illusion. As Goldfield says, "resistance [to integration] unwittingly revealed the rotted philosophical underpinnings of white supremacy" (Goldfield 248). By the middle of the sixties, for a southerner to have heroic characteristics, he or she could no longer adhere to the ideas of the Old South but must be either a Yankee, ideologically speaking if not by dint of blood, or a willing participant in the implantation of northern ideals in the region.

Relatively speaking, Lin McAdam is still a fairly romantic character in *Winchester '73*, drawing on ideas of family honour, chivalry, and the inherent goodness of the lost southern cause. While some of these themes are still present in 1965, Stewart's later portrayal is bound up much more with mercantile concerns, and is more removed from the notion of a collective south than any generation since, interestingly, the one that he is depicting.

It is intriguing, though, to consider the respective fates of the two characters. As shown, the uncertainty of the conclusion of *Winchester '73* complicates matters. The viewer could easily see Lin McAdam, both fatherless and now brother-less, as lacking direction without the need to take revenge upon his sibling. There is potentially something unsatisfactory in this narrative trajectory, in as much as the hero is ultimately denied closure even once his quest has been completed. This could potentially be interpreted as McAdam's punishment for his own contravention of southern familial codes. While his brother is guilty of the crime of patricide, he, too, is guilty of fratricide in avenging that death. This reading would offer something of a parallel with *Shenandoah*, since despite Anderson's ability to see through much of the philosophy of those around him, he remains enthralled by this familial link. Nevertheless, his family suffers tragedy on a number of occasions throughout the film. Firstly, his son is imprisoned by the Union army and, on his escape, is virtually press-ganged into the Confederate Army where he is shot in the leg. Two of his sons are killed, as well as his daughter-in-law. His son-in-law and daughter are separated by the war before their honeymoon. Although the final shot of the film shows Anderson reunited with his youngest son, the number of family members lost in tragic circumstances forms a catalogue of misfortunes. Perhaps this last image reinforces this message, since there is one character treated with complete reverence – the deceased Martha Anderson, wife of Charlie. She is presented (in her absence, at least) as the embodiment of decent southern womanhood (“the southern lady [was] characterized by piety” [Mathews 123]), and it is after talking to her grave that Anderson heads for church where the reunification with his son takes place. Given the order of events, one might see Anderson as being punished for his deviation from southern norms, but when he gives in to one wiser than himself, this pure vision of southern womanhood with strong religious overtones, he is rewarded by the safe return of his youngest son. Regardless of any progressive or Yankee credentials one might ascribe to the film, then, potentially the southern doctrine of faith and family wins out in the end.

Although the figure of the southerner changes dramatically between 1950 and 1965, Bruce Steel Wills has suggested that the conclusion to *Shenandoah* is “ultimately uplifting” (Wills 3). Perhaps, with the film's release during the commemorations of the centenary of the ending of the Civil War, the goal was not so much to present a liberal polemic but to aim for something with a more universal appeal. In the final analysis, “the picture in the spirit of the national festival took no sides” (Campbell 171). Although our hero is neither southern zealot nor slaveholder, the pragmatic and individualistic Charlie Anderson is ultimately redeemed by an idealised southern woman. At the film's conclusion, he stands in church with his son, and seems to stand for the nation itself as, after all the privations and calamities of war, there is some symbolic joy in the act of familial reunification. Perhaps more significantly in standing for the nation, both

northern and southern at the moment of this national festival, Anderson exists as one of Vera and Gordon's "sincere fictions of the white self," reunited in fairly uncomplicated fashion, despite the film's clear liberal discourse elsewhere (Vera and Gordon 279).

In the final reckoning, perhaps there is less of a surprising distance between Stewart's upbringing and his military history, and his portrayal of rebellious southerners than one might first imagine. For various reasons, the representation of the South had always been largely depoliticised, and as a result the associations of independent hard work and civic virtue might transfer straightforwardly from Stewart's Pennsylvania background to a certain interpretation of the southern yeoman farmer. What is apparent from considering these two films in close proximity, though, is that Hollywood movies reach into the past for source material, but bring with them contemporary interpretations and the concerns of the national political climate in which they are produced. Taken as a case study, the ways in which these films diverge reveal that what the Civil War meant in American history, and, indeed, what it meant to be a southerner, were contested questions in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Clearly, these questions play out not only in explicit political discourse, but also in the realm of popular culture.

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Antoni Górny

## Appalling! Terrifying! Wonderful! Blaxploitation and the Cinematic Image of the South

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**Abstract:** The so-called blaxploitation genre – a brand of 1970s film-making designed to engage young Black urban viewers – has become synonymous with channeling the political energy of Black Power into larger-than-life Black characters beating “the [White] Man” in real-life urban settings. In spite of their urban focus, however, blaxploitation films repeatedly referenced an idea of the South whose origins lie in antebellum abolitionist propaganda. Developed across the history of American film, this idea became entangled in the post-war era with the Civil Rights struggle by way of the “race problem” film, which identified the South as “racist country,” the privileged site of “racial” injustice as social pathology.<sup>1</sup> Recently revived in the widely acclaimed works of Quentin Tarantino (*Django Unchained*) and Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*), the two modes of depicting the South put forth in blaxploitation and the “race problem” film continue to hold sway to this day. Yet, while the latter remains indelibly linked, even in this revised perspective, to the abolitionist vision of emancipation as the result of a struggle between idealized, plaintive Blacks and pathological, racist Whites, blaxploitation’s troping of the South as the fulfillment of grotesque White “racial” fantasies offers a more powerful and transformative means of addressing America’s “race problem.”

**Keywords:** blaxploitation, American film, race and racism, slavery, abolitionism

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The year 2013 was a momentous one for “racial” imagery in Hollywood films. Around the turn of the year, Quentin Tarantino released *Django Unchained*, a sardonic action-film fantasy about an African slave winning back freedom – and his wife – from the hands of White slave-owners in the antebellum Deep South. In spite of controversies, such as the alleged overuse of “the n-word,” the film received five Oscar nominations (including for Best Picture) and two Oscars. That summer, as the Black Lives Matter movement began to take shape, Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* – an adaptation of a nineteenth-century slave narrative by Solomon Northup – debuted to widespread critical acclaim. It went on to win the Best Picture Oscar at the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony. Both films were historic in their separate ways. *Django Unchained*’s ultra-violent revenge plot allowed Jamie Foxx’s Django to embody a menacing Black masculinity without remorse in a violent fantasy of a slave avenging himself on slave-owners. *12 Years a Slave*, on the other hand, repeatedly hints at universal images of “racial” violence, such as lynching photographs. As a headhunter, Django is consciously anachronistic, a parody of blackface minstrelsy’s Zip Coon – an “uppity” Black dandy (Lott 23; Nama 117). As a slave, Solomon Northup is a virtually transparent victim of a historic injustice – made more accessible than his literary model at the expense of the source’s cognitive weight (Stevenson 106-118). Both films thus represent the Black experience as a historical event, using symbols and images that have a determinate history, but from a thoroughly contemporary angle.

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1 Throughout the text, the words “race” and “racial” are put in quotation marks to highlight the questionable status of the pseudo-scientific notion undergirding systems of dehumanizing oppression.

Yet, the manner in which this is achieved is by no means unproblematic. Django's story only begins in earnest when he is set free by a White German headhunter, Dr. King Schultz, who seeks to exploit the slave's intimate knowledge of a group of renegades. Indeed, it is Schultz's death that propels the film toward the grotesque, painstakingly choreographed final bloodbath that betrays Tarantino's fascination with 1970s exploitation film. While Northup's story is hardly as spectacular, it features a similar dramatic leap. Before his kidnapping, Northup is an insignificant figure, a "middling" man, whose Blackness is a superficial fact.<sup>2</sup> Once he becomes a slave, his very existence in itself becomes proof of the injustice of the slave system. Like Django, who travels across a progressively dystopian slave country, Northup slowly descends toward the bleakest side of slavery, where no benevolence can hide the inherent cruelty of the system. Then, like Django pulled out of insignificance by the will of one White man, Northup is saved by a White Canadian artisan who empathizes with the slave. Neither protagonist carries much significance without the intervention of the White "participant observer" – a figure as old as the slave narratives (Stepito; Olney 46-73). Without Dr. Schultz, *Django Unchained* is traumatic and inaccessible; it is his investment in Django's story of lost love that creates space for audience identification with both characters: not as quirky and ultra-violent vagabonds, but as relatable people (Johnson 13-21). By the same token, Brad Pitt's cameo as the Canadian artisan grants the character not only an attractive physique, but also a simplicity and frankness that is otherwise absent from *12 Years a Slave*, thus helping to frame the "message" of the film.

It is mostly because of these White witnesses that both texts gain universal ramifications. At the outset, Django only seeks vengeance and reunification with Broomhilda, the wife he was separated from. Schultz's progressive empathy transforms Django's quest into something deeply human. The transformation also explains Schultz's demise: unable to bear the inhumanity of racism, he sacrifices Django's personal happiness by killing the perverse, pretentious slave-owner Calvin Candie – a true Enlightened man denying recognition to a despicable impostor (Dassanowsky 21-23). Though not as dramatic, the contrast between the anti-slavery White Northerners and slave-owning White Southerners in *12 Years a Slave* is also disturbingly stark. The film conjectures a North of "racial" equality, where Northup can pursue an American Dream for himself and his family without facing White oppression, in contrast to the unequal and inhuman South. Northup's kidnapping conjures up the specter of the basic inequality between Blacks and Whites in antebellum America (Stevenson 108-109). White "racial" duplicity then contrives to move Northup further and further South, until he reaches the hell of a Louisiana plantation – a place whose distance from the protagonist's family home serves to underline the basic humanity of his struggle.

In both cases, the (proximate) presence of slavery provides the backdrop to a peculiar morality play. On the one hand, these films narrate a struggle between good and evil, set in terms common to nineteenth-century abolitionist propaganda. The body of the slave becomes a stake in the contest between two visions of Whiteness: White (Western) civilization as a moral mission (Dr. Schultz) or as the pursuit of power and

2 Pero Dagbovie points out that this characterization is at odds with the realities of life of free Blacks in New York (Dagbovie 95).



wealth (*12 Years a Slave*'s Master Epps) (Dyer 35-36). Thus, the Black body is only available as a means by which the Western man achieves supremacy, either as a man of God, or as a man of capital (Baker 19-25). On the other hand, the slave's initial destitution and later resurgence is symbolized by the absence or presence of familial bonds. Here, too, the Black body provides the necessary reflective surface for a White tale. The moral failure of the Godless man of capital, after all, consists not merely in the act of trading in human bodies, but rather in a psychological regression expressed on the level of civilization and family relations. It is not enough that Calvin Candie be an amoral exploiter of human beings; he must also be a fake, putting on the airs of an educated Western man and maintaining questionable relations with multiple female members of his household, including his own sister. By the same token, Epps must both express inhuman excesses of power as a slave-owner and exercise his sexuality on a female slave while neglecting his White wife – and implicitly dragging her into the mud of his moral depravity.

The manner in which Tarantino and McQueen negotiate these perspectives provides a crucial connection between the legacies of abolitionist propaganda (as well as its blackface parody) and the post-World War II aesthetic revisions coinciding with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. In the figures of the docile, enduring slave and the assertive, resisting freedman, the two filmmakers capture the spirit of two divergent traditions of Black representation, rendered in two major post-war Black-themed genres of American cinema: the "race problem" film and blaxploitation. In this context, Northrup represents the assimilationist ambitions of the Civil Rights movement, driven by a belief in the ultimate triumph of justice and the perception of racism as a curable ailment of the individual. Django, on the other hand, stands for the desire for self-assertion and independence, made readily apparent by his embrace of the figure of the frontiersman. Both aesthetic currents focused on ideas of masculinity and the family, positing slavery and "racial" oppression as a form of emasculation and denial of patriarchal privilege and deploying an idea of the South as a signifier for the perversion of patriarchy. However, as the contrast between *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* demonstrates, the decay the South comes to represent, rather than containing the "racial" drama initiated by slavery, carries within itself the power to destroy "race."

## I.

Perhaps the prime example of abolitionist propaganda, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a vital role in establishing stereotypical ideas about slavery and Blackness that continue to inform American popular culture today. The story of a slave's collapse from forced labor in the fields of Kentucky to physical and psychological terror in the plantations of Louisiana dramatizes the contrast between slavery as an educational institution and as a means of inhuman exploitation. Though critical of the institution, Stowe nevertheless upholds notions of Black inferiority, portraying "mixed-race" characters as more intelligent and attractive than "pure racial types" and reducing the latter to stereotypically comic or melodramatic roles not far removed from stage caricatures known from blackface minstrelsy. The tenor of

the descriptions of the slaves seems peculiarly aligned with the conditions in which they were brought up; religious Blacks reside adjacent to religious slave-owners and “unruly,” amoral “pickaninnies” next to sinful White wretches. As a result, slavery in Kentucky is presented as a form of paternalism, if marked by anxieties over what was already being called “miscegenation” and its impact on the system. However, once the plot moves to Louisiana, two divergent versions of slave management emerge: one typified by St. Clare, whose name (and world-weary attitude) imply old European noble roots and, in consequence, whole generations of experience in slave-ownership, and another by Simon Legree, a *nouveau-riche*, godless Northerner. While Legree’s evil is diametrically opposite to Tom’s goodness, it also represents a melodramatic rendition of a type common to slave narratives – of a ruthless White “slave breaker” willing to countenance even loss of property if it fails to submit to his will.

Legree’s significance as a symbol cannot be overstated. Like the Wedgwood medallion depicting the slave with his shackled arms raised in a two-dimensional plea for recognition as man, Stowe’s devilish slave-owner is both true to the period and highly unrealistic. However, while other instances of masters wronging their slaves in the novel are motivated by either economic hardship or ignorance – Black persons being treated as property even when they are virtually members of the family – in his case, the wrong is committed out of a desire for supremacy that seems to be a product of the specific setting of the act. The incident of Legree’s settlement in Louisiana is explained primarily by the potential for wealth accumulation that a cheap Southern plantation provides to a sharp, ruthless Northern moneymaker. The novel justifies the slave master’s evil ways by describing him as a coarse man who subscribes to the frontier idea of masculinity, favoring mobility and acquisition over domesticity and family. Designed to represent the worst of the South’s “peculiarity,” he is also the product of a failed family, inevitably reproducing the failure in his own household (Stowe 485-486). Viewed from this perspective, the destruction of Tom is also an expression of a perverted notion of patriarchy, devoid of its normative paternalism.

By denying the devilish Legree the privilege of paternalism, Stowe disputed a common argument made by proponents of slavery before emancipation. Antebellum slave-owners argued that enslavement was a natural condition for Blacks, either because it was practiced in Africa, or because Africans were perceived as congenitally unfit to exercise full citizen privileges. For some, slavery provided a fitting transition into full manhood, helping transform savage people into civilized men through hard work and character formation – albeit without a specified deadline (Pieterse 39-51). Once slavery was abolished, its apologists foresaw a complete destruction of society, with Whites disenfranchised and Blacks left without necessary guidance or control (Fredrickson 79-82). Already perceived as savages, freedmen were now subjected to increasing amounts of violence, justified through notions of Black hypersexuality encapsulated in the myth of the black rapist (Davis 172-201). The influence exerted by this narrative is best illustrated by the impact of one of its most well-known cultural expositions – D.W. Griffith’s ground-breaking Civil War epic, *The Birth of a Nation*. A story of two families – one from the North, one from the South – divided by the exigencies of American “racial” politics, the film provides ample visual evidence to the benefits of slavery, particularly through the figure of

the Black Mammy (played by a White male actor in blackface), who commands the domestic spaces of the White family home and scolds “uppity” Blacks for transgressing the “racial” rules of the South (Robinson 59-62). Emancipation figures as a moment of anarchy that leads directly into injustice, with veterans of the war denied a voice in their own communities, now taken over by rough, ignorant, and brutal Blacks. Inevitably, Black misrule leads to a major transgression when a rogue Black Union soldier (again, a White in blackface) stalks the little sister of the film’s main protagonist – a Confederate officer. The girl’s suicide – committed in defense of her virtue – prompts the lynching of the soldier by a group of men in white hoods, a symbolic birth of the Ku-Klux-Klan.<sup>3</sup>

While Griffith’s film thus helped enshrine the myth of the Black rapist in American culture, the literary sources for the film, written by Thomas Dixon, Jr., offered a somewhat more contrived notion of “racial” relations. Dixon professed the view that slavery, in fact, had a negative impact on America because it introduced into the purely White community a foreign, inferior element. With its arrival, the American nation itself was degraded; sexual relations between the “races” produced a class of unhinged individuals driven by the urges of the bestial Blacks, but possessive of the ambitions and a modicum of the intellect that typified Whites. In the film, the impact of this group of people is depicted through the figures of Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch – two characters whose hypersexuality is blamed for both the outbreak of the war and the implementation of Reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> Brown, the housekeeper of Congressman Stoneman, a major Northern politician (modeled on Thaddeus Stevens), seduces the man and drives him to push for the war; Lynch, Stoneman’s protégé, promotes the cause of “miscegenation” in Southern state legislatures while lusting after the politician’s daughter. Individual sexual depravity thus leads to the collapse of morality and threatens the integrity of White families (Rogin 150-195).

## II.

Griffith’s retelling of Dixon’s narrative achieved immense popularity in its day, but the viability of both texts also stemmed from their resonance in a segregated US. The early twentieth century saw the Great Migration begin to alter the image of major American cities. At the same time, the Lost Cause narrative, in tandem with mainstream cultural tendencies, served to reinforce the image of the South as an idyll of benevolent, courteous masters, lazy, but ultimately obedient slaves, and idealized, pure mistresses. Perfected in the romanticized portrayal of the Old South in Hollywood’s plantation genre, these Southern Belles, epitomized by Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, represented a devious and deceptive mode of hyperfemininity set in melodramatic plots centering on the transformation of a “jezebel” into a “respectable” (noble)woman (Robinson 123-124). Typified by heightened sensuality, whimsicality,

3 The film is credited with reviving the Klan after a period of nonexistence (Robinson 114-115).

4 Susan Gubar highlights the “racial” ambiguity of the “mixed-race” characters – again, played by White actors in brownface – who can plausibly be claimed to look Jewish (Gubar 61). Cedric Robinson identifies the story of Leo Frank – a Jewish American lynched for allegedly raping a young White woman – as a major inspiration for the film (Robinson 112-114).

and treacherousness, Hollywood's Southern Belles unavoidably invoked the specter of "miscegenation" – of "race" as a biological threat to White "racial" purity, but also as a stumbling block in social (and family) relations. In fact, with the arrival of the post-World War II "problem film," "racial" conflicts were increasingly traced to failures of the family and, by extension, to a certain culture of bigotry.

Whether viewed from the perspective of sexual, labor, or social relations, "problem films" blamed racism on the South and its inherent perversities. In Elia Kazan's *Pinky*, the revelation of Black ancestry turns the main protagonist from a respectable figure into a pariah fit for abuse (including sexual) by backward Southerners (Bogle 147-154). Other films, such as *Home of the Brave*, pitted sympathetic Blacks against ragingly ignorant Whites (De Rosa 52-73). During the 1950s, the blame for antisocial – particularly racist – behavior became more explicitly tied to Southern family dysfunction. Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* traces the progress of two escaped convicts in the South, one White (Tony Curtis), one Black (Sidney Poitier). Poitier's Noah Cullen spends most of the runtime re-educating his racist companion, who is increasingly exposed as a victim of failed upbringing. Toward the end of the film, Noah's efforts are thwarted by the appearance of a single White mother who clings to Joker, the White convict, as her chance for an escape; to that end, she reinforces Joker's racism with her own and proceeds to misdirect the Black convict into a nearby swamp in the hope that he will die or be caught. When Joker learns of the woman's duplicity, he immediately rallies to Noah's side, in spite of being shot by the woman's son. The two men achieve complete mutual recognition just before the search party finds them stranded by a railway line – a fact signified by Poitier's rendering of the Black folk song "Long Gone," a symbol of the "colorblindness" of the fugitive's plight.

The "problem film's" notion that America's "racial" problem is individual and should be administered to by patient, exemplary Negroes paralleled the media image of the Civil Rights struggle. Around the turn of the 1950s, American viewers were routinely treated to images of White violence against peaceful Black protesters, mostly in the South. The notion of the South as "racist country," psychologically attuned to a backward, hateful ideology, became ingrained in the public imaginary (Berger; Walker 41-66). Hollywood played its part, too: in figures such as Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, acting as the healthy, liberal conscience of a wayward people, the industry established a paradigm for representing rural White Southerners. In the film, Finch defends a Black worker accused of raping the daughter of a poor White farmer. As the prosecutor ramps up the racist rhetoric, the defense studiously disputes the assertions of the victim, who is eager to sacrifice the man to hide her own fascination with him (Graham 160-165).<sup>5</sup> Failing families also feature prominently in such films as *Pressure Point*, where Poitier plays a psychiatrist treating a White Nazi sympathizer.<sup>6</sup> The man's hateful ideology is explained as a result of hateful upbringing

5 Allison Graham sets *To Kill a Mockingbird* against *Cape Fear*, another contemporaneous Gregory Peck vehicle, to highlight the way in which the backward "redneck" fills the part of the liberal Southerner's repressed (Graham 162-165).

6 Poitier's reminiscence of the fact is prompted by a problematic case involving a Black adolescent filled with hatred of Whites – another failed family scenario which curiously resonates with the conclusions of the so-called Moynihan Report (discussed below).

in a broken home; inevitably, he fails the test of manhood, pursuing supremacy by socially unacceptable means.

Toward the end of the 1960s, as the Civil Rights movement fizzled out following the legislative changes it had clamored for (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which greatly reduced the potential for public mistreatment of Black people across the country), American culture was gradually forced to face the fact that the problem of racism was not limited to the South. As cities in the North burned in the latter half of the 1960s, set ablaze by Black populations frustrated by the persistence of “racial” oppression, Hollywood offered a highly guarded response to the challenge. In *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Poitier portrays a ridiculously overqualified doctor who woos a young, White, San Franciscan socialite from an upper-class, liberal family. His proposal proves unsettling to the girl’s parents, who justify their perplexity by invoking an idea of the South ensconced in the “anti-miscegenation” prejudice of “those people.” The young ones’ wish is ultimately granted, but only at the cost of reinforcing the dominance of the patriarch: the father’s consent, ostensibly giving in to their demands, is in fact proof of his power. In other words, if “racial” progress is hindered by backward convictions and lack of civilization, the best solution is to reinforce “traditional family values” against the bigots and the radicals alike (Courtney 187-217).<sup>7</sup>

Poitier’s other major hit of 1967, *In the Heat of the Night*, transports him into the South as a Philadelphia policeman apprehended as a suspect in a murder case. Though he has a cast-iron alibi – he has only arrived to the town’s train station for a nightly layover on his way back from his mother’s place – this fails to prevent disrespectful behavior and racist statements from the local officers. Once his identity is confirmed (via phone, by his – presumably White – superiors), he is released and finds himself enlisted as an expert, gradually winning over the local sheriff. During the investigation, Poitier’s Virgil Tibbs grows increasingly suspicious of a local patrician: a large landowner who runs a cotton plantation not unlike those found in the antebellum South. When challenged, the man responds to Tibbs’ accusations with typical White slave-master’s indignation, slapping the Black officer across the face, to which Tibbs replies in kind. The detective’s unwillingness to follow “racial” protocol eventually prompts a mob to descend on him. The seemingly inevitable lynching is only averted when the killer steps forward – an unhinged young man who committed the murder unintentionally whilst robbing a wealthy local to fund his girlfriend’s abortion. The film’s ending, which offers a promise of reconciliation in the figure of Rod Steiger’s Sheriff Gillespie (a role that earned the actor an Oscar), ultimately only reaffirms the common theme of the South’s intransigence and moral degradation (Baldwin 44-49, 57ff.).

### III.

By the late 1960s, the “race problem” traveled from the South up to major cities in the North. Following a series of urban riots prompted by various instances of White violence – from social exclusion, through police brutality, to outright murder – the

<sup>7</sup> The film’s premiere coincided roughly with the conclusion of the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case concerning “miscegenation” laws; the court ruled such laws unconstitutional.

narrative shifted: the performatively passive Civil Rights movement gave way to Black Power, and the liberal audiences that used to flock to “race problem” films now became increasingly perturbed by images of Black violence and lawlessness (Berger 47-50). This change coincided with broader trends in politics, culture, and the state itself. As the Vietnam War was ramped up, the economy lost momentum. The liberal coalition that Lyndon Johnson hoped to mobilize for his War on Poverty crumbled in the face of unrest in the streets and on university campuses. Johnson’s own withdrawal from the 1968 presidential elections, followed by the death of Robert Kennedy, arguably the only candidate capable of withstanding the conservative challenge, and battle scenes outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago, marked a sea-change (Patterson 637-709). Meanwhile, demographic shifts in the inner cities, accompanied by legal challenges to vertical integration – the extension of studio control to all levels of film production – meant that Hollywood, already behind the times in terms of aesthetics, had to seek new ways of speaking about the current crises. In addition, Black political organizations exerted pressure to increase diversity both in front of and behind the camera (Cook 2-4).

Aside from these challenges, Hollywood was experiencing a major crisis of its own, prompted by declining film audiences and rising costs of production. In order to address these issues, the studios came to increasingly rely on the production methods and style characteristic of exploitation film, which came to prominence in the late 1960s (Cook 171). This shift also affected the manner in which Hollywood addressed “race,” leading to the emergence of the style of film-making described as “Black exploitation,” or blaxploitation. Where “problem films” routinely looked to the South as the locus of racism and bigotry, blaxploitation turned its attention primarily to Northern urban centers. In addition, isolated, idealized Black protagonists were replaced by grittier individuals operating within what Paula Massood calls a “ghetto chronotope” (Massood 79-116). Still, the main focus remained on masculine figures, braving a “racially” oppressive reality by exercising their sexuality and honing their personal style. In Gordon Parks’ *Shaft*, the main protagonist – a private detective – cuts a striking figure, traversing the streets of New York with the swagger of a middleweight boxer and talking down Whites, including the police, as if he is immune to their power. Sporting fashionable clothes, he presents an irresistible attraction to women of all “races” (Wlodarz 729-731). Placed in the real-life context of downtown areas of major cities, characters of this kind constituted a direct rebuttal of established narratives about Black masculinity – yet, inadvertently, they carried over many of the previous, hugely limiting assumptions.

The contours of this type of masculinity derived partly from the disenchantment with Poitier’s portrayals of Black manhood in films of the 1950s and 1960s, and partly from a social concern about Black males best expressed in the infamous Moynihan Report. Entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, this policy paper devoted significant attention to the dissolution of patriarchal families among urban Blacks, a trend expressed through the increasing prevalence of single-mother households. The author of the paper, sociologist Daniel P. Moynihan, believed that the absence of father figures inevitably contributed to criminality and lack of social cohesion. Attributed to legacies of slavery, this development produced incomplete



men, denied the patriarchal privilege of “strutting” – visibly asserting their masculinity; instead, raised in highly emasculating contexts, Black men became stereotypically fickle, irresponsible, and asocial (Moynihan). Blaxploitation put forward a travesty of both the assimilationist, “respectable” Blackness promoted by the “race problem” film and Moynihan’s “strutting,” masculine performance by depicting Black male “bantam roosters” capable of exercising patriarchal privileges in a spectacular fashion while being treated as “respectable” regardless of their social background or source of income.

Even as blaxploitation shifted attention to the North, the South continued to operate as a signifier within the genre in several different ways. One early example was Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which, though set in post-industrial Los Angeles, repeatedly deploys images reminiscent of slavery in the South, with the thinly-veiled racism of latter-day police officers serving to connect contemporary abuses to age-old wrongs. The main protagonist himself, an empty signifier that reflects a projected image of Black masculinity, plays the part of a fugitive slave pursued by deranged, unabashedly racist Whites (Massood 94-101). Other action films with Black leads go further into the “racial” mythology of the Old South, its perversity now no longer attached to “White trash.” In Jack Starrett’s *Slaughter*, starring football Hall-of-Famer Jim Brown as the title character, a Green Beret pursues his parents’ killers to an indeterminate South American locale, where he faces off against a network of mafia-style operators. Though the aging head of the organization is willing to compromise with Brown’s *Slaughter*, the man’s heir apparent, played by Texan Rip Torn, goes into a frenzy over *Slaughter*’s fling with a White female subordinate from the organization. The resulting battle pits the straight-talking Brown against the deranged White Southerner – whose accent and demeanor clearly signify at the Old South.

Due to its low cost and profitability, blaxploitation is often said to have “saved Hollywood” during times of economic decline; *Shaft*, *Slaughter*, and their followers clearly allowed the film industry to maintain a viable “racial” market without incurring additional cost. Almost all blaxploitation films were made for less than one million dollars, not even a half of the average cost of a Hollywood film (Cook 337). Though statistics from the period are limited, many of the early exponents of the genre can be said to have made upwards of ten times as much as they cost. On the other hand, the films generated a significant amount of negative publicity, both from film critics and from Black political organizations. The latter continued to call out Hollywood’s racism while criticizing the “Black exploitation” of gullible urban viewers by a handful of shady Black operators and their much more numerous White backers (Quinn and Krämer 184-198).<sup>8</sup> With the arrival of the blockbuster, heralded by *The Godfather* (1972, dir. Francis Ford Coppola) and *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin), two films which fared very well with Black urban audiences, major studios lost the incentive to invest in the Black market – something they only ever did to a very limited

8 Many contemporary critics described the films in terms of “mind genocide,” arguing that young viewers were incapable of distinguishing the fictions (which were shot on location) from the reality – an interpretation seemingly supported by fan investment in film-related paraphernalia (Lyne 42-44; Quinn, “‘Tryin’ to Get Over’” 99-100).



degree, anyway, as evidenced by their reluctance to support Black artists in more high-quality productions (Guerrero 105). By 1973, even as the Academy nominated several Blacks for Oscars (most notably Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield for *Sounder*, set in Great Depression-era South), Black-themed films were virtually monopolized by B-movie studios specializing in exploitation film.

#### IV.

If anything, the consigning of “race” to the low-budget, topical approach of B studios only reinforced blaxploitation’s interest in the South as a potentially titillating signifier. Indeed, sexploitation films with “mixed-race” casts had appeared around the same time the blaxploitation fad started, combining sexuality with tropes of enslavement and revenge. By 1973, American International Pictures – a major producer of exploitation films – had become a primary purveyor of Black-themed exploitation, churning out not only profitable, but also culturally significant titles, which continued to invoke the South as a common signifier, even as many of the films were explicitly set outside of the region (Cook 263-265). One classic example of an AIP blaxploitation film, Jack Hill’s *Foxy Brown*, features Pam Grier in the title role of an upwardly-mobile woman from the ghetto who exacts revenge on the White underworld for killing her policeman boyfriend. Infiltrating the local crime syndicate as a prostitute, she exposes the hypocrisy and perversity of those in power, both within the organization and beyond. In one scene, she teams up with a friend, enacting a sadomasochistic play to destroy the reputation of a local judge – a role reversal with serious “racial” overtones. Eventually caught, she is put away in a small hut in the middle of nowhere, bound to a bed and overseen by two aging White men who proceed to feed her heroin and use her body for their own pleasure. As one of the men describes it, having easy access to the Black woman’s prostrate body brings back “that old feeling.” When Foxy finally breaks free, she proceeds to dismantle the crime organization with the help of local Black Power activists, exacting an equally brutal revenge on its two leaders: the willowy matron Katherine and her restless partner Steve (Dunn 118-130).

While the raping brute invokes the specter of the South almost directly (“that old feeling” signifying the sexual exploitation of Black women under slavery), the two latter characters link the film to the world of *Gone With the Wind*, parodying White sexual stereotypes received from plantation melodramas. The willowy maiden who trades in other women’s bodies, particularly “colored,” is a latter-day Southern Belle – near-comically feminine, but also extremely exploitative. Her counterpart enacts the roguish charm of a Southern gentleman while being an unstable sex addict, deranged and unfaithful to his consort, yet curiously unquestioned in his attitude or power. The incompatibility of the two figures is readily apparent: Steve exhibits visible annoyance at Katherine’s advances while courting every girl he can. The role of Black sexuality in this scenario is captured in a scene which depicts Steve’s raid on the apartment of Link, Foxy’s drug-dealing brother. Having forced their way in, Steve and his henchman find Link on a bed with his White girlfriend. The sight causes Steve to erupt in unpremeditated violence, murdering the pair with apparent relish. By the end of the film, having been, in effect, lynched by Black Power activists (at

Foxy's behest), Steve's significance is reduced to his mutilated genitalia, which Foxy delivers to Katherine, prompting a curiously powerless outburst of rage. Though a White penchant for perversity provides a common thread throughout the film, it is the specter of the South that helps expose this perversity as sexual paranoia undergirding the "racial" order.

Blaxploitation's forays into the South were amplified for broader audiences by Albert R. Broccoli and Dino De Laurentiis, two veteran film producers well-acquainted with topicality in film. In 1973, at the height of the genre's popularity, Broccoli oversaw the filming of *Live and Let Die*, an adaptation of Ian Fleming's James Bond novel which pitted the MI6 agent against a Black Caribbean drug lord in the US. The villain, Mr. Big, is powerful, but superstitious, and retains his own expert female Tarot card reader, the celibate White Southerner Solitaire. However, "Black magic" plays an even more significant part in the film through the figure of the apparently indestructible Baron Samedi, cast as a virtual host of the show. Like the New York ghetto of Chester Himes' *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, famously adapted by Ossie Davis in one of the forerunners of blaxploitation, the South is a world unto itself, governed by an inscrutable logic and immune to White man's "civilizing" influence (Massood 86-93). The film also flirts with the idea of "interracial" sexuality, Bond being briefly paired with a duplicitous Black CIA operative; in the end, though, the notoriously promiscuous agent beds Solitaire, thus rendering her useless to Mr. Big as a fortune teller. *Live and Let Die* quite consciously codes Blackness in stereotypical terms, though it is also possible to read the "racial" signifiers as signs of incompatibility – cultural or otherwise – between the two groups. When action shifts to New Orleans, the Deep South is immediately understood as the end of White man's civilizing mission: the destruction of White enterprise, the supremacy of Black intransigence and subterfuge, and the intermingling of death and sex.

Much of the same symbolism accrues with De Laurentiis' production of a popular slavesploitation pulp novel, Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo*, shot at a time when blaxploitation was slowly ebbing away. The film is set in 1840s Louisiana and tells the story of the destruction of a wealthy landowning family caused by "racial" tensions. The plot focuses on Hammond Maxwell, son of a well-respected local magnate, and his investment in Blackness by way of Ellen – his sex slave – and Mede, a physically imposing "Mandingo fighter." As Hammond's fascination with Black bodies intensifies, his estranged wife Blanche grows increasingly unstable, troubled by the fiction her life has become. Hammond's cousin, she hoped marriage would free her from a sexually abusive family, but once the husband – himself a rapist of Black slaves – learns of her motivation, he finds her repulsive. When Ellen becomes pregnant with Hammond's child, Blanche deliberately beats the slave, leading to a miscarriage. The care Hammond shows his sex slave leads his wife to force herself on Mede. Eventually, Hammond's father demands an heir, but Blanche gives birth to a "mixed-race" child. In response, her husband throws Mede into a vat of boiling water, prompting a slave revolt that kills Hammond's father. This fall of the house of Maxwell binds the historical conjecture of bare-knuckle slave fighting with an incongruous "interracial" romance, unraveling the mythology and pseudo-science of slavery even as it satirizes the image of a Victorian, aristocratic South permeated by a perverse fascination with "race" and sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

9 Indeed, casting itself highlights the themes of a collapse of mores; the pairing of the impotent

## V.

If the “race problem” film viewed the South as a region ripe for a moral reconstruction, blaxploitation seems to suggest that it has become necessary to burn the house of Whiteness in order to save its inhabitants. One common view of the “racial” politics of the genre is that the films effect a simple reversal, “putting in the place of the bad old essential White subject, the new essentially good Black subject” (Dunn; Hall 445). However, the protagonists of blaxploitation, though fetishized as privileged objects of the gaze and marked by boundless potency, do not represent a mere transposition of White Hollywood “normalcy.” Indeed, like Foxy Brown, they actively negotiate their positions throughout the texts, seeking a place – and a voice – to express their identities. What the South comes to signify in blaxploitation is not the collapse of Western civilization under the weight of “race,” but rather the cognitive limits of “race”; its destruction does not consist in a role reversal, but in the violent dismantling of the “racial” edifice, so that “the last shall be the first” (Fanon 2-3). To the extent that this project requires a reclamation of Black masculinity and femininity, it inevitably puts forward a critique of the normative, White family extolled by conservatives of Moynihan’s ilk, with at times radical overtones.

It is here that the disparity between McQueen’s and Tarantino’s visions of the South becomes apparent. *12 Years a Slave*, though set in the South under slavery, focuses primarily on the drama of wrongful conviction and incarceration, the main protagonist being robbed of his identity and forced into unfamiliar roles. Northup’s primary concern is to protect his inner self, to ensure that he does not succumb completely to oppression. Captured in the scene of his hanging, evocative of images of turn-of-the-century lynchings, as well as the increasing self-enclosure that Northup establishes as a defense mechanism, it provides the central dramatic aspect of the entire story. By focusing on the universal (male) struggle for survival, for recognition as a subject in the midst of a totally dehumanizing institution, McQueen inevitably downplays the significance of the slave society, sacrificing its variety at the altar of the singularity of the unjustly oppressed (Stevenson). In this sense, his story – while illustrative of the excesses generated by slavery – ultimately remains one of human resilience rather than of the inhumanity of enslavement. Like the presence of the abolitionist talking over the autobiographer in a slave narrative, the appearance of Northup’s savior certifies that the wrong can be remedied; that, through proper moral reformation, the horrific South of slavery can achieve redemption. Even after Northup had told his tale, the system that enabled the “racial” order remained in place; even after the Civil War, which broke out with the express purpose of dismantling it, slavery continued to define the South and still casts a shadow on America – a fact clearly indicated by the continued validity of the “race problem” film formula, however advanced in its aesthetics.

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James Mason with the smooth Perry King signifies the corruption of a pampered generation of exploiters who inherit the sins of their ignorant fathers. The choice of Susan George – the hysterical wife of Dustin Hoffman’s aloof mathematician in Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971, dir. Sam Peckinpah) – to play Hammond’s wife underlines the role of White womanhood in establishing and maintaining slavery and segregation.

In contrast to McQueen's work, *Django Unchained*—though flawed—proposes a more radical challenge to “racial” representation. Starting from the opening gesture, the half-lawful acquisition of Django by Dr. Schultz which enables the slave to tell his story, the film provides a striking illustration of the paradoxes of emancipation and subjectivity in a “racial” democracy. One such paradox is the fact that the slave's speech is always mediated through the experience of slavery; even though his heritage presumably stretches beyond the Middle Passage, the earliest event depicted in the film is the violent separation of Django and his wife. Perhaps because of this limitation, the freed slave expresses himself through excess. Asked to play Dr. Schultz's valet, he dons a striking blue costume, making him hypervisible even as he is supposed to act as a spy; then, he dresses up as a frontiersman and rides to a Louisiana “big house” on horseback.<sup>10</sup> Down in the “devil's empire,” however, the spectacle of a Black man exercising his freedom in such an arresting manner turns out to have been anticipated by racist anthropology: as Calvin Candie is all too happy to indicate, Django merely represents the accidental genius, a travesty of the DuBoisian “talented tenth,” whose destiny, like that of Stowe's “mulatto” George Harris, lies in Africa, not America. This symbolic containment of spectacular Blackness is accompanied with its visual dissolution. As he ventures deeper into the stereotypically hellish Louisiana, the freed slave is treated to brutally realistic vignettes of human cruelty that serve to ensnare him in a spiral of dehumanization, pulling the story into *Mandingo* territory.

Yet, the aesthetic transition that follows the death of Calvin Candie and Dr. Schultz moves the film's enactment of exploitation beyond *Mandingo*. Fleischer's film, while radical in its implications, could only illustrate the unsustainability of “race,” its inherent tendency toward excess and disintegration. By shifting between the different modes of exploitation film—spaghetti western, blaxploitation, revenge film, slavesploitation—Tarantino eventually reaches a point where the framing of the story can no longer contain it. In this light, the role assigned to Candie's most trusted advisor—Samuel L. Jackson's ridiculously subservient house slave, Stephen—seems far from incidental. As the last man standing after the bloodbath visited upon Candie's “big house” by the unstoppable Django, Stephen throws away his cane and stands tall as the guardian of the “racial” order, turning into the embodiment of the Blackness established by slavery, a repository of “racial” stereotypes and knowledges. When Django locks Stephen in the big house and blows it up, this act of radical violence symbolically enacts Fanonian revolution against colonialism, razing the social structure imposed by White power along with its non-White agents, the colonial bourgeoisie (Fanon 8-10). The destruction of the “racial” edifice obliterates not just the moral taint of slavery, but Whiteness and Blackness as stable, clearly defined entities in themselves. It is at this point that Tarantino, with astonishing incongruity, pulls the viewers back to the safer waters of romance, having Django and Broomhilda enact courtship in broadly comic tones. Rather than a teary-eyed moment of release in a romantic tale of love

<sup>10</sup> Adilifu Nama argues that Django's attire serves as one of the visual cues communicating the internalization of American Gothic as the mode of representing slavery (Nama 106-109). It should be noted, however, that the comedic aspect of Gothic narratives tends to manifest itself as satire, consciously parodying sentimentalism—the proper mode for depicting a tale of lovers reuniting against all odds—in particular.

lost and regained, this scene envisions a completely new beginning in a world without Whiteness. Turned inside out, the scaffolding of the cinematic Old South is still there: an ironic backdrop to the joyful reunion of a Black man and a Black woman that dismisses Moynihan's anxieties about the Black family while ridiculing the plantation melodrama's oblivious romances.

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### **PART THREE**

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE OF THE SOUTH**



## Riding the Rails to (Un)Freedom: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This novel about US black slavery departs from realism, moving around in time and space as a means of dealing with different racial terrors in different historical periods. One of the author's intentions is to make us think about slavery not just in the past but with reverberations for the present. Published in 2016, the novel resonates with a contemporary America characterized by acrimonious racial division. After escaping from a Georgia plantation through a literalized Underground Railroad, the adolescent female protagonist soon learns that freedom remains elusive in states further north, even those where slavery has been abolished. The novel fuses the odyssey of Cora with the history and mythology of America, and asserts the inseparability of slavery from American capitalism and the building of empire. Cora explores both the Declaration of Independence and the Bible, two foundational texts of the nation, in a novel that addresses some of the foundational sins of America. Hers is the all-American story of escape to freedom, but her journey takes her through ever darker varieties of depredation and oppression. She becomes an American dreamer in the sense that she never accepts her place in a system that she persists in defying, and through this process becomes a fictional representation of black people who, with their relentless pursuit of freedom, contributed so greatly to the building of American democracy.

**Keywords:** Colson Whitehead; *Underground Railroad*; black slavery; runaway slaves

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In his *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves* (2015), Eric Foner quotes the abolitionist James Miller McKim, who wrote that fugitive slaves represented "some of the finest specimens of native talent the country provides" and that their actions gave "ample proof" of everything abolitionists maintained about "the capacity of the colored man" (27). In a dispatch written in 1855 as the Philadelphia correspondent of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, McKim made this prediction:

These wonderful events ... now being enacted before the American people, will, one day, be justly appreciated. Now, deemed unworthy of the notice of any, save fanatical abolitionists, these acts of sublime heroism, of lofty self-sacrifice, of patient martyrdom, these beautiful Providences, these hair-breath escapes and terrible dangers, will yet become the themes of the popular literature of this nation, and will excite the admiration, the reverence and the indignation of the generations yet to come. (Qtd. in Foner 27)

With his 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, Colson Whitehead has fulfilled McKim's prediction by writing a very popular novel about one of those "finest specimens of native talent," a fictional female slave who escapes from a Georgia plantation in the 1850s. The journey

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of African Americans through American history constitutes the essence of this novel, an African American epic of resistance which becomes the story of America itself. This essay will set Whitehead's novel in the context of the current national conversation about slavery and its consequences, and will relate it to recent historical research that has shed new light on the phenomenon of the so-called Underground Railroad, and also to new studies on the connections between slavery and capitalism. References to other African American writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison will be made along the way, to situate Whitehead's novel in the context of African American literary history.

The railroad has always been a crucially important symbol in African American literature and culture, signifying, among other things, spiritual hope and a vehicle of freedom. In Leon Forrest's novel *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973, revised and expanded in 1988), the train is, according to Darcy Zabel, "a symbol of deliverance, but one which carries one away from what is known, including one's own former identity" (52). This *Bildungsroman*, dominated by the symbol of a train with a mystery man at the controls, is about the quest for identity of the motherless boy Nathaniel Turner Witherspoon. He feels pressured to choose between the demands of his father, who works as a third cook in a luxury train and wants his son to pursue material success, and his Aunt Harriet, a character based on Harriet Tubman, who insists that he should be a spiritual being and transcend the world of man and work for a higher cause, that is to say, remain on track for a special mission (Zabel 53). Zabel provides an insightful assessment of the importance of the train as reality and symbol in African American history and literature:

For African American writers of the twentieth century, however, the train symbolizes more than just a hope for progress or self-improvement. The history of the Underground Railroad, the commitment of Harriet Tubman, the strength of John Henry, the experiences of riding the train North as a passenger, a porter, a stowaway, the sense of again being driven underground in the modern world, all these facets of African American history add to the power of the train as a literary symbol. (31)

The phrase Underground Railroad as a metaphor for the secret network of abolitionists who organized routes and safe houses to guide runaway slaves to freedom in the North appeared in the 1830s, coinciding with the arrival of the railroad as a new system of transportation which, according to Sarah Gordon, provided "a unifying and even orderly influence which aided the country's rapid growth" (8).<sup>2</sup> The networks that secretly whisked black slaves off to freedom had existed ever since Africans had been forcibly brought to the American colonies in the early 1600s, but, as Kate Larson contends, "By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a more organized system

2 The growth of the underground organization was almost exactly contemporaneous with the expansion of the railroad system itself, which began in the 1830s and transformed the physical and sociological landscape of America as intensely as the abolitionist movement was changing the country's moral environment. In fact, the rapid development of railways increased the speed of underground travelers across the Free States of the North, as the underground used trains when and where they were available (Bordewich 236).

had started to take shape, one that provided some measure of support to runaways finding their way to freedom" (87).

Historians have lately taken a renewed interest in this little-known subject, in an effort to rescue the Underground Railroad from the fogs of myth and legend and to make it part of the present national conversation about the central role of slavery in American history, one of the results being the rightful place regained by African Americans at the center of the story of the Underground Railroad itself. In his groundbreaking study *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961), Larry Gara questioned the approach of early histories here that merely glorified the work of northern abolitionists, especially Quakers, and he emphasized rather the initiative to escape, coming as it did mainly from slaves. Gara questioned many assumptions about the nature and function of the Underground Railroad, and also about its principal accomplishments. He successfully dismantled the legend of the Underground Railroad as a nationwide underground network of conductors, agents, and depots, the legend that "tells of intrepid abolitionists sending multitudes of passengers over a well-organized transportation system to the Promised Land of freedom" (Gara 2); rather, it was a series of ad hoc and sporadic unconnected escapes. In his revisionist version, "The relatively few slaves who did escape were primarily dependent on their own resources" and "The abolitionists play a less important part and the escaping slaves a more important one" (Gara 18).

In *Bound for Canaan* (2005), Fergus Bordewich argues that the Underground Railroad "was the country's first racially integrated civil rights movement, in which whites and blacks worked together for six decades before the Civil War, taking great risks together, saving thousands of lives together, and ultimately succeeding together in one of the most ambitious political undertakings in American history" (4). Most of the recent historical research emphasizes the courage and initiative of the many black people, both enslaved and free, whose actions gave the lie to those pro-slavery ideologues who maintained the inability of blacks to take their destiny into their own hands and to exercise individual initiative. In *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (2013), R. J. M. Blackett also notes the role of slaves in seeking freedom and makes them key figures in the construction of what we know as the Underground Railroad, and ultimately in helping to bring about the collapse of slavery. Blackett reiterates some of the points made by Larry Gara: "my focus is on the slaves as well as those who aided them where it mattered most: in the South" (2), the South from which some slaves escaped to avoid being punished or sold, or because masters had failed to fulfill promises, or to join family members who had escaped earlier. Blackett concludes that "They were well aware of what they were doing and the consequences of their actions" and that "whatever the specific reasons for leaving, collectively their actions were informed by what E. P. Thomson has called a 'general notion' of rights and a passionate desire for freedom" (95),<sup>3</sup> thus disproving notions of slaves as content and spineless.

In *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898), the first major historical study of the phenomenon, Wilbur Siebert traced and gave the names of 3,211 individuals involved in the underground, almost all of them white men. Bordewich

3 E. P. Thompson. *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1991, p. 212).

argues that at least three or four times the number of people estimated by Siebert must actually have worked on the Underground Railroad, and that Siebert “failed to take into account the large numbers of African Americans — possibly the majority — who risked their lives to help fugitives, or the fact that women who provided refugees with food, clothing, and advice were as much a part of the underground as were their husbands and brothers” (437).

Another myth that recent scholarship has debunked is the conception of the Underground Railroad as a fixed, centralized, and unaltered system. As Bordewich explains, “In actuality, routes were always in flux. Even as new routes were opened, old ones became too dangerous, or no longer practical, and were abandoned. Participants died, moved, dropped out, or were driven out of the business by threats” (230). Local networks rose and disappeared over time and the image of a secret organization of abolitionists using covert methods and secret signals to carry slaves to freedom through more or less clearly defined routes is rather simplified. Rather than a single entity, Eric Foner conceives the Underground Railroad as “an umbrella term for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives, some public and entirely legal, some flagrant violations of the law” (15).

In an interview with *Publishers' Weekly*, Whitehead referred to his discomfort when people asked him what he was trying to say in this novel: “I’m not a teacher, I’m not a historian; I’m trying to create a world for my characters.” He also said that he hoped people would “maybe think about American history in a different way,” referring to the contemporary relevance of the problem of slavery which he hoped people would see anew (Patrick 28). We inevitably reassess the past in light of the present, and there is a sense in which all history is contemporary history, and that the past somehow changes with the present. As Ira Berlin argues at the opening of his study of Emancipation, “History is not about the past; it is about arguments we have about the past. And because it is about arguments that we have, it is about us” (1). According to the black writer James Baldwin, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are *our* history” (107). The appearance of Whitehead’s novel about slavery not only coincided with the recent historical reappraisal of the nature and historical significance of the Underground Railroad; it obviously resonates with the acrimonious ongoing debate about racism, the most critical contemporary social problem in America. In an interview with *Time* magazine, he said: “But if the way I handle different periods of American history and black history does illuminate the way we live now in a way that’s useful, I’m glad” (R. Jones 48). There is no doubt that Whitehead intended this novel to become a part of the important national conversation about the nature of slavery and its consequences, about Black Lives Matter,<sup>4</sup> about the story of black Americans being a story of the path “from the Plantation to the Prison,”<sup>5</sup>

4 Black Lives Matter is a movement against police brutality and against all forms of discrimination in all social areas, created in 2013 by three black activists: Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.

5 *From the Plantation to the Prison* (ed. Tara T. Green, Macon: Mercer UP, 2008) is a collection of essays about the history of the confinement of African Americans viewed as a physical and sometimes spiritual state. It explores texts of African American confinement literature set in a place of confinement, including plantations, prisons, and segregated environments.

at a time when there are more black people held in criminal supervision than all the slaves in the 1850s. In her study *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Michelle Alexander shows how mass incarceration is actually re-enslaving African Americans in a nation in which many blindly believe that racism is dead.<sup>6</sup>

In his essay "Slavery and Historical Memory in Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction," Ashraf Rushdy discusses new modes of black fiction like Ishmael Reed's flippant and humorous *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Octavia Butler's use of time travel in *Kindred* (1979), and asks if "contemporary authors [could] make positive use of their distance from antebellum slavery to take liberties and assume freedoms in their playful innovation and experimentation with form, genre, and tone" (237). Like Octavia Butler in *Kindred*, Whitehead also uses time travel to show us how the past affects and has implications for the present. The main conceit of the novel is as simple as it is daringly original. The Underground Railroad here is more than the secret network of abolitionists who organize routes and safe houses to guide slaves from southern plantations to freedom in the North: in the safe houses you open a trap door or find the entrance to a secret cave and you reach an actual railroad, with actual engines and boxcars, and conductors, sometimes even benches on the platform. The trains show up at unpredictable times and go to uncertain destinations. The idea came to the author fifteen years before he began the novel: "In school, hearing about the Underground Railroad, your first thought, at least for a minute, was that it was a literal subway — which made me wonder, what if the Underground Railroad was an actual railroad, literally underneath the earth?" (Patrick 27).

Whitehead sends his protagonist, the 15-or-16-year-old Cora, on a journey through different states: South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, following the structural model of *Gulliver's Travels*. As he says, "So each [state] is a sort of island, in a *Gulliver's Travels* kind of way" (Patrick 28). The realism of the subject is balanced with fantastic touches modeled on García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>7</sup> Whitehead is fond of taking liberties with his settings and his time frames, and the point is to have the Railroad carry his protagonist through different Americas, through different phases of the black experience of perpetual unfreedom and inhospitality. Thus it is that Cora travels through an America in which "All men are created equal, unless we [whites] decide you are not a man" (182).

There are two crucial questions in contemporary historical renditions of slavery: the question of agency, and the connections between slavery and American capitalism. We have already referred to the recent engagement with the history of the Underground Railroad on the part of revisionist historians who cleared away the mist of myth and legend and stressed the active role of African Americans. Nowadays history gives a different version of slavery, forcefully rejects the myth of the happy-go-lucky slave, and takes far more seriously the incidence of slave resistance, of brave individuals who risked their lives by fleeing and fighting slavery. The new social

<sup>6</sup> Schuessler explicitly mentions Alexander's book as one of Whitehead's influences for the novel.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead said: "I went back and reread *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and it made me think about what it would be like if I didn't turn the dial up to 10, but kept the fantasy much more matter-of-fact" (Schuessler).



historians insist that abolition was not an issue of white saviors rescuing passive black victims, and they devote due attention to an active black resistance that for too long remained unacknowledged. Ira Berlin's *The Long Emancipation* (2015) and Manisha Sinha's *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (2016) recover the largely ignored role of African Americans in the long fight for emancipation, whose most important characteristic was the will to survive and the enduring resistance of enslaved blacks themselves. According to Sinha, "Critiquing and perfecting American democracy was the black man's burden" (299). Berlin shows how African Americans, free and enslaved, stood at the vanguard of abolitionism, demanding not only freedom but also full citizenship, often seeking inspiration in the Bible and the Declaration of Independence.

In a most resonant episode in the novel, the protagonist's runaway companion asks a station agent who built the Railroad's tunnels and stations, and the answer is: "Who builds anything in this country?" (67), which reminds us of how much of America was built by black workers. In *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the History of American Capitalism*, Edward Baptist, one of the historians Whitehead explicitly acknowledges as an influence, notes that "Enslaved African Americans built the modern United States, and indeed the entire modern world, in ways both obvious and hidden" (xxv). Baptist maintains that slavery was not the pre-modern pre-capitalist institution that Eugene Genovese described in the early 1960s, something isolated in the past and with no connection to America's later economic success;<sup>8</sup> on the contrary, racial slavery was central to American economic development and national power, and the slave South was distinctively modern in terms of capitalist management. The untold half of the story that Baptist reveals is that enslaved Africans survived forced migration to the cotton-based South and then shaped the modern world through their labor, survival, and resistance. Cotton was the single most important commodity in the global economy of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, the essential raw material of the factory revolution that launched the global economy on its modern course. Whitehead's novel takes place in the 1850s, when cotton was booming, and it opens with the story of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, kidnapped in Africa and brought to America: "Since the night she was kidnapped she had been appraised and reappraised, each day waking upon the pan of a new scale. Know your value and you know your place in the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible" (8).

This issue of extreme dehumanization that turns people into assets is obsessively emphasized in the early stages of the novel, when Cora is on the plantation. The master is a "savvy businessman" who "when black blood was money ... knew to open the vein" (23). As "the world's insatiable demand for cotton goods" grows, the plantation owner demands a reorganization of the fields and more work from each hand "to accommodate a more efficient number of rows" and an increase in every picker's daily

8 In *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, Eugene Genovese argues that "The planters were not mere capitalists; they were precapitalist, quasi-aristocratic landowners who had to adjust their economy and ways of thinking to a capitalist world market. Their society, in its spirit and fundamental direction, represented the antithesis of capitalism, however many compromises it had to make" (23).

quota (47). Historians like Baptist have recently documented how methods of torture became more brutal and sophisticated, with the aim of turning enslaved bodies into commodities with which the financial history of the western world was transformed (Baptist xxviii). John Brown, a fugitive slave, said in 1854: "When the price [of cotton] rises in the English market, the poor slaves immediately feel the effects, for they are harder driven, and the whip is kept more constantly going" (qtd. in Beckert 110). The expansion of cotton manufacturing in Great Britain depended on brutal coercion and violence in the southern plantations. Cotton flowed from the United States to Europe and the capital that flowed in the opposite direction was often secured by mortgages on slaves. Cora actually decides to escape soon after her master, financed by the Bank of England, decides to plant cotton, and perfects the means of torture to increase production, which coincides with his beginning to touch and squeeze her breasts (47), in a system in which, as we read in the Ajarry section, "A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money" (6-7).

The agent at the first Railroad station encourages Cora and her companion to take the train despite its uncertain destination: "Every state is different. Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach the final stop" (68-69). The novel has the episodic structure of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and builds on the inherently American motif of the journey, in this case to express the painful journey of African Americans through American history. The idea of the train journey is, for Cora and her runaway companion, Caesar, to "find the true face of America" (69). Later in the novel, Cora remembers the words of the first station agent and concludes that "It was a joke, then, from the start. There was only darkness outside the windows on her journeys, and only ever would be darkness" (262-63). As James Baldwin said, "The story of the Negro in America is the story of America. It is not a pretty story" (95). Cora is tied to American history and mythology as is Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, but Gatsby embodies the history of white America. *The Great Gatsby* is about the inevitable failure and corruption of the Dream of white settlers who eventually turned a dreamland into a wasteland. But Fitzgerald's novel ignores the fact that "the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro," as James Baldwin maintained in his 1965 Cambridge University debate with William F. Buckley, and it does not refer to the human tools that made the country, the slaves that in Whitehead's novel the renowned patroller Ridgeway returns to their owners, using "his facility for ensuring that property remained property" (80). He relentlessly plays his part as a tool in a system that dehumanizes both blacks and whites, making them tools and parts in the machine of empire.

Ridgeway is the Ahab-like slave catcher that relentlessly pursues Cora wherever she goes. Described in his first appearance as "burly and resolute" (74), he has the intense concentration of Melville's monomaniacal captain, and is equally obsessed by the relentless chase: "In the chase his blood sang and glowed" (76). A product of the fear and anger that the Underground Railroad provoked in the South, which led to draconian legislation that eroded even the rights of white Americans in the North, he represents the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which, according to Ibram Kendi, "handed enslavers octopus powers, allowing their tentacles to extend to the North" and

“criminalized abettors of fugitives, provided northerners incentives to capture them, and denied captured Blacks a jury trial, opening the door to mass kidnappings” (189-90). Ridgeway’s appearance in all the different places and historical periods that Cora traverses represents the recurrence of black exploitation, which adopts different guises, depending on the place and the historical period. His actions are dictated by what he calls “the American imperative,” which consists of “lift[ing] up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate” (222). In a different way from Cora, Ridgeway is also a victim of the destructive wandering imposed by the logic of empire on both pursuer and pursued.

Whitehead’s novel is, among other things, about the consolidation of a white nation in which, as Ridgeway observes, destitute European immigrants are arriving in New York City, “Hapless as niggers, by any measure. But they’d be called to their proper places as he had been” (79). Aware that his own situation down in the South is nothing but “a ripple of this first arrival,” he notices that “The possibilities lay before these pilgrims like a banquet, and they’d been so hungry their whole lives” (79). The color of their skin would favor material prosperity and “they’d leave their mark on this new land, ... making it theirs through unstoppable racial logic” (79-80), a “racial logic” that dictates that the advancement of these “pilgrims” in the new nation will depend on the enslavement of blacks and the dispossession of Natives. In North Carolina, the poor Irish servant girl who, for a reward, sneaks on Cora and the white couple hiding her, says, “A girl’s got to look after her interests if she’s going to get ahead in this county” (187), the American Dream thus becoming inseparable from treachery and inhumanity. Some of these poor immigrants did indeed channel their initial economic and political frustrations into racist ideas, and this led to more hatred of black people (Kendi 170). As Khalil Muhammad observes, “Whiteness scholars have shown how the attributes of skin color, European ancestry, and the gradual adoption of anti-black racism were crucial to immigrant assimilation into the singular ‘white race’” (6). Ibram Kendi notes that racist ideas conditioned the minds of people arriving in the US in the early 1900s and observes that “When Irish, Jewish, Italian, Asian, Chicana/o, and Latina/o people in America were called anti-Black racial epithets like ‘greasers’ or ‘guineas’ or ‘White niggers’, ... most [of them] probably consumed the racist ideas, distancing themselves from Black people” (285-86). Manisha Sinha maintains that, in the years immediately before the Civil War, “immigrants’ hostility to abolition was the result of a process of Americanization through which they sought to accrue the benefits of ‘whiteness’ and hypernationalism or demonstrate loyalty to their adopted country” (360).

In one of the most famous passages of his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass quotes one of his masters as saying: “Now, if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy” (29). Whitehead’s novel digs into the established tradition in African American literature and culture that the journey away from slavery is simultaneous with the journey toward education. In the section about Caesar, Cora’s traveling companion in the first leg of the journey, we learn that “if he didn’t read, he was a slave” (235).

Cora takes full advantage of every opportunity that she has to learn to read and figure out the world. During her captivity in North Carolina she explores both the Declaration of Independence and the Bible, two sacred foundational texts. According to Ira Berlin, one of the new historians who contend that the most important factor in bringing about emancipation was the will to survive and the enduring resistance of enslaved blacks themselves, which are precisely the impulses that Cora embodies, "black people in the United States not only raised the question of their post-emancipation standing, but answered it as well, drawing on their commitment to ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and in biblical precepts of evangelical Christianity" (10). The free black population grew simultaneously with a nation formally committed to liberty and equality, so "black people adopted it [the Declaration] as their ideal and became its most steadfast defenders" (10). More in line with our time's Afro pessimists such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, who reject the optimistic notion of a post-racial America, Cora sees the foundational sins of America and perceives the Bible's contradictions about slavery, which is "a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African" (182). And after seeing some of the country, Cora is not sure that the Declaration "described anything real at all. America was a ghost in the darkness, like her" (180).

With his cruel cynicism, Ridgeway indirectly instructs Cora. He tells her about Manifest Destiny, which for him is anything but "a new idea," but only "taking what is yours, your property, whatever you deem it to be. And everyone taking their assigned places to allow you to take it. Whether it's red men or Africans, giving up themselves, giving of themselves, so that we can take what is rightfully ours" (221). The phrase was coined by John O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*. He was a fervid expansionist who supported the annexation of Texas and the expansion of the nation and of slavery to the West. To counter the first published copies of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845), O'Sullivan wrote in the July 1845 issue about Anglo-Saxon Americans' "manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which Providence has given us" (qtd. in Kendi 186).

The first stop on Cora's journey is in a surreal South Carolina with skyscrapers, where slavery has been abolished and the Civil War seems never to have happened. It is a paternalistic state where whites are engaged in "their mission of colored uplift, especially for those with aptitude" (98). The government is buying blacks, and they are given rooms and schooling, but they are technically "the property of the United States government" (92). Cora is first employed as a house servant for a rich family and is later made a slave to white commemorations of falsified history when hired to perform as a live mannequin acting her part in a depiction of the slave experience in the Museum of Natural Wonders, with white visitors looking at her intensely from the other side of the glass. Thus is she objectified and made into a side-show freak in a culture characterized by its myopic and restrictive understanding of the racial Other. Whitehead is interested in reflecting the many ways in which black history has been stolen and re-written by white narrators, noting the following in an interview: "But I did want to talk about how world fairs would exhibit black people as jungle natives" (R. Jones 48). Cora actively questions the accuracy of the static scenes of black life that make up the diorama and she decides to look back, to stare down the white spectators and give them the "evil eye" (125). The exhibits of white people have no live models,

and the whites are free, they are masters, as shown in the figures of pioneers: "They were masters of their lives, lighting out fearlessly into their futures" (115), a satirical allusion to the white icon Huck Finn who at the end of Twain's novel announces his intention "to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest."

It turns out that under the paternalistic facade of care and uplifting, South Carolina is busy preparing a sinister future for former slaves. Cora discovers that there is a long-term project of solving the "Negro problem" through eugenics and sterilization. The new hospital is conducting medical experiments, infecting black men with syphilis and sterilizing black women, to prevent blacks from outnumbering whites. And what we are presented with here is an America much closer to the present; it sounds outlandish, but perhaps it is not, especially when we remember the sickening experiments with black men in Tuskegee, Alabama: an infamous clinical study was conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the US Public Health Service to study the natural progression of untreated syphilis in African American men; 399 poor black sharecroppers from Alabama were never told that they had syphilis and were not given the penicillin that could have cured them; another 201 black men served as controls. This experiment, conducted by a government agency, made many people recall Nazi Germany and equate it with genocide (J. Jones 12). In Whitehead's fictional South Carolina black men are given "their blood treatments" (112), an obvious allusion to the guinea pigs in the Tuskegee experiment who were told that they were being treated for "bad blood" (J. Jones 5). Cora is encouraged to undergo "a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby" (113). According to Dorothy Roberts, "During the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of poor black women were coercively sterilized under federally funded programs. Women were threatened with termination of welfare benefits or denial of medical care if they didn't 'consent' to the procedure. Southern blacks claimed that black women were routinely sterilized without their consent and for no valid medical reason—a practice so widespread it was called a 'Mississippi appendectomy'" (Roberts). Whitehead's anachronism is no doubt intended to make the point that the depredation and suppression of the black body continued long after Abolition.

In the North Carolina depicted in the novel they have abolished slavery because they now employ "white niggers" (poor immigrants) to do the farm work, but they are intent on abolishing all blacks as well, and the place is ruled by brutal white supremacists. Cora enters the unnamed town, staying on a road called "Freedom Trail" (152), on the side of which is a long line of lynched bodies hanging from trees. The only blacks she sees in the place are "at the ends of ropes" (156). Julian Lucas finds echoes here of the 1898 Wilmington Insurrection, when the city's interracial government was deposed by a mob of white supremacists, who shot or lynched dozens of African Americans, an event which was part of the so-called redemption of the South and was followed by more than fifty years of segregation (56).

In North Carolina Cora spends an unspecified period of time hidden in a "cramped nook" (154) above a false ceiling in the attic of the house of the local station agent, where "the only source of light and air was a hole in the wall that faced the street" (154); a "suffocating nook" (157) reminiscent of the attic, also in North Carolina, where Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent, hid for almost seven years in



order to escape from slavery.<sup>9</sup> The self-chosen imprisonment in what Jacobs terms “a dismal hole,” “my little cell,” or “my dungeon,” is, nevertheless, better than slavery: “This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave” (Jacobs). In a similar vein, Cora muses on the paradoxes of her captivity, in a puzzling world “that makes a living prison into your only haven” (179). And, like Jacobs, Cora converts the tomb into a womb, a source of life and learning. During her captivity in this claustrophobic nook with notorious gothic overtones, she improves her reading skills and sharpens her critical thinking, through interactions with her hosts and through the spectacle she sees in the square outside through the hole in the wall. Every Friday the whites gather in the park for a festival, with music, a “coon show” (157) in which whites with blackened faces perform as stupid blacks, a morality play about the futility of slaves escaping to the North (157), and culminating in a lynching festival. The matter-of-fact description of the party atmosphere may seem fantastic and grotesque, but not if we remember the celebratory atmosphere that characterized the lynching of so many African Americans. North Carolina constitutes a very important stage, in which Cora, as has already been noted, reads and questions the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. As Laura Dubek observes, by watching the townspeople she “gets an education in the politics of white identity construction” (76). Cora sees through the inconsistencies of whites, who are perfectly happy to live in a sort of Nazi police state in which she is like a black Anne Frank, and who “were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear,” fear of retaliation on the part of “the rising black tribe” (179), fear of their own neighbors who could concoct false accusations of wrongdoing or report on protectors of runaways.

But it is not just the whites who are perverted and paralyzed by fear. With Cora's capture in North Carolina by the relentless Ridgeway, a new character is introduced into the story, a black ten-year-old boy named Homer who works as the slave-catcher's assistant and accountant and wears a “tailored black suit and a stovepipe hat” (187). He never shows racial affinity for Cora or any of the other captives. Ridgeway had bought Homer in Atlanta and freed him, but Homer stayed with him. He is one of those people who exhibit a false consciousness and prefer a sense of security to the personal autonomy Cora is ready to kill for. A quintessential instance of what Erich Fromm termed fear of freedom, Homer can only sleep well after he chains himself: “Each night, with meticulous care, Homer opened his satchel and removed a set of manacles. He locked himself to the driver's seat, put the key in his pocket, and closed his eyes” (203). Cora is self-critical enough to acknowledge her internal division, with the coexistence of “the slave part of her” and “the human part of her” (34). In sharp contrast with Cora, Homer is dominated by his “slave self” and seems to have internalized the prevailing notions of black inferiority in a form of black self-contempt. In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (2014), David Davis shows how the assumptions of black inferiority and incapacity for freedom that had been used as a fundamental justification for slavery were held not only by whites but also affected some blacks – those that “failed to see their own oppression since

9 Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is actually one of the sources Whitehead acknowledges for his novel.

they had internalized the whites' definition of their own identity and even felt a sense of duty and indebtedness to their more paternalistic masters" (213). The escaped slave and black abolitionist Henry Harland Garnet described the intentions of enslavers thus: "They endeavor to make you as much like brutes as possible. When they have blinded the eyes of your mind," then slavery has "done its perfect work" (Garnet). Slavery, or any other system of oppression, is more difficult to defeat when there is some kind of consent on the part of the oppressed. As Ira Berlin notes, "Asserting the primacy of black abolitionists likewise does not deny that many black people did little to aid the struggle for universal freedom, whether because of their indifference, their fear, their feelings of powerlessness, or their active opposition to abolition" (34-35).

The last two stages of Cora's journey include one of traveling, as Ridgeway's captive, through a Tennessee where the land has been burned, because of a fire that was started to clear land stolen from the Indians; that is, the soil of a Native South that preceded the South as the political-cultural imagined community that it has been since the first decades of the 19th century. The other stage is a brief stay at a flourishing farming community of black people in Indiana, where runaways are welcome to stay. But Cora soon learns that the "Whites Only" nightmare is spreading upwards from the South (277) and that, in terms of racism, the whole country *is* the South. The farm is eventually ambushed by whites bent on destroying what they cannot control: a reminder of episodes like the furious whites burning down the successful black business section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, called the "Black Wall Street," in 1921. Thus Cora is once again excluded from the home that she yearns for and which her country does not want her to have. The only shelter she has ever had, and still keeps on her memory, is the small garden she tended in the Georgia plantation.

At the end of Voltaire's story "Candide" the protagonist says, "We must cultivate our garden." He is not speaking about paradise regained; he has seen the world and it is full of misfortune and negativity, but the return to something close to home brings meaning, the meaning that resides in the struggle, even if there is no hope that we will ever be wholly free. The little garden plot that was begun by her grandmother Ajarry and that she inherited from her mother remains a dear and powerful memory for Cora throughout. Even when it is just a memory, "a shadow of something that lived elsewhere, out of sight" (179-80), it is the only thing of her own, the only spot in the plantation where she is a human that momentarily escapes a culture of slavery. The plot that she defends tooth and nail is expressive of the rebellious spirit that Cora inherited from her runaway mother and that impels her to take action rather than be acted upon, of her resistance to abuse and thingification. As Caesar, Cora's runaway companion, perceives, "She knew the preciousness of what little she called her own. Her joys, her plot, that block of sugar maple she perched on like a vulture" (232). Cultivating the garden is not only an avenue for African American self-expression that Alice Walker explores and celebrates in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1974), but also a way of resisting the predation of what Orlando Patterson calls "social death," the dehumanization pursued by enslavers. The garden is a site of resistance, a way of showing that the institution of slavery did not work because it did not render all slaves servile: in her garden Cora "owned herself for a few hours every week" (12); it is "An anchor in the vicious waters of the plantation"



(55), the proof that slavery does not destroy creativity in African Americans. With her gardening, Cora refuses to give in to circumstances and defies the stereotype of the brutish and uncultivated black person who excels only in forced physical labor. As in Alice Walker, the garden is related to family heritage and continuity: passed on from Ajarry through Mabel to her daughter Cora, it is "The most valuable land in all of Georgia" (294). This heavily symbolic garden is also reminiscent of the garden of Miss Ethel, the old, healing African American woman who restores the protagonist's sister to health in Toni Morrison's *Home*, a garden that "was not Eden; it was so much more than that" (130).

In *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line*, Trudier Harris argues that the South has always shaped the imagination of African American writers, whether or not they were born in the South, and that their conception of the southern territory "helps to understand creativity operating under the influence of history as well as under the influence of race" (1). Persuaded that "the American South ... becomes a rite of passage for African American writers" and that "Not one of them considers himself or herself truly an African American writer without having confronted the South in some way" (2), Harris describes the South as the mountain that black writers, even if they are non-southerners, like Whitehead, have to tunnel through: "Tunneling through the mountain of the South enables them to arrive at the other side with a heightened sense of who they are as writers. Complete identity as an African American writer seems to come only after a confrontation with black history and American history as represented by and in the South" (16). In "North," the last section of Whitehead's novel, there is a passage in which Cora seems to be a representation of Whitehead tunneling his way as a black writer thorough that southern mountain of repression and violence. In her last ride on the Railroad we see Cora, after hitting Ridgeway and escaping from him, going into a tunnel "no one had made, that led nowhere" (303), in a handcar, as if she were simultaneously riding and building the Railroad. It is probably the most powerful passage in the novel, about the urge to go anywhere but back to slavery, a very intense and ambivalent passage: "Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?" (303). The passage celebrates the moral triumph of the effort that built a miracle like this Railroad: "The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her" (303). From the beginning, Cora has stood for the many black people who with their relentless pursuit of freedom and their denunciation of a dehumanizing system carried "the black man's burden" of perfecting American democracy. Actually, Caesar had chosen her as his runaway partner because she was not just good luck but "the locomotive itself" (234).

In "One More Boxcar" (1999), Nikki Giovanni's poem about the Underground Railroad, the narrating voice sees him or herself as "one more boxcar" resolutely "inching along" toward freedom (24). The Underground Railroad itself becomes a person, and individual runaways become their own vehicles of escape. Each runaway becomes a boxcar and, moving single-file, together they form an endless train of people on their way to freedom. According to Darcy Zabel, the poem suggests that the real Underground Railroad "was composed of the individuals who never actually boarded a train, received no help, and made the journey alone, inch by inch." Giovanni is suggesting that "History and heroism ... is written not in milestones but in inches"

and that “The slow, individual creep toward freedom becomes a massive force to be remembered when all the inches are measured up in miles” (71). Both Giovanni in her poem and Whitehead in this passage suggest that instead of waiting for the Underground Railroad that would never really come to their rescue, it was the individual runaways who, with their own bodies, became their own vehicles of salvation. Cora here rightly claims the right to belong in the American mythology of renewal and the existential belief that we can continually remake ourselves and transform our weaknesses into strengths: “On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light” (304). In other words, the fight can go underground for strategic purposes, but it cannot be destroyed, and to board the train you have to leave behind the known world of an old identity and become a new person at the end of the journey. One of the most important mythological figures in black literature and culture is John Henry, the Herculean builder of railroad tracks, who symbolically builds himself at the same time as he builds America.<sup>10</sup>

Cora finally finds her way out of the tunnel through a cave, and at the very end she is like a pioneer, when she gets on a wagon, driven by an old black man, going West, first to Missouri and from there maybe to California, a twenty-first century version of Martin Luther King Jr.’s long-deferred dream of a promised land, and a probable echo of Shirley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), a novel in which the final flight of fugitive slaves is not to the North, as in the traditional political geography, but to the West, to the non-slave territory, the frontier, the soil of which Ralph Ellison, according to Harris, said that it “enabled black human beings to picture themselves as Renaissance people, able to do and be whatever they wanted to be” (Harris 96). Williams and Whitehead thus combine the African American Tubman tradition of slaves riding the Underground Railroad to freedom in the North with the white epic of pioneers moving westward.

For Cora it is anywhere rather than going back, and her surviving slavery, an institution based on dehumanization and thingification, is the most effective way of showing that it did not work because it did not break the will of slaves to fight. Whitehead sees the closing pages as optimistic, but also realistic: “I find the last pages very hopeful. But still, wherever we go, we’re still in America, which is an imperfect place. That’s the reality of things” (Schuessler). Cora is still running away, still without the home her country doesn’t want her to have, without a community where she can build and belong unhindered. The novel has taken us through successive phases that begin with promises of potential and soon end in tragedy and dispossession brought about by white supremacy. It is, as one reviewer has said, “As though to remind us that the tragedy of slavery was not what happened but what never happened because of it” (Lucas 57). She continues to be in transit, like a refugee, and that is how black people have always been treated as a population in America. In her essay “Message to My Daughters,” Edwidge Danticat contends that black people in America have always been treated as a population in transit, housed and educated in conditions not much better than those of refugees. As a black Haitian immigrant, she complains about “the precarious nature of [black] citizenship here: that we too are prey, and those who have been in this country for generations — walking, living, loving in the same skin

10 Colson Whitehead wrote a novel titled *John Henry Days* (2001) about this legendary figure.

we're in — they too can suddenly become refugees" (210-11). For Cora, the world has always been one with "no places to escape to, only places to flee" (257), and her story reaffirms our perception that the Underground Railroad has not reached its destination yet.

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Patrycja Antoszek

## The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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**Abstract:** The aim of my paper will be to discuss the African-American reworking of the Gothic tradition in Colson Whitehead's neo-slave narrative. I want to argue that the figure of the protagonist Cora may be seen as the embodiment of losses that span over generations of black women. Cora's melancholia is a strategy of dealing with the horrors of slavery and a sign of a black woman's failed entry into the Symbolic. While the novel's narrative technique is a symbol of the ever-present past that haunts black subjectivity, the underground railroad may be read as a metaphor for the repressed content of American national unconscious.

**Keywords:** African-American gothic, loss, melancholia, slavery, affect

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"Not a house in the country ain't packed  
to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief."  
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

*The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead's National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, revolves around a trope whose historical, political and emotional potential has turned it into a popular topic of book-length scholarly studies, films and fictional works. In her article titled "The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad," published in *The New Yorker* in 2016, Kathryn Schulz astutely observes that nostalgic stories about the adventures of blacks escaping slavery with the help of noble whites are alluring as they provide us with moral reassurance and "a comparatively comfortable place to rest in a profoundly uncomfortable past." Indeed, as Laura Dubek points out, telling the story of the Underground Railroad requires a more thoughtful confrontation not only with American history but also with the American psyche, as it involves "navigating the complicated psychic landscape of a country whose people seem intent to remain in perpetual flight not just from their past, but from any understanding of the deep and enduring contradictions at the core of their national identity" (Dubek 69).

In numerous interviews following the publication of *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead, asked about his reworking of historical facts in the novel, explained that his major goal was not to tell the facts but to tell the truth. Asked by Oprah Winfrey why we need another story about slavery, Whitehead responded that though we all know slavery as a historical fact, our understanding of the "aftereffects" of African American history remains insufficient. Like many other African American writers then, Whitehead, born and raised in New York, feels "*compelled* to confront the American South and all its bloody history" as a peculiar form of a rite of passage, an attempt to come to terms with his complex sense of identity (Harris). Indeed, as Trudier Harris demonstrates in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*, no black author can consider himself or herself a true African American writer without confronting the idea of the South – both attractive and repulsive to them

– in some decisive way. As Harris’ study reveals, for many black authors writing about slavery not only involves a psychological journey in time and space back to a place of unspeakable historical traumas, but also becomes an almost visceral experience.

In what follows I want to argue that Whitehead’s fictional neo-slave narrative, while referring to actual facts, defies historical accuracy and chronology to tell an affective history of African American experience. By revisiting slavery as probably the most horrific trauma haunting American consciousness, Whitehead’s novel becomes a meditation on the history of social, cultural and personal losses and the process of unresolved mourning that continues to shape African American identity. At the same time, by making literal the metaphor of the Underground Railroad, and therefore by demythologizing it, the novel reveals the complex mechanisms of racial melancholia and challenges some of the myths of white America. Hence, in Whitehead’s narrative the Underground Railroad provides an alternative route through the history of racialized America, where the past cannot be erased but has to be confronted. It is a journey not only across states but also through the history of abuse, bringing up shameful facts from America’s past, which refuse to be forgotten.

American literature has a long tradition of excluding uncomfortable details from national memory. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison investigates the ways in which blackness and slavery were fundamental for the construction of white American identity. As Anne Cheng observes, “[b]y citing African American presence as the formative but denied ghost in the heart of American literature, Toni Morrison has essentially identified the national literary canon as a melancholic corpus” – melancholic “because of what it excludes but cannot forget” (Cheng 12). In her influential *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng reverses Morrison’s perspective and looks at texts by minority writers to explore the double nature of racial melancholia. According to Cheng, a non-white subject may be seen as both the object of national melancholy and a subject of racial melancholy, which results from an accumulation of injuries and losses encrypted inside the racialized ego. The long history of racial oppression, going back to the dramas of separation from the African homeland, through the torments of the Middle Passage to the humiliation and terrors of chattel slavery, leaves the black subject in America burdened with a long history of unresolved grief passed from generation to generation.

Whitehead’s novel, though inspired by realistic accounts of slave narratives does not follow the rules of factual or chronological accuracy. Escaping from a plantation in Georgia, the teen-age protagonist, Cora, travels through several states constructing a fictional and almost mythical landscape out of the history of African American experience. This includes the inhuman conditions of cottonfield work, terrors of bondage, medical experiments on blacks, including the infamous Tuskegee Study, and the ritual killing and lynching of runaway slaves. The uncanny retelling of some of the most shameful facts from American history brings back – in a truly Gothic fashion – what has long been repressed or purposefully erased from the national unconscious. The novel relies on a classic Gothic plot in which an imperiled heroine (Cora) running away from an oppressive male (the slave-owner Randall) is followed by another cruel male antagonist (the slave-catcher Ridgeway) and becomes lost in a dark, labyrinthine and imprisoning space (the underground railroad). By turning the metaphor of the



railroad into a physical structure, Whitehead invests the narrative with another Gothic trope: a subterranean, gloomy maze of railways full of dead ends and ghost stations. Also, the very life of a slave, as Maisha L. Wester observes, is undoubtedly a Gothic existence: “[t]he murders/suicides, rapes, entrapment and escape cycles, torture (brutal whippings), and familial secrets (illegitimate births) that make up numerous gothic plots constitute real, daily existence under slavery” (35). The South in Whitehead’s novel is a haunted and gloomy landscape troubled with terrors and tortures, which challenge America’s national myths of purity, equality and innocence. Finally, the book’s protagonist is the embodiment of the Gothic Other – she is black, female and an outcast even in her own community, who considers her mentally unstable and puts her with other insane slave women in what they call a Hob.

More importantly, however, by revisiting the story of slavery as America’s most unbearable trauma, Whitehead’s novel speaks the unspeakable and exposes – with horrific detail – the dark underbelly of American history. According to Teresa Goddu, who believes all American Gothic is haunted by race,

The nation’s narratives – its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations – are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. (10)

Hence, by making the metaphor of the Underground Railroad literal, the book attempts to de-mythologize the monstrous past, which becomes as real and as uncomfortable as the dirty, derelict railcars that take Cora from one station to another. As in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the Gothic in Whitehead’s novel serves to “rematerialize” African American history and proves that slavery and racial oppression continue to haunt the American literary imagination like a “ghost in the machine” (cf. Goddu 154-6). When Cora begins her journey on the Underground Railroad, she is told, “If you want to see what this nation is all about . . . you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (83), but all Cora can see is “darkness, mile after mile” (84). Indeed, the protagonist’s journey – one of American literature’s favorite tropes – makes her realize that “America was a ghost in the darkness, like her” (216). The Declaration of Independence, which states that all men are created equal, recited by one of the slaves, sounds like a joke, and the idea of Manifest Destiny celebrated by the Ahab-like, obsession-driven Ridgeway only proves that “America . . . is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes – believes with all its heart – that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are” (341). As the slave catcher ironically observes, “[w]e come up with all sorts of fancy talk to hide things” (266).

One of Cora’s most eye-opening experiences is her work in the Museum of Natural Wonders where she performs the role of a slave in an exhibit educating white people about their national history. Acting in three different settings – Scenes



from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship and Typical Day on the Plantation – Cora becomes physically enframed into a fabricated white script which neatly erases all the horrifying truth about slavery. Rather than showing a kidnapped slave “chained belowdeck, swabbing his body in his own filth,” the museum offers images of black boys running the decks and being patted on the head by their white kidnappers (138). In other words, the exhibition demonstrates how African American suffering – the blood, death and anguish, that is the Kristevan *abject*<sup>1</sup> – has been exorcised from the official national narrative in which “[t]ruth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking” (139). Forced to participate in this officially sanctioned falsehood, Cora chooses one spectator every hour and offers them what bell hooks would call an “oppositional gaze.”<sup>2</sup> Looking back at the white spectators (a gesture forbidden for slaves), the protagonist challenges the image of a black person and the version of black history contrived by white mythology: “It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too” (151).

While *The Underground Railroad* undoubtedly challenges the white mythology and exposes the cracks in its racial logic, the novel also dramatizes the experience of slavery as an ever-growing reservoir of losses. The book opens with the story of Ajarry, the protagonist’s grandmother, who was captured in her African village and brought to America on a slave ship. Though Ajarry has long been dead when the novel begins, her life of unbearable suffering serves as a prologue to the story of Cora. First, when she was a girl, Ajarry lost her mother; then she was kidnapped and separated from home and family. Becoming a slave on an American plantation only multiplied her losses: deprived of dignity, safety and freedom, she lost three husbands and four of her five children, “one after another.” Unable to cope with her pain, Ajarry acquired a “new blankness behind her eyes” (8) and disintegrated emotionally: “her burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces” (5). As a consequence, the grandmother’s unending mourning turns her into a melancholic subject whose only legacy – like the legacy of slavery – is unresolved grief.

In his “Mourning and Melancholia,” an essay published in 1917, Freud explains the complex relationship between loss, the denial of loss and its incorporation into the ego. He differentiates between mourning, which he believes is a healthy though undoubtedly painful process of acknowledging loss, and melancholia, which he sees as pathological. As Freud observes, in the state of melancholia the ego, unable to accept the loss, identifies with the lost object, which becomes incorporated into the ego, causing a split in the subject. As a consequence, “an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (Freud

1 In Julia Kristeva’s definition, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers of Horror*, 4). In this sense, abjection involves a “throwing off,” or exclusion of historical horrors to facilitate the construction of coherent national identity.

2 As bell hooks has argued, repeated desires to repress the black gaze have resulted in “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.” Like Foucault, hooks interprets the act of looking, or looking back, in terms of power relations and insists that the “gaze” is always political and may be an act of resistance (94-5).

249). In his later work, *The Ego and the Id*, Freud goes on to suggest that “there is no non-melancholic loss, no mourning that leaves the ego unchanged” and that “the very character of the ego is formed by its lost objects” (Flatley 49). In their rereading of Freud, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok propose that the refusal to part with the lost object leads to a fantasy of “incorporation” of the loss into the ego, which is meant to protect the object and help the mourner deal with the loss: “The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss” (130). The inability to express the sorrow leads one to the creation of a psychic crypt, which preserves the memory of the lost object and “entombs the ‘part of ourselves that we placed in what we lost’” (Abraham and Torok 127; Singleton 53).

The story of Whitehead’s protagonist begins with her identification with her grandmother as an ancestor whose unresolved pain and loss of self she has inherited. Therefore, initially, when approached by Caesar, another slave who is planning an escape to the North, Cora says what her grandmother would have said: “no.” When three weeks later she says “yes,” she refuses to remain encrypted in the impossible mourning of generations of slaves. Like her mother, Mabel, who also integrated Ajarry’s melancholy into her life, and whose overwhelming sadness and silent suffering Cora so well remembers, she decides to break the cycle of continuous grief and losses-of-self and move on. At the same time, in her decision to escape, Cora identifies with her mother – the only slave ever to run away from Randall’s plantation and whose loss she does not want to accept. In her refusal to lose her mother, who abandoned her when she was still a child, Cora preserves her inside her psychic crypt and part of her becomes Mabel. She cultivates her mother’s tiny plot of land and, in a motherly gesture, protects the little Chester from the master’s rage “ben[ding] over the boy’s body as a shield” (40); finally, she has “the same reluctance to mix, the burden that bent her at all times and set her apart” (64). Most importantly however, she does what her mother did: she steps outside her master’s property and never returns.

But Cora, like generations of black women before her, also has to incorporate and encrypt her own denigrated self. Abandoned by the mother, physically and sexually abused, and cast out of the slave community to live in the Hob as an outcast, Cora displays some typical symptoms of melancholia: she retreats into alienation and silence, avoids contacts with others, and feels intense hatred for her mother for leaving her. The crypt as melancholia’s central trope appears throughout the novel in the form of small, enclosed spaces, in which Cora hides from the world. Though she has just escaped from the most horrible of cages – the plantation – as a runaway slave she finds herself continually trapped between captivity and freedom, life and death. In order to survive, she has to move from one hideaway to another, travelling through narrow, underground tunnels in tight, uncomfortable boxcars. The most conspicuous of her crypts, however, is the suffocating, “cramped nook” in the attic of Martin Wells’s house in North Carolina, where Cora hides for several months. It is here, in the most confining of her prisons that she begins to ponder the nature of freedom. Contemplating white people’s racial violence through a tiny hole in the wall, she recognizes “they were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear” (216), scared to death by “[t]he shadow of the black hand that will return what has been given,” and realizes that “she was one

of the vengeful monsters they were scared of" (206-7). Cora's refusal to look at the morbid, grotesque ceremonies of the ritual lynching of a black person taking place every Friday night at the town's main square is her gesture of resistance – this time by averting her gaze from what is intended to terrorize and humiliate her, Cora again opposes white racist ideology in the only manner available to a slave. Recognizing the affect behind "the American imperative," she realizes that for a black person "[b]eing free had nothing to do with chains or how much space you had" (215), but involves the necessity of freeing oneself from the oppressive memory of the past and unresolved pain of one's ancestors. If, as Abraham and Torok suggest, melancholic incorporation means almost literal "swallowing" of the lost object in a refusal to mourn, Cora reverses the process by finally losing the contents of her stomach and bowels in the small space of her crypt-like nook. As she metaphorically purges her inside of all unwanted burdens, she is, in a sense, brought back to the beginnings of her trauma: she has a dream about herself being transported from Africa on a slave ship, chained below decks together with hundreds of captives crying in terror. Thus embracing the painful history of slavery and rejecting the impossible weight of inherited losses, Cora chooses to confront herself with grief and finally leave it behind:

List upon list crowded the ledger of slavery. The names gathered first on the African coast in tens of thousands of manifests. The human cargo. The names of the dead were as important as the names of the living, as every loss from disease and suicide – and the other mishaps labeled as such for accounting purposes – needed to be justified to employers. ...

The peculiar institution made Cora into a maker of lists as well. In her inventory of loss people were not reduced to sums but multiplied by their kindnesses. People she had loved, people who had helped her. The Hob women, Lovey, Martin and Ethel, Fletcher. The ones who disappeared: Caesar and Sam and Lumbly. Jasper was not her responsibility, but the stains of his blood on the wagon and her clothes might as well have represented her own dead. (258)

While melancholia has been traditionally understood as an individual psychic condition, recent scholarship has explored the relationship between prolonged mourning and collective memory. As Julia Stern observes, "[w]hen entire groups endure unrelenting experiences of dehumanizing, disabling treatment and recurrent separation and death, the notion of mourning itself might be better understood as collective melancholia" (62-3). In "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," David Eng and Shinhee Han argue that mourning may be understood not only in individual but also in cultural contexts, as a response both to personal losses and collective traumas. The refusal and inability of racialised subjects to forget the past should no longer be treated as pathological, but must be seen as a "militant refusal" that lies "at the heart of melancholia's productive potentials" (Eng and Han 365; Kaplan 514). Similarly, Jose Esteban Muñoz believes that, for queers as well as for people of color, melancholia functions as an integral part of daily existence and a certain strategy of survival. Rather than seeing melancholia "as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood which inhibits agency," Muñoz claims that "it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names" (qtd. in Eng and Han 363).

Whitehead's rendering of racial melancholia in *The Underground Railroad* shows the African American subject formation as "an ongoing process of legislating or feeding on loss" (Singleton 46). Yet, it is Cora's recognition of melancholia's productive potential that allows her to emerge out of the gloomy, imprisoning tunnels of the underground railroad and her own traumatized self, and keep going. As the protagonist gradually gains power and agency, she begins to grieve for every individual person she lost, or for whose death she may have been responsible. By the time the slave-catcher finally finds her, "she had finished mourning [Caesar]" (264), then "shutters swung out inside her and she saw the boy [she had killed in self-defense] trembling on his sickbed, his mother weeping over his grave" and realizes she "had been grieving for him, too, without knowing it" (265). It is the recognition of loss and the utterance of grief that grants Cora agency she never had being a slave. In the last pages of the novel, and in a gesture reminiscent of another Gothic tale – Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" – Cora attacks her pursuer Ridgeway "lock[ing] her arms around him like a chain of iron" (361) and, like Poe's Madeline, brings him down to the floor "a victim to the terrors he [as a white man must have] anticipated" (Poe 95).<sup>3</sup> Leaving the slave catcher behind, Cora finds herself alone in the darkness of an underground ghost station from which she has to find a way out. In the most unrealistic passage of the novel, Cora seems to be digging the tunnel herself, thus constructing it: "On the one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light" (363). After the arduous journey through the gloomy underside of America, the light at the end of the tunnel implies a new beginning for Cora, whose symbolic birth is an act of leaving behind the dark past to face the future. The new self that emerges out of the tunnel, however, brings with herself an awareness of the necessity to confront one's legacy of suffering and loss, of the need to travel the underground railroads of both America and one's self.

Whitehead's novel does not offer full narrative closure, nor does it suggest racial injuries can be forgotten, or that there can ever be an end to trauma. As one character says: "Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade" (340). And yet, as Cora emerges out of the darkness into a place she does not know, she meets an old black man and joins him to travel in an open carriage to California. As she wonders "where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he travelled before he put it behind him" (366), Cora, covered with a blanket whose rough fabric reminds her of her life as a slave, seems to understand that African American sense of community must be built on their common cultural memory of lost lives, lost selves, lost possibilities. As Judith Butler points out, "there is something else that one cannot 'get over,' one cannot 'work through,' which is the deliberate act of violence against a collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates an anonymity for memory" (468). It is undoubtedly

3 Several scholars have suggested that "The Fall of the House of Usher" may be read in the context of American slavery. As Harry Levine observes, the story "acquires a sociological meaning when it is linked with the culture of the plantation in its feudal pride and its foreboding of doom" (*Power of Blackness* 160). More recently, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argues that Poe's tale offers interesting insights when read against the backdrop of slavery and, especially, the fear of slave revolt (*The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* 49-53).

Whitehead's achievement to understand melancholia not only as "a private, backward-looking phenomenon of paralyzing psychic conflict" but, more importantly, "as an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances that traverse continents and cross time" (Kaplan 513). Whitehead's novel, while showing melancholia's productive potential, is yet more proof that slavery and its terrible legacy remains America's most excruciating trauma, which perhaps can never be adequately mourned (cf. Stern 79).

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Ewa Kłęczaj-Siara

## Protecting the Spirit of the American South: Representations of New Orleans Culture in Contemporary Children's Picture Books

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**Abstract:** This article explores selected aspects of southern culture as presented in contemporary children's picture books. It analyzes children's stories which celebrate New Orleans' residents and their traditions. Unlike many scholars who point to the end of the New Orleans spirit due to recent economic and demographic changes, children's authors perceive the culture as a resource which regenerates the city. By means of writing for children they keep the city's distinct black culture from disappearing. The aim of this article is to examine to what extent the spirit of the South has survived in the minds of contemporary authors and artists addressing young generations of readers. It discusses the presence of such cultural elements as jazz music, body movement and the ritual of parading in selected children's picture books set in New Orleans. Among others, it analyzes such titles as *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) by C. Weatherford, and *Trombone Shortly* (2015) and *The 5 O'Clock Band* (2018) by Troy Andrews. The article focuses on the interaction between the verbal and the visual elements of the books, and the ways they convey the meaning of the stories.

**Keywords:** New Orleans, jazz, parading, Hurricane Katrina, children's literature, picture books

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African American children's literature has always been marked with political struggle and resistance. Black authors regularly respond to social and political transformations as well as natural disasters which strike black neighborhoods. In many books they focus on the culture that binds the people and gives them a sense of identity in the time of crisis. This is what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina of 2005. While scholars and journalists stress the fact that the disaster threatened the cultural existence of New Orleans, causing mass migration of residents to other parts of the country, children's authors represent the opposite view, claiming that culture kept the people together and brought some of them back to the city. By means of simple stories and the accompanying illustrations, they emphasize the transformative force of the storm, thus raising an important point in the post-Katrina conversation about New Orleans. To counter inadequate accounts of the place, children's authors argue that "the storm is part of a much longer history of people surviving and celebrating under difficult conditions" (Watts and Porter xv). Culture has always been considered a significant asset of the city, especially if created by the local people. Recently, however, many scholars fail to mention the fact that New Orleans' root culture cannot be preserved without its people. This point, frequently overshadowed in the post-Katrina debate, is the main argument of many children's books published after the hurricane.

### New Orleans Culture

Apart from New York's Harlem, New Orleans, perceived by many to be the most cosmopolitan southern city, is one of the most popular settings of contemporary

children's books telling the stories of black communities. There is a specific reason why so many authors decide to feature New Orleanians and their culture. According to Jerry McKernan and Kevin V. Mulcahy, "Unlike the cultural assets of some other places, those in New Orleans are rooted firmly in its communities. Rather than its museums and symphony halls, it is the people, neighborhoods, local organizations, and small businesses of New Orleans that make it culturally distinct" (228). New Orleans popular culture can be defined by its music, customs, religion, architecture, food, and other material products. However, this kind of culture cannot be preserved without the people who create and consume it. Curators or scholars alone are not able to maintain New Orleans traditions if they are not practiced by the locals. Thus, once the inhabitants of the city had to leave as part of the Great Migration or due to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, its living culture was at risk.

After Hurricane Katrina there were many initiatives on the part of the local authorities to keep the city's distinct black culture from disappearing. On 30 September 2005, a month after the storm, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which was supposed to reconstruct the city's cultural economy. As Crutcher notes in his study, the committee set out five objectives:

1. rebuild our talent pool of artists, cultural groups, and cultural entrepreneurs;
  2. support community-based cultural traditions and repair and develop cultural facilities;
  3. market New Orleans as a world-class cultural capital;
  4. teach our arts and cultural traditions to our young people;
  5. attract new investment from national and international sources
- (Crutcher 117).

The fourth point was soon realized by a number of children's authors who celebrated the southern traditions in their stories about New Orleans. Writers of different races all over the U.S. have drawn their inspiration from the popular culture of the town. As Catherine Savage Brosman notes, "Like painters, dancers, and musicians, good authors devise, from the materials at hand, inventive expressions of the city – popular and accessible, yet appealing to readers' intelligence, to their sense of humor, historical curiosity, aesthetic feeling, and appreciation of local color" (Brosman 47). Over twenty children's books on New Orleans were published in the U.S. in the years after Hurricane Katrina. Most of them are picture books, in which the illustrations provide extra information about the place and expand the verbal narrative.

Although there are lots of scholarly publications on American children's literature, none of them focuses on the ways it represents local cultures. By combining elements of cultural geography and the existing systems of children's books analysis, and making references to the African American historical context, this article aims to examine the extent to which selected children's books reflect the spirit of New Orleans' popular culture. How do the authors communicate their concept of the city? Can these works become canonical in terms of presenting the ingredients of the city's local culture? The analysis of selected children's books will start with a close reading

of both the visual and the verbal narratives, and then it will look at cultural codes evoked by each of the stories. References will be made to recent research into the state of New Orleans culture.

### Body Movement as a Form of Resistance

Congo Square, a nineteenth-century slave and Indian marketplace depicted as a site of resistance and freedom in New Orleans' historical district of Tremé, is the setting of Carole B. Weatherford's picture book. It was here that hundreds of enslaved and free blacks gathered on Sunday afternoons, which were work-free in Louisiana according to the Code Noir of 1724 (Crutcher 22). As well as seeing their family members, New Orleans' slaves were allowed to practice their African music and religious rituals at Congo Square. Being deprived of personal freedom throughout the week, on Sundays they could express their feelings by singing, dancing and drumming. Unlike anywhere else in the U.S., here slaves could preserve their African rhythms and customs. Mixing up different African musical genres with European or Caribbean ones led to the creation of new styles and traditions. Thus Congo Square is regarded as the birthplace of jazz music, celebrations such as jazz funerals and second-line dancing, and parades like Mardi Gras. Congo Square was also a marketplace, which – by allowing enslaved blacks to sell their produce – gave them a sense of freedom. But, most importantly, it was the center of communication, where blacks could share their concerns about living in bondage as well as their revolutionary ideas of how to resist slavery.

Weatherford's *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) is a typical picture book, which consists of sparse text and exuberant illustrations taking up most of the pages. An analysis of the relationship between words and images is essential to an understanding of how meaning is constructed in the book. There is no specific narrative. The main focus is on the concept of enslavement and resistance. The days of the week are the underlying structure of the book. The first few pages depict slaves working hard on a daily basis and looking forward to the day off work, that is Sunday afternoon. The accompanying text on each of these pages is a rhyme about the hardships of slavery on every working day. It starts in the following way:

Mondays, there were hogs to slop  
Mules to train, and logs to chop.

Slavery was no ways fair.  
Six more days to Congo Square. (Weatherford, unpagged)

The accompanying pictures provide an overview of all kinds of plantation chores slaves did: plowing the fields, harvesting crops, feeding animals, and different types of household duties. Characteristically, most of the figures presented in the illustrations have their bodies bent while doing their jobs, which indicates their physical suffering. The second part of the book shows the same slaves in totally different moods and postures: dancing and drumming while communing in Congo Square. The silhouettes of both black men and women are presented in motion with their arms and legs stretched out. Some of them even seem to be flying, which is a popular symbol of freedom

in the African cultural context. One double-page spread of the book includes simple drawings of African masks and instruments, which are referred to as “triangles, gourds, and bells, banzas, flutes, fiddles, and shells.” Another one depicts elegantly dressed dancers, who strongly contrast with the figures of slaves on the previous pages. They are described as follows: “Women in gauze, silk, and percale, men in fringe and furry tails shook tambourines and shouted chants as rhythms fueled a spirited dance.” What is happening in Congo Square becomes an interesting attraction to white inhabitants of the town. The final pages of the book show some of them in the background observing skilled black dancers enjoying their temporary freedom:

They rejoiced as if they had no cares;  
Half day, half free in Congo Square.  
This piece of earth was a world apart.  
Congo Square was freedom’s heart.

The spirit of Congo Square became part of the southern tradition of black people appropriating spaces to which they had limited access due to structural inequality. To this day the people of New Orleans gather in this place for cultural and political reasons. Since 2013, when the Black Lives matter movement rose to prominence, Congo Square has attracted a large number of African American artists and musicians who perform in defiance of established norms. They frequently organize concerts and dances that encourage the audience to join in the rituals.

Moving one’s body in protest is part of the long-lasting tradition which goes back to slavery times. As enslaved blacks were not allowed to move beyond certain limits, they moved their bodies in response to the social and political constraints imposed on them. As Hunter and Robinson observe, “How bodies move in place says a great deal about how they make and lay claim to places. In New Orleans, which had outlawed dancing of enslaved people in Congo Square several years before the Civil War, a confluence of African ethnic groups left a legacy of motion that persists today. To gather and to dance, even in the face of oppression, is a place-making practice of chocolate maps” (Hunter and Robinson 113). The tradition of using one’s body in protest was transferred to many black areas, which became sites of resistance and gave blacks the chance to speak out on political issues.

### **The Unifying Force of New Orleans Musical Gumbo**

It is hard to find a literary work on New Orleans which does not mention its music. Irrespective of the historical period in which it is set, almost every story points to the power of jazz, its players and instruments. The musical spirit of the American South is a dominant theme in two picture books, *Trombone Shortly* (2015) and *The 5 O’ Clock Band* (2018), written by Troy “Trombone Shortly” Andrews, a well-known contemporary New Orleans musician, and illustrated by renowned artist Bryan Collier. While the first book focuses on the author’s early musical interests, the second one is a tribute to his hometown. New Orleans culture is defined by the author by means of three words: tradition, dedication and love. The young character, who is an embodiment of the place, makes a successful career thanks to the three values: he

upholds his family and hometown tradition, he is dedicated to developing his talents, and he does everything with love.

At the very beginning of the first book, the author says: "We have our own way of living down here in New Orleans, and our own way of talking, too" (Andrews, *Trombone*, unpagged). What he means by the way of talking is the musical language of the town. As we learn from the author's note, he was raised in New Orleans, always surrounded by music. He inherited the musical tradition from his brother James Andrews and his grandfather, and as a young boy he was already focused on maintaining this cultural heritage. Trombone's music is a combination of jazz, blues, gospel, rock and roll, funk and hip-hop. In the Author's note, he describes his music as "SupaFunkRock." In the story, the author compares his music to the way people cook in the South: "I listened to all these sounds and mixed them together, just like we make our food. ... We call it gumbo, and that's what I wanted my music to sound like – different styles combined to create my own musical gumbo!" (Andrews, *Trombone*). The author mentions his early passion for music as he and his friends made makeshift instruments: "We were making music, and that's all that mattered" (Andrews, *Trombone*). Then he writes about his participation in different types of parades. The accompanying illustrations show crowds of people singing, clapping their hands and dancing to the music. The instruments loom large in the pictures. On some pages they are even more visible than the players. The main character's instrument seems to be the most important. It accompanies the boy whether he is at home or out in the streets. His first meeting with Bo Diddley, one of the most famous musicians from New Orleans, is the climax of the story. As a young boy, Trombone Shortly starts to play his trumpet among crowds of people during the New Orleans Jazz Heritage Festival. He is immediately noticed by Diddley and asked to join him on stage. For young Andrews this event is the beginning of his music career. The following pages of the book show images of places from outside of America, which focus on Trombone Shortly's worldwide music career. The book ends with the author's reflection on the significance of New Orleans for his personal development. He says he will never forget the town's parades, which gave shape to his musical style. Nor will he forget his first instrument: "I still keep my trombone in my hands, and I will never let it go" (Andrews, *Trombone*).

*The 5 O' Clock Band* is a follow-up to *Trombone Shortly*. It gives more information about Troy Andrews' childhood and how he was inspired by his hometown's local traditions. He is a leader of a boys' band called The 5 O' Clock. One day he gets "lost in his own music" and misses the afternoon rehearsal. He journeys through the Tremé neighborhood searching for his companions. He seems to be disappointed with himself and tries hard to improve his performance as a bandleader. Walking across the French Quarter the young trombonist comes across three iconic figures of the town: musician Tuba Tremé, Creole chef Queen Lola and a Mardi Gras Indian with his troupe. All of them welcome the boy with the local greeting "Where y'at!" and offer useful advice on how to make a career. Tradition, dedication and love are the so called "ingredients of success." On being asked what makes a musician successful, Tuba Tremé says: "If you understand tradition and you keep it alive, you will be a great bandleader," and adds that every musician "needs to know where music came from in

order to move it forward” (Andrews, *The 5 O’Clock*, unpagged). Queen Lola offers the following advice: “As long as you love what you do, you will always be a success,” and the Indian chief first responds with a single word: “Dedication,” and then provides the following explanation: “Each year, all the Indians make new suits, hand-sewn from scratch. It takes a lot of time and patience, but when we hit the streets, it’s worth it” (Andrews, *The 5 O’Clock*).

In both of the books the author conveys the spirit of New Orleans by making references to different senses. The sounds of the place, including such old melodies as “When the Saints Go Marching In,” inspire the boy to continue the jazz tradition of his forefathers: “Like so many other New Orleans musicians, Shortly had learned how to play his horn with this tune. Pride swelled in Shorty’s chest as he and Tuba played the same notes together that Louis Armstrong had played many years before them in these same streets” (Andrews, *The 5 O’Clock*). Then music is compared to popular smells and flavors of New Orleans cuisine: “[Tuba] was as sweet as pecan pie – and the sounds that floated from his horn were even tastier” (Andrews, *The 5 O’Clock*). The art of cooking is also mentioned in one of the central episodes when the young character meets Queen Lola, one of the best Creole chefs in New Orleans. The woman treats the boy to a meal of red beans, rice, andouille sausages, collard greens and okra with tomatoes. The accompanying illustration shows the lady with a bowl of food, out of which the steam is spreading to different parts of the town. Like the musician, the cook inspires the young artist to make his music with love: “There’s love in my food, because I love everything dish I make” (Andrews, *The 5 O’Clock*).

The books’ illustrations perfectly reflect the mood of the stories and the liveliness of New Orleans culture. In both of the books, there are sound waves marked with rich colors and different shapes with strong lines that seem to be coming out of the young trombonist’s instrument, which indicate the resonance of jazz music and its far-reaching impact. In *Trombone Shortly*, the collage-style illustrations are enriched with numerous balloons floating around the figures of New Orleans’ musicians. At the end of the book these little balloons are transformed into a large hot-air balloon that is flying away from the city. From the illustrator’s note we learn that “This balloon first transports Troy’s musical message over the city of New Orleans, but as Troy grows, his music has the power to soar over the entire world” (Andrews, *Trombone*). The other book conveys the same concept of music by means of the illustration depicting Shortly playing his horn by the bank of the Mississippi River. A sound wave coming from the instrument reaches a northbound steamboat, taking the southern tones to other parts of the country.

The musical message of Andrews’ picture books goes beyond the beauty of musical creativity. The author emphasizes the fact that the southern black music gives people living there a sense of community. Despite the oppression they might experience in their lives, they feel totally free while playing the music, listening to the local bands or walking and singing in the parades. As were slaves during the Sunday meetings in Congo Square, so too are African Americans of this and the previous century relieved as they engross themselves in New Orleans jazz or blues. It is especially significant during political crises or natural disasters that inevitably break the community spirit. Thus Andrews’ books are a reminder of the healing nature of music, especially to



those who left the South geographically. He suggests that Mardi Gras parades are one of those occasions that bring together Southerners returning home from all over the country. Interestingly, those parades gather people of different social status. Thus it is not the material riches that keeps Southerners together but the unique power of their music. As is mentioned in *Trombone Shorty*: "People didn't have a lot of money in Tremé but we always had a lot of music."

Many children's authors stress the fact that music did not disappear from the streets of New Orleans even during the largest natural disaster of this century, Hurricane Katrina of 2005. The musical motif is present in numerous books on the theme of the tragedy. The aim of the publications is to remind young readers of the strong community spirit of New Orleans and to restore some musical traditions in the black areas of the South. *A Storm Called Katrina* (2011), written by Myron Uhlberg and published on the sixth anniversary of the storm, is the story of a ten-year-old black boy, Louis Daniel, whose family had to leave their New Orleans home due to the hurricane. The family try to save some of their belongings, but the boy's musical instrument, the brass cornet, seems to be the most important thing. Although the verbal narrative does not mention this, most of the illustrations depict the boy holding his instrument. First we see the cornet in his bedroom and on the kitchen table as the family are observing the oncoming storm. Once they decide to leave their place, the boy grabs the instrument and says: "I hugged my brass cornet close to my chest. I always feel better having it nearby" (Uhlberg, unpagged). The following pages of the book show Louis Daniel together with his parents and neighbors trying to find a rescue place in the Superdome. Whether the boy is wading through the water or floating on a piece of wood, the cornet is always on his lap, easily discernible due to its shiny yellow color. Having found a place in the Superdome, the family experience lots of difficulties, ranging from lack of food and water to arguments with other victims of the storm. One day Louis's father gets lost in the crowd but the boy has an idea how to find him. He takes his cornet and runs to the middle of the stadium to play "Home, Sweet Home." The sound of his music finds Louis's father, and the family are all together again.

The first-person narrative told from the perspective of the boy is what distinguishes the book from many other children's titles on Hurricane Katrina. The child's voice neutralizes the tragedy by instilling hope in many young readers that life can return to its normal state even after such tragedies as Katrina. The musical instrument is an important element of the story. It is like a living character which has a role to play. It gives the family comfort and a sense of continuity. They left their home in the face of the storm unified and accompanied with the boy's musical instrument – so too do they return.

Published six years after the tragedy and in the midst of public debate on the future of New Orleans, Uhlberg's book is a call for action to help the town's citizens return to their place and continue the long-lasting musical tradition of jazz playing. In his numerous interviews, the author repeatedly claims that southern music will survive as long as African Americans can make a living in such places as New Orleans. As Tom Piazza notes in his book *Why New Orleans Matters*, "[The people] spun a culture out of their lives – a music, a cuisine, a sense of life – that has been recognized around the world as a transforming spiritual force. Out of those pitifully small incomes and



crumbling houses, and hard, long days and nights of work came a staggering Yes, an affirmation of life – their lives, Life Itself – in defiance of a world that told them in as many ways as it could find that they were...dispensable” (Piazza 154–55).

### Spatial Means of Celebration

In his social study on the historical district of Tremé, Michael Crutcher writes that African Americans have always used “spatial means such as parades” to celebrate their culture and to resist (Crutcher xi). In New Orleans black neighborhoods parading has a special meaning as it expresses the spirit of the community. It is connected with the jazz funeral tradition, which involves music parades to and from the cemetery. The “second-line” parading perfectly reflects the people’s solidarity. The second line of the parade is made by the district’s residents who follow the first liners, usually comprised of family members and a brass band. Thus, by joining in the celebration, the second-liners sympathize with their neighbors and support them in their mourning procession. As Crutcher observes, “Unlike the Main Street parade ... a second line winds through the streets of residential neighborhoods and particularly of black neighborhoods. Also unlike the typical parade, there is no separation between the parade and the audience. The audience is part of the parade, moving along with it as people dance to the music of the brass band” (Crutcher 16).

The authors of children’s books build some of their stories on this tradition. They emphasize the fact that the parades stopped due to the natural disaster, but soon after the hurricane people were collectively returning home together with the local bands. *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans* (2015), written by Phil Bildner and illustrated by John Para, depicts the ritual of parades just before and after Hurricane Katrina. It is the true story of a street sweeper, Cornelius Washington, who is exceptionally devoted to his work. Bildner was inspired to write the story after reading Katy Reckdahl’s article (2007) about this extraordinary man in *The Times-Picayune*. Cornelius embodies the spirit of New Orleans, which is marked with people’s attachment to music as well as their deep sense of belonging to the local community. The verbal narrative is rather scarce but the illustrations add more details by means of colors, symbols and the layout of the pages.

The first few pages depict New Orleans streets before Hurricane Katrina and the main character, Cornelius, who seems to do the same job every day – cleaning the streets, collecting rubbish and greeting the same people along his way. The illustrations are filled with exuberant colors indicating the positive atmosphere of the place. Although one can see typical New Orleans buildings, with large windows and balconies decorated with flowers and beads, it is not the architecture that creates the mood of the story but all the people in the streets. Cornelius, despite his low-status profession, occupies the central place in most of the illustrations. In some of them he looks like a giant, indicative of the illustrator’s intention to present him as a larger-than-life persona. While doing his everyday duties, Cornelius is incessantly involved in some musical activities. He communicates with the hooter’s driver by means of such rhythmic sounds as “Woo! Woo! Wooooo! / Rat-a-tat-TAT! / Hootie Hoo!” (Bildner, unpagd). He dances while collecting garbage bags and playing with

the bin covers. One illustration reflects the rhythm of Cornelius's work. It shows the man in several different positions as he holds garbage bags and dances with them along the curb of the pavement. The accompanying text is written in a swirling line, which is supposed to reflect the rhythm as well: "Cornelius front flipped to the curb / and flung the bags over his head / behind his back, between his legs / into the truck." The next page shows the enormous figure of Cornelius in the middle of the street playing the metal tops, as well as several smaller figures behind him who are playing musical instruments. The text on the double-page spread reads: "He clapped the covers like cymbals and / twirled the tins like tops. Whizzing and / spinning back and forth across the street." As other people join Cornelius, the street comes to resemble a parade. The book's author uses specific vocabulary to convey the spirit of those parades:

The old ladies whistled and whirled.  
The old men hooted and hollered.  
The barbers, bead twirlers, and  
beignet bakers bounded behind  
the one-man parade.

He even describes the people's movements with the names of specific dances: "Tango-ing ...Samba-ing ... Rumba-ing ...Cha-cha-ing ..."

This friendly atmosphere changes gradually with the text anticipating the oncoming hurricane. The illustrations are no longer so vivid and colorful. They are dominated by the blue hues of water as well as the grayish and brownish shades of garbage piled in the center of the town. Once the hurricane arrives, Cornelius is overwhelmed with his street work but his initiative and determination to restore the city encourages hundreds of volunteers to help him. There is a symbolic image which shows the man's determination and hope that the town will be restored, both in its physical and spiritual form. In the picture we can see the face of Cornelius under the intense sun rays which strongly contrast with the view of the devastated city. Additionally, the man is looking at a flying bird which is carrying a little green branch, a symbol of hope and peace. The following illustrations show the same people who were dancing with Cornelius on the previous pages. Now they are all cleaning the streets of New Orleans. Then they are joined by thousands of volunteers coming to help restore the town, whom the author calls "A flood of humanity." The last two illustrations portray a fine street in the town with people of different races playing instruments and dancing in front of their homes. The accompanying text is a reflection on the significance of such involved people as Cornelius:

And the great city rose again.  
Marvelous Cornelius,  
he passed on.  
But as for his spirit,  
That's part of New Orleans,  
New Orleans forever after.

In his Author's Note, Bildner further explains Cornelius's contribution to the city's restoration: "On so many levels, Cornelius symbolizes what the city of New Orleans is all about – the energy, the spirit, the magic, the people."

The spirit of New Orleans is finally conveyed by means of several small images on the endpapers. Among others, there is a lily flower, which is a controversial symbol as it indicates the French rule of New Orleans. Nowadays, the city is a multicultural place with a diverse culture created by Europeans, Africans and the mixed race called Creole people. As Crutcher observes, the city "has never been totally black, but since the first half of the twentieth century, blackness has characterized the neighborhood" (5). The American flag, among other images, suggests that the place belongs to all Americans, and it is as diverse as the whole country. The most specific symbols reflecting the spirit of New Orleans are the musical instruments as well as masks and hats – the typical attire used by paraders.

Although *Marvelous Cornelius* focuses on the popular symbols of the town, it is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the spirit of New Orleans as it stresses the individual and collective power of the people. Cornelius is an ordinary man who expresses his love of the city by means of simple gestures and everyday activities. Moreover, he is able to inspire people from the historical French Quarter not to leave the town but rebuild it and restore its unique atmosphere. The one-person parade which he begins turns into a "flood of humanity" as other people join the old tradition of street parading.

### Conclusion

All of the discussed children's books educate young readers about the distinct black culture, which, according to many scholars, is disappearing in some parts of New Orleans. McKernan and Mulcahy write about the destruction of the local culture due to Hurricane Katrina, which they call "a cultural Chernobyl" (218). They believe New Orleans culture is "a way of life," which cannot be maintained if local communities stop participating in it. Another danger to the local culture is gentrification of the city. There is an influx of new residents who try by legal means to change the atmosphere of some neighborhoods by prohibiting late-night music or unsanctioned parading (Crutcher 5). The cultural survival of post-Katrina New Orleans is the theme of many academic studies. All of them outline the risks of the loss of the cultural memory and communicate new visions of the city, which are usually negative. The approach of children's authors differs from the popular concept of "culturecide" promoted by many contemporary sociologists and cultural geographers (McKernan and Mulcahy 218). By showing the strong traditions of the place, children's books establish New Orleans' cultural significance, especially the French Quarter and Tremé. They pay homage to the city's residents and the ways they create this unique culture, while seeking to highlight how Hurricane Katrina transformed the cultural image of New Orleans. Many authors maintain that the natural disaster made people realize the importance and impact of New Orleans traditions on the culture of the whole country. The topic has reached children's literature due to the belief that the youngest generation must be educated about the roots of African American culture so that its spirit does not fade away.

The focus of the stories on New Orleans communal life and its popular culture might exclude them from standard literary criticism. However, drawing on earlier cultural products is not mere imitation. What matters is how these concepts are identified and combined. All of the selected titles are packed with the local color of the town by means of verbal and visual narrative. Musical rhythms and people's performances inform most of the works. The significance of those traditions and rituals in modern times would not be exhibited if they were not placed in the new social context, which is the post-Katrina period in most of the books. As the city has been deserted by many of its locals, its popular culture has changed and gained new significance. The authors of children's books evoke some of its rituals with nostalgia and sentimentality. They also stress the fact that jazz music or street parading gives them a sense of belonging, not always to the place itself but the people of the place, the New Orleans local community. Unlike the sociological studies which point to the end of New Orleans spirit, children's authors perceive the culture as a resource which regenerates the city after the hurricane or the more recent transformations caused by gentrification (Watts and Porter 21). They convey the belief that the old New Orleans culture as well as its new products will resist any attempts to delete it from the cultural map of the U.S. Due to the growing interest of literary scholars in American children's literature, the books increase the visibility of New Orleans culture in the academy, which tends to accept children's picture books as canonical literary works. Like music, which has always been regarded as a "barometer of the city's recovery" (Watts and Porter 23), children's books celebrating the New Orleans way of life are a great hope for the city's cultural return.

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## **PART FOUR**

### **SOUTHERN TENSIONS AND CONTRASTS**





Joseph Kuhn

**Bataille in the South:  
James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*  
and Erskine Caldwell's Depression Fiction**

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**Abstract:** This article tries to show how James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Erskine Caldwell in his fiction from the Depression years – especially the little-known novella, *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* (1930) – used a discourse of the sacred to represent the strange otherness of the Depression South. They particularly drew on the “left hand sacred” (of taboo, repulsiveness and sacrifice) as distinct from the “right hand sacred” found in institutional religion. The article argues that a theoretical understanding of Agee and Caldwell’s use of the sacred may be provided by Georges Bataille. It seems particularly appropriate to invoke Bataille since he was concerned with the political elements of the sacred and sought to mobilize these elements during the 1930s when liberal democracy was thought by many leftist writers on both sides of the Atlantic to have failed. Bataille provides a productive analogue to the two southerners, who shared this perception of liberal democracy, because he tried to articulate a radical path in this decade that was not Marxist. Agee and Caldwell, although notionally Communist, were dissatisfied with Marxism because they saw it as another version of a utilitarian or restricted economy. They looked instead to the sacred as a discourse of transgression – a discourse that was rooted in what Bataille called a general economy or the deeper organization of collective life around ecology and the gift.

**Keywords:** the sacred, transgression, heterology, southern agriculture in literature, the Depression.

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A region is more than a geographic or political division: it also is a spatial fantasy, a fantasy produced by certain figurative practices that arise within a historical context. A fundamental figure for the American South of the 1920s and 1930s, notably found in William Faulkner (in such works as “The Tall Men” [1941]) and the Nashville Agrarians, was that of the restorative earth and of its natural wealth. But a fundamental problem with this conservative figure of the earth was that by the time of the Depression years of the 1930s, which struck cotton agriculture in particular, it had become counter-historical and even utopian. In response to this belated Jeffersonianism of so many of the major figures of the Southern Renaissance, a minority of southerners on the political left developed a more subversive variety of writing about the earth and tried to find radical literary forms to respond to the devastation of agricultural depression. James Agee’s study *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men* (1941) (hereafter shortened to *Praise*) and Erskine Caldwell’s fiction, notably *Tobacco Road* (1932), were harsh human documents that focused on white cotton tenants (not the small farmers favoured by the Agrarians) and on their impoverished place in the debt structure of southern agriculture. The political point of view informing these works of Agee and Caldwell was close to Communism: indeed Agee called himself “a Communist by sympathy and conviction” and Caldwell advocated a collectivization of agriculture by the state (Agee, *Praise* 249; Caldwell, *Tenant* 29). Yet the forays of these two writers into a surrealist aesthetic (automatic writing, use of the illogic of dreams in narrative) is far

from the proletarian realism favored by such northern literary radicals as Mike Gold and magazines like *The New Masses*.<sup>1</sup> One could go further and argue that *Praise* and *Tobacco Road* reach beyond the narrow political categories of dissent available in the America of the 1930s and draw on the transgressive energies of the sacred as described by Georges Bataille, the renegade surrealist and founder of the College of Sociology. For Bataille, the sacred was a heterological structure that defined itself in opposition to the profane (the utilitarian or servile: the political meaning is uppermost for Bataille in the 1930s). It is unlikely that either Agee or Caldwell read Bataille, whose work went virtually untranslated into English in the interwar years. But, arguably, the theories of Bataille concerning transgression, sovereignty, and the need for wasteful expenditure are applicable to Agee and Caldwell, particularly when one considers that Bataille's theories were explicitly formulated as political responses within the context of the failed democracies of the 1930s and that this context is implicit in the writings of Agee and Caldwell.<sup>2</sup> The intention of this article is to examine these two radical authors of the southern earth for their transgressive expression of an "other" south, defining "other" as a heterogeneity that is pitted against the homogeneous. By homogeneous is meant all varieties of the rational, scarcity-based economy possible in the 1930s South: plantation agriculture and its post-bellum offshoot, the sharecropping system; New Deal welfarism; Communist state planning; and the Jeffersonian agrarianism of the Nashville school.

One potential confusion should be cleared up, particularly since some southern writers such as Allen Tate and Flannery O'Connor have said that twentieth-century southern writing rests on an implicit foundation of religious orthodoxy. For Bataille,

1 Agee's preoccupation with surrealism – for example his experiments with automatic writing – has been studied by Hugh Davis (51-72). A pre-publication extract from *Praise* ("Colon") appeared in James Laughlin's anthology *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 1940, a journal intended to be "an exhibition gallery for new trends and techniques" (Laughlin xiii), especially those of the European avant-garde, and which included nearly two hundred pages of "A Surrealist Anthology" and a long essay on surrealism by Kenneth Burke. Both Davis (93) and Leigh Anne Duck ("Arts" 293, 299) discuss Agee's similarity to Bataille, although neither mentions the sacred as the central concept that they hold in common. Caldwell was likened by Kenneth Burke to the Surrealists in an article on Caldwell in 1937. The definitions of surrealism in this article are further developed in Burke's 1940 essay on surrealism ("perspective by incongruity," the nonlogic of dreams, "gargoyle-thinking") (Burke, "Surrealism" 575). As Chris Vials points out, the use of "the magical" and of allegorical characters in Caldwell's fiction contrasts with the dialectical naturalism sponsored by most proletarian novelists of the 1930s (Vials 82-83).

2 Georges Bataille was rarely published or discussed in English in Agee's lifetime. One exception is a translation of "The Sacred Conspiracy" by Georges Duthuit in Eugene Jolas's 1941 yearbook, *Vertical: A Yearbook for Romantic-Mystic Ascensions*, a work that Agee might conceivably have read since he was intrigued by the surrealistic importations appearing on the New York artistic scene. Another exception was Bataille's "On Hiroshima" published in Dwight Macdonald's journal *Politics* (July-August 1947, 147-150), an essay on the existential implications of the Bomb that had similarities to Agee's famous *Time* article of August 1945 on this subject. Agee was most probably aware of Bataille's "Le Souverain," a major theoretical exposition of the rebellious sovereign self, because it appeared in the same volume of *Botteghe Oscure*, the Rome-based international journal, as did Agee's short animal fable of the Holocaust, "A Mother's Tale" (1953, volume 9). But it seems that neither Agee nor Caldwell ever mention Bataille in their published writings.

the sacred is different from the religious sense of the word affirmed by Tate and others in that Bataille's definition of the sacred rejects the transcendence of orthodox Christianity and derives from the most material of materialisms, or what Bataille called base materialism. The sacred for Bataille is an energy latent within the collective material body and is released in such total impulses as disgust, the erotic, laughter and madness. These can produce a social "effervescence" (to use Emile Durkheim's term [407]) that breaches the psychological controls of the utilitarian society and its results may be revolution, festival, or inner experience (a meditative overcoming of the everyday ipseity of the self). Both Agee and Caldwell show the closeness of their poor whites to an immanent force that permeates base matter: a force that holds them in what is both a destructive and regenerative relation to southern soil. The presence of this sacred force in these writings is the reason why Kenneth Burke refers to a "balked religiosity" in Caldwell's work and why Agee so assiduously seeks to find evidence of "human divinity" in the cotton tenants (Burke *Philosophy* 351; Agee *Praise* xiv). Despite the numerous differences of idiom and cultural context between Bataille's dense philosophical construction of an atheology and the more experiential focus of the two southerners, it is evident that all three writers converge in their marked preoccupation with the sacred in a secular age. For them the sacred, however, does not mean the anachronistic beliefs of a primitive society but the expression, in modern life, of intense collective forms of the social body.

For these writers, therefore, it is the political aspect of the sacred that is significant. The most notorious scene in Caldwell's *oeuvre*, the scene from *God's Little Acre* (1933) where the striking loom-worker Will Thompson strips the clothes off his brother-in-law's wife Griselda and tears them into pieces of lint, can be read as a scene of Bataillean transgression. Will's destruction of a machine-made object – its reversal from commodity into raw material – is both wasteful expenditure and, at the same time, an assertion of proletarian virility. Will goes on to have sex with the willing Griselda, an erotic transgression that on the next day carries over into a political one when Will leads the strikers in a takeover of the mill (Will's throwing his ripped up shirt out of the factory window and "turn[ing] on the power" are also acts of proletarian virility [Caldwell *God's* 245]). Ty Ty Walden, the impoverished farmer who is Caldwell's spokesman on religious matters in the novel, does not hesitate to ascribe Will's extramarital sexual cravings to "the God inside of a body," the interior space of transgression that is its own sacred sanctification (Caldwell, *God's* 269).

One could argue that in the Will-Griselda scene the Bataillean act of transgression has been softened and compromised by the demands of a mass readership. Certainly most recent critics of Caldwell's work have expressed unease with his voyeuristic manipulation of the stereotypes of male desire found in the popular fiction of the 1930s (for example, Vials 85). But in an early experimental novel by Erskine Caldwell, *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* (henceforth *Kent*), a novel written at the turn of the 1930s, the Bataillean sacred stands out with sharper definition, and the "God inside" is not identified with Will's male hedonism but with the anguish of self-sacrifice. In his apprenticeship phase in the late 1920s Caldwell was searching for a "new ground" of modernist form and he published *Kent* from 1929 to 1931 in two avant-garde American publications: the yearbook *New American Caravan* (the first installment) and the

little magazine *Pagany* (the last two installments) (Caldwell, *Conversations* 283). The novel, with its present title, subsequently appeared in the short story collection *American Earth* (1931) and then as a separate short novel in 1936.<sup>3</sup> It is a first-person account of a transient who, after a troubled childhood as the son of a clergyman, wanders across a scarred South, moving from job to job as farm laborer, as railroad builder or as restaurant worker. In the process he is the casual witness of murder, lynching, fatal accidents, and prostitution. After an attempt to return to his parents' house, only to find they have disappeared, and after a brief liaison with an elusive woman-muse who then dies, he is left with a final sense of abandonment: "I knew I would always be alone in the world" (Caldwell, *Kent* 57).

The form mirrors this peripatetic story: instead of telling a connected narrative, it is divided into three chapters of brief, numbered fragments, each containing a small episode or description (an "*imagistic concatenation*" in Kenneth Burke's description of the surrealist text [Burke, "Surrealism," 565]).<sup>4</sup> This is an appropriate form for a narrative in which the heterogeneous part breaks off and revolts against the whole (Burke calls this Caldwell's "cult of incongruity" or "his deft way of putting the wrong things together" and he finds evidence for it even in Caldwell's supposedly naturalistic works, which he prefers to call works of "magic" [Burke *Philosophy* 352, 355, 358]). Kent's life is made up of gratuitous events that appear and pass: they can be sudden incursions of violence (for example, the murder of the construction camp prostitute for her money) or little epiphanies of what Burke calls "purest poetry" ("Once the sun was so hot a bird came down and walked beside me in my shadow") or micro-stories of the ordinary ("A man walked in a restaurant through the front door and ate all he wanted to eat") or even such super-real happenings as Kent's observation of a man leaping to the moon from a hilltop (Burke *Philosophy* 351; Caldwell *Kent* 25, 33). Overall the work is one long staging of the loss of the self. It presents Kent's life as an act of "sacrilege," a desecration that is heightened by his being the son of a clergyman. The accidents that befall Kent – for example, in his childhood he spills hot sausage grease onto himself, which burns "deep red holes" in his flesh, and in his early adulthood he is left with "a scar on [his] eyes" by a glimpse of the muse-woman, Florence – all seem like the acts of auto-mutilation that Bataille noted in his essay on Vincent van Gogh: "the necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself *out of oneself*" (Bataille, *Visions* 67; Caldwell, *Kent* 8, 42). In other words, Kent turns sacrifice, that supreme act of non-productive expenditure in Bataille's scheme of the sacred, on himself and in so doing breaks open the homogeneity of the self, its function as a thing in a servile

3 The novel is seen by Guy Owen as Caldwell's "strangest, and in some ways, most original book" (46) while Sylvia Jenkins Warner says it "deserves a larger audience" (31). Despite these recommendations of several decades ago, the novel remains largely undiscussed in southern literary studies.

4 Burke's "*imagistic concatenation*" might be compared with Rodolphe Gasché's comment on "phantasm" in Bataille's fiction. "Phantasm," says Gasché, depends on the deliberate materialization and desublimation of the poetic image; such images are "divided and separated from each other" and do not add up to a unity that can be grasped as an integrative concept or as beauty (Gasché 150). This process of katabolic fracturing Gasché calls "sacrilege" (157), a term clearly applicable to *Kent*.

economy.<sup>5</sup> Kent welcomes his torment and says that if his "soul" were not torn apart by this "painful hunger" it would die "from lack of food" (Caldwell, *Kent* 43).

But, says Kent, his land – the South – is also a "sacrilege." It is the unhallowed ground from which "throwaway bodies" – often black bodies – emerge and indifferently return (Yaeger 15). In a way that is unmatched in a literary work published by a white southerner in 1930 there is a frank admission of the sadism of the southern racial order: for example, Kent witnesses some men lynch a black boy and take body parts for souvenirs (this custom had been described in newspaper accounts of lynchings, but probably not in literary writings before), then later observes the sexual abuse of black women workers by a southern landowner who goes back to the times of slavery by putting them in chains (when the landowner burns one woman with a hot poker, Kent and a black worker shoot him). Caldwell was that relatively rare white writer in the interwar South: an absolute dissenter from all forms of Jim Crow. In a later novel, *Trouble in July* (1940), he expanded the brief oneiric horror of the lynching in *Kent* into a perceptive psycho-social analysis of the white supremacist mob and its emotional manipulations of criminal "evidence" (at the end of the novel this mob would rather not face having to understand the confession of the white woman, who admits that she told a lie about the black youth whom they have just lynched, and they kill her as well).<sup>6</sup>

So Kent's earth longings in the narrative – his need to feel "part of the roots that lived" – are longings for what is a criminal earth (Caldwell, *Kent* 48).<sup>7</sup> The toxic redness of this soil, constantly emphasized by Caldwell in *Kent*, is a historical index of the agricultural depression in the late 1920s and 1930s: the red "gashes" point to over-cultivation of cotton as a single cash crop.<sup>8</sup> In the opening sentences of the narrative Kent's birth during a downpour of rain becomes a Bataillean tear in the order of being: "Rainwater had soaked the red earth so that the world might bleed to death" (Caldwell, *Kent* 7). This contagious red quickly spreads to the sun and to fire, those other symbols of non-productive expenditure in Bataille's writing. Kent's childhood home is burnt in a "red" bush fire; and he is rescued and deposited in "red mud" while his dog is burnt alive (Caldwell, *Kent* 11). Self-mutilation and the energy of the sun are conjoined at the end of the first section when it is the sun that bites the narrator's "eyeballs" and his blood "drips over all over the world" (Caldwell, *Kent* 21).<sup>9</sup>

5 Kent, however, is not some passive Christ-child like Faulkner's Benjy: he himself murders workers at the behest of his employers (a black worker who falls ill; an ineffectual fortune teller at a circus) and he has illegitimate children of whom he loses track. Such behavior, however, can be seen as part of his project of auto-destruction.

6 Erskine Caldwell, *Trouble in July* [1940] (Savannah: Beehive P, 1977).

7 For Bataille, the earth is intrinsically criminal since its constituent of base matter "can only be defined as the *nonlogical difference* that represents in the relation to the *economy* of the universe what crime represents in relation to the law" (Bataille, *Visions* 129).

8 The sociologists Arthur Raper and Ira de A. Reid in *Sharecroppers All* (1941) see the "red gashes" in southern agricultural land as an ecological sickness that mirrors that of a stultified and segregated social order (Raper and Reid 220).

9 In "Rotten Sun" Bataille presents the sun as a maddening, excremental excess much like "a mental ejaculation, foam on the lips, and an epileptic crisis" (Bataille, *Visions* 57). The sun, for both Bataille and the southerners, is the type both of crippling loss (as in Kent's predator sun) and of a

The sacrilegious South is never far below the sociological surface of James Agee's *Praise*. Perhaps when Agee first started on his project in the summer of 1936 he wanted to produce a more scientific account of the tenants of the kind associated with New Deal ethnography and with the fact-collecting work of such federal agencies as the Farm Security Administration. But Agee came to see this point of view as very limited and he mocks its representatives in *Praise* as those who support "well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South" (Agee, *Praise* 14).

The reason for his passionate dissent from such "liberal efforts" is that Agee discovered that the enormity of the condition of the tenants was so overwhelming that it turned round and devastated the whole presumption of a rational economy. This makes it "obscene" for outsiders, including himself, to "pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings" (Agee, *Praise* 7). What cuts off the three tenant families of Alabama that Agee describes – the Gudgers, the Woods, and the Ricketts – is a force field of taboo and abjection that attaches itself to poverty and which, following the ancient Latin sense of *sacer* (that which must be kept separate), can be described as the antipathetic domain of the sacred. For Agee, one cannot report on these southern poor whites in a calm, neutral manner. In his "Preamble" to *Praise* he sets out what is essentially a Bataillean method of transgressive writing for his book: he wants to write in a way that is "beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life" (Agee, *Praise* 16). Therefore he has to draw on every resource to scandalize the liberal reader, to do the equivalent of jamming this reader's ear against a gramophone playing a Beethoven symphony: "You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it" (Agee, *Praise* 16).

Agee uses various strategies to induce this hurt. One is that he mediates his account through a martyr-figure of a narrator, who goes out of his way to wound himself in dramatic mimesis of the tenants' plight (for example, he seemingly enjoys being eaten by bed bugs at the Gudgers). But Agee's main strategy is to show how the three families are ravaged by what Durkheimian sociology had called "the left hand sacred." Early Durkheimians distinguished between "the right hand sacred" (official, hierarchical) and the "left hand sacred" (repulsive, transgressive); Bataille, taking up his legacy in a renegade way, became a partisan of the latter category. Agee certainly has moments when he sees the tenants as the angels or priests of the right hand sacred, but within this apparently Catholic piety the transgressive elements of the left hand version are barely concealed. The proximity is there to see, for example, when Agee, staying with the Gudgers overnight, notices how the family Bible has a cold smell of excrement. He also records, for example, how the clothes and bodies of the Ricketts family are "insanely ... dirty" and how the tenants' food seems "unclean, sticky, and sallow with some sort of disease," causing "a quiet little fight ... on your palate and in the pit of your stomach" (Agee, *Praise* 197, 416). He observes the surrealist menace of the domestic objects that the Gudgers hoard in their cupboards, such as the chipped china dolls, or of the detritus that collects under their home, such as the "bone button, its two eyes torn as one" (with its Bataillean frisson of enucleation) (Agee, *Praise* 147). The left hand sacred also permeates the nauseating labor of cotton farming: for example,

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glorious expenditure of energy. What appears, to use Bataille's terms, to be self-destructive within a restricted economy can be transformed into a generative force within a general economy.



the cotton, when it is ripe, "vomit[s]" forth into white balls, and Agee observes that the mules are so crushed beneath "hopeless work" that they have a "Mongolian look" that derives, according to Agee, from being "part insane" (Agee, *Praise* 336, 212, 216). There is also an oft-repeated emphasis on the wounded bodies of the tenants (for Bataille, the wound is a mode of communication between individuals that opens each person up to the other as part of a collective of emptied out selves). Wounds, dirt, rags, and excrement are all variations of what Bataille called the "formless," or the actual being of the object when considered outside of the "mathematical frock coat" of form imposed by "philosophy" (Bataille, *Visions* 31). When seen from the perspective of base, rather than idealistic, materialism all objects appear not as stable forms but as something like "a spider or spit" (Bataille, *Visions* 31). Agee even wants to do away with the very representational structure of writing so as to be able to merge with such "formless" objects. In "Preamble" he notoriously says that he wishes he could do no writing at all but simply present "fragments of cloth ... lumps of earth ... phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement ... A piece of the body torn out by the roots" (Agee, *Praise* 13). Such a wish is much closer to Bataille's materialistic, deviant surrealism than the dream surrealism of the movement's founder, André Breton, whose vision was rooted in romantic idealism. Agee indeed presents an anti-aesthetic, claiming that it is the role of literature to describe "the cruel radiance of what is" and not to imagine other worlds, and he asks of the reader, "Above all else ... don't think of it as Art" (Agee *Praise* 11, 15). "Art" is another way of assimilating the absolute singularity of the tenants and their manifestation of "the cruel radiance of what is" into a universal or homogeneous standard of beauty and thereby achieving "the emasculation of acceptance" amongst his readership (Agee, *Praise* 13).

The question is: why, for Agee and Caldwell, should it be the South, and particularly the agricultural South, that is associated with the sacred? A likely explanation is that the otherness of the South, its essential difference from the rest of the nation, can be readily mapped onto the differential structure of the sacred. The sacred, for Bataille and the College of Sociology, is a relation of difference, one that is solely constituted by its opposition to that which is profane and normative. The South has historically been perceived as an internal other, a backward region within a nation of liberal modernity (the interwar South was the "nation's region," according to Leigh Anne Duck, or an "internal orientalism" according to David R. Jansson). The Depression of the 1930s sharpened this contrast, particularly since the New Deal took the South as, in President Roosevelt's expression of 1938, the nation's "No. 1 economic problem" (quoted in Leuchtenburg 104). In other words, the poor whites were a heterogeneous class within a heterogeneous region – they were southern heterogeneity doubled. The land on which the tenants lived seemed located in a different time and space. Duck argues that "Caldwell was centrally concerned with the social and characterological effects of uneven development – the radical geographic divergences within the process of U.S. modernization" and that this "uneven development" was projected as a spatial and temporal estrangement onto "regional grotesques" such as the Lester family (Duck, *Region* 86, 87). Agee's method of appraising the non-synchrony of the agricultural south was undoubtedly more sophisticated than Caldwell's. He opens out the life of three tenant families from Alabama in all its micro-logical predicament and gives a



sense of the insoluble, tragic depths of poverty. This poverty seems to have its origin outside the political reach of any “cure” and its taint is biological in nature, reaching down into the eugenic source of broken being as it rises from the early sea-bed of life (Agee, *Praise* 207).

There is a well-established critical lexicon for the literary expression of the otherness of the South: the grotesque, the southern gothic, the freak, the abject (in Julia Kristeva’s sense). But in all of these terms the historical configuration of otherness tends to get deflected into formal or psychoanalytical terms. Such terms turn the heterology of the South into a more limited expression of a regional eccentricity (for example, in the antebellum period the heterology of the poor white was often projected onto distorted, over-materialized bodies by the southwestern humorists) or into a regrettable break in the psychogenesis of the subject – the underlying critical assumption being that southern subjects are particularly broken and open to abjection in this regard. Patricia Yaeger, however, rightly argues that the presence of the southern grotesque or of an accent on “monstrosity” in southern literary writings “suggests a poverty within southern culture’s political idiom – an idiom that is not enriched by change but made hysterical” and this implies a congealed gaze on the part of writers and critics that fixes on extreme formal schematizations (Yaeger 7). This “hysterical” history in the representation of the poor white is why Agee is morally averse to the grotesque as a way of depicting this class in *Praise*. In contrast to this physiognomic use of the grotesque, the force of the sacred in Agee or Caldwell (at least in *Kent*) is a mode of intensifying the heterogeneous part so as to bring out its subversive and material power.

Despite the fact that Georges Bataille is recognized as the major twentieth-century theorist of the heterological, his work is hardly ever cited in critical commentary on southern literature.<sup>10</sup> Yet Bataille is clearly relevant in locating such southern critical terms as the abject within a larger political and transatlantic context. Such a context is particularly applicable to the southern literature of the cotton tenant because it was the textile industry that connected the southern proletariat to precarious global markets, markets that in the 1930s were driving the price of cotton down. This is Agee’s emphasis: “[T]he economic source” of the tenants’ plight “is nothing so limited

10 For Bataille, who coined the concept of the abject in 1934, abjection is the exclusion of one class by another dominant class, which henceforth considers the abjected class as convertible with dirt. His scheme of abjection does not have any reference to the psychoanalytic drama of maternal absorption found in the adoption of his work by Kristeva, an adoption which has been seized upon by critics of southern literature without going back to Bataille as source (for the question of Kristeva’s changes to Bataille see Kristeva and Lotringer). Bataille’s philosophy of base materiality seems too sharply political for southern studies, even if these do often focus on the southern body and on trash phenomena. Bataille is even absent from Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (2000), a ground-breaking study that directed attention to the role of “dirt” in southern fiction as a marker of social exclusion in the region (Yaeger prefers to invoke Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva, probably more limited guides when considering dirt as the “stuff of rebellion” than Bataille [Yaeger 265, 80]). Jay Watson’s *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2012) aligns the study of the Southern Renaissance with the new materialisms of recent critical thought, a necessary counterbalance to a long critical preoccupation with the “mind” of the South, but it also makes no reference to Bataille.

as the tenant system but is the whole world-system of which tenantry is one modification" (Agee, *Praise* 207-208).

Bataille's relevance to the literature of southern transgression can be seen, notably, in his contribution to the concept of "bare life," a concept which emerged after the First World War in such writers as Walter Benjamin.<sup>11</sup> It specified a new kind of biopolitical vulnerability of the body on the part of some European peoples of the interwar years, particularly stateless peoples who were not offered the legal protection of citizenship. Agee was sensitive to the transatlantic implications of this figure of exposure. Writing notes for *Praise* at the beginning of the Second World War, he observed that every second of the tenants' lives "contain[ed] a dreadfulness to equal the whole of war" and his way of presenting the families as under siege from a militarized nature serves to make the South a home front in an international conflict (Agee, *Rediscovered* 149). Caldwell made an analogous point in a tract, *Tenant Farmer* (1936), when he said that in parts of the Depression South "human existence has reached its lowest depths" (Caldwell, *Tenant* 3). The sacrificial nature of this "bare life" lies behind Agee's frequent use of the Crucifixion to evoke the lives of his tenants: he says, for example, that "those three hours upon the cross are but a noble and too trivial an emblem" for their endurance (Agee, *Praise* 100). Here the way that Bataille brings the concept of sacrifice into the center of thinking about modernity is relevant. For "bare life" would be the result of the modernization of the concept of sacrifice within a secular age: where there is no theological return on the investment of sacrifice, the sacrificial act turns in on the self and renders it "an open wound, an *exposure*" – a life as continuous sacrifice without returns (Ffrench 75).

All this does not make Agee and Caldwell's South a kind of bleak cul-de-sac. The left hand sacred can become a positive force. A social repression or taboo is an ambivalent juncture in which the energy of repression can become an energy of contagion. Hence these two authors, in addition to their emphasis on the tragic consequences of exposure of the body, also present the Dionysian aspects of sacred expenditure. Agee sees in the damaged tenants the reversible principle of joy – and this is in keeping with Bataille's statement "I teach the art of turning anguish into delight" (Bataille, *Inner* 35). In *Praise* one manifestation of this sacred effervescence is as a solar principle, since the sun is a centre of energy that expends itself without return. Thus George Gudger's overalls are turned by backbreaking labor into a reflective fabric that is "as intricate and fragile, and as deeply in honor of the reigning sun, as the feather mantle of a Toltec prince" (Agee, *Praise* 268). At the conclusion of the book Agee has a final reference to the sleeping child, Ellen Woods, her umbilical "circle" exposed and issuing "a snoring silence of flame" that "shall at length outshine the sun" (Agee, *Praise* 442). It is in allegiance to this immanent religion of the sun as excess that Agee calls on William Blake as an "unpaid agitator" and on his principle that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" (Agee, *Praise* xxii, 458).

This Dionysianism of the earth is also present in Caldwell. Of course the Dionysian might not be immediately apparent in a family like the Lesters in *Tobacco Road*. They are so shiftless and numbed with repetitive habit as to have a virtually

11 The term "bare life" is explored in its interwar manifestations in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

pathological relationship with the real: this is caught in Jeeter's fruitless attempts to sell worthless blackjack wood or the unregarded way the grandmother is accidentally run over by Bessie's car and left to die. In such scenes Caldwell seems to be derisively watching his characters inch toward the condition of trash objects, like the unsold wood that is eventually burnt by Jeeter in the ditch. But this near psychotic relationship to the real suddenly swings round in the Lesters' favor, and the joke is on the knowing reader, if that real is seen as utilitarian or servile and therefore worthy of rejection. In this light Jeeter Lester's instinctive clinging to the land is not only a wasteful attachment to a pre-modern economy, but also a sort of Dionysian observance in a collective religion of the earth. Jeeter's own accidental immolation in a scrub-clearing fire at the end of the novel seems like an assimilation to this cyclical earth and one where fire and sun have played mediator. As Lov Bensey says in a simple eulogy to the doggedness of Jeeter, his father in law, in trying to raise a crop: Jeeter "was a man who liked to grow things in the ground" (Caldwell, *Tobacco* 169). Caldwell and Agee are attuned not only to the tenants' inefficiencies within a rational economy but to an ecological economy based on surplus and gift. In this they are in keeping with Bataille, whom as Jürgen Habermas says, "opposes to this particular scarcity-based viewpoint the *general* viewpoint of a *cosmically expanded* energy ecology" (Habermas 234). Even the Lesters' apparent obtuseness in their demolition by stages of Bessie's new car, reappears in this symbolic scheme as a justified hostility to the invasive modern commodity – goods whose price has been inflated by tariffs and which keep the region in a state of colonial dependency.

A collective religion of the sun appears in one of Caldwell's most remarkable short stories, "Kneel to the Rising Sun" (1935). Lonnie, a white tenant, lives in near starvation because he dare not ask his landlord for scraps of food; his friend Clem, a more forceful black tenant of the same landlord, reproves Lonnie's docility. Clem's rebelliousness finally leads to him being pursued by the landlord and a lynching party. Clem's hiding place is betrayed by Lonnie, who reverts to an instinctive race solidarity with other whites at this moment of crisis. As Lonnie flees the lynching scene, he seems to absorb momentarily a transgressive, cross-racial spirit from the rising sun, even a revolutionary form of what Bataille called "non-knowledge" (Bataille, *Inner* 52): Lonnie "struggled to this knees, facing the round red sun. The warmth gave him the strength to rise to his feet, and he muttered unintelligibly to himself. He tried to say things he had never thought to say before" (Caldwell, "Kneel"). These "things he had never thought to say before" belong to an inexpressible political thinking that at this moment of stress almost comes into expression. Lonnie's rebelliousness, however, peters out and he returns to his former obsequiousness toward the landlord.

Caldwell's final accent in the story on the failure of multi-racial solidarity is true to the deep-rootedness of segregation in the interwar South and is a repudiation of the demands of propaganda art (one reviewer of *American Earth* in *The New Masses* had urged Caldwell to "go left" [quoted in Cook 35]). It is significant that these three writers of the sacred in the 1930s – Caldwell, Agee and Bataille – were not literary Communists. Bataille moved at the end of this decade away from the street-fighting militancy of the *Contra-Attaque* group to founding a secret society, *Acéphale*, which tried to introduce the sacred surreptitiously into the French body politic. Agee's un-

derstanding of the sacred as self-dispossession also took him far from the ideal of the fused community sought by the Communist party or indeed sought, in different variations, by the New Deal or by Nashville Agrarianism.

For Agee, the three tenant families, in their isolation behind "shell and carapace" (Agee, *Praise* 53), do not belong so much to a corporate community as to what Bataille called "the community of those who have no community" (quoted in Blanchot 25). Bataille's paradoxical idea of the community was worked out as a consequence of the failure of Communism in the late 1930s. This line of Bataille's thinking, with the impossible demand to unite the wounded separation of individuals and the Durkheimian "social facts" of the group, was taken up by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot with their concept of an "inoperative" community (Durkheim 231).<sup>12</sup> Agee's tenants can be considered as participants of this "inoperative" community. In *Praise* the self is indissolubly bound to a neighbor not in the sense of fusion, but as to one whose very otherness and susceptibility to death takes the self out of itself (in a relation of wounding or loss). That is why in the late section of *Praise*, "Shady Grove, Alabama, July 1936," the "inoperative" community of tenants seems to cohere around, and have its centre of being, in a graveyard and in such emptied-out grave memorials as a "blown bulb" (Agee, *Praise* 438).

This article has tried to show how both Agee in *Praise* and Caldwell in *Kent* saw the otherness of southern poverty in the Depression through the sacred and particularly the politicized sacred of Georges Bataille. They could do this because they inherited a similar Christian imaginary of the exposed, sacrificial body as did Bataille and applied its logic of loss to the South. The southern soil serves as the matrix of this sacred – for Caldwell and Agee it is their primary instance of "the base earth, domain of pure abjection" (Bataille, *Visions* 42). So well did Agee communicate this quality of southern and transnational abjection that Dwight Macdonald could describe *Praise* in 1948 as a "*Works and Days* of our times" and see Agee as a Hesiod for the modern necro-agriculture; he even compared Agee's tenants and their "way of death" to the inmates of "Nazi and Soviet concentration camps" (Macdonald 124-125). But the work of Bataille on expenditure shows that the writings of Agee and Caldwell cannot only be regarded as sheer loss within a rational economic model. They also appeal to a pre-utilitarian type of collective life where "sociality is equivalent to expenditure beyond productive utility" (Ffance 31). Caldwell's Ty Ty Walden with his fruitless digging for gold on his land, or the credit-poor Jeeter Lester, or Alan Kent the farm laborer, are failures in their attempts to reap wealth from an unproductive southern earth, but the anguished totality of their commitment is also a form of sacred expenditure on "God's little acre." Agee's tenants likewise display the "royalty" of an older sovereignty of the self rather than of state power, a sovereignty that belongs to a religion of the sun (Agee, *Praise* 415).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1991; Maurice Blanchot (in works cited).

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Elena Avanzas Álvarez

## Form and Diversity in American Crime Fiction: The Southern Forensic Thriller

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**Abstract:** The forensic thriller has traditionally been constructed as a mainstream American narrative focused on the stereotypical representation of the country as a metropolis with an incredible amount of resources, and the American capitalist dream. The author Patricia Cornwell (*Postmortem*, first novel in the Kay Scarpetta series, published in 1990) is considered the founding mother of this crime fiction subgenre native to the US, closely followed by Kathy Reichs (*Déjà Dead*, first novel in the Temperance Brennan series, published in 1997) whose series have been successfully adapted to television in the show *Bones* (2005-2017). But the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the inclusion of more diverse settings for these stories, the South being the most economically successful and dominated by women authors too. Georgian Karin Slaughter is the author of the “Grant County” series, set in the fictional town of Heartsdale, in rural Georgia, and responsible for the inscription of the South in American forensic thrillers thanks to her own experience as a native. *Blindsighted* (2001) includes elements from both the grotesque southern gothic and the hard boiled tradition. My analysis of the first novel in the series will examine how the southern environment becomes quintessential to the development of the crimes and the characters from a literary, philosophical and feminist point of view. The issues examined will include, but not be limited to crime, morals, religion, professional ambition, infidelity, divorce, sexual desire, infertility, and family relationships.

**Keywords:** Literature, crime fiction, southern, forensics, thriller

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### The Forensic Thriller

The forensic thriller is the name given to a series of crime novels produced from 1990 onwards in the US that share a series of characteristics, the first and most important being the featuring of forensic science in the solving of murder cases and the final restoration of the status quo. Critics and academics alike agree in considering *Postmortem* by Patricia Cornwell, published in 1990, the first forensic thriller as it marks the start of a new literary tradition that has shaped not only crime fiction literary productions but television shows in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cornwell’s success inspired a generation of writers to challenge the conventions of crime narratives based solely on the detective’s ability to solve a crime thanks to logical thinking. The evolution of the forensic thriller in the US is therefore linked to the evolution of science and technology in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is tightly linked to the appearance of new forms of investigation.

In 1997, forensic anthropologist Kathy Reichs published the first novel in the Temperance Brennan series inspired by her own real-life work as an internationally renowned forensic anthropologist. The series is responsible for introducing the liminal field of forensic anthropology into mainstream cultural productions and challenging the way scientific knowledge is represented and absorbed by the general public by inscribing the personal experience of the author in the text (Cohen 249). After the success of the Scarpetta and Brennan series, more scientific professionals with an interest in writing

saw their works published, with their own real-life experiences used as marketing strategies to highlight the hyper-realism of their works. Another author with a scientific background who has enjoyed moderate success in the US is Tess Gerritsen. After writing medical thrillers during the 1990's, she finally created the Rizzoli & Isles series in 2001 featuring Boston Police Department detective Jane Rizzoli and forensic doctor Maura Isles (Gerritsen *The Sinner*, *The Apprentice*, *The Surgeon*).

The emergence of the forensic thriller is closely tied to the US crime fiction tradition as it borrows iconic elements from the hard boiled tradition. These elements affect the way the hero is portrayed, but also the detecting methods used to solve the crime (Walton and Jones). The portrayal of the hero/heroine in forensic thrillers – as an individual who fights against a corrupt system – is maintained, though ironically the forensic doctors of these stories see themselves fighting against injustices happening in their own privileged and institutionalized environments. That is, these detectives are part of laboratories or institutions that do not meet their moral expectations but from which they get an almost unlimited resources that will help them solve the crime (Knight). In their fight against said injustices, the featuring of firearms as a source of self-defense is still present, with Scarpetta being a convinced gun-owner (Cornwell) and Brennan wishing for a gun when she is attacked in her own house (Reichs). However, the feature from the hard boiled tradition that has been maintained yet adapted to this new detecting paradigm is the appearance of specific linguistic codes. In the original hard boiled tradition, language specificity came from the detective's experience in the streets with an informal and high coded language. But in forensic thrillers, this specificity has been replaced by scientific language (Avanzas Álvarez 2018). Historically unavailable to non-experts, this language now floods the pages of forensic thrillers with the characters functioning as interpreters that help readers – and later on audiences – understand the consequences of these scientific developments for crime detection. See the following experiment carried out by doctor Brennan:

The blood knows its own proteins, or antigens. If it recognizes foreigners, antigens that don't belong, it tries to destroy them with antibodies. Some antibodies blow up foreign antigens, others clump them together. That clumping is called an agglutination reaction.

Antiserum is created in an animal, usually a rabbit or a chicken, by injecting it with the blood of another species. The animal's blood recognizes the invaders and produces antibodies to protect itself. Injecting an animal with human blood produces human antiserum. Injecting it with goat blood produces goat antiserum. Horse blood produces horse antiserum.

Human antiserum creates an agglutination reaction when mixed with human blood. Watch. If this is human blood a visible precipitate will form in the test tube, right where the simple solution and the antiserum meet. We'll compare the saline as control. (Reichs 429)

Though the excerpt quoted is full of technical words and describes a complex process, it is made available to general audiences through Brennan's description and explanation of its consequences for the crime she is investigating. From a cultural point of view, this narrative technique signals the appearance of a new paradigm in which science is no longer reserved only for an educated elite but becomes part of mainstream discourses.

That is, readers and viewers can learn science from these cultural products, and they can incorporate this knowledge in their everyday lives and experiences.

With these innovations, the forensic thriller – due to its historical circumstances – offers readers more diversity than their original hard boiled antecedents, as the social and scientific developments of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed for social and scientific changes in the forms of representation of the story's traditional elements. So, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, forensic thrillers were clearly an important part of US popular culture, and the portrayal of forensic science was at its peak with the release of the iconic television show *CSI* (2000-2015) in 2000. However, it must be noted that despite the success of these stories, they perpetuated one of the most relevant aspects of the hard boiled tradition by locating the stories in big cities where resources are not particularly scarce, and the diverse landscape offers readers a portrayal of the quintessential American city.

But the US is a large country with very different locations and cultures that have not historically found space in mainstream representation except in stereotyped images (the tough West, the conservative and boring Mid-West, the conservative and uncultured South, etc.). So, motivated by this lack of diversity in representation and looking to inscribe misrepresented US locations and cultures in popular products, a new type of forensic thriller appeared with the new millennium. The broad acceptance of science as the only way to produce truth (Foucault) has created a new global paradigm that no longer limits itself to big cities but has become the dominant discourse for crime-solving. Hence, the regional forensic thriller was born.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the main characteristics of the regional forensic thriller as an American text that plays a key role in inscribing the country's cultural diversity in mainstream literature, moving the historically preferred city landscapes to regions that have been misrepresented in popular culture products. The analysis will be complemented with a case of study of Karin Slaughter's *Blindsighted* (2001), the first novel in the "Grant County" series. Karin Slaughter's novels signify the diversity in forensic thrillers by moving the story from big cities to a small town in the state of Georgia, where the specificity of southern living, religion and the acclaimed Southern Gothic tradition enrich the narrative. The "Grant County" series, featuring pediatrician and coroner doctor Sara Linton and her ex-husband, Chief of Police Jeffrey Tolliver, relocates the detecting process to a small community where the main character no longer has access to the unlimited scientific resources of the big city. Even though Sara does not occupy a politically relevant post in her daily life like Scarpetta and Brennan – who were presented as internationally celebrated forensics experts – her role as the only pediatrician and coroner makes of her a respected figure in her native town of Heartsdale. Her authority is therefore rooted in her tight links to the community in small-town America challenging hard boiled conventions and signaling the importance of societal links for professionals and crime solving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Regional Forensic Thriller: *Blindsighted* (2001)**

In the first reference to the regional forensic thriller in crime fiction studies it appeared as a crime fiction subgenre in 2001, when authors Willem Johannes Bertens and Theo

D'haen, motivated by their economic success, dedicated a whole chapter of their book *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* to this kind of book. One of the points that the authors make very early on their text is that regional forensic thrillers are predominantly written by women (Bertens and D'haen 60). Even though US crime fiction has been known for its celebrated male authors (Raymond Chandler, James Ellroy, Michael Connelly), it is women who have inscribed the country's diversity in mainstream novels. This is a feature that the regional forensic thriller shares with the general forensic thriller, whose main representatives (Cornwell, Reichs, and Gerritsen) have never hidden their identities behind pseudonyms or initials.

Though the regional forensic thriller can be located in any of the liminal regions of the US, the South has clearly emerged as the one preferred by readers if we use economic success as a measure. Women authors of southern forensic thrillers have taken advantage of the specificity that has characterized this crime fiction subgenre from its beginnings, and they have turned it into a tool to challenge the misconceptions about the South and southern culture. If their antecessors were required to be well-versed in forensic science to offer a better portrayal of the discipline in the forensic thriller, it is of the utmost necessity that southern forensic writers know about the codes that structure southern living in order to break away from stereotypical representations: "she must have intimate knowledge of the region in question and she must be able to conjure up a convincing representation by means of judiciously selected atmospheric detail, regional idiom, and scenic description" (Bertens and D'haen 68).

Part of this intrinsic knowledge comes from the author's own experience in a location that has been traditionally misrepresented, and which has gone through a severe economic crisis that has shaped not only their lives but local history and the landscape too. In Karin Slaughter's *Blindsighted* (2001) the native Georgian author highlights the local history of the fictional town of Heartsdale paying special attention to how politics have shaped the lack of resources:

'Grant County' was named for the good Grant, not Ulysses, but Lemuel Pratt Grant, a railroad builder who in the mid-1800s extended the Atlanta line deep into South Georgia and to the sea ... This rail line had put cities like Heartsdale, Madison, and Avondale in the map ... During the Depression, the citizens of Avondale, Heartsdale, and Madison decided to combine their police and fire departments as well as their schools ... [which] helped to keep the Grant line open; the county was much larger as a whole than as individual cities.

For nearly sixty years, the county prospered, until base closings, consolidations, and Reaganomics trickled down, crushing the economies of Madison and Avondale within three years of each other. (Slaughter 14-15)

Due to the uniqueness of the setting and the traditional misrepresentation of the South in mainstream US products, the representation of the environment can sometimes be more important than the solving of the crime (Bertens and D'haen 68). Though the research quoted above took place in 2001, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has granted regional forensic thrillers a place in mainstream culture. A tendency to offer better and more complex representations of the South can be appreciated in recent cultural products such as Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects* (2007) and television shows in which

the landscape sets the tone of the story, infusing it with a unique personality. Take for example Louisiana's distinctive landscape in *True Detective's* first season (2014) which has been described as "moody" and "atmospheric" (Denise) and is certainly unique.

One of the features that has characterized the South as a unique place comes from its public exposure to religion and religious symbols, as well as the influence of deeply religious beliefs in societal expectations. Even though the South has its own combination of religious practices in which Voodoo and Catholicism are also present, the dominant discourse imposed by Evangelic Protestantism is what is known as the "Bible Belt," an area comprising most of the southern-eastern states. Though the naming of this area is informal, its creation has been derived from polls and census data that evaluated variables such as church attendance and the impact of Evangelic Protestantism on everyday life and culture. Georgia is at the heart of this area, and religious values structure life in Heartsdale, both spiritually and physically: "Contraceptives were still kept behind the counter" (Slaughter 211) and "Bookmarks with religious sayings were alongside diabetes bracelets" (Slaughter 213). Though these representations have been considered problematic in portrayals of the South from outsiders, Slaughter's take on the situation through Sara's eyes shows her ambivalence and her acceptance of religious influence as long as it does not compromise the town's safety. Only when the local chemist is found to be the serial killer twisting excerpts from the Bible to justify his actions, do Slaughter and her heroine condone religion.

Slaughter's efforts to fight unbalanced representations of the South also touch on two bones of contention in contemporary US culture: racism and the Ku Klux Klan's prevalent influence in contemporary politics. Closely interlinked, these two national traumas are still part of southern culture, and their importance as national scars in US history has become even more relevant during the Trump administration. Slaughter's ambivalence towards religion is not present when representing these two characteristics, and *Blindsighted* includes two male detectives in their fifties whose attitude towards women and non-white people is representative of a broken and traumatized South that still keeps up the KKK's "good work" (Slaughter 97). Their political views plague their appearance in the novel and when investigating the town's serial killer, they quickly become suspicious of "Pete's colored man" (Slaughter 108), who eventually gets attacked by fellow local KKK sympathizers only to be saved by the Chief of Police. These two men yearn for a time when strict gender roles structured life and they are also resentful of detective Lena Adams: "Frank wasn't thrilled to have women on the force ... He was constantly leaving Lena out of investigations ... He was not the kind of guy who would let his female partner lead an interrogation" (Slaughter 27). Taking a stance on these issues, Slaughter criticizes these political views through the attitudes of other characters towards these two men, though their appearance clearly signals the prevalence of these views in some southerners.

As it could not be otherwise in the US crime fiction tradition, the owning and using of firearms is also present in these novels. Sara, the main character in the "Grant County" series, secretly keeps a gun with her, and though Slaughter does not explicitly make Sara pro-guns, she uses the character's traumatic sexual assault to make a point about firearm ownership: "Sara certainly wasn't against private citizens having

weapons, but he [Jeffrey] knew for a fact that she wasn't exactly comfortable around guns, especially the kind that could shoot the lock off a barn door" (Slaughter, 208). Her ownership of a gun is finally justified when she is proved to be the real target of the serial killer, a man who holds Sara responsible for the death of his sister during one of the doctor's shifts during her internship in Atlanta. By putting the main character in danger, Slaughter is playing on the character's fear and need for protection, and though it is Jeffrey who eventually saves her, the final confirmation of her fears become an emotional mechanism that justifies owning a gun.

Conservative values are then present in the novel, and they are also portrayed in the prevalence of the nuclear family. Regional forensic thrillers do not portray their hero as a lone wolf, but rather inscribe her in the community she was brought up in and still lives in. A central figure in this community is the mother, traditionally absent from US crime fiction (Munt), especially in those texts authored by men: it is unlike "its male counterpart in which the mother only rarely appears and is usually dead if she really is a presence (as in James Ellroy)" (Bertens and D'haen 60). For Sara Linton, her mother is a source of love, support and inspiration, and though they may differ in the little things, she knows that she can always count on her mother for comfort: "She had forgotten how good it felt to be comforted by her mother" (Slaughter 300).

However, that mother is rarely a lonely presence, and the hero finds herself surrounded by a network of support in the form of parents, siblings, and even ex-partners. Sara's father is also a source of support, both economically and emotionally. When Sara returned to Hearstdale after her sexual assault, she found a home in one of her father's apartments, and he offered her a new job to start fresh though she refused it. Breaking with sexist expectations for her daughters, Linton was happy to share his business with his two daughters and aptly renamed it "Linton and Daughters" (Slaughter 7) so that they felt included in the business. Though Sara chose to remain a doctor, her younger sister joined the family business. Sara has a loving relationship with Tessa despite their different lifestyles, as two quotations illustrate: "'I'm not like you. I can't just sleep around.' Tessa didn't take offence at this. Sara had not expected her to" and "Sara, you'll never understand that sex is different for some people. Sometimes it's just fucking" (Slaughter 78-80).

The appearance of these characters helps challenge traditional representations of the detective/doctor as a lonely hero who does not have any ties and has problems bonding with other human beings and establishing lasting and meaningful social connections. In fact, Sara had a nice childhood surrounded by as many privileges as her parents could afford, including her passion for school and studying: "When Sara became obsessed with school, a study with a half-bath was built into the attic" (Slaughter 80). Hence, one of the consequences of this blurring of the lines between the professional and the private is the consideration of crime as a moral problem that is not separate from everyday life but rather is an intrinsic part of it: "In a number of recent books, however, the personal and the professional ... do not simply exist side by side, as is usually the case, but gradually become entangled with each other, leading to often fundamental confrontations and insights. The case becomes a catalyst for personal growth" (Bertens and D'haen 62). This personal growth is related not only to the solving of the crime but also to a more complex personal development of



the main character. If Kay Scarpetta was a lone wolf, her identity was far more static during the first instalments of the series than Sara's own journey in *Blindsighted* which includes a personal trauma, sexual violence, and the misunderstanding of traditional southern values.

An important part of this growth is the construction of the hero as a complex human being rather than just a symbol representing moral order. Though another forensic thriller writer, Kathy Reichs, had already inscribed their heroine's sexual desire in the Temperance Brennan series (1997), this discourse is even more important in southern narratives as the presence of religion and conservative values had traditionally subjugated women's sexuality. However, Slaughter creates a main character who is well-aware of her desire and even exhibits it in inappropriate places, such as church:

She was actually fidgeting in her seat, thinking about Jeffrey touching her, the way his hands felt on her skin when Cathy Linton jabbed her elbow into Sara's ribs ... Cathy had crossed her arms angrily, her posture indicating she was resigning herself to the fact that Sara would go to hell for thinking about sex at the Primitive Baptist on Easter Sunday. (Slaughter 9)

Here not only is Sara experiencing desire in a holy place, but she is experiencing desire for her ex-husband, whom she divorced after he cheated on her with a local woman. Her struggle with her attraction for Jeffrey is present throughout the novel and it is made even more relevant as their love and their sexual history is deeply affected by Sara's sexual assault, which happened before their marriage and which she decided to keep from her husband.

The regional forensic thriller then moves along a thin line between tradition and innovation, and this tension is present not only in the culture and the lives of the characters but in the detecting methods used to solve the crime too. Sara is the town's coroner and pediatrician, a double responsibility motivated by her ambition – "There were only so many sore throats and earaches Sara could take before her mind started to go numb" (Slaughter 80) – and influenced by the traumatic sexual assault that prevented her from pursuing a bigger and better career in Atlanta. Hence the use of up-to-date medical terms that characterized previous forensic thrillers is maintained in *Blindsighted*, and their use helps the plot move forward and, eventually solve the crime. Though technical in nature, these terms are made clear for non-expert readers so that they understand what is going on without going into too much detail:

Sara held her breath as she jabbed the three-inch needle into the woman's jugular. The needle called an introducer, would act as a funnel for three separate IV ports ... Sara rattled off the tests as she flushed the ports with heparin solution to keep them from clotting. 'Blood gases, tox screen, LFT, CBC, chem twenty-seven. Go ahead and pull for a coag panel while you're at it.' Sara paused. 'Dip her urine stat. I want to know what's going on before I do anything else.' (Slaughter 182)

This quote shows the appearance of technical and jargon terms such as "tox" which is short for "toxicology" and "coag" which is short for "coagulation." Though the author



does not use Sara's expertise to explain these terms to the reader, their fatal results are made clear when the patient eventually dies.

Despite the tension that evolves with the crime narrative, the final restoration of the status quo that characterizes crime fiction always has a conservative resolution in regional forensic thrillers: "The regionalism that in the course of the last 15 years has become an important presence in crime fiction is almost always conservative. It ... wants to preserve a status quo that is threatened by current [events]" (Bertens and D'haen 74). Though conservative narratives involving racism and misogyny are being reconsidered in these stories, there are still traces of classism and social hierarchies in which race plays a key role. Detective Lena Adams – whose own Hispanic origins present themselves as a problem to her southern identity – even indulges in racism and classism using traditional southern rhetoric:

She felt a bump on her arm and looked up in time to see *Websters* definition of a hick sitting down beside her. His face was sunburned from his neck to about an inch from his hairline where he had obviously been working outside wearing a baseball hat. His shirt was starched within an inch of its life, and the cuffs were tight around his thick wrists. (Slaughter 60)

Not only that but Lena, who is the first victim's twin sister, struggles throughout the novel with her sister's sexuality, and never acknowledges the relationship and the feelings that her beloved sister had for her long-time girlfriend, the town's librarian. The novel is plagued with her resentment, and she even tries to conceal her sister's sexual identity: "Now the whole world would know her sister was gay" (Slaughter, 96).

Despite the complex relationship that readers can have with these characteristics of southern living, Slaughter clearly portrays them as the norm, hence challenging mainstream representations of the South as an Other (Said 1978). One of the most representative challenges of that norm comes from the clash between northern and southern accents. In US culture, the southern accent is usually considered "sweet" and "sugar-coated" due to its unique vowel system. However, for Sara and Jeffrey their way of talking does not imply that "they have an accent," but northerners do:

Jeffrey's biggest problem with Moon ... was the language barrier. Moon was from somewhere up east, the kind of place where consonants took on a life of their own ... Her nasal tone and the fact that she spoke sixty miles an hour gave Jeffrey the impression that he was talking to a French horn. (Slaughter 320)

The South's uniqueness is reproduced on the page by incorporating elements from the celebrated southern Gothic tradition. The features of this literary movement perfectly fit the crime narrative as they highlight the extreme realism that has characterized forensic thrillers, allowing for gruesome and very detailed descriptions of crime scenes and dead bodies (Downey 2016). Though the forensic thriller is, in fact, responsible for a better and more responsible representation of dead bodies and forensic medicine, the regional forensic thriller set in the South takes this representation a step further.

Darkness, violence and blood flood the crime scenes, and Slaughter does not shy away from the realistic representations that are now iconic of her writing.

She had been stabbed in the abdomen. Blood filled the toilet between her legs, dripping onto the tiled floor ... Sybil's shirt was pulled up, and Sara could see a large vertical cut down her abdomen, bisecting her navel and stopping at the pubic bone. Another cut, much deeper, slashed horizontally under her breasts ... Sara put her hand to the wound, trying to halt the bleeding, but blood seeped between her fingers as if she were squeezing a sponge. (Slaughter 12)

The excerpt quoted above describes the first crime scene, where Sara tries to save Lena's sister to no avail. Part of her efforts, which are more typical of a medical drama than of a forensic thriller, include being exposed to the victims' blood and internal organs in an effort to stop the hemorrhage. This performance of CPR is possible only through the southern gothic tradition that allows for "the odd, the eccentric, and the physically or sexually atypical" (Downey 365): "Sara tried again, gagging as blood coughed up into her mouth. She spat several times to clear her mouth prepared to continue, but it was too late ... A trickle of urine came from between her legs" (Slaughter 13). It is necessary here to highlight that through the release of urine by a dead body is not something atypical, its representation in mainstream fiction is. Though her predecessors Cornwell and Reichs did in fact great work in rehabilitating the representation of dead bodies in forensic thrillers, they stayed away from these details. Hence, there is plenty of space in regional forensic thrillers for the abject (Yaeger 228), for that part of society that lacks representation and that organically emerges linked to the area's own misrepresentations in mainstream culture.

### Conclusions

The US regional forensic thriller has become one of the most successful crime fiction subgenres in 21<sup>st</sup>-century crime fiction. Their portrayal of regions of the USA that had been traditionally stereotyped or misrepresented is one of these novels' strengths as they challenge a homogeneous representation of the country. Even though the regional forensic thriller can be located in any region, southern settings seem to be preferred by reading audiences as they offer a more complex look at southern culture. The South's cultural richness – made patent in the elements borrowed from the Southern Gothic tradition – allows more realistic representations of crime scenes and autopsy. Despite the specificity of southern culture, regional forensic thrillers have been a success outside the US: Slaughter's works have been translated into more than twenty-five languages (Slaughter *Personal Website*).

More importantly, regional forensic thrillers consider the author's lived experience and they infuse it with value by recognizing the complexity of southern culture. Even though forensic thrillers have traditionally been inspired by the writer's professional lives, the fact that these regional texts focus on the everyday

life and dominant discourses at play in the construction of culture is a tool of representation that challenges the assumptions and stereotypes that have shaped the understanding of the South by outsiders. The focus on the tension between tradition and innovation is present in the combination of traditional lifestyle choices (the power of religion to construct the dominant discourse) and the consideration of forensic science as the only legitimate way to produce truth and restore the status quo.

Hence, it is necessary to reconsider the cultural impact of the regional forensic thriller in mainstream culture and in the global construction of southern culture in mainstream popular products. These texts highlight the diversity of the US as a country and they describe the delicate balance that needs to be found between tradition and innovation both in literature and in everyday life so as to make the past accountable while accepting social change and innovation in an area as historically and culturally complex as the South.

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Michał Choiński

## Figures of Contrast in Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Ostensibly, Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* (1948) revolves around the figurative contrasts between the bodily and the spiritual. This bifurcation is the basis of the clash between the play's two main characters: John Buchanan and Alma Winemiller, whose unfulfilled romance is for Williams a study of the tragic impossibility of a conflation of opposites. In the construction of the characters, Williams shows a great deal of figurative "plasticity" – he is particular about the metaphors used to designate two sides of the central contrast. This article adopts the figurative approach to study how the playwright constructs John and Alma in metaphorical terms, as contrastive macrofigures, and to demonstrate how this figurative perspective allows him to escalate the tragedy of their impossible romance.

**Keywords:** *Summer and Smoke*, Tennessee Williams, macrofiguration, figurative contrast

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"I think he can speak, / but in the language of vision"  
— Tennessee Williams, *The Purification*

Tennessee Williams's idea of "plastic theatre" played a vital role in the early success of his dramas. The artistic goal behind the "plastic" formula was to "release the essential spirit of something that needs to be a stripping down, a reduction to abstracts" (Williams, Bak 26). In other words, Williams sought to direct his attention to the fundamental elements of artistic expression, and to shed all the obsolete practices of a realistic play. By ridding his dramas of all mimetic redundancies, Williams aimed to refashion the complex artistic formulas of the convention standardized by such playwrights as Henrik Ibsen or Seán O'Casey. At the centre of this "plastic formula" lies his "memory play," which conjoins elements of expressionism, neo-romantic emotionality and emphatic symbolism. The appropriation of various non-verbal elements of theatrical expression, like light and music, as correlative signifiers, was somewhat innovative back in the 1940s, and allowed Williams to employ the themes of deceptive illusion and nostalgic memory in a way that resonated particularly well with both readers and theatregoers.

In this creative use of theatrical plasticity, Williams did not, by any means, undervalue the role of language. On the contrary, his non-realistic setting, framed in a "plastic" and symbolic space, is meticulously described in stage-directions with the vision of a painter's eye and the verbal craft of a poet. Likewise, the exceptional literary quality of his plays springs from the dialogue that he fashions out of the natural patois of Southern American speech, an idiom that is at once rhythmical, imagistic

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and genuine. It is my goal in this essay to demonstrate the way figurative aspects of Williams's language help in the construction of the dramatic space in *Summer and Smoke*. In particular, I wish to discuss the figurative contrasts the language of the play is so strongly saturated with, paying particular attention to metaphors and hyperbole.

### Macrofiguration

In his discussion of the "poetics of mind," Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. says that "the mind itself is primarily structured out of various tropes. These figures of thought arise naturally from our ordinary, unconscious attempts to make sense of ourselves and the physical world" (Gibbs 434). The assumption that is the starting point of my discussion of Williams's figurative language in *Summer and Smoke* concerns precisely the manner in which the workings of the human mind are reflected in the use of metaphorical or metonymical expressions. These do not constitute mere embellishments and stylistic ornaments – in other words, they are not only "responsible for the manifestation of text as text" (Müller). On the contrary, the tropes of discourse reveal a seminal truth about the very manner in which the users of language conceptualize the reality around them – that is, of their "mode of comprehension" (to borrow Hayden White's term; 1978). This constation has considerable implications regarding the organization of the figurative language and the metafictional aspects of the language of Williams's drama.

In his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), written more than eight decades ago, I. A. Richards drew a distinction between two constituents of a metaphor: *tenor* and *vehicle* – the former signifies what the trope refers to, and the latter stands for the verbal phrase employed. While Richard's model of figuration concerned primarily the functioning of metaphors in the artistic context, it also reduced the significance of the complex mental process of transference accompanying the figurative language. In the Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT), a more dynamic and bidirectional approach, all humans "live by" metaphors that are not merely linguistic or literary devices, but effectually function as common modes of thinking. Laid out by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) almost four decades ago, CTM favours the idea of an "embodied" mind which metaphorically conceptualizes different experiential domains, mapping one domain onto another, thus forming a conceptual template that is the source of a phalanx of figurative expressions even in common, everyday language. As stressed famously by Terry Eagleton, a contemporary British literary theorist, "there is more metaphor in Manchester than there is in Marvell" (Eagleton 6). Thus, for researchers working within the paradigm of CMT, such as Peter Stockwell (2002), it is the metaphor that occupies a central role in figuration as a direct verbal representation of the workings of the artist's mind, and the way he or she conflates ideas.

In her publications on figurative language, Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2009, 2010, 2013) stresses the distinction between three diverse levels of interpretative ranks of figures in a text. The microfigurative level concerns particular phrases or clauses, and most commonly is the object of traditional stylistic analysis. The macrofigurative level involves figures which are larger and more complex, and which may span over sentences, paragraphs or even entire texts, functioning often as cohesive devices. The third level of analysis focuses on megatropes, namely, the most abstract



and elusive figurative rank, which is concerned with the metalevel of the text and the overall directionality of thought. The figures of the metatropical level are surreptitious and remain hidden behind the two lower levels of the figuration. They would be more reminiscent of David Lodge's figurative "modes of writing" (1977). In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's model of figuration, the higher orders are constituted by various components of lower orders and the macrofigurative fabric of a text may be composed a diverse network of singular figures, not necessarily even metaphorical in nature.

The approach of figuration assumed in this essay draws on the above idea of tropes as "modes of comprehension" and the way they may function as macrofigurative devices, spanning over larger sections of texts. Such a method of enquiry allows me to look into the way in which various figures like metaphors and hyperbole, are employed by Williams to present the failed romance of the two main characters of *Summer and Smoke*, Alma Winemiller and John Buchanan. Furthermore, it also addresses the functioning of the body and the space in his "plastic" theatrical design. In my discussion, I wish to move beyond single tropes, and demonstrate the way particular figures constitute larger patterns of representations. In other words, I wish to construct a bridge between the microfigurative level and the macrofigurative level of analysis.

### Williams's Figures of Contrast

Apart from being one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tennessee Williams was also one of the most prolific. His oeuvre includes an impressive collection of twenty-five full-length plays, forty short plays, two novels, numerous screenplays, an opera libretto, more than four dozen short stories and a hundred poems. Over Williams's life, his fiction underwent a profound evolution and one can see a clear caesura between the texts he authored in the 1940s and the 1950s, and those that were written in the last two decades of his life. His earlier dramas were unanimously praised by the critics and, when they entered Broadway, Williams himself was elevated to the status of artistic genius. The predominant reason for this success is that his embattled life spawned embattled fiction and the fact that most of his earlier texts – maintained in the quasi-autobiographical framework – rendered the sense of unrest and genuine pain particularly appealing. Williams's later plays, more disparaged and misunderstood by his contemporary critics, were much more obscure, especially if compared with *The Glass Menagerie* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

For Williams's dramatic lyricism and theatrical design, the figuration of contrast seems particularly relevant. The figurative clash of concepts, not uncommonly escalated to the point of violent rupture, pervades not only his lyrical stage directions, but also the management of plot. In her recent study of Williams's drama, Annette Saddik postulates that this tendency escalated in his late texts, in the form of a "theatre of excess" (2015). Especially in his mature dramas, Williams seeks to alleviate pressures through figurative exaggeration, chaos, and laughter: "[his] excesses serve to highlight the ambiguities and inconsistencies of living in and experiencing the world – the excess that leaks out of closed systems of meaning, that seep through the cracks of the rational, the stable, the complete, and point toward the essence of the real" (Saddik 6). In consequence, Williams's "plays honor the grotesque power of chaos, of

the irrational and inexpressible, and the truth that it reveals” (Saddik 7). The excessive and the grotesque are not only Williams’s trademark ways of engaging the world, but also of escaping it.

In his *Memoirs*, Williams presents himself as a paragon of contradictions, in this way hinting at the conflicted nature of his fiction, which to a large extent reflects his troubled life. Among others, he famously evoked the stereotypical antitheses of American culture – a Puritan and a Cavalier – to talk about his inner conflicts: “Roughly there was a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about” (Williams, Waters 127). The playwright would naturally attribute the Puritan element to the overprotective and chastising upbringing of his mother, Edwina Williams, and the Cavalier to the belligerent and abusive father, Cornelius Williams. This duality translates into a notorious conflict in Williams’s works in which animal promiscuity and ladylike fastidiousness clash, escalating to the point of violent rapture. This skirmish between the carnal and the spiritual translates into the conflict between the painful and disappointing present and the idealized and nostalgic past, palpable particularly in his early, “memory” plays like *Glass Menagerie* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The past becomes an indicator of a world that still offered hope of happiness and fulfillment, while the present, touched by decay, leaves Williams’s characters to ponder desperately on what was irreversibly lost. Little wonder that Roger Boxill describes Williams as an “elegiac writer, a poet of nostalgia who laments the loss and a past idealized in the memory” (Boxill 1).

Against the background of the nostalgic drama of time, the figure of a faded belle becomes quintessential for Tennessee Williams. The framework of his drama and fiction rests on a repetitive scenario of a destructive encounter of two contrastive, archetypal characters, the faded belle and the animalistic, virulent brute. The clash between them always takes place against the background of a haunting drifter figure, whose lack of presence generates most acute discomfort and a sense of longing for the normal. William repeats this framework with a manic compulsivity, developing it in different contexts and different scenarios in the early stages of his career. Despite this artistic recycling, this broken, autobiographical template never grows old, simply because the tensions embedded in it are far too real and turbulent not to move one to the core, especially when combined with Williams’s unparalleled gusto for dialogue. As stressed by Boxill, “the faded belle and the wanderer, the has-been and the might-have-been, are elegiac characters of the ‘the fugitive kind’ and still-born poets whose muffled outcries are destined to oblivion the tyranny of time” (34).

### The Angel of Stone

Set in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, *Summer and Smoke* tells the story of a doomed affair between two mismatched lovers – John Buchanan, the son of a doctor, notorious for indulging in physical pleasures and succumbing to his desires, and Alma Winemiller, a timorous southern damsel and daughter of a preacher, who embraces John’s courtship, but rejects his proposal of sex. The play was released in 1948, just one year after *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Alma definitely ought to be included into the famous

pantheon of southern belles from Williams's major plays – right next to Amanda Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*) and Blanche DuBois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*).

John and Alma are visibly designed by Williams as emblematic of contrasts set against diverse axes: art and religion contrasted with science, the carnal contrasted with the ethereal, the masculine set against the feminine – to name but a few. These macrofigurative contrasts employed by the playwright multiply and overlap, encompassing the entire meta-dramatic fabric of the play's language. It is precisely through a series of these contrastive macrofigures that Williams formulates the ontological binarity at the heart of *Summer and Smoke*, demonstrating the two characters' fundamental inability to synchronise their stances on life, what translates into the failure of their love.

Williams uses the strategy of contradiction right from the beginning of the play. In the prologue to *Summer and Smoke*, against the canvas of a "great expanse of sky" (Williams's Note on the Setting), the young John and Alma hold a flirtatious conversation by a fountain adorned with the figure of a stone angel. In his stage directions, the playwright stresses that he wishes the stone angel to be clearly perceptible – so that it would "brood over the course of the play" as a "symbolic figure." The statue of a petrified angel, an essentially contradictory image, is to constantly remind the viewers of the play that the idea of a paradox, a union of opposites is looming over the entire story of a failed romance of Alma and John.

In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a series of lectures for the University of Harvard, Italo Calvino, lists lightness as a "value," an asset of literary expression which will help in carrying literary works over to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He views the myth of Perseus, a mythological hero who "supports himself on the very lightest of things" (Calvino 10) and manages to decapitate the Gorgon, avoiding petrification and death-like heaviness, as an allegorical image of the process of artistic creation. Calvino argues that "lightness is ... something arising from writing itself, from the poet's own linguistic power, quite independent of whatever philosophic doctrine the poet claims to be following" (Calvino 10). To the Italian writer, the subtraction of heaviness is the prerogative of art, which symbolically rises above the weight of the quotidian world. Calvino's deliberations about how lightness is emblematic of art and the liberation that comes with it perfectly translate into the metaphorical images of *Summer and Smoke*, especially into the dichotomy of the weight of stone conjoined with the lightness of seraphic wings.

The statue of the angel represents one of the key dichotomies of the play, namely, the contrast between soaring airiness of the form and earth-bound solidity of the matter. The image of a being associated with celestial descent is encased in a material that is heavy, dead and unchangeable. The inscription at the base of the statue reads "Eternity," a word that gives Alma "cold shivers" because of its overwhelming, soteriological implications. The angel does not change and cannot change, it is bound to "eternally" remain what it is because of the immutable material it is made of – the evanescent wings of the sculpture symbolically can never ascend. This basic figurative clash, functioning as the macrotrope for a number of longer passages in the text, allows Williams to generate figurative expressions of contrast pertaining to directionality of movement, consistency of the body, its weight and nature. Also, the "lightness" of

Alma's singing and the spiritual components of the human nature that she notoriously emphasizes are hence, reminiscent of Calvino's "artistic" lightness. The metaphorical ascent and the lack of weight Alma hints at align with the angelic aspect of the shape of the statue – and all these elements are relentlessly brought down by the "heaviness" of the stone – whose materiality can be, in contrast, associated with the anatomy chart hanging on the wall of John's office.

### The Body and The Soul

Williams describes John in the stage directions as a "Promethean figure" (Part I, Scene 1), evoking the name of the mythical benefactor of mankind who bestowed the gift of fire upon the people of the Earth. While in the myth Prometheus is mankind's kindler of the protective fire, at this stage of the plot, John fails as he cannot set the metaphorical "airiness" of Alma ablaze. In the stage directions, his character is characterized by hyperbole, a surplus of vital energy which he cannot control and which, by proxy, becomes the decisive drive behind his actions: "The excess of [his] power has not yet found a channel" (Part I, Scene 1). This figurative condensed energy, connoting increased pressure and high temperature, is shapeless and chaotic, and its boundaries are demarcated by the inside surface of his body, which is metaphorically represented as a container. As stated in stage directions, "If [the excess of power] remains without [a channel], it will burn him up" (Part I, Scene 1). John's physique is figuratively represented as a vessel which houses the shapeless, hot energy of passion. This smoke-like force is pressing upon the walls of his body from inside out with an increasing force. Thus, the failure of the body to contain the metaphorical energy inevitably generates burning tensions which, at the end of the day, stimulate his riotous behavior. The figurative increase makes him an unstable character who is driven by an excess he cannot control. In a manner typical of his style, Williams studies the motives and circumstances that compel his characters to undertake various actions, and here he manages to create an image of man who is more a passive object swayed by passions, than a active subject retaining the agency of his actions. Since his body is a metaphorical container for the energy inside of him, the carnal and the fiery become his elements – and form one part of the play's initial figurative binary.

In the figurative description of Alma, it is the air that becomes her defining element. As a singer, she bears the artistic nickname of "The Nightingale of the Delta," reminiscent of the mythical character of Philomela and of her transformation into a bird recognized for its delightful singing. Interestingly, in his *Memoirs*, the playwright described his frequent one-night stands as "nightingale encounters," stressing their transitory and ephemeral nature. In *Summer and Smoke's* stage directions, Williams stresses that in Alma's voice and manner "there is a delicacy and elegance, a kind of 'airiness'" and "her gestures and mannerisms are a bit exaggerated, but in a graceful way" (Part I, Scene 1). Alma's demeanor is excessive, not unlike John's, but while he is being consumed from inside out by a surge of fiery energy, her hyperbole is that of the taciturn propriety of a southern belle. She emphatically distances herself from the summer heat of Mississippi, wishing for the Gulf wind to "cool the nights off." She finds no comfort in the pressured, combustible aura of energy that fills John's carnal

container – instead, she wishes for air, the element she is associated with, to mitigate and temper the power of the sweltering temperate.

In a conversation, John observes that Alma is “swallowing air” and associates her hyperventilation with hysterical behavior, diagnosing her mockingly with an “irritated doppelganger.” When Alma breathes heavily, she fills the metaphorical container of her body with air, the element which forms an opposition to the fiery energy that amasses in him and presses from inside out. He then teases her, by giving her a diagnosis of a “doppelganger” (Part I, Scene 1), a second self which remains hidden, and whose surreptitious presence would be connotative of a Kayserian notion of the grotesque, that is, a hidden, “alien” double who is both terrifying and uncanny. What John implies in his sarcastic assertion is that there is a fundamental dichotomy in Alma, and that her behavior is disassociated from her true nature. The way she describes herself – “My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul” (Prologue) – binds her with the notions of the ethereal and the spiritual. When Alma talks of eternity, social responsibilities and propriety, John opposes her proclamations and in his reply, he resorts to carnal rhetoric, describing his dying mother in a language which pertains to the functions of a sick body and the sordid aspects of human physicality. This rhetoric, aligned with his medical education at John Hopkins Medical School, is completely alien to the artistic and spiritual language of Alma, leaving her confused and disconcerted. This dichotomy of body and soul takes its roots in the pedigree of the two characters: while John’s father, as a doctor, nurses the bodies of his patients, Alma’s father, as a minister of the Episcopal church, attends to the souls of his parishioners. John and Alma apparently appropriate these callings since John studies medicine and Alma performs on stage as an amateur singer. But because the two of them exist in different figurative worlds, which are derivatives of their different ontological statuses, they cannot consummate their relationship. Their romance is thwarted before it actually starts and when John later proposes sex, Alma refuses, offended by his innuendoes which cannot be reconciled with the feelings and expectations of a southern damsel. The rejection of John’s proposal is the moment of rapture, of the ultimate divergence between the two characters’ paths. From the metafigurative perspective, this is also the climactic moment of a metafigurative reversal which underpins the play.

### **The Figurative Reversal**

This juxtaposition of numerous macrofigurative contrasts, emphatically stressed by Williams through a phalanx of macrofigures in the initial sections of the play, undergoes a fundamental reversal as the plot progresses. By the end of *Summer and Smoke*, Alma has ceased to adhere to her prescriptive decorum of propriety, while John has abandoned his belligerent and promiscuous ways and assumed the stance of righteousness, rebuffing her open advances. Using lines akin to those from the opening of the play, Alma talks of how “the Gulf wind has blown [the feeling of dying] away like a cloud of smoke” (Part II, Scene 5), instigating a powerful change in her. In consequence, as she professes, “the girl who said ‘no’ – she doesn’t exist anymore, she died last summer – suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her” (Part II, Scene 5). The previous content of Alma’s metaphorical body-vessel turned out

be deadly for her, figuratively depriving her of air and causing her symbolic death. Ostensibly, in her declaration, she resorts to the metaphorical language of solidity and the conceptualization of the human body as a vessel that was earlier characterized by John. This time, however, the figurative warmth and the carnal solidity become her macrometaphorical domain. The choking smoke itself is ambivalent, however, as it can be associated with both carnal passion as well as the intangibility of the incorporeal soul.

At the end of the day, ironically confirming John's mocking diagnosis, Alma's metaphorical asphyxiation is the demise of only one of the two identities that he differentiated between at the beginning of *Summer and Smoke*. The death of the damsel who refused his sexual advances, who constantly shivered from the cold and who was notoriously preoccupied with her social duties as a daughter of a preacher, provided the metaphorical space for the growth of her second "self." The liberated and thriving doppelganger allows Alma to shed the pretenses that were the basis of her earlier image of a belle. When the girl who says "no" is gone, by implication, it is the girl who says "yes" that is given prominence – a female version of the belligerent John, who is finally figuratively set ablaze by his earlier "Promethean" advances.

Both John and Alma are characters in transition, whose worldviews undergo a fundamental shift. John's new philosophy of life is to look beyond the carnal, and to see in the human body more than a combination of "ugly and functional" organs, as reductively implied by the anatomy chart hanging on the wall of his office. John admits to Alma, "something else is in there, an immaterial something – as thin as smoke – which all of those ugly machines combine to produce, and that's their whole reason" (Part II, Scene 5). In his newfound wisdom, he acknowledges the existence of the spiritual that permeates and overshadows the carnal, the very element that defined Alma before the transition. Likewise, his perception of Alma is turned upside down, and what he had recognized as the apprehensive "ice" of her demeanor would now be viewed by him as an inviting "flame," as her earlier refusal to embrace the physical element of human nature becomes a source of admiration for him.

Alma reacts to John's transformation with dread, declaring despondently, "you talk as if my body had ceased to exist for you" (Part II, Scene 5). She realizes that the complete reversal of John's perception of her former self effectively means that their relationship cannot come to fruition. His view of human nature is still hyperbolized, in the sense that it is still selective – yet, while at the beginning of the play John was blind to Alma's spiritual complexity, now he remains ignorant of her newly awakened corporeality. As she declares, "the tables have turned with a vengeance" (Part II, Scene 5), recognizing the dramatic irony of the situation. The reason for her earlier rejection of John is the very thing that she would like to see in him now. Thus, she realizes that getting what she had hoped for in the first place is now the reason for her ultimate unhappiness. After John's departure, in the final scene of *Summer and Smoke*, under the notorious, symbolic statue of the stone angel in the fountain, Alma engages in another flirtatious conversation – this time, with a nameless stranger, a "travelling salesman" that is bound to lead to a one-night stand. This conversation and the implied causal sex she becomes engaged in complete her transformation and the metafigurative reversal of the play's central binarity.



## Conclusions

The itinerary of the play, the transition from part I, "A Summer" to part II, "A Winter," provides *Summer and Smoke* with a timeline against which the drama of the mismatched relationship of John and Alma unfolds. And, as is usually the case in the tense world of Williams, the flow of time has a highly destructive impact on the characters of the plays. As the drama progresses, Williams reveals all the obstacles that prevent the fulfillment of the protagonists' desires. To reinforce the impact of the failed love affair upon the recipients of the play, Williams framed the tragic plot in a metafigurative act of reversal, a chiasmus-like changing of perspectives which generates the effect of a paradox. The complete rearrangement of the worldviews between John and Alma is accompanied not only by the replacement of symbols associated with them, but also by a transition in the network of macrometaphors of temperature and solidity that Williams deploys strategically in both dialogue and stage directions. These macrometaphors serve as cohesive devices, allowing him to form a uniform figurative binarity of soul and body. In the final sections of the play, Williams reverses this arrangement, demonstrating how fleeting the chance for a successful romance between John and Alma was in the first place, and how relative the monomaniac and uncompromising points may turn out to be.

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