Title

The White Man's Magic Word: Southern Knowledge and White Racial Melancholy

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6wk2392k

Author

Gilmore, John Garrett Bridger

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

The White Man's Magic Word: Southern Knowledge and White Racial Melancholy

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

John Garrett Bridger Gilmore

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Arlene Keizer, Chair
Professor Richard Godden
UCI Endowed Chair in Rhetoric Virginia Jackson

2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

<div align="center">

CURRICULUM VITAE

Garrett Bridger Gilmore

</div>

EDUCATION

PhD**,** English (with Critical Theory Emphasis), University of California, Irvine (Expected May 2018)

MA, English, University of California, Irvine (2014)

BA**,** English and Philosophy, Tufts University (2012)

FIELD OF STUDY

American Literature

PUBLICATIONS

In Print

"New Reflections on the Old Jim Crow" (Review Essay), *North Carolina Literary Review Online* (January 2018)

Forthcoming

"Refracting Blackness: Slavery and Fitzgerald's Historical Consciousness*," Mississippi Quarterly*

"The Case Against an Agrarian Fantasy" (Review Essay), *South* (Spring 2018)

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The White Man's Magic Word: Southern Knowledge and White Racial Melancholy

by

Garrett Bridger Gilmore

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine 2018

Professor Arlene Keizer, Chair

"The White Man's Magic Word: Southern Knowledge and White Racial Melancholy" re-evaluates the uses to which the memory of slavery is put in white-authored modernist literature. In chapters on Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and F. Scott Fitzgerald, I develop a literary history of white liberal racial attitudes that continue to define the racial discourse of the present. Through these readings, I develop a theory of white racial melancholy: a condition of personally painful and politically paralyzing attachment to intellectual concepts the white subject feels to be corrupted by white supremacy, but without which they cannot imagine either politics or literature.

INTRODUCTION

I)   Racial Individualism, Progress, and National Shame

I must begin by admitting that, contrary to the promise of this project's title, there is no "magic word" contained in the following pages. Such a word would need to unfailingly conjure or trigger the melancholic disavowal, denial, and forgetting that this dissertation theorizes. Drawing on recent psychoanalytic work on race and melancholy and historical and literary critiques of the development of racist and anti-racist ideas in the twentieth century, I ask how and to what extent twentieth-century white authors imagined their status as both critics and beneficiaries of white power. I argue that the authors considered in my dissertation display and, through conventional critical accounts of their work, helped institutionalize what I call *white racial melancholy*, a specific form of intellectual resistance to giving up attachments to modes of white self-making founded in anti-blackness despite the recognized shame of those attachments.

I borrow my title from Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word,* an investigation into the role of melancholia in one of Freud's most famous case studies, because the authors I discuss in what follows are fundamentally similar to Freud's Wolf Man. In "The History of an Infantile Neurosis ('Wolf Man')" (1918), Freud recounts that his treatment of the Wolf Man faced a unique obstacle. "The patient with whom I am here concerned," Freud writes, "remained for a long time unassailably entrenched behind an attitude of obliging apathy" (403). The reason for the Wolf Man's apathy? "His unimpeachable intelligence," Freud suggests, "was, as it were, cut off from the instinctual forces which governed his behavior" (403). At a basic level, white racial melancholy in the authors I consider manifests as an inability or self-satisfied refusal to emotionally process accounts of racism that define it as a system or structure of power, even as

they produce literature that shows an intellectual understanding thereof. Like the Wolf Man, these authors go through the intellectual motions of anti-racist enlightenment without, as it were, altering the deeper-seated attachments to whiteness that their work ostensibly exorcises. These authors therefore reveal a conservatism at the heart of mid-century ideologies of racial progress that relied on the self-evident of education to change the hearts and minds of the average white person.

The inability for apparently racially liberal white people[1] to relinquish racial privilege and power is not a new idea. In *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967), a work published two years after Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* the latest work I consider in this dissertation, Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton concisely lay out the difference between "individual" and "institutional" racism. Individual racism, they offer, is comprised of "overt acts, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property," (4) whereas institutional racism, "originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type" (5). "Thus," they conclude, "*acts* of overt, individual racism may not typify the society, but institutional racism does—with the support of covert, individual *attitudes* of racism" (5). This idea was articulated earlier still. "As Robin M. Williams Jr. argued in 1947," Leah Gordon writes in *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Mid-Century America*, "a 'total orientation' to the race problem might disillusion activists since it

---

[1] While people of any racial background might hold racially liberal beliefs (defined further below), in this dissertation I am interested in the particular historical and psychic stakes of white people's negotiations with more radical anti-racist ideas and movements. Anne Anlin Cheng and David Eng, for example, have each offered theorizations of Asian American processes of losing and retaining whiteness as a cultural ideal as a form of racial melancholy. Within African American intellectual, political and literary history, the relationship between black communities and white cultural ideals has long been a subject of both intellectual debate and shifting pragmatic concern.

prompted, 'the feeling that intergroup tensions are so deeply embedded in the nature of our whole social system that only a major alteration of the system could bring adequate solution" (11). Similar ideas expressed throughout the twentieth century constitute an ongoing critique of the epistemological and social protocols of American racial liberalism. Defining that concept, the philosopher Charles Mills argues that

Liberalism…has historically been predominantly a *racial* liberalism, in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the contract, correspondingly, has really been a *racial* one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit. (29)

Throughout the twentieth century, black Americans found increasingly complex and public ways to offer critiques of American racial institutions from the perspectives of black experience that challenged the, "cultivated forgetfulness, [the] set of constructed deafnesses and blindnesses, [that] characterizes racial liberalism: subjects one cannot raise, issues one cannot broach, topics one cannot explore. The contractarian ideal of social transparency about present and past would, if implemented, make it impossible to continue as before: one would see and know too much" (Mills 43). One historical thread tying together the authors under consideration is the changes in their affective and intellectual responses to critiques of white supremacy as black political and social organizing came into national prominence over the course of the middle decades of the twentieth century. That is, I provide accounts of how white authors succumbed to the melancholic aspects of racial liberalism as they provided institutionally acceptable intellectual critiques thereof.

In naming this response "melancholy" I draw on the work of Anne Anlin Cheng and Paul Gilroy, whose *The Melancholy of Race* and *Postcolonial Melancholy* (respectively) suggest lines of exploring the racial expression of what Gilroy calls "the loss of a fantasy of omnipotence" (107).

In the context of early 2000s Britain, Gilroy argues that the formulation of a theory of "poscolonial melancholia," "[acknowledges] that exceptionally powerful feelings of comfort and compensation are produced by the prospect of even a partial restoration of the country's long-vanished homogeneity. Repairing that aching loss is usually signified by the recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness" (95). For Gilroy, the "discomfort, shame, and perplexity" (98) of the dissolution of the British empire and the internal political antagonisms attending multiculturalism lead to a "neurotic" (96) attachment to World War Two and the country's role in the defeat of fascism across Europe, historical triumphs presumed to by the exploits of an imagined insular white Britain.

Cheng shares with Gilroy the suspicion that internal contradictions spurs melancholic feeling. She suggests

If one of the ideals of that sustained the American nation since its beginning has been its unique proposition that 'all men are created equal,' then one of America's ongoing national mortifications must be its history of acting otherwise... American melancholy is particularly acute because America is *founded* on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over. (10)

In other words, the "loss" that initiates white racial melancholy in Cheng's formulation is the failure of America's liberal ideals, a loss potentially borne out over and over as succeeding generations of white and non-white subjects encounter each other through racialized power structures. When faced with the realities of racial disparities permeating apparently neutral institutions and attitudes, white Americans are illiberal despite themselves. Cheng's focus on different types of white racial melancholy proves instructive for positioning *different* responses to the loss of the fantasy of omnipotence. Cheng insists that *both* white racists *and* white liberals are melancholic. White racists, "need to develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideologies," while liberals, "need to keep burying the racial other

in order to memorialize them" (11). "Most melancholic of all," Cheng insists, are those who consciously adopt blindness to racial history and insist that they cannot "see" race (11). Each of these attitudes suggest a lingering attachment to abstract institutions—American ideals—over and above political solidarity with subjects who experience racialized patterns of harm.

A turn to the concept of melancholy to theorize whiteness, that is, defining white racial experience in relation to "loss" is constantly under threat of being co-opted for the normalizing and reifying white supremacist political logics. As Juliet Hooker argues, "the political imagination of white citizens has been shaped not by the experience of loss but rather by different forms of white supremacy and…this results in a distorted form of racial political math that sees black gains as white losses, and not simply losses but defeats" (485). Cheng explicitly argues that "what is needed is a serious effort at rethinking the term 'agency' in relation to forms of racial grief, to broaden the term beyond the assumption of a pure sovereign subject" (15). In their focus on contradiction as the effective cause of a feeling of loss, both Cheng and Gilroy usefully challenge a tradition of liberal racial thinking as their attention to the unconscious and collective dynamics of melancholia offer critiques of the liberal subject who might finally fully know and thereby fully control his or her actions and beliefs. In *From Power to Prejudice,* Gordon defines mid-to-late twentieth-century U.S. race thinking according to "racial individualism," which "[brings] psychological individualism, rights-based individualism, and the belief in the socially transformative power of education" (2). Racial melancholy offers a useful conceptual rebuttal to racial individualism, denying as it does the progressive optimism of educational and psychological transformation in favor of unconscious resistance and stagnation at odds with consciously held egalitarian ideals.

The use of psychological and social-scientific discourses to define and produce knowledge critical of racism emerges in the United States in the middle decades of the twentieth century. As Nell Irvin Painter explains, "by the late 1920s psychology and sociology had begun focusing on the subjective nature of racial differences in society. Soon race prejudice became a subject worth analyzing" (329). In the 1927 article "The Pathology of Race Prejudice," which resulted in his ouster from Morehouse College, E. Franklin Frazier offered an early argument for considering white anti-blackness as a psychopathology.

> Southern white people write and talk about the majesty of law, the sacredness of human rights, and the advantages of democracy,—and the next moment defend mob violence, disfranchisement, and Jim Crow treatment of the Negro. White men and women who are otherwise kind and law-abiding will indulge in the most revolting forms of cruelty towards black people. Thus the whole system of ideas respecting he Negro is dissociated from the normal personality and,—what is more significant for our thesis,—this latter system of ideas seems exempt from the control of the personality. (857)

While some foundational works of racial psychology like the wave of IQ testing in the early decades of the twentieth century[2] used the scientific force of the field to buttress intellectually outmoded concepts of racial difference with disciplinary objectivity, by the 1930s and 40s more and more mainstream white American researchers began to conceive of *racism*, not *race*, as a pathology. As Sander Gilman and James Thomas explain *Are Racists Crazy?* (2016), "the intra- and post-war years were marked by the rise of attitude-focused research in social psychology, which quickly became part of the core of the discipline. As a result, racism became widely seen as a variety of individual psychopathology" (74). The task for psychologists and other social scientists increasingly became explaining the relationship between the individual mind and the social forces and material effects of racism.

---

[2] See Robert Guthrie *Even the Rat was White: A Historical View of Psychology,* 55-87.

Theorists of racial individualism in other fields developed policy positions alongside these changes in psychological discourse. The turn towards sociological and policy approaches to racism reflect the workings of, "educationalization…the American penchant for addressing complex social problems through education" (Gordon 8). Gunnar Myrdal, for example, "presented prejudice and discrimination as the root cause of racial conflict, focused on individuals in the study of race relations, and suggested that racial justice could be attained by changing white minds and protecting African American rights" (Gordon 2). In *An American Dilemma The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, Myrdal theorizes racism as precisely a problem in white people's thinking, not as a problem of black people's racial essence. "There is a natural tendency on the part of white people in American to attempt to localize and demarcate the Negro problem into the segregated sector of American society where the Negroes live," he writes in the work's introduction, "the assumption underlying the approach in this book is, on the contrary, that the Negro problem exists and changes because of conditions and forces operating in the larger American society" (xlix). Several years earlier in *Race: Science and Politics* (1942), anthropologist Ruth Benedict offered a systematic definition of racism for the first time as "a creation of our own time" (4). While Benedict decried *racism,* a belief in the moral and cultural superiority of one racial group over others, she nonetheless argues in the fundamental biological reality of *races*. "It is essential, if we are to live in this modern world," she writes, "that we should understand racism and be able to judge its arguments. We must know the facts first of race, and then of this doctrine that has made use of them" (5). Even if Benedict held on to a belief in quantifiable biological differences between distinct races, her work articulated an emerging liberal position that took objective scientific knowledge to be a tool of anti-racism.

In *An American Dilemma,* Myrdal bases his definition "of what a social problem really is"

on a relationship between knowledge and action quoted from John Dewey's *Freedom and Culture:*

Anything that obscures the fundamentally moral nature of the social problem is harmful, not matter whether it proceeds from the side of physical or of psychological theory. Any doctrine that eliminates or even obscures the function of choice of values and enlistment of desires and emotions in behalf of those chosen weakens personal responsibility for judgment and for action. It thus helps create the attitudes that welcome and support the totalitarian state. (xliii)

Under this definition, objective knowledge counteracts obfuscating "doctrines" that limit and

bastardize personal responsibility and agency. For Myrdal, the American "dilemma" is defined not

by differences in racialized modes of knowledge held by white and black Americans, but by the

fact that

the conflicting valuations are also held by the same person. *The moral struggle goes on within people and not only between them. As people's valuations are conflicting, behavior normally becomes a moral compromise. There are no homogenous 'attitudes' behind human behavior but a mesh of struggling inclinations, interests, and ideals, some held conscious and some suppressed, for long intervals but all active in bending behavior in their direction.* (xliv, emphasis original)

For Myrdal, what white people *feel* about racism is important. "Anxiety may be mingled with a

feeling of individual and collective guilt," he writes, "to all [the American dilemma] is a trouble"

(xli). Myrdal's definition of white guilt rests on a notion of internal contradiction. "Relative to all

other branches of Western civilizations," he argues, "[America] is moralistic and 'moral-

conscious.' The ordinary American is the opposite of a cynic. He is on the average more of a

believer and a defender of the faith in humanity than the rest of the Occidentals. It is a relatively

important matter to him to be true to his own ideals and to carry them out in actual life" (xlii).

Myrdal goes so far as to define the American racial ethos as a "bright fatalism' content with

willfully ignoring these fundamental contradictions.

While on the one hand, to such a moralistic and rationalistic being as the ordinary American, the Negro problem and his own confused and contradictory attitudes toward it must be disturbing; on the other hand, the very mass of unsettled problems in his heterogeneous and changing culture, and the inherited liberalistic trust that things will ultimately take care of themselves and get settled

in one way or another, enable the ordinary American to live on happily, with recognized contradictions around him and within him, in a kind of bright fatalism which is unmatched in the rest of the Western world. (xliii)

Despite the social-scientific patina of Myrdal's research, then, his study attempts to produce new moral categories, or as Sander Gilman and James Thomas write of Myrdal's work in *Are Racists Crazy?* (2016), for Myrdal "science is not merely a tool for explaining and justifying behavior, but is unequivocally intended to produce social change and policy" (166). Myrdal notes the relationship between anti-racist knowledge production and the field of politics on which it can act. "All 'pro-Negro' forces in American society, whether organized or not, and irrespective of their wide differences in both strategy and tactics, sense that this [the self-contradiction between white people's valuations] is the situation. They all work on the national conscience. They all seek to fix everybody's attention on the suppressed moral conflict" (xlii). Myrdal fins evidence for a disjunction between white people's professed ideals and their actual behavior in the gap between feeling and knowledge attending black civil rights victories. What Myrdal calls "'pro-Negro' forces," "are often regarded as public nuisances, or worse—even when they succeed in getting grudging concessions to Negro rights and welfare" (xlii). For Myrdal, the end of anti-racist work was assimilation not only of black citizens into the national community, but of white people's particular improper feelings about black people into the proper national moral ideals.

Both Myrdal and Benedict frame racism as a moral problem fundamentally linked to insufficient white ways of knowing. Benedict's critical account of scientific racism attends almost exclusively to forms of intra-white racial thinking that would characterize inhabitants of Europe along distinct, hierarchical racial lines. "The racist literature of the United States," she suggests, "deals hardly at all with our great national racial problem, the Negro" (126). Benedict understands this absence historically; if white race-researchers largely ignored black people in their frenzy to

codify European ethnicities, it was because the general oppression of black people required fewer new scientific ways of justifying blackness as a racial and cultural other. "Our treatment of the Negro," she writes, "conforms so closely to the predilections of those authors [of white-supremacist race science] that they doubtless had little to suggest" (126). White racial science responded to crises in European immigration and shifting class relations, but anti-blackness did not need elaborate intellectual justification; it was self-evident. In Myrdal and Benedict, then, we can begin to see the codification of a way of understanding racism and anti-racism as intellectual and moral ventures jointly housed within social scientific disciplinary boundaries. The main tasks of the anti-racist intellectual were therefore to draw attention to contradictions in white thoughts and actions or to produce objective data about black people (as in Abram Kardiner's *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (1951)) that would correct gaps in white knowledge. Each of these knowledge-producing actions would implicitly lead to the correction of moral behavior, and racism would be corrected.

Racial liberalism thus prioritized changes in attitude over changes in material relations, leaving the latter to emerge organically from the former. The intellectual and moral protocols of racial individualism inaugurated in the mid-twentieth century continue today, as Gilman and Thomas argue, in part because

the emergent authority of the medical and psychological sciences has produced a growing belief among laypersons *and* academics that *racism* is (1) an individual action and (2) a negative position to hold. Within the psychological disciplines, this sentiments fueled, in part, by the growth of 'attitude research,' some of which has resulted in the promotion and promulgation of educational resources, social activism, and even social policy aimed at making individuals *less racist* by raising their awareness of their own prejudicial beliefs. (226)

Despite its disparate intellectual forbearers, Gordon argues, racial individualism's core commitment was to the agency of the individual as opposed to consciousness of the impersonal institutional and material histories of American racism. In advance, then, the racial individualism

that would shape official US policy in the 1950s and 60s and that today justifies the dismantling of voting rights protections, reductions in social welfare and civic services to black communities, and near-total impunity for police brutality was shaped to buttress, rather than challenge, white imaginative and emotional capacities.

The official adoption of racial individualism in American political institutions began in *To Secure These Rights*, a 1946 report authored by a special committee on civil rights convened by President Harry Truman. The report details findings related to disenfranchisement, economic and educational discrimination, housing and healthcare disparities, lynching, police brutality, the enslavement of black inmates, and the internment of Japanese Americans before offering paths for redress at the legislative and judicial level. Summarizing their findings, the authors report, "from our work as a Committee, we have learned much that has shocked us, and much that has made us feel ashamed." Here, in the officially summary of this federally commissioned fact-finding committee, white shame arises in relationship to failures to live up to national ideals. Militating against this same, the report's introduction doubles down on its commitment to American values:

This necessary emphasis upon our country's failures should not be permitted to obscure the real measure of its successes. No fair-minded student of American history, or of world history, will deny to the United States a position of leadership in enlarging the range of human liberties and rights, in recognizing and stating the ideals of freedom and equality, and in steadily and loyally working to make those ideals a reality. Whatever our failures in practice have been or may be, there has never been a time when the American people have doubted the validity of those ideals. We still regard them as vital to our democratic system.

Whatever vitality might remain in American democracy, and whatever the "strong arm of government" might do to "cope with individual acts of discrimination, injustice and violence," the committee concludes that "the actual infringements of civil rights by public or private persons are only symptoms. They reflect the imperfections of our social order, and the ignorance and moral weaknesses of some of our people."

In Myrdal and Benedict as in Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, then, we can begin to see the codification of a way of understanding racism and anti-racism as distinct intellectual and moral ventures in line with official American ideals and not, as they might have been, critiques of foundational racial power structures in American society. The main tasks of the anti-racist intellectual were therefore to draw attention to contradictions in white thoughts and actions or to produce objective data about black people. As the authors of *To Secure These Rights* theorize, "Most prejudice can not survive real understanding of the great variations among people in any one group; or of the scientific findings which establish the equality of groups, and disprove racist nonsense; or of the fact that in a democratic commonwealth, prejudice is an immoral outlaw attitude" (134). The reports insists that "people must be taught about the evil effects of prejudice. They must be helped to understand why they have developed prejudices. It means trying to show them that it is unfair and stupid to condemn whole groups" (134). Each of these knowledge-producing actions would implicitly lead to the correction of moral behavior, and racism would be corrected. The committee's faith in the power of knowledge leads them to explain their admission that "since many bigots need their prejudices for reasons of their own, they do not like to give them up" by suggesting that such bigots "are very successful at avoiding written or spoken presentations which may disturb their prejudices" (134). To end white racist attitudes, the government simply had to get the right people to read or see the right educational material, and from there the self-evident power of American democratic ideals would run its course.

Yet twenty years after *An American Dilemma*, Charles Silberman argued in *Crisis in Black and White* (1964) that "the tragedy of race relations in the United States is that there is no American Dilemma. White Americans are not torn and tortured by the conflict between their devotion to the American creed and their actual behavior. They are upset by the current state of race relations, to

be sure. But what troubles them is not that justice is being denied but that their peace is being shattered and their business interrupted" (9-10). Indeed, in attributing too much to the propriety of white feelings at the advance of black civil rights and social influence, liberal thinkers in the tradition of Myrdal have solidified into a politics of what Juliet Hooker calls "white grievance." Hooker writes of the centrality of white feeling in national racial discourse,

There is a certain irony in the expectation that the aim of black politics should be to elicit white empathy, as there is an important distinction between empathy and political solidarity. To have empathy is to be able to see and identify with the pain or suffering of others. Empathy can thus remain in the realm of feeling without implying action, and it can also depend on seeing the other as like oneself in some fundamental way. In contrast, political solidarity does not depend on prepolitical bonds and requires taking action to redress injustice. (484)

A focus on empathy, racial attitudes and other subjective concepts can lead to theories of melancholy that fetishize the felt experience of loss, whether or not those losses are real, let alone necessary for a transformative anti-racist politics.

As Robyn Weigman argues in *Object Lessons*, "the distinctiveness of southern white supremacist identity since the Civil War hinges on a repeated appeal to the minoritized, injured, 'nature' of whiteness" (146). In a language of loss unattuned to power relations—even when those loses are understood to be symbolic and psychic—whiteness can transform itself a threatened position—a racialized position among others—and entrench itself in a politics of racist reaction and defense. This dynamic accounts for a history of concerted and systematic pushback against black civil rights, what Carol Anderson calls a "white rage" that is triggered by "blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full equality and citizenship" (3). For Anderson, white rage "is not about visible violence, but rather [works] its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly" (3). One of the central concerns of my dissertation is tracing the way that intellectual and literary institutions of the twentieth century shape and define the possibility

of turning ostensibly anti-racist knowledge into action. How does the Committee on Civil Right's enlightened shame differ from the shameful ignorance of the white American racist? Conscious of the racist uses to which a concept of white racial melancholy might be put, I argue that the framing of melancholy is better understood not as a cultural expression of white American society and but as a defensive commitment to white power. White racial melancholy invites the construction of narratives about white supremacy and institutional racism that privilege white psychic transformation through education or emotional catharsis (or both) at the expense of knowledge and accounts of institutional racism developed by non-white people. Instead of focusing on the primacy of narratives of loss in melancholy, then I focus on what narratives about melancholy have enabled white authors to communicate about their particular experiences of the growth of racial individualism, black civil rights movements, black power, the Great Migration, and other changes in the material and intellectual dynamics of race in the twentieth century. In facing the relationship between whiteness and shame, knowledge and action, we come to the problem of white racial melancholy.

II)   White Racial Melancholy

Navigating the difference between historical and structural melancholy, United States policy and white anti-racist intellectuals adopted "the notion that a sick society produces sick individuals," which was, "a recurrent theme within mental health discourse through the 1950s, and, consequently, would appear within the claims of public officials and activists who drew upon the authority of medical and psychological science to make claims about the nature, and consequences, of extreme racism" (Gilman and Thomas 228). Racial individualism and its associated intellectual and political protocols thus sought to facilitate *introjection*, the process by which the psychologically healthy subject moves on from loss. When a loved object or ideal is

lost, the subject's attachments to it seek new forms of satisfaction. Through introjection, transference occurs whereby the newly unsatisfiable attachments are systematically assigned to new objects whose validity are socially reinforced. For Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the first introjection is the loss of the maternal breast, whose place is taken by words that initiate the subject into a community shaped by the same introjective psychic processes. The language acquired as a trade-off for the reality of the mother's absence is guaranteed as a substitute because it does, in the form of calls to the mother, re-establish her presence. Thus initially, "the mother's constancy is the guarantor of the meaning of words. Once this guarantee has been acquired, and only then, can words replace the mother's presence and also give rise to fresh introjections" (128). The elaboration of language shifts the burden of guaranteeing meaning off of the mother and onto "the speaking community at large" (128). From then on, "introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths...Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by *giving figurative shape* to presence, it can only be *comprehended* or *shared* in a 'community of empty mouths'" (128). While signaling loss, then, "introjection does not tend toward compensation, but growth. By broadening and enriching the ego, introjection seeks to introduce into it the unconscious, nameless, or repressed libido" that emerges following a loss (113). The educational and psychological protocols of racial liberalism seek to facilitate this introjective process by providing new terms around which a new racially enlightened "community" might form.

What, though, does racial liberalism see as lost? As Cheng suggests, a sense of contradiction between explicitly held beliefs and actions and habits can precipitate a feeling of loss. Abraham and Torok suggest something similar, arguing in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* that "structures of signification…work to produce a fictional or topological event" (iv) that transforms

some previously psychically neutral facet of the subject's history into a shameful, incommunicable desire. Psychic "loss" in this case is not precipitated by an historical event experienced in the moment as a loss, but rather by the retroactive application of a new set of values onto past experiences. Indeed, for Torok in "The Illness of Mourning," melancholia arises "not…from the affliction caused by the objectal loss itself, but rather from the feeling of an irreparable crime: the crime of having been overcome with desire, of having been surprised by an overflow of libido at the least appropriate moment, when it would behoove us to be grieved in despair" (110). The contradictions attending the racial contract, then, only seem painful when an overflow of racist, illiberal feeling arises in response to therapeutic attempts to facilitate introjection. At stake here is the recognition of a real contradiction: the existing political and intellectual institutions that would facilitate racially liberal introjections are themselves the product of histories of violent racial exclusion, and thus require transformations of their own.

Racial liberalism sets up an impossible task for its subjects, creating a condition of psychic *incorporation*. As Torok writes, incorporation, "implies a loss that occurred before the desires concerning the object might have been freed. The loss acts as a prohibition and, whatever form it may take, constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to introjection" (113). In the case of incorporation, the desires that attach the subject to the lost object continue to seek expression before introjection can run its course; something in the attachment remains unspeakable in the subject's introjectively expanded psychic vocabulary. Torok continues, "incorporation is born of a prohibition it sidesteps but does not actually transgress. The ultimate aim of incorporation is to recover, in secret and through magic, an object that, for one reason or another, evaded its own function: mediating the introjection of desires" (114). This last phrase is crucial for white racial melancholy: when the white institutional norms and ideals that have historically governed the

constitution of white subjectivity are revealed to be racially exclusionary and therefore internally contradicting, whiteness fails its assembled introjective community. Torok later restates this process, arguing that "the presence of an imago in the subject attests to the fact that a desire became retroactively reprehensible and unspeakable before it could be introjected" (121). Racial liberalism insists that new knowledge will correct its internal contradictions, but the knowledge that has been increasingly produced since the 1950s that is critical of the violent histories and ideologies of racial liberalism in fact make the grammars and vocabulary of the liberal racial contract "retroactively reprehensible."

Thus is mid-century racial liberalism partially a result of incorporation; if as Gunnar Myrdal suggests, the truth of racial conflict is "within people and not only between them," it is between an identification with the ideal image of white and/or American values in spite of the conscious recognition of the material violence the history of those values. Under the concepts "equality," "justice," "fairness," (or any other moral abstraction, as I detail in the chapters that follow) conceived through individual rights-based frameworks (Gordon 2), white power is the norm. As Hooker argues, "white dominance has resulted in a narrow political imagination that constrains the way whites understand citizenship, as asymmetrical access to institutional political power vis-à-vis racial 'others'" (486). Changes in the material structure—schools, prisons, health care, labor opportunity and conditions, the environment—of American society that might address racial violence and inequality by dismantling an redistributing racialized material and psychic benefits are forestalled because they might hurt. To counteract this privileging of white feeling, Hooker argues, "an important question for black political thought (and democratic theory) is how to theorize the kinds of (white) political imaginaries and practices of politics wrought by the absence of political loss" (484). In the apparently sincere historical and contemporary calls for

gradual progress, the preservation of American institutional norms, and white leadership in imagining anti-racist futures, "the imagoic and objectal fixation is cemented precisely by the contradictory and therefore utopian hope that the imago, the warden of repression, would authorize its removal" (Torok 116).

With this dynamic of white racial melancholia in mind, I read my authors for the way they resist and/or fail to yield to a position of white supremacist grievance and a politics of loss by the use of a rhetoric of melancholia as both a critique of and a tacit participation in emerging discourses of progressive and educationalist racial individualism. I argue that the authors considered in my dissertation are no different from other "antiracist scholars [who] negotiated competing theoretical and political commitments, frequently delineating racial individualism, the social theory, from racial liberalism, the agenda for change. Ultimately, however, many embraced racial liberalism while simultaneously raising questions about racial individualism, a form of political pragmatism whose long-term consequences endure" (Gordon 8). What is at stake in my readings is a separation of the terms of these authors' critiques of racism, white supremacy, and segregation and the transformational ends to ends to which they are put. On the one hand, narrative melancholia as a theme helps these authors to articulate a feeling through which structural melancholia might be brought to bear as a critique of racial individualism. Melancholia offered as literary theme, though, does not necessarily constitute genuine introjection. Instead, as I argue through readings of the moral and political stakes of anti-racism across the careers of the authors in question, I take overt staging and rumination on melancholia to signal incorporation. By staging melancholic pain, these authors exhibit incorporation as "merely a language *signaling* introjection, without actually accomplishing it…merely *states* the desire to introject" (Torok 115). Ultimately, the intellectual white racial melancholy I identify in this dissertation results from the painful realizations that these

authors both explore and avoid, that regardless of their unique knowledge and insight into the human psyche, institutional structures of whiteness routinely supersede their attempts to transcend them.

I want to further stress the role of narrative in the incorporation and introjection, as in my dissertation I comment on both fictional narratives written by and cultural narratives about the authors I consider. The recognition of the subject's loss by other subjects with the same psychic needs (the same histories of loss) is crucial for the recovery of psychic stability after loss. As subjects talk about their losses and pain, openly grieve them and orient themselves to others through them, they legislate the pain of loss and are (re)affirmed within a community. Community is thus based around, in part, the mutual recognition of the symbolic language of desire that introjection creates. This conception of a racial community resonates with Orlando Patterson's elaboration of the concept of recognition in the master-slave relationship given a view of slavery as an "institutional process" and not an interpersonal relationship. Disagreeing with Hegel that "slavery created an existential impasse for the master," Patterson argues, "the master could and usually did achieve the recognition he needed form other free persons, including other masters" (99). The recognition of the master's freedom need not come from the enslaved but could come just as easily from other masters *through* the recognition of mastery in the relationship with the enslaved. What Pattern conceives of as the master class, and what Wilderson calls "civil society," can be understood to be social structures shaped by shared histories and processes of racial introjection. I take such "communit[ies] of empty mouths" to be held together not only abstractly through language as a structure, but also concretely in the way that language is used in what Frank Wilderson calls "intra-communal narrative arcs of transformation" (139). The kind of recognition that language affords subjects comes about through use, and thus is subject to the way that

language and its functioning is racialized. As Wilderson argues, the white "collective unconscious calls upon Blacks as props, which they harness as necessary implements to bring about their psychic and social transformation, and to vouchsafe the coherence of their own human subjectivity" (139).

The central concern of my dissertation is tracing how white-authored literature has served in service of and as a critique of the cultural narratives about education, intelligence, morality and psychopathology that constitute twentieth-century racial individualism. I read canonical works of white Southern and American modernism as they interact with the development of racial individualism and the politics of white grievance by mapping imminent critiques articulated as *white racial melancholy* expressed through narrative and historical frames of loss that both affirm and avoid the recognition of structural melancholy. In turning to these works, I share Toni Morrison's suspicion in *Playing in the Dark* that something particularly interesting with regard to white racial self-fashioning happens in high canonical white writers—F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Penn Warren—not, though, as Morrison suggests, because writers are inherently perceptive, but rather because these writers are so central to traditional evaluations of the achievements of American literature in a period of profound racial *and* literary ideological change in the middle decades of the twentieth century. That is, melancholy's disrupted temporality and associated social alienation serves these authors as a conceptual tool for challenging (for various racist and anti-racist reasons) progress narratives of racial liberalism, but it also demarcates the racial limits of the address of their narratives. The tendency of these authors to present intellectual characters as pathologically melancholic suggests a reflexivity in their critiques of segregation and racist attitudes, and I read these authors for the way their presentation of white racial melancholy in their texts opens allows us to read implicit

conservatism, grievance, and rage at the margins of their ostensibly anti-racist work. I take the critiques of white supremacy and anti-blackness contained in these works as being both authorized and constrained by melancholic attachment to white cultural ideals.

I bring to my readings several forms of critical skepticism emerging from black feminist intellectual traditions, especially insofar as white authors and critics evaluate their own relationship to black figures and politics. The basic architecture of the violent process of self-fashioning through anti-blackness is laid out plainly by Hortense Spillers in "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book:"

The captive body…brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated'…dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (208)

Spillers identifies an agent-less discourse, "bloodless and anonymous" that murders the black subject through the basic processes of thought: naming, judging, remembering. The anti-blackness that Spillers identifies here becomes for Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* a literary logic of whiteness: "the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17). Morrison argues that reductive and stereotypical representations of black people and culture in white-authored American literature, for so long ignored or dismissed as signs of aesthetic or personal failure, actually constitute an important grammar of white self-fashioning. Africanist tropes, instead of being *simply* white misunderstandings of the way black people really are, are in reality windows into the creation of white self- and other-consciousness in particular historical moments. For both Spillers and Morrison, the powers of whiteness and anti-

blackness operate through misdirection, obfuscation, and ignorance. Spillers' "endless disguise" is for Morrison a "silence and evasion [that] have historically ruled literary discourse" (9).

In their own registers and in the critical projects that their work has inspired, Morrison and Spillers teach us ways of critically reading blackness in dominant white texts and cultural practices. Yet, as their work makes visible the ideological functioning of blackness in white power structures, it does not immediately solve the problems of identification and attachment that constitute white racial melancholy. Christina Sharpe draws attention to such a failure of identification in her reading of white critics' responses to Kara Walker's work. Sharpe comments on Joan Copjec's readings of Walker's *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), "Race, like slavery, is read as entirely about black people, and everyday practices become reified in these descriptions" (173). Sharpe suggests that Copjec, "knows that these characters represent black and white people of various classes, slave and free, but she proceeds to list only diegetically black characters and to discuss the actions of the cutouts as if they were only black performances" (173). The effect of this stunted reading, Sharpe argues, is that Copjec "repeats what is standard in white critics' readings of Walker," (173) and by extension, of white critics' responses to representations of race and slavery in general: "To erase the white characters is to repress and then to repeat the profound national, visual, and rhetorical violence that Walker's allegories of slavery attempt to make visible. The subject (black and white) doing the erasing (of self and other) is unable to see that erasure as the site of slavery's traumatic insistence" (176). Copjec's inability to "see" the white figures in Walker's work is "symptomatic" (173) of this "traumatic insistence," indicating what Sharpe calls, "the interior limit of post-slavery Euro-American subjectivity" (182). In scenes of slavery, white subjects do not recognize themselves, despite the ease with which they can perceive the continuity between contemporary and historical experiences of black subjects. I

ask how and why such identification with the structural processes of racism find expression as and in melancholy in the mid-twentieth century.

White people can become better readers of blackness in literature and critics of anti-blackness the world, but without a turn to self-reflection such reading remains a participation in the very processes of white self-definition through black relationality that Spillers, Morrison and others characterize.[3] Nevertheless, this work attempts to do what its archive for the most part cannot: engage in white self-reflection without falling back on what Morrison calls the "companionably ego-reinforcing" (8) rationales for white power. In order to do so, I make of Morrison's reading practice what Paul De Man does of Jacques Derrida's reading of Rousseau in "Blindness and Insight." De Man criticizes readers of Rousseau, Derrida included, for assuming that they "[know] something about Rousseau that Rousseau did not wish to know" (112). In the same light, I approach the problem of whiteness, knowledge, and agency in the texts I read as exhibiting at least partial *awareness of* the contradictions in their racialized cultural and political tropes. I also take cues from De Man in his argument that, "a literary text…leads to no transcendental perception, intuition, or knowledge but merely solicits an understanding that has to remain immanent because it poses the problem of its intelligibility in its own terms" (107). This is to say that the generalizations I will make about white racial melancholy at different periods will be limited, and I will instead focus on the particular ways that these authors pose and answer the questions about the world and themselves that seem pertinent to them. For the authors I am considering, the "not wish[ing] to know" is part and parcel of the broader epistemological and ethical implications of their efforts to process history through literature. It is within this cluster of problems that my dissertation begins. How do white Southern writers (and writers sympathetic to

---

[3] Certainly, the present work is not immune from this problem.

the South, in the case of Fitzgerald), burdened *both* by regionality and forced by exterior parties to acknowledge the racism of the present, understand their own position as inheritors of slavery? How do the tools of modernity, both creative and critical, allow for the processing of slavery's legacy, and how do they allow for the theorization and representation of the failure to process it? Finally, how do the barriers these authors faced still block white critical and political knowledge and feeling in the twenty-first century?

In Chapter 1, "'That's a Poor Way to Be': Two Forms of White Racial Melancholy in Flannery O'Connor," I develop an account of narrative and structural manifestations of white racial melancholy through readings of two works by Flannery O'Connor that dramatize the melancholy position of the liberal intellectual and that reveal a dynamic of white racial melancholy in O'Connor herself. In her early short story "The Barber" (1947), O'Connor asks what it would mean to be "neither a Negro nor a white lover." She casts the story's protagonist Rayber as a melancholic alienated by his liberalism, whose fantasy of willful, rational disengagement from racial logics fails because it produces a racialized sentimentality about black people. In *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), O'Connor sentimentalizes the rural black poor in the service of a theological critique of liberal ideologies of psychological determinism, demonstrating a melancholic intellectual evasion she knows operates through black exclusion. In response to the intellectual contradiction inherent in this development, O'Connor satirizes the concept of melancholy in *The Violent Bear It Away* in order to deny the value of the past (Rayber's history, which I read as being both his unique subjective history in the novel and the textual history of the Rayber character) on the present. I end by re-evaluating critical narratives of O'Connor's intellectual development during her career, arguing that in the dynamic of incorporation in the rewriting we see between "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear it Away,* we

can see her entire career as a process of racial reaction expressed in the language of an apparently racially transcendent theology.

Developing the theme of melancholic incorporation as thematic repetition and returns to troubling characters, Chapter 2, ""An Obituary, not a Segregation:" William Faulkner, Black Women, and Melancholic Repetition" reads white racial melancholy as the central motivating force of *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and for Faulkner's ambivalent late-career racial politics. In early works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and "That Evening Sun" (1931), Faulkner had depicted whiteness's origins in racial slavery as a trauma that continued to disrupt the modern white psyche. Yet as he witnessed the commercialization and liberalization of the South in the 1940s and 50s during the Second Great Migration, he began to depict slavery as simply a stage in a broader process of national homogenization in order to imagine a space for white and black coexistence and the survival of white Southern virtues. Outwardly defenses of integration and racial justice, novels like *Requiem for a Nun* naturalize black women's suffering in order to radically rewrite the history of the South as an imagined space of racial harmony. This reading of *Requiem for a Nun* reveals works like *The Sound and the Fury* to exhibit incorporation and demonstrates Faulkner's frustration with black movement and cultural independence as barriers to and refutations of his belief in the white South's desire and ability to move beyond Jim Crow economic and social power structures.

In Chapter 3, "'Some Pain to our Particular Selves': Robert Penn Warren, White Guilt and the Progress of Narratives," I read the centrality of irony to Robert Penn Warren's theories of fiction and narrative as a symptom of white guilt, a mix of self-conscious melancholic shame and self-castigation that nonetheless preserves the psychic claim of white power. Central to my study are Warren's critical works from the 1930s and 40s—text books, essays, anthologies—that

sought to produce politically transcendent literary categories that would preserve fantasies of racial paternalism. I argue that in *All The King's Men* (1946) the protagonists research into the history of his slave-owning family represents a moment of crisis in which Warren realizes he can no longer ironically distance himself from racial antagonism. Yet, for Warren this rejection of intellectual distancing is replaced by an affective distancing that reifies contemplation of the feelings of shame and alienation as signs of a morally upright whiteness, thereby foreclosing action undertaken in the name of anti-racism and melancholically preserving the critical function of white cultural abstractions that these narratives seemingly seek to exorcise. I end by arguing that the performance of white guilt in Warren's interviews with black radical leaders in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965) serves to further entrench a regime of racial liberalism even as it recognizes the affective and logical force of black radical critiques of racial individualism and liberalism.

Finally, in Chapter 4, "Refracting Blackness: Slavery and the Historical Visions of F. Scott Fitzgerald," I argue that for Fitzgerald slavery serves as a sign of an exploitation necessary for representing white alienation in modernity, and that in his final unfinished work, *The Last Tycoon* (1941), economic integration becomes the only thing that might save the self-cannibalizing institutions of consumer capitalism. In the early work I consider, "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz" (1922) Fitzgerald depicts Southern slave society as an idealized, if tragic, model for white culture in which the disavowal of the exploitative relation between production and ownership is naturalized through an un-self-critical textual depiction of racial difference. By contrast, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender is the Night* (1934) begin to critique the white supremacy of the leisure class and in so doing characterize Nick Caraway and Dick Diver through their troubled relations to their own Southern pasts. In these novels, Fitzgerald explores

the limits of white modernity's relationship to slavery as one of melancholic disavowal that positions white existence as increasingly hopeless. Unsuccessfully attempting to move beyond representations of blackness as an unresolvable modern contradiction in *The Last Tycoon,* Fitzgerald paradoxically valorizes consumer capitalism as an outlet for black social equality even as he criticizes its irreversible effects on white American culture.

In each of these chapters, I trace the evolution of connections between subjective and historical pasts at play in the author's career. I look back to white Southern modernism because its conscious and symptomatic presentation of the affective and intellectual limits of white self-critique and intellectual transformation again have become relevant as historians and theorists of race, politics, and economics have increasingly insisted on the foundational importance of slavery to national and international networks of racial and economic control and circulation. Such revisionary work forces us to reconsider the histories of racial and economic progress and stagnation in the composition of the modern nation (the U.S. in particular and the "modern nation" as a formal political arrangement). If this work turns nationally- and globally-focused critical works back towards an interrogation of the disciplinary and exploitative institutions that gave life to and arose from chattel slavery, both using historical forms of slavery to theorize the present and using the present to provide insights into what the archive of slavery leaves unsaid, white critics in particular should be wary of the affective traps and intellectual cul-de-sacs that might result from such a turn.

This process of intellectual and political paralysis befell Whiteness Studies in the 1990s. Writing in 2001 in one of the earliest post-mortems on the field, Mason Stokes notes that Whiteness Studies "too often reproduces what could be called the founding tenets of white critical practice: narcissism and an extreme narrowness of vision" (182). More recently in 2012,

Robyn Wiegman questions "how such critical agency can be differentiated from the narcissism of white subjectivity that underwrites Western humanist traditions…along with the prospect that white antiracism itself is a symptomatic feature of white self- and social mastery, not its political or epistemological displacement" (140). In perhaps the field's final death blow, David Roediger goes to great lengths in his volume *Class, Race, and Marxism* (2017) to reframe the early works of Whiteness Studies as emerging from a black critical tradition grounded in the scholarly work of W.E.B. DuBois and not a white American activist tradition. "The particular identification of *The Wages of Whiteness* and *How the Irish Became White* as founding texts [of Whiteness Studies]," he writes, "have [sic] also threatened…that the genealogy of the field thus created would set up attacks on it as an ultra-radical project designed to further revolutionary aims, not scholarly knowledge" (48). If Roediger is eager to reframe the intellectual genealogy of his own work, perhaps it is because, as Stokes noted in 2001, "Whiteness studies isn't going to end racism…In fact, whiteness studies may not even make a dent in racism" (192) Whiteness Studies, if it continues to exist at all, does so in a state of anxious, handwringing self-reflection following its failure to connect the knowledge it produced to visible and programmatic anti-racist action.

While Whiteness Studies' intellectual relevance faded perhaps in part to do the intractability racism in the world, the growth of critical discourses in African American and Black Diasporic studies about racism's same intractability has led to a wealth of concepts and ethical positions from which Whiteness Studies might draw energy or, once and for all, put itself out of business. Whatever the future of Whiteness Studies, both it and Black Studies find themselves on opposite ends of a major epistemological and ethical gulch which is really a disruption of traditional ways of conceptualizing the relationship between knowledge and

political action caused by the recovery of compromised and fugitive modes of subjectivity lived and experienced by the enslaved and their descendants. Christina Sharpe's argues that "the question for [black] theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in the afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives" (50). For Black and African American Studies to engage intimately but not fatalistically with histories of violence and exploitation as constitutive of contemporary black experience requires what Denise Ferreira da Silva theorizes as "knowing (at) the limits of justice," which is "at once a kind of knowing and doing" (44). As Wiegman concludes, in Whiteness Studies "an inordinate amount of critical force is attributed to the productivities of *conscious* political intentions: the antiracist white subject that Whiteness Studies seeks to cultivate is the consequence of a deliberate refusal of white skin privilege" (139). Whiteness Studies, put simply, was unable to articulate what kind of doing should follow the knowing that it produces. Each of these critical developments points to the necessity of changes in the framing of the co-constitutive concepts of "individual" and "institutional" racial violence, exclusion, and ways of knowing. My reading white racial melancholy in the following chapters attempts to bring attention to previous crises in the relationship between these broad categories, or perhaps rather, attention to crises that precipitated these categories.

My project thus works to extend to other white literary and theoretical discourses Jon Smith's injunction for a New Southern Studies in *Finding Purple America: The South and the future of American Cultural Studies.* Smith calls on Southern Studies scholars to "learn to break the cycle: learn not to 'forget' a lost loved object or southern 'essence' (as this issue has historically been presented) but to come to understand what leads [one] to seek out such objects in the first place and invest so much in them." (34) I do not find in this dissertation's readers answers to the

questions that contemporary work in Black and African American Studies proposes about the evolution of slavery's social relations through the twentieth century. While looking back to slavery authorizes important lines of black intellectual and artistic production, I do not look to white Southern modernism for successful models of white intellectual inquiry, nor do I find in my authors radical insights made newly available by recent theoretical developments in black critical fields. Rather, I find a history of psychic resistance to and institutional exclusion of the kinds of ethical and intellectual questions that such criticism raises, and seek to clear room for these new critical questions to reshape our understanding of the relationship between slavery, modernity, the South, and whiteness.

CHAPTER ONE

"'That's a Poor Way to Be': Two Forms of White Racial Melancholy in Flannery O'Connor"

When it was finally published in the October 1970 *Atlantic Monthly,* Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Barber" was offered to the public by way of an apology. Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor's editor, "consented to this publication [only] with a note making clear…the earliness of the story and its apparent standing in the estimation of the author" (111). Written sometime before 1947, "The Barber," it seemed, was subpar juvenilia, of marginal interest to a public that was beginning to think retrospectively about the scope of O'Connor's accomplishments a half-decade after her death. Despite Fitzgerald's insistence as to its lack of quality, "The Barber" offers an alternative starting point for a critical narrative of O'Connor's development as an observer of American racism. The dominant critical narrative begins with O'Connor's first published story, "The Geranium" (1946), and ends with the final entry in her final published collection, "Judgment Day" (1965); it suggests that as O'Connor refined her religious storytelling she also refined her awareness of all kinds of racism.[4] A critical investment in the recovery of Flannery O'Connor for the political present undergirds this narrative about O'Connor's development as a writer.[5] Julie

---

[4] This critical narrative about the exemplary status of these stories was canonized in Robert Giroux's introduction to the posthumously published *The Complete Stories*: "The final story, 'Judgment Day,' was mailed to me in early July. It is a revised and expanded version of "The Geranium," which appears to have been a favorite of hers" (xvi).

[5] A notable exception is Alice Walker's "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." For Walker, the enjoyment of O'Connor's fiction (and its theological message) comes only with the bracketing of historical knowledge. On the one hand, she argues "*essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming as it does, out of such a *racial* culture. If it can be said to be 'about' anything, it is 'about' prophets and prophecy, 'about' revelation, and 'about' the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it" (77). On the other, she recounts a conversation with her mother in which she suggests that "Everything That Rises Must Converge" "is a good story. [but] it is, to me, only half a story" (75) because it has no interest in the fate of the black mother

Armstrong diagnoses the "critical consensus about Flannery O'Connor and race: no matter what her private opinions were regarding political events or political action the fiction [O'Connor] left behind is both theoretically and theologically anti-racist" (297). In this chapter I argue that it is precisely the fact that "The Barber" seems like a bad O'Connor story that makes it worth paying attention to as a beginning point for a critical evaluation of the development of white racial melancholy that defines O'Connor's mature fiction and the body of criticism that takes this later fiction and its attendant melancholy as her best thinking on racism.

Using a theory of white racial melancholy derived from the work of psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, I argue for a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between race and religion in O'Connor's fiction by turning a critical eye to "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), two works linked by a shared character, Rayber. Insofar as "The Barber" fails as a typical O'Connor story, it reveals the dynamics of whiteness that O'Connor's later fiction obscures through psycho-developmental and theological narrative motifs. At the end of this chapter, I turn to a reading of white racial melancholy in critical narratives about O'Connor's development as both an author and a theorist of racism. Abraham and Torok's insistence on the relationship between reality and abstraction in the linguistic processing of loss helps their model serve portably between the thematic registers offered by the two works I am discussing. *The Violent Bears It Away* offers a version of melancholy grounded in historical narrative, wherein real loss begets real symptoms, that conforms to the value placed on narrative exposition in criticism of the religious themes of O'Connor's fiction and for a politics of white racial melancholy that privileges white psychic losses over and above calls for black social and

---

on the bus. This ambivalence seems to stem from Walker's positioning herself as a black reader whom the text does not attempt to hail.

political inclusion. "The Barber" offers a version of white racial melancholy arising from an aporia within political discourse, a melancholy arises only symptomatically as Rayber refuses the space in the community that white political discourse affords him, and thus offers a model for thinking the limits of the white political imaginary to respond and imagine alternatives to white supremacist social institutions. In highlighting the shift in O'Connor's fiction from a structural model of white racial melancholy to a narrative model of religious melancholy, I hope to make clear how the loss-driven theological determinism of O'Connor's fiction forecloses in advance an anti-racist expansion of the white political imaginary.

I offer "The Barber" as an alternative starting point for a re-evaluation of Flannery O'Connor's relationship to whiteness because it resists many of the critically established truisms about race in O'Connor's work. Written before 1947, it responds to a political era pre-dating the Civil Rights movement. Furthermore, it is conspicuously secular. These two details place it outside the main body of O'Connor's fiction; therefore, the well-worn conclusions about the roles of blackness and whiteness in O'Connor's stories apply to it only unevenly. True, in "The Barber" we witness a white, intellectual liberal punished for his pride in his intellect and (relative) open-mindedness, a motif found also in stories like "The Enduring Chill" and "Everything that Rises Must Converge" (both 1965). "The Barber" is unique in that it makes explicit the logic of whiteness that moves out of view in, but nonetheless animates, O'Connor's later works. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor, I argue, exhibits a white racial melancholy of O'Connor's own as she refuses the lessons of Rayber's failure to be "neither a Negro-nor a white-lover" by shifting her understanding of white racial melancholy from a structural to a narrative, loss-driven framework.

"The Barber" concerns an earnest liberal college professor in a small town who meets his intellectual match in his segregationist barber, Joe. In advance of the Democratic gubernatorial primary, Joe attempts to convince Rayber to support the segregationist candidate, Hawkson. Shaken by this first discussion, Rayber resolves to debate the barber during his next visit, but eventually forgets about the conversation. A week later, Joe starts to talk politics again, again flustering Rayber, who is again unable to make any headway in the argument. Resolving a second time to best the barber's arguments in favor of Hawkson, Rayber seeks council with his wife and his colleague Jacobs, both of whom are decidedly uninterested in Rayber's plight. Rayber writes a speech to deliver during his next visit, but when he arrives he finds he is unable to deliver the speech with any confidence. Humiliated by the condescending reception with which his failed speech is met, Rayber punches Joe and flees the barbershop, never to return.

"The Barber" begins by juxtaposing two fundamentally opposed ways of framing the position of its protagonist, Rayber, in relation to both whiteness and narrative. The first two sentences of the story contain in them the entirety of the story's narrative: "It is trying on liberals in Dilton. After the Democratic White Primary, Rayber changed his barber" (15). The question that motivates the plot of the story—"why does Rayber change barbers?"—is answered before it is even asked: because "it is trying on liberals in Dilton." From the beginning, then, "The Barber" presents its action as already accomplished, undercutting the narrative telos of the story so as to highlight its thematic meaning. Already, the gesture towards theme has occurred, underscored by the conspicuous but unremarkable White in "Democratic White Primary". What is important in the story is not so much what happens, but what it says about liberals. Against the ease of the story's stage-setting—this is a story about liberals—stands Rayber's inability to articulate his abstract, "liberal" position. Asked by Joe if he is a "nigger-lover," Rayber responds, "No" (15).

This reflexive denial is complicated by what Rayber *cannot* say, "If he had not been taken off-balance, he would have said, 'I am neither a Negro-nor a white-lover'" (15). Rayber attempts to position himself outside of an antagonistic white-black binary. As the story notes of Rayber's self-definition through the words of Rayber's colleague Jacobs, "that's a poor way to be" (15). The impossibility of this position proves to be the central source of conflict in the story, as through a series of verbal encounters with other white people Rayber's abstract notions about himself and his relationship with whiteness break down, leaving him, at story's end, where he began—again in a (different) barber's chair.

"The Barber" thus works through the relationship between whiteness, moral agency, and discursive possibility by interrogating the efficacy of rational, philosophical abstraction—what I am calling discourse—as a counterpoint to other (better) kinds of speech. Rayber attempts to position himself outside of a black-white binary by insisting on his mastery of philosophical abstractions, but O'Connor uses a language of melancholy to show how this act of will works within the racial structure to mark him irrevocably as white. Since critical treatments of "The Barber" are in short supply, I will make two passes through the plot; first with the goal of locating "The Barber" in relation to the question of the failure of discourse to signify, and then again with the goal of reading it on its own terms as a case study in a structural imaginary of white racial melancholy that uses melancholy as a way of naming racial structures.

Rayber's first act in "The Barber" is to announce his support for Darmon, the liberal gubernatorial candidate. In response, the barber defends segregation, parroting the racist rhetoric of the segregationist candidate Hawkson.

"I'm tellin' you," he said, "there ain't but two sides now, white and black. Anybody can see that from this campaign. You know what Hawk said? Said a hunnert and fifty years ago, they was runnin' each other down eatin'each other—throwin' jewel rocks at birds—skinnin' horses with

their teeth...Why, lemme tell you this—ain't nothin' gonna be good again until we get rid of them Mother Hubbards and get us a man can put these niggers in their places. Shuh." (15-16)

Rayber passively allows the barber to finish his rant, but the barber insists that Rayber respond. He repeats, "You a Mother Hubbard?" (16) This insult works at two levels. It serves as a remarkably concise slander of New Deal Democrats, casting liberals as effeminate caretakers whose generosity towards their dogs—here black people—has left the cupboards bare. More vulgarly, it evokes "motherfucker," threatening rage and violence under the veneer of harmless civil discourse. Such name-calling threatens to foreclose serious discussion, but Rayber maintains his composure, responding, "I'm voting for Darmon, if that's what you mean" (16). The barber then begins to explain to Rayber that he *must* hear Hawkson give a speech. The truth of Hawkson's political appeal lies in the experience of his rhetorical prowess; his speeches are fiery and irrational, the antithesis of Rayber's rational approach to political discourse.

O'Connor presents a conflict between Rayber's ostensibly thoughtful argumentation and Hawkson's self-professed demagoguery. Unfortunately for Rayber, every charge he can level against Hawkson and every possible evasion of the barber's ignorance and anti-intellectualism ("Rayber thought that if the barber would just read a few....") are already anticipated and mocked by the segregationists (17). The populist power of Hawkson's vile brand of ignorance is figured in his mocking appropriation of high rhetorical strategies, reducing "poetry" to further racist spins on nursery rhymes. Hawkson's Fourth of July speech,

had been another killeroo, ending with poetry. Who was Darmon? Hawk wanted to know. Yeah, who was Darmon? The crowd had roared. Why didn't they know? Why, he was Little Boy Blue, blowin'his horn. Yeah. Babies in the meadow and niggers in the corn. Man! Rayber should have heard that one. No Mother Hubbard could have stood up under it. (17)

The story's opening scene concludes with the table set for an initial opposition between the barber's violent, racist rhetoric and Rayber's non-confrontational attempts at rational discourse.

Hawkson's candidacy in effect reduces politics to a battle of wills; the candidate who wins will be the last man standing. But even in the threatening physicality of this rhetoric, the barber insists that it is Hawkson, not the liberal Darmon, who is the one who is "thinking" straight. He accuses Rayber of relying on "big words" that "don't do nobody no good. They don't take the place of thinking" (17). When Rayber pushes back, asking what speeches have to do with thinking, the barber evades with yet another empty figure of speech: "The barber thought it was plain as a pig on a sofa what that had to do with thinking. He thought a good many other things too, which he told Rayber. He said Rayber should have heard the Hawkson speeches at Mullin's Oak, Bedford, and Chickerville" (17). Though the initial alignment of this violent rhetoric is with the segregationist position, O'Connor undermines this binary in the story's final, violent act.

Rayber's frustration with the barber eventually overwhelms him and he rushes from the shop. Unshaken in his faith in reason and civil discourse, he spends that night pondering possible responses to the barber's rhetoric. Yet during his next trip to the barber, Rayber unwittingly plants the seeds of the undoing that will befall him in his third and final argument with the barber. During this second trip it appears that the barber is willing to back off his earlier antagonistic approach, appealing to Rayber's economic interests. "Looks like you fellows would vote for Hawk," he says, "on account of you know what he said about teachers' salaries. Seems like you would now. Why not? Don't you want more money?" (18) Rayber deflects this line of thought, saying that Hawkson would in fact "cost me twice as much as Darmon," to which the barber quickly responds, "So what if he would?... I ain't one to pinch money when it does some good. I'll pay for quality any day" (18-19). The conversation continues, but takes another negative turn when Rayber is forced to fall back on an empty platitude of his own: "better schools...benefit everybody" (19).

Assured of his moral high ground, Rayber loses sight of the fact that he, like Hawkson, is employing empty rhetorical tropes to express his position. When the barber reminds Rayber that he still has not given any reasons to support Darmon, Rayber defiantly declares that he will be back in a week with "as many good reasons for voting for Darmon as you want— better reasons than you've given me for voting for Hawkson" (20). Another customer insists that Rayber must make his speech "without sayin', goodgovermint," to which Rayber irritatedly responds, "I won't say anything you can't understand" (20). At this point a schism between Rayber and his interlocutors is clearly visible. The barber and his clients trade in public speech—shared tropes that bind them impersonally into a single community. Barring Rayber from "sayin goodgovermint" seeks to limit the kind of public speech to which Rayber has access. Allowed is the populist language of Hawkson that explicitly names violence, but not the emergent bureaucratic rationality implied by euphamism "goodgovermint." O'Connor figures Rayber's boastful promise to give a speech so powerful it will "make everything in that shop squirm," (21) as an essentially violent promise that belies the ostensible pacifism of Rayber's liberal identification. "I'm going to argue," Rayber tells his colleague Jacobs (who insists that arguing with barbers is never worthwhile), "I'm going to say the right thing as fast as they can say the wrong. It'll be a question of speed. Understand this is no mission of conversion; I'm defending myself" (22). Rayber's language will be an efficient, rational attack, not a quasi-religious "mission of conversion" (22) that would appeal directly to the affective foundations of white supremacy. Rayber does not seek to reshape his community around anti-racist values but rather to make real his imagined superiority over the barber. This debate is thus a conflict over who better masters whiteness.

Rayber's hubris and lack of perspective—the result of his processing of interpersonal relations through values and converting the dynamic quality of conversation into static ideological

positions—lead to his violent reversal at the story's close. In their final encounter, it is not the barber but Rayber who instigates the argument. Even as Rayber's ire is at its peak, the barber is at his most conciliatory. While other customers are dismissive of Rayber's intention to speechify then and there in the barber shop, the barber lends his support. "You ain't heard one by Rayber," he tells a customer who complains that he's heard enough speeches already. "Rayber's alright," he continues, "he may not know how to vote, but he's alright" (24). Rayber insists that he is *not* giving a speech, because speeches are shallow and coercive. He insists, "I want to discuss it with you—sanely" (24). As the customers gather around him, Rayber begins his not-a-speech. He stumbles through it and is immediately defensive when the crowd begins to laugh. One customer jokes, "I'm gonna run right down there now so I'll be first to vote for Boy Blue tomorrow morning" (25). Rayber explodes as the mocking continues; he is unable even to convince the barber's black employee to vote for Darmon. Losing control, he lashes out, yelling "do you think I'm trying to change your fat minds? What do you think I am? Do you think I'd tamper with your damn fool ignorance?" (25)

That O'Connor does not provide the text of Rayber's speech only heightens the irony of the moment because we realize that neither side can positively define their values. For the segregationists, real black people and imagined white Mother Hubbards provide a contrasting position against which they can consolidate mass emotional investment. Rayber, because he refuses to see political discourse as anything other than a meritocracy of ideas, cannot build solidarity with his pragmatic colleague Jacobs nor can he understand rhetorical attacks against his political position as anything other than deliberate, ignorant personal attacks. His words failing to signify in the way he intends, Rayber is overwhelmed by anger that seems entirely disproportionate to the low-stakes, and at this point comically repetitive, barbershop small talk. The barber insists,

"we all thought it was a fine speech. That's what I been saying all along—you got to think, you got to...." before Rayber punches him (25). Even if we accept Rayber's belief that the barber is maliciously mocking him and not simply indulging Rayber in a debate that Rayber continues to escalate, the leap from talk to violence totally ruptures Rayber's moral position. Rayber's idealization of rational speech collapses into blind violence.

What little existing criticism there is of "The Barber" focuses broadly on plot and character, and has considered the story largely in terms of what it has to say about language. Margaret Whitt argues that through Hawkson's rhetorical tropes, "O'Connors suggests that adult men who speak in a child's Mother Goose character have a stunted development" (208). This reading suffers from a certain credulity about the story while also operating from the assumption that the story is bad fiction. For Whitt, Hawkson's use of nursery rhymes serves simply as a sign of his genuine idiocy, an idiocy that explains his racism and represents a failure in O'Connor's compositional process. Such a reading does not square with further development of the barber's relationship to Rayber and political discourse in general and is indicative of the dismissability that has dogged "The Barber" (at least) since it was published.[6]

To read Joe as simply a stupid character implies that Rayber's political position and judgment of the situation are truths endorsed by the narrative, an assumption systematically undercut by the story's narration. Whitt acknowledges this point to a degree in her final appraisal of the story: "There is no clear-cut victory for either Rayber or the barber in the story, no win for either intelligence nor ignorance. The south's racial relationships are too complex, but, in this early story, O'Connor suggests that discrepancy exists between language spoken and behavior

---

[6] For an extended treatment of the aesthetic merits of "The Barber" in relation to O'Connor's later fiction, see Larsen.

displayed" (209). Whitt's judgment that neither Rayber nor the barber "wins" in the story is not commensurate to either the stakes of the story or of O'Connor's fiction in general. It is clear that Rayber "loses" insofar as he humiliates himself and cannot return to the scene of the action. For his part, the barber never stands in serious opposition to Rayber and in fact, after the first encounter, repeatedly attempts to finds common economic and social ground between the two. Whatever interpersonal conflict that exists does so only in Rayber's mind. Second, Whitt's conclusion that a "discrepancy exists between language spoken and behavior displayed" suggests that her easy correlation between the barber's language and his intelligence is misguided. Taken together these two observations suggest that an identification with Rayber's politics obscures a critical awareness of the "too complex" dynamic internal to whiteness which the story dramatizes. That Whitt concludes that this is ultimately a story about language (as opposed to a story about race) while citing race as a barrier to linguistic accomplishment is telling. For Whitt as for Rayber, whiteness is a critical blind spot that opens up space for other schemes of interpretation to operate. But, as "The Barber" makes evident, each of these schemes *is white* in that each serves to reinforce the ostensible universality of white supremacy by foreclosing discussion about possible ethical positions white subjects can take. Whiteness is assumed to be the ground for political (or theological) possibility, and thus a-political in its own right.

Val Larsen offers an alternative reading of the central conflict in "The Barber," though this reading too marginalizes a critical reading of whiteness even as it points to the necessity of such a reading. Larsen argues that in "The Barber," "political disagreement is only the surface manifestation of a larger conflict between social classes and their distinct linguistic traditions" (25). Both Joe and Rayber, "have the same objective—to differentiate their own class from the class they perceive to be immediately below them" (26); Rayber attempts to distance himself from

Joe (who is ostensibly "below" Rayber), while Joe attempts to distance himself from all black people. Larsen's reading is convincing in its diagnosis of Joe's "orality" and Rayber's "literacy," though the shift of attention from race to the text's heteroglossia traps Larsen in a critical cul-de-sac. In concluding that the dialogic nature of "The Barber" signals an aesthetic achievement, Larsen likewise declares the story a political success: "Even in this early story, her skepticism (which is not yet explicitly Christian) keeps her disconnected from both parties and open to some third mode of thought and action that transcends the dichotomy explored in the story" (43). Though Larsen does not argue as much, O'Connor's achievement of a race-conscious critique in "The Barber" arrives parasitically on the story's "literacy," legible insofar as it transcends the dichotomous thinking associated with oral culture.

Taking for granted the alignment of racism with orality and racial liberalism with literacy (and more broadly assuming that oral cultures fundamentally lack cognitive and social complexity), Larsen uses these aesthetic categories to draw a conclusion about the political effect of the story. Doing so *reverses* explicit judgments made earlier in the essay, such as her argument that "for all their many faults [racism] the men at the barbershop are redeemed in some measure by their capacity for community, their capacity, rooted in orality, to be bound to other in a whole that is larger than themselves" (36). That this "whole" is explicitly defined by racist exclusion seems to be of little matter—an accident—rather than a defining characteristic of white Southern identity. This Southern identity, understood in Larsen's terms as "oral", is affirmed through a "literate" transcendence of an apparently "oral" binary frame of representation. This is to say that Larsen's "third mode" is indistinguishable from the mode of "literacy" that the story finds fault with, and O'Connor's non-committal "skepticism" actually places her in Rayber's position— "neither a Negro- nor a white-lover."

Like Whitt, Larsen is compelled by an identification with Rayber (subtly through "literacy" as opposed to directly through racial liberalism) to solidify a critical position vis-à-vis race that is directly undermined by the terms she sets out: "The Barber" is understood to embrace *both* orality and literacy, *both* white supremacy and anti-racism through a gesture of authorial silence understood to be aesthetic transcendence and not ideological avoidance. Taking Larsen's suggestion that "The Barber" is O'Connor's, "first and fullest meditation on language and the linguistic encoding of culture," (25) as a starting point, I aim to bring Abraham and Torok's theory of the linguistic foundation of melancholy to bear on the way "The Barber" and later *The Violent Bear It Away* bring in to question the problem of intra-white conflict raised in "The Barber." In each work, Rayber exhibits signs of melancholy related to his intellectual commitments to rationality and universal principles.

"The Barber" shows O'Connor thinking through what I call a structural melancholia by illustrating Rayber's inability to reason or will himself out of his whiteness; that is, his melancholia is not the result of a moment in his own psychic past, but is rather produced by the cultural logic of his psychic present. We can the social institutions that Rayber attempts to reject as what O'Connor considered "manners," the ability for people with conflicting beliefs and interests to live side by side without overt conflict (*Mystery and Manners* 234), as stemming from the need for a community to mutually reinforce psychic reality for each member. As Abraham and Torok write, language brings subjects together in communities with shared psychic histories as "introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a community of empty mouths" (128). Such communities bound by shared psychic topographies work together to produce psychic stability for each member, producing a shared "fantasy" of "all those representations, beliefs or bodily states that gravitate toward…the preservation of the status quo" (125). Reality,

on the other hand, is "everything, whether exogenous or endogenous, that affects the psyche by inflicting a topographical shift on it" (125). This division between fantasy and the real maps on to O'Connor's philosophy of fiction. The appearance of the grotesque rattles the foundation of this introjected social reality, and it is in the interest of this kind of "realism" that O'Connor writes. The job of the novelist, or the task that O'Connor set out for herself, is *not* to fall prey to easy, ego-affirming moral relativism or sentimentality, indeed to not be the kind of writer characterized in "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" who, "excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human" (43). One way of understanding O'Connor's literary project is as a concerted effort destabilize sentimental introjections of the losses and alienations that constitute modern life, turning people instead towards the "real" of their own impotence in the face of God by way of shocks delivered through narrative.

Abraham and Torok suggest that certain traumas and losses are unresolvable because the metaphoric language of introjection cannot conjure a linguistic object to satisfy the need the loss has left. "Because our mouth is unable to say certain words and unable to formulate certain sentences," Abraham and Torok write, "we fantasize, for reasons yet to be determined, that we are actually taking into our mouth the unnamable, the object itself" (128). In Rayber's final speech, his language precisely fails to accomplish its psyche-stabilizing task. Note the brute materiality of the words Rayber speaks; he feels them "pull out of his mouth like freight cars, jangling, backing up on each other, grating to a halt, sliding, clinching back, jarring, and then suddenly stopping as roughly as they had begun" (24). Whereas introjection is the process of symbolically reorganizing the subjective topos to accommodate a socially recognizable loss, incorporation is a fantasy that denies the importance of the very loss that instigates it. If introjection produces metaphors for the lost object, eventually settling the subject into the psychic reality of metaphor, "*incorporation*

results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such" (130 original emphasis). The impossibility of communication, and thus of identity within the community, characterize losses that are incorporated. In the case of incorporation, "the impossibility of introjection is so profound that even our refusal to mourn is prohibited from being given a language, that we are debarred from providing any indication whatsoever that we are inconsolable" (130).

Incorporation results from a loss that cannot be named *as loss,* because the shock to the stability of subjective fantasy caused by admitting the attachment, never mind its loss, would be unthinkable. In these cases, Abraham and Torok write that the words that would introject the loss are "swallowed," and form a "crypt" in the psychic kernel. "Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects," the incorporated fantasy of the object, "is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography" (130). The incorporated object thus takes the form of a ghost inside the subject, a ghost with the same desires the subject understood the lost object to have. It is as if there is another subject *inside* the subject, an inner subject with its own distinct psychic topography. Abraham and Torok figure this kind of loss as resulting from libidinal attachments that cannot be made public within a community because the libidinal and narcissistic attachments the loss affects are themselves unspeakable given social norms. Incorporation thus leads to a process whereby the subject leads its life *as if for* the incorporated object, manifesting in the form of unexplainable, seemingly irrational desires and behaviors. Incorporation can be characterized by the following sequence: 1) The loss of an ideal object that 2) cannot be grieved publicly is 3) denied as loss through 4) the reconstruction of the lost object in fantasy, wherein 5) the reconstructed object exists vicariously through the subject as if its original existence were inside of the subject's psyche and not in the reality of the world. The

incorporated object is a problem for the subject, is pathological, when its desires come into conflict with the demands of reality, including normative social laws, on the subject. At the heart of this model of incorporation is a definite moment of loss, a scene back to which future pathology might be traced. It is thus a historical or personal, but above all narrative, model of loss, and its location of cause within the subject makes it a valuable conceptual tool for discourses of racial indvidiualism.

In this way Abraham and Torok offer a useful continuation to Freud's undeveloped notions of why some losses cause melancholy while others are resolvable through processes of mourning. This characterization is an important innovation because it can locate the "cause" of a traumatic loss *outside* the subject's direct experience. That is, under Abraham and Torok's model, something can *become* traumatic if it cannot be spoken. In such cases "structures of signification…work to produce a fictional or topological event" (*The Wolfman's Magic Word* iv) that transforms some previously psychically neutral facet of the subject into a shameful, incommunicable desire. "Loss" in this case is not precipitated by an historical event, but rather by the barring of future signification of and around that desire. Under this model of approaching the subjective history of melancholy, then, the loss that precipitates the chain of psychic events is actually synchronically determined, that is, outside of the subject's history. As opposed to the neatly ordered sequence described above, a structural view of melancholy would begin with 1) a structural prohibition against the public recognition of certain kinds of attachments that 2) produce aporia in a subject's psychic experience requiring 3) overdetermined collective modes of discursive avoidance that must nonetheless 4) be registered as within a narrative of "loss" so as not to disrupt the topography of subject. This framing locates racial ideology and exclusion outside of the subject; all subjects regardless of their unique psychic history are subject to its

structural determination. This framing can thus serve as a challenge to racial individualism insofar as it speaks to the limited possibilities of individual transformation, growth, and will in response to racial-ideological strucutres.

These two frames of loss, narrative and structural, map onto *The Violent Bear it Away* and "The Barber," respectively. I therefore read *The Violent Bear it Away* and its insistence on satirizing narrative theories of psychological loss and development in relationship to the structural model of incorporation putforward by "The Barber," and argue that O'Connor self-consciously refuses the structural insights available in the earlier story. In "The Barber," the racist position held by Hawkson and Joe is an obsession with order. Joe argues as much when he tells Rayber that, "ain't nothin gonna be good again until we get rid of them Mother Hubbards and get us a man can put these niggers in their place" (16). Racial difference becomes a meaningful visual symbol that solidifies subjective existence within white communities, even if that white community seems to exist in a degraded state because of the presence of raced others. "The Barber" shows an attempt to imagine a white self that is not determined by this structural determination, and Rayber's failure exhibits a structural racial melancholic dynamic. Rayber has incorporated the whiteness of his rational-liberal position because he cannot consciously lose it; he cannot admit that his own position is as exclusive of George as that of the other white characters. His violent transformation at the story's conclusion stems from his inability to find an alternative language—an alternative introjection—for the white moral and intellectual supremacy his interlocutors repeatedly insist on sharing with him.

The structures of signification shaping the political imaginary of O'Connor's story cannot accommodate a position outside the black-white binary without disastrous narrative consequences. "The Barber" thus mines a unique psychic dynamic: a white person who attempts to will himself

outside of the black-white binary. Rayber adopts a color-blind position; as he would put it, he is "neither a Negro- nor a white lover." Rayber seeks a third space *not* defined by race, denying the reality of racial exclusion in the fantasy that race affects neither his life nor his thinking. Because he in some sense knows that race is only a historical social category without metaphysical essence, the liberal melancholic attempts to avoid the problems posed by racism by denying their existence. This melancholic formation arises symptomatically in "The Barber" in two ways: through the fetishization of philosophical knowledge in the figure of Jacobs and the related de-signification of George, the story's lone named black character. George acts as a trigger for Rayber's encrypted idealism in a way that recalls introjective fetishism in Abraham and Torok. In certain cases, they write, repressed and incorporated libidinal losses reveal themselves in fetishized attachments to objects and scenes that de-metaphorize the symbolic meaning of words that might allow the subject to introject their loss. In several instances, George's cleaning recalls the motions of the barber shaving away Rayber's whiteness and anticipates the story's climax. Rayber's initial recollection of Jacobs' racist outburst follows the introduction of George as "the colored boy wiping up the floor around the basins" (16). Later, it is not until "Rayber could hear George's broom slowly stroking the floor somewhere in the shop, then stop, then scrape, then...." that Rayber, whose psychic absorption in the sweeping motion is indicated by ellipses, initiates the final argument (23).

O'Connor represents George as an absorbing barrier to Rayber's will, and this connection seems to have stuck in O'Connor's mind when providing Rayber with a first name in *The Violent Bear It Away*: George. But absent any personal history in "The Barber," Rayber's melancholia should not be understood as his own, per-se. As a reminder of the impossibility of the position in which he imagines himself, racial difference returns in ghostly forms to disrupt the reality that

excludes but cannot recognize it. During the second argument Rayber offers the lackluster argument that "better schools...benefit everybody," but his rhetoric is quickly shot down as being just an empty phrase (19). His interlocutor says, "listen, you can talk all you want. What you don't realize is, we've got an issue here. How'd you like a couple of black faces looking at you from the back of your classroom?" (19) The threat of a hidden-yet-visible black presence in the rear of Rayber's classroom disrupts his argument, but he does not realize the implications of this moment of failure. Rayber is faced with a chance to realize his own racism, of which he indeed is guilty, but this would push him into the camp of ignorance. When asked about black students in his classroom, "Rayber had a blind moment when he felt as if something that wasn't there was bashing him in the ground" (19). This moment threatens the crypt that resides inside Rayber; its ghostly apparition surfacing to punish him as a defense against his recognizing his own racism. Who takes on the form of this apparition? O'Connor immediately follows the image of Rayber being bashed into the ground with George's entrance into the shop. Rayber utters a strange, subject-less sentence, "Willing to teach any person willing to learn—black or white" (19). Without uttering "I," Rayber plays host to this liberal sentiment, as if it speaks itself through him. Rayber's interlocutor is not the true intended recipient of this statement. Rather, Rayber, "wondered if George had looked up," and acknowledged his liberal virtue signaling (19). The barber asks George if he would go to a white school, to which George evasively replies, "Wouldn't like that," before changing the subject to business matters (19). In these moments, Rayber finds himself unable to challenge white supremacy, but through his psychic denial George takes on a negative symbolic value. The black-white binary reasserts itself against Rayber's attempt to transcend it.

Rayber's colleague Jacobs calls the former's color-blind aspirations, "a poor way to be" (15). Jacobs is a symbol, for Rayber, of the power of reason, though O'Connor makes it plain that

Rayber's idealization of Jacobs is itself an irrational attachment that dramatizes Rayber's idealistic blindness to reality. After his first argument with the barber, Rayber replays the experience in his mind, this time correcting the memory with what he knows he should have said. The correct response, Rayber fantasizes, would have been to answer however "Jacobs would have handled it. Jacobs had a way about him that made people think he knew more than Rayber thought he knew. It was not a bad trick in his profession. Rayber often amused himself analyzing it" (18). Reliving the conversation by imagining "how Jacobs would have done it," and ultimately, "doing it himself," Rayber forgets about the argument by his next week's visit to the barber (18). As an ideal object of identification, Jacobs has a fantasmatic palliative effect on Rayber that prevents the latter from internalizing the reality of his past conflict. Rayber does not come to a negotiated reality with the barber; he fantasizes away the challenges presented by his first argument.

The real Jacobs is very different from the fantasy role he plays for Rayber. Rayber briefly recalls during his first encounter with the barber, "Jacobs telling him about lecturing at a Negro college for a week. They couldn't say Negro—nigger—colored—black. Jacobs said he had come home every night and shouted, "NIGGER NIGGER NIGGER" out the back window" (16). While the social source of Jacob's frustration is obvious, its textual representation is ambiguous. It is unclear in the list of words that denote the black students Jacobs was addressing precisely which ones were unspeakable, and for that matter who exactly is "they" that "couldn't say" the words that name blackness—the students or Jacobs and his colleagues? Jacobs, described by Rayber as, "the philosophy man," represents the possibility of universal truth and of rational knowledge—the type of abstract discourse O'Connor legislates against. What Jacobs or the students "couldn't say," then, is the nature of the particular position of blackness in the scene of philosophical address that cannot recognize its own exclusive whiteness. Jacobs thus displays an introjective response to the

frustration of his lecture at the black college. Returning to his home, he can release the violent name that feeds upon the repressed recognition of racial contradictions in his teaching. The introjection of the shouted epithet re-establishes the exclusive whiteness of the home and by extension the inhabitability of the world. It is also the word that links Jacobs to the barber as the signifier of white identity in difference. We can read Rayber's decline as the failure to recognize the connection between Jacobs and the barber, which leads to his failure to confront the implications of his own racial situatedness. Rayber cannot become, like Jacobs, such a racial pragmatist.

This brief but critical anecdote about Jacobs is recalled by Rayber at the moment that the story's lone named black character, George, is introduced into the conversation. George holds the promise of validating the various arguments that Rayber and the barber make to defend their political positions. When the barber concludes his initial diatribe, he shouts, "You hear that, George?" to which George responds, "Sho do" (16). O'Connor continues, "It was time for Rayber to say something but nothing appropriate would come. He wanted to say something that George would understand. He was startled that George had been brought into the conversation" (16). George is expected to *hear* what these white men are saying, but his input is not really relevant to the discussion at hand. It is, after all, the Democratic White Primary the white men are discussing, and as George says elsewhere, "I don't know is they gonna let me vote" (25). Here, O'Connor puts words skeptical of the stakes of the white characters' drama in the words of a black character. George's acknowledgement that the story unfolding around him does not change his situation signals the whiteness of the narrative, complicating the stakes of narrative unfolding around him. Compare George's words with Munson's at the end of *The Violent Bear It Away*: "It's owing to me [Mason's] resting there. I buried him while you were laid out drunk. It's owing to me his corn

has been plowed. It's owing to me the sign of his Saviour is over his head" (240). Munson's words merely reinforce the novel's narrative closure and do not refer to Munson's position as a black man; Munson's commentary pushes along Tarwater's theological transformation and does not complicate it.

"The Barber" on the other hand insists on the problematic figural existence of George as a black body in a white space. In its final scene the barber's dialogue gives a clue as to the role of George in the political subtext of the story. The barber, in anticipation of Rayber's final speech on the election, gathers the other customers around Rayber's chair.

"What are you trying to make of this?" Rayber muttered; then he said suddenly, "If you're calling everybody else, why don't you call your boy, George. You afraid to have him listen?"
The barber looked at Rayber for a second without saying anything.
"He can hear," the barber said. "He can hear back where he is."
"I just thought he might be interested," Rayber said.
"He can hear," the barber repeated. "He can hear what he hears and he can hear two times that much. He can hear what you don't say as well as what you do." (24)

Rayber falteringly gives his speech, provoking only laughter from his listeners. The final struggle over control of the situation is figured as a battle over George's opinion.

"Listen!" Rayber shouted, "I'm not trying..."
"George," the barber yelled, "you heard that speech?"
"Yessir," George said.
"Who you gonna vote for, George?"
"I'm not trying to..." Rayber yelled.
"I don't know is they gonna let me vote," George said. "Do, I gonna vote for Mr. Hawkson."
"Listen!" Rayber yelled, "do you think I'm trying to change your fat minds? What do you think I am?" He jerked the barber around by the shoulder. "Do you think I'd tamper with your damn fool ignorance?" (25)

If Rayber is not trying to change the political convictions of his interlocutors, then what is he trying to do? His inability to positively define what he wants to do with his speech repeats his earlier inability to articulate being "neither a Negro- nor a white-lover" as a viable political position. Rayber's speech ultimately might be addressed to George, as if George, by hearing "what

you don't say as well as what you do," can confer reality to the empty speech that Rayber has to offer. But it might be worth asking not what Rayber hopes to accomplish with his speech, but rather who, through Rayber, wants to gain satisfaction *in* speech. Rayber's speech is symptomatic of the emergence of the failure of ostensibly universal reason to vitiate the discursive logic of whiteness. But does Rayber's train wreck of a finale fail to signify for the same reasons for all parties? Rayber's call does not produce the lost object of democratic unity because they attempt to address in a legibly introjective way both the white patrons and George. On either side of a binary Rayber refuses to recognize, neither set of characters are hailed by the words which fail to recognize either the White or Black subject position. The speech cannot hail George because he is already excluded by virtue of his blackness. For the barber and his customers, the speech is merely one among many; they do not recognize Rayber as speaking authentic words, and this alienation is figured by O'Connor's describing the words as a train wreck. But these words also suggest the emergence of the incorporated rational-democratic ideal speaking through Rayber to reach, ineffectually, both George and the barber. Rayber practically vomits out his speech, rejecting the swallowed incorporated object, but also sacrificing himself to its desires.

There is a psychic triangle that Rayber constructs between himself, Jacobs and George. The triangle organizes Rayber's desires in a way that clearly mark them as internally coherent, but—to use one of O'Connor's preferred terms—freakishly out of sync with his social circumstances. Jacobs hears Rayber's speech and believes that his making it public will be useless. George hears the speech and is unmoved by it, even though the barber's insistence that George can hear more than what is said affirms the shared fantasy of the redemptive potential of his approval. These two rejections coupled with Rayber's symbolic loss of whiteness reveals that Rayber's fantastic self-coherence is at odds with social reality at every point. We know, though, that

Rayber's melancholy persists after the conclusion of the story's action. Beginning with Rayber's retreat to a new barber and the framing of the story as a description of how it is trying on liberals in Dilton, "The Barber" tells the story of melancholic attachment to ideals, of their resurfacing, and their re-suppression without offering a narrative of subjective development to ground these relations and therefore without offering any ready escape from the logic of white supremacy. An incurable melancholic, Rayber is doomed to roam the streets, uncomfortable with but unable to reject his whiteness, a liberal ghost haunting the barbershops of the small-town South.

While "The Barber" understands this melancholy to be a result of intellectual commitments made within a white supremacist culture, *The Violent Bear It Away* throws Rayber's intellectualism into conflict with the irrationality of the spirit in a battle between psychological and theological determinism. In doing so, O'Connor relies heavily on Africanist gestures—both narrative and discursive—to ground the novel in a theological register that relies on a narrative structure of psychic loss even as it attempts to reject psychological determinism in favor of the theological. As Toni Morrison explains in *Playing in the Dark*, Africanism is "a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about [black] people" (6). Africanist figures, Morrison writes, do various kinds of emotional and ideological work for white authors by providing routes for the evasion of social contradictions. They are "both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (7). Africanist tropes—hyper-visible signs of blackness in stories otherwise not "about" race—draw critical attention away from the whiteness of narrative by establishing the white/black binary as the normative frame for interpretation. Readers "know" culturally shared assumptions about

blackness and so "know" what the story says by using blackness as a symbol. Africanist figures, then, serve the white "community of empty mouths," and whereas for Rayber in "The Barber" such figures failed to signify, they are central to the thematic closure of *The Violent Bear it Away*.

The self-torturing, self-righteous liberal intellectual type first introduced in "The Barber" would go on to become one of O'Connor's favorite narrative tropes, but Rayber would appear again in *The Violent Bear It Away*, a novel in which, according to Whitt, "O'Connor struggles to make [the Rayber character-type] authentic" (207). No less a critic than Harold Bloom seems to disagree with Whitt's appraisal, writing of *The Violent Bear It Away,* "Rayber is an aesthetic disaster…O'Connor despises Rayber and cannot bother to make him even minimally persuasive" (2). Whitt's identification with Rayber is complicated by this gesture towards Rayber as evidence that "The Barber" is an aesthetic failure. The unremarked upon incoherence of this position— Rayber is both who I am and the problem with the story—is not atypical of criticism of O'Connor's work. That her stories put white liberal critics into this position of incoherence and disavowal forecloses the possibility of criticism along racial lines; there can be no coherent anti-racist critique of O'Connor's work that at the same time embraces the fundamental tenets of her philosophy of fiction. Both O'Connor and her critics are struck by what Patrick Wen calls a "terror of neutrality…resulting from glaring logical flaws in [O'Connor's] pseudo-religious, self-imposed stance of neutrality as a justification for skirting Civil Rights conflict in the American South" (124). The more O'Connor's fiction explicitly insists on its internal theological coherence as an avoidance of historical and political topicality, the less it calls into question the stability of its own location in a structure of white racial melancholy, the more it frames white racial attitudes as determined by historical losses.

Like Rayber in "The Barber," O'Connor's later fiction insists that it can talk its way out of involvement in a white-black binary. That at one point O'Connor realized this was impossible brings new racial dimension to what Clare Kahane calls O'Connor's "rage of vision." Kahane helpfully opens the way for a reading of O'Connor's theological impulse as a psychological impulse, with O'Connor reserving especial scorn for those characters most like her. This includes, I am arguing, Rayber. Working through a Freudian model, Kahane argues that O'Connor's authorial position "exerci[zes] the scorn characteristic of the superego[;] she imposes on the characters a humiliation so intense that they are forced to acknowledge their impotence" (122). This recognition of impotence is typically understood in a more positive light as the moments of "grace" in O'Connor's stories, wherein a character is confronted with the reality of God's power, however brutal that realization may be. Reading O'Connor's theological insistence as a form of authorial ideological control, Kahane argues, "O'Connor dramatizes a psychic determinism more profound even than Freud's and constructs a literary form that allows no escape from the infantile determinations of personality" (126).

This thread of criticism is picked up by James Mellard, who suggests that

O'Connor respects Freud because his theory of the unconscious provides an explanation of the workings of personality whose efficacy even her Church concedes. She fears him, however, because the theoretical congruence between the workings of the unconscious and the workings of grace or spirit is—in the modern world, especially—very threatening to her theology. (628)

Mellard draws attention to the apparent similarities between O'Connor's religious determinism and psychoanalysis' developmental determinism, suggesting ultimately that the two are indistinguishable at the level of structure. The difference between reading O'Connor's stories as inspired Christian truths and reading them as allegories of the Lacanian subject rests solely on the critic's belief in one God or the other. *The Violent Bear It Away* in particular insists on its religious grounding by literally staging a conflict between religious calling and modern psychology. Writes

Mellard, "about all O'Connor can do is assert that a Freudian reading is not the proper one from her perspective. But for many readers her denials are ineffective in banishing the specter of that *other* reading" (632). In insisting on this *other* reading, white racial melancholy allows us to keep both structural and narrative theorizations of melancholy in view so that we can better understand O'Connor's rejection of her past insights into whiteness's structural political imaginary.

The Violent Bears It Away serves as the second nodal point in my proposed narrative of O'Connor's development because it demonstrates how the narrative stability needed to produce a theological critique of the intellectual/atheist Rayber-type requires a silence on matters of racial difference and white political possibility. The tight networks of signification around childhood trauma, psychology and religion lead to an intense thematic focus and a monological cast of characters. As I will argue, a major facet of this narrative stability is created through the narration of histories of trauma, of narrative losses through which the novel uses its characters to construct a melancholic model of the theological subject. As Frederick Asals notes, *The Violent Bear it Away* is a focused, lean, more expressive articulation of theological tropes from O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*. How, though, does *Violent* relate to its other predecessor, "The Barber"? In its "intense concentration" (Asals 162) on the theological, what does it opt not to see? In turning to *The Violent Bear It Away,* I want to ruminate on Rayber's fate and O'Connor's attempts to make him "authentic" through a frame of narrative loss before returning to "The Barber" to argue that its depiction of structural loss is fundamentally different from later stories. "The Barber" provides a key to understanding the loss-focused melancholic quality of the later O'Connor's insistence on constructing a religious context for her stories.

The insight that *The Violent Bear It Away* offers a fuller characterization of Rayber has only recently been argued at length. As John Desmond details, the fact that Rayber is given a

backstory reveals how, "his rationalism is an intellectual mask he adopts as a defense against the vulnerabilities and confusion he experienced as a child" (35). At the level of narrative then, O'Connor provides Rayber's abstract intellectualism with a motivation, grounding his abnormal psychology in a developmental narrative. For Desmond, Rayber's pathology in *The Violent Bear It Away* stems from the fact that Rayber loved his backwoods prophet uncle Mason "like a daddy and was ashamed of it" (O'Connor 73). Reeling from this shameful love, "as an adult, Rayber tries to solidify his rejection of Mason, as well as his rejection of his parents. Against both influences he forges a willful, self-reliant identity encased in stoic isolation" (40). This shame accounts for the depth of Rayber's character, and Desmond argues "to regard Rayber in any other light is to discount his real suffering and make the mistake of reducing him to a stereotypical rationalist" (45). Desmond's detailing of the centrality of shameful love for Rayber's character in *The Violent Bear It Away* is important. At the same time, the drive to interpret his own past through a psychological lens is exactly what dooms Rayber at the novel's conclusion. Through this dynamic in the novel O'Connor takes what Larsen calls a "skeptical" approach to its contrasting of psychological and theological determinism, using the novel's psychological discourse to facilitate its gesture towards the divine. In the climactic scene of Tarwater's rape, O'Connor in effect turns the blasphemy of Rayber's psychologism back onto psychology itself, creating an absurdly literal scene of trauma that once and for all pushes Tarwater into religious madness. *The Violent Bear It Away,* then, does not so much simply *dramatize* melancholy in action, but rather *works through* melancholy as a dramatic form to show—through an over-determined theological narrative gesture—the limits of using psychology to explain religious belief.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Rayber's shameful love for Mason produces what I have called a narrative loss. Having found love and acceptance in his short time with Mason as a child,

Rayber, once re-assimilated into modern society, casts that connection as an impossible, shameful love. Denying its reality, as Desmond outlines, Rayber, "attempts to exclude or reduce to human intelligibility the whole dimension of mystery so crucial to self-understanding, personal freedom, and development" (40). Through intellectual mastery, Rayber attempts to deny his past connection to Mason and his prophetic calling; if God is not real, neither can be his loss. For O'Connor, this denial is the sad condition of secular society. Her insistence that loss is felt despite nonbelief is made apparent in Rayber. The strength of this connection so denied arises symptomatically in Rayber's interactions with his developmentally disabled son, Bishop. Desmond argues, "Rayber's love for Bishop is pure because, given Bishop's handicap, he demands unconditional love, that is, to love him and all creation as it is, absolutely, for its own sake. But Rayber resents this demand— the seed of love in his own blood with its insistent call to the heart" (43). When Tarwater drowns Bishop and thereby fulfils the dead Mason's claims on his psychic life, Rayber's melancholic relationship to the "unconditional love" he has so lost is likewise brought out into the open, albeit through destruction and "the cold realization of his desolate spiritual state" (Desmond 54).

So *The Violent Bear It Away* returns to the Rayber character, but it drastically shifts its focus on him. In both "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away*, Rayber is committed to discourse over and against action and what each work presents as the reality of his situation. No longer a budding integrationist, Rayber instead teaches in a high school and is committed to bringing sociological and psychological efficiency to education. The plot of the novel follows Tarwater, who flees the backwoods homestead, Powderhead, of his deceased great uncle, spurred on by a demonic shadow figure who tempts him away from prophecy throughout the novel. Refusing to bury Mason, Tarwater denies his great-uncle's final request, which decision haunts him throughout the novel. Arriving at Rayber's house in town, Francis meets Rayber's

developmentally disabled son Bishop, who is an object of revulsion and fascination for both Tarwater and Rayber. Rayber attempts to domesticate Tarwater, who lacks the attention span and comportment required for suburban life, but in doing so struggles with his own emotional damage that has resulted from his childhood relationship with Mason. In a series of flashbacks, we learn that Rayber too was taken from his home by Mason, baptized at Powderhead, and told that Jesus was his one true Father. Feeling love and acceptance for the first time in his young life, Rayber is disappointed to be rescued by his otherwise neglectful father several days later. As a teenager, Rayber returns to Powderhead to confront Mason, inveighing against what he now experiences as Mason's false prophecy and abusive spiritual manipulation.

In the present, the novel ultimately turns into a struggle between Tarwater and Rayber over the fate of Bishop, whose intellectual disability marks him as both spiritually innocent and an impossible inheritor of Rayber's intellectual patrimony. Bishop's innocence disturbs both of his relatives because it gestures towards the greatness and terribleness of God. Both Tarwater and Rayber feel compelled to drown Bishop in a perverted form of anti-baptism as an act of defiance of Mason's calling on them to baptize him to everlasting life. Tarwater eventually does drown Bishop, and Rayber realizes that he has unconsciously allowed the act to happen. He is left emotionally drained, crushed not by grief for his lost son but by the realization that he is not grieving. Returning to Powderhead to finally bury Mason, Tarwater is raped by the Devil. Seeing that a black neighbor had long ago buried Mason, Tarwater decides to embrace his calling as a prophet, thus ending the novel.

O'Connor filters Rayber's struggle with Tarwater over Bishop's future and Mason's past through two ways of framing what discourse can and cannot change in one's life. Rayber and Tarwater each have their own way of framing their rejection of Mason's desires, Rayber trying to

exert total control over his thoughts and Tarwater attempting to control his actions. Hanging over the novel's fascination with the childhood of its protagonists is the unspoken possibility that both Rayber and Tarwater are victims of sexual abuse at the hands of Mason. Rayber is committed to making sure Tarwater recovers from his abusive upbringing, but he is unable to overcome Tarwater's traumatic past. Summarizing the interpersonal dynamics of the novel in this way is a risky, as the critical judgment that childhood trauma is to blame for Rayber's and Tarwater's conditions is not the novel's own.

Rayber's efforts to psychologize his experiences first come to light when Mason briefly lives with Rayber during Tarwater's infancy. Rayber writes a case study of Mason, attempting to understand Mason's prophetic madness as the result of a childhood pathology. O'Connor reports, "He questioned him at length about his early life, which old Tarwater had practically forgotten. The old man had thought this interest in his forebears would bear fruit, but what it bore, what it bore, stench and shame, were dead words" (19). Rayber concludes that Mason's, "fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity. He needed the assurance of a call, and so he called himself" (19). Mason takes great offense at the idea that he "called himself," and makes it his mission to correct the blasphemous path Rayber seems to be taking the family down by gaining control over Tarwater and later baptizing Bishop.

In another flashback, catching Mason baptizing the infant Tarwater, Rayber resists him through a language of trauma, arguing, "Children are cursed with believing. You pushed me out of the real world and I stayed out of it until I didn't know which was which. You infected me with your idiot hopes, your foolish violence" (73). At this moment, Rayber broaches an unspeakable pain, "'I'm not always myself, I'm not al…' but he stopped. He wouldn't admit what the old man knew" (73). What Mason knows is that "the seed was still in him," the seed of faith, yes, but also

potentially Mason's own (73). O'Connor seems to insist on this possibility, as Rayber goes on to blasphemously "[turn] Tarwater over and [pour] what was left in the bottle over his bottom and [say] the words of baptism again" (73). Mason angry response, "Blasphemy never changed a plan of the Lord's!" foreshadows the eventual rape of Tarwater. This foreshadowing is grotesque as it implies that the Lord had always planned for Tarwater to be raped; Rayber's act of protection against Mason (for why else would Rayber think to protect Tarwater's bottom?) cannot protect Tarwater, who, shortly after this scene, is taken away to Powderhead by Mason. O'Connor is canny in constructing this scene, as she demonstrates that there is a melancholic attachment *and* that Rayber is aware of and consciously struggling against this attachment. Rayber's ascetic, intellectual lifestyle is a consciously adopted form of therapeutic living. Rayber's cryptic identification is an open secret; both reader and character are aware of it, and it is the inevitability of Rayber's failure to control this hereditary haunting that constitutes Rayber's real struggle.

For his part, Tarwater too fears Mason's madness might be somehow hereditary; "what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him" (21). Tarwater fears a moment that will trigger this latent madness, something to unleash the symptoms he fears are hidden inside him. Of course, this moment does come in the novel's closing chapters. Mason had warned Tarwater that he was "the kind of boy…that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask your bidnis" (58). Returning to Powderhead after drowning Bishop, Tarwater is picked up by a man in a car, given marijuana and whiskey, taken into the woods and assaulted. This attack sets Tarwater finally on his path:

He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again. (233)

O'Connor turns blasphemy against God into blasphemy against psychology. A sexual trauma *does* trigger Tarwater's madness, but this sexual trauma is itself demonic in nature.

Before this ending, Tarwater resists this inevitability by exerting total control over his actions. As he explains to a confused hotel clerk, "You can't just say NO…you got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you're not going to do one thing by doing another. You got to make an end of it. One way or another" (157). It is at this moment that Tarwater apparently resolves to drown Bishop, and O'Connor underscores this change in stakes by having Rayber lay bare his understanding of their shared plight. Later that day, Rayber confesses to Tarwater that he had tried to drown Bishop but had "a failure of nerve" (169). Rayber struggles to get Tarwater to talk about his time with Mason before catching his attention by repeating the line "Children are cursed with believing" (171). Tarwater is adamant that *he* is not, but Rayber responds, "some…think they aren't…It's not as easy as you think to throw it off. Do you know…that there's a part of your mind that works all the time, that you're not aware of yourself. Things go on in it. All sorts of things" (171). Tarwater continues his evasion, suggesting, "I ain't worried about what my underhead is doing. I know what I think when I do it and when I get ready to do it, I don't talk no words. I do it" (171).

Later on, Rayber returns to the subject of baptizing or drowning Bishop, telling Tarwater, "I want you to see the choice. I want you to make the choice and not simply be driven by a compulsion you don't understand. What we understand, we can control…I want you to understand what it is that blocks you" (194). Rayber thus offers a kind of talking cure, de-fetishizing the act of baptism: "What you want to do is meaningless, so the easiest solution would be simply to do it" (194). Rayber though admits that this simple solution is not satisfying and would be "unworthy of the courage you've already shown" (195). As an alternative, Rayber offers the path he believes he

has chosen, "being born again the natural way—through your own efforts. Your intelligence" (195). This natural way requires constant struggle against the irrational urges that, intellectually, Rayber knows are meaningless. Rayber reveals that he cannot do away with the traumatic wound that baptism signifies for him. Herein lies the melancholic aspect of Rayber's personality; he cannot do away with the connection to the past wound that he nonetheless denies the importance of.

To use his language, Rayber knows "what it is that blocks him" but this *knowing* is not enough; it requires Tarwater's *doing* for the melancholic structures to come undone. O'Connor describes the scene in which Rayber realizes Tarwater has drowned Bishop in a way that suggests Tarwater acts out Rayber's unconscious desires, those desires being also Mason's desires. A complex web of thinking and doing takes place:

> He remained standing woodenly at the window. He knew what had happened. What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle.
> He stared out over the empty still pond to the dark wood that surrounded it. The boy would be moving off through it to meet his appalling destiny. He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for, that he moved off now through the black forest toward a violent encounter with his fate.
> He stood there trying to remember something else before he moved away. It came to him finally as something so distant and vague in his mind that it might have happened, a long time ago. It was that tomorrow they would drag the pond for Bishop.
> He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed. (203)

Rayber's self, built up around the denial of the affective power of his attachment to Mason, comes undone as he realizes that Tarwater's action has fulfilled Rayber's own unconscious desires. Killing Bishop, Rayber had fantasized, would be the act that would symbolize his moving on from

Mason's cryptic influence. Bishop's death proves to be what Rayber had warned Tarwater Bishop's baptism would be: meaningless.

Literary critic John Burt writes of O'Connor's characterization, "American romancers…do not describe their characters by describing their place in the social or familial world they inhabit but by describing what obsession or what circumstances have caused them not to do what everyone else does" (135). The clarity gained in this narrative strategy is accomplished through the de-centering of political and economic variations within whiteness from the novel's field of vision. No longer asked to identify with a man occupying a conflicted racial position, readers connect instead to other facets of Rayber's personality that develop across the novel with a single-minded religious focus. Despite the differences in biography between the two Raybers, O'Connor offers what we can understand as a singular mode of subjectivation that positions Rayber in each of his iterations as an intellectual approaching his world in the wrong manner. Each believes that conscious knowledge leads to conscious actions capable of fending off the painful reality of the unsaid.

As convoluted as O'Connor's construction of the unsaid in *The Violent Bear It Away* is, like the "The Barber," *The Violent Bear It Away* begins by exposing the entirety of its narrative arc. But, whereas in "The Barber" the story's *explicit* discourse on whiteness is established through the context defining phrase "Democratic White Primary," blackness is hyper-visible in the opening sentence of *The Violent Bear It Away* in the service of an *implicitly and uncritically* white narrative arc. We see in the novel's breathless first sentence an Africanist trope that presents the reader with the information that motivates Tarwater's search for truth.

Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury

it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up. (3)

Robert Pope draws attention to this sentence as evidence that "perhaps no writer has challenged the intellectual as much as Flannery O'Connor, for she challenges all of the changes he has experienced, all of his newest and fondest insights, and points to an ancient source of light and meaning in a world that seems to contradict hope, threatening us at every step" (736). By offering the solution to the problem of Tarwater's development before narrating the problem, Pope argues, O'Connor signals the primacy of a spiritual knowledge not bound by the narrative timelines of experiential knowledge. The novel's first sentence thus serves as a microcosm of this anti-intellectual, evangelical dynamic by containing in advance and as if from on high everything that we could possibly come to know through analysis of the narrative: "We hear the voice that has already accepted the spirit; the journey on which we will be bound will bring us back to understand the meaning and intent of these first words" (748). At the novel's conclusion, Tarwater seeks to escape the dynamics of the real world by returning to Powderhead, declaring, "I'm going back there. I ain't going to leave it again. I'm in full charge there…now all I have to do is mind my own bidnis until I die" (210). Finding his uncle buried and learning from Buford that he had been buried all along, Tarwater burns the property to the ground and returns to the city to prophesize. As goes Tarwater, so has the novel already gone. God's providence is assured before it is even called into question.

In both "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away* we see a fundamental disjunction between narrative sequence and thematic meaning. At a basic level, *The Violent Bear It Away* depicts a boy returning home to figuratively bury his symbolic father whom he had refused to literally bury at the story's inception. The easy parallelism between symbolic and real-world registers is no accident, as *The Violent Bear It Away* is intensely concerned with contemporary

psychology's threat to Christian belief. At the same time, *The Violent Bear It Away* is an iteration of O'Connor's quintessentially "mature" narrative trope of homecoming identified by Nicholas Crawford: "a white protagonist on a journey of return, whose encounter with an African American character signals a failure of personal and social self-reckoning" (1). Pope makes a similar point, drawing attention to how the reader's foreknowledge of this Africanist encounter is contained in the novel's opening sentence: "Perhaps the appearance of this Negro in the first sentence does, in fact, provide the background of absolute, unquestioning faith and responsibility against which we see the drunk and wandering vagrant who must run away to come back to the spirit" (748). The well-mannered black man is one of O'Connor's favorite stock figures and uncritically casts the beginning of this narrative *as white*. Against the feral Tarwater stands Buford Munson, one of those "uneducated Southern Negroes [who] is not the clown he's made out to be. He's a man of very elaborate manners and great formality" (*Mystery and Manners* 234). Considering O'Connor's own words on black men and manners, it stands to reason that Munson's completion of the funeral ceremony, without which the symbolic arc of the novel is meaningless, could be interpreted as "for his own protection and to insure his own privacy" (234). Surely Munson understands that his connection to the mysterious death of a white still operator might pose a problem for his "protection" and "privacy."

This Africanist troping is not exceptional, but it does cut against O'Connor's insights in "The Barber." Like Rayber, O'Connor attempts to reach a racially-transcendent abstraction through speech directed through black figures. While Rayber's speech to George fails, though, O'Connor's Africanist troping succeeds, at least according to the majority of O'Connor's readers. Like the majority of O'Connor's black characters, Munson is simply a functional object in a story about white people. Like the title object of "The Artificial Nigger," Munson serves as a portal for

divine revelation. Munson's artificiality, however, is unacknowledged. If we compare the opening salvo of *The Violent Bear It Away* to the narrative aporia introduced in "The Barber," though, we can see that something interesting is happening nevertheless. That is, Munson serves as a sign of narrative impossibility and foreclosure. Munson accomplishes Tarwater's narrative task without Tarwater's knowledge. In a sense, the work of maintaining the story's symbolic order is accomplished by a black figure without anyone's consent. This accomplishment extends beyond even that required by the narrative. Mason had asked to buried at home for Tarwater's convenience, explaining, "I ain't even asking you to go for the niggers and try to get me in the plot with my daddy" (15). Refusing the traditionally raced labor practice of patriarchal funereal rites, Mason asks for a simple burial that nonetheless is accomplished by the novel in the traditional terms he had sought to refuse. Munson's act of burial thus connects to larger social patterns despite the white characters' attempts to refuse them. Munson's presence forcibly interpolates Mason in a white patriarchal symbolic order, though again, this interpolation happens in the unconscious of the text. That this counter-reading is possible but unacknowledged by the text is evidence of the purposive positioning of black and white characters in service of a racially exclusive theological moral. Munson offers little more than an endorsement of the novel's opinion that Mason "was deep in this life, he was deep in Jesus' misery" (48).

Munson's role in the Tarwater's personal journal is highlighted again at the novel's conclusion, bookending the novel's entirely white central portions with a return to Africanist troping. Stopping at a general store on his way to Powderhead, Tarwater is confronted by the woman behind the counter:

After he had arrived and stopped, she did not speak but only looked at him and he was obliged to direct a glance upward at her eyes. They were fixed on him with a black penetration. There was all knowledge in her stony face and the fold of her arms indicated a judgment fixed from the foundations of time. Huge wings might have been folded behind her without seeming strange.

"The niggers told me how you done," she said. "It shames the dead." (225)

This clerk, an angel of judgment, reveals communion with the black characters Tarwater had taken for granted. Tarwater is chastened, "conscious that no sass would do, that he was called upon by some force outside them both to answer for his freedom and make bold his acts" (225). What happens to Tarwater next mirrors O'Connor's representation of Rayber's failures in "The Barber." Like Rayber, whose final speech comes in the form of a train wreck, Tarwater "opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair. Shocked, he saw the moment lost" (225). Here, O'Connor contrasts the intention of blasphemy with its social effects. Unperturbed, "the woman did not move a muscle. Presently she said, 'And now you come back. And who is going to hire out a boy who burns down houses?'" (225) Unable to either scandalize the woman or convince her to sell him a drink, Tarwater leaves the store, but his mind lingers on the failures of the exchange: "He thought of turning and going back and flinging the right words at her but he had still not found them. He tried to think of what the schoolteacher would have said to her but no words of his uncle's would rise to his mind" (226). O'Connor recapitulates Rayber's desire to process his failure through identification with his intellectually superior colleague, "how Jacobs would have done it" (18). For both Rayber in "The Barber" and Tarwater, this identification leads to further pain, as Tarwater is almost immediately picked up by a passing driver, drugged, and raped, with all of this seeming to stem from his unutterable blasphemy. The novel's conclusion thereby makes brutally good on the promise of the "word made flesh."

Despite the disastrous end Tarwater, his process of development is central to the way O'Connor defines and works out her spiritual message. Clarity in characterization contributes to the clarity of message; the psychology versus religion dynamic of the novel is buttressed by

assumed knowledge about what black people are good for—dirty work, gossip, impenetrable mysticism. But what of Rayber in "The Barber," a story that, more than any of O'Connor's others, takes up the question of what white people *know* about their whiteness? How can reading these two models of white racial melancholy reframe the way we approach the racial attitudes that shaped O'Connor's career?

As I have already suggested, Rayber's development in *The Violent Bear It Away* underscores his lack of development in "The Barber," and this lack of development is connected in the critical common sense to a lack of aesthetic merit in that story.[7] If we view "The Barber" as a starting point in the alternative history of O'Connor's development—moving away from a conscious engagement with whiteness towards a dogmatic insistence on religion as the ground of Southern identity—we can see in Rayber's characterization the difficulty of narrating whiteness as a social force. As opposed to the Rayber of *The Violent Bear It Away* whose intellectualism is overtly if ambivalently tied to a melancholic developmental narrative, the Rayber of "The Barber" cannot be easily explained by a narrative of loss that defines his relationship to whiteness.

What then might it look like to read with Rayber in mind? To not identify with Rayber's liberal political faith, but instead to take that evasive denial of particularity as the central problematic of O'Connor's fiction? This tendency to abstraction through religious, social, and aesthetic forms cuts at the very heart of O'Connor's professed theory of what literature can and should accomplish. Abstraction as narrative principle belies O'Connor's insistence on the South's superiority with respect to *both* fiction and race relations. O'Connor argued in *Jubilee* in 1963, "The South is a storytelling section…the Southerner knows he can do more justice to reality by

---

[7] In "The Barber" Rayber lacks even an oppressive mother, a character used as a short-hand way of characterizing intellectuals in many of O'Connor's later works.

telling a story than he can by discussing problems or proposing abstractions" (33). O'Connor proposes a basic contrast between true knowledge emplotted in a narrative and false knowledge developed through scientific, philosophical or otherwise abstract secular discourses. The apparent narrative-discourse binary here breaks down under the pressure of the way that O'Connor insisted fiction operates. Realist narrative, based in the material, produces a gateway for "mystery" and "grace" (i.e. abstractions) to become visible. Criticism of O'Connor is for the most part defined by an uncritical assumption that the religious grounds of O'Connor's definition of realism are not in themselves abstractions resulting from a definite white-supremacist power structure. As Tony Magistrale writes, "[O'Connor's] sympathy is born from a common humanity, the awareness on O'Connor's part that all of us share in concert the fundamental condition of sin and the possibility for spiritual advancement once we recognize the devil's hand within our own" (97-98). This sentence alone cites four related abstractions ("common humanity," "fundamental condition of sin," "spiritual advancement," "devil") that rigidly define the past (original sin), present (shared humanity and demonic adversary), and future (spiritual advancement) of a possible narrative. O'Connor's rejection of abstraction is therefore a rejection of certain possible categories of theoretically foundational concepts, a rejection of certain discourses and the stories they allow to be told. To achieve the proper final form of abstraction, one must begin with the proper initial abstraction while at the same time insisting on the fundamental reality of that primary abstraction.

All of this is not to argue that O'Connor's approach to the function of fiction is unique in a fundamental sense; any definition of reality begins with certain foundational concepts that give shape to warp and woof of "real" experience. Further, to insist on the singularity of O'Connor's difficulty squaring what appear to be universal concepts with the affective and intellectual patterns of whiteness would be to obfuscate whiteness as a broader critical problem. To declare this

tendency toward uncritical abstraction a problem unique to O'Connor would mean to place its origins somewhere in O'Connor's own past (that is, locate it in a different "narrative") and foreclose, rather than open, an investigation into how whiteness functions in O'Connor's literary imaginary. O'Connor's critics have a notable tendency either to embrace the white-supremacist basis for this religious theory of narrative or to excuse it by attributing it O'Connor's unique religious outlook to some quirk of her character. They do so in place of historicizing the investments in white-supremacy that defined the totality of O'Connor's intellectual beliefs. O'Connor and her critics, both religious and secular, insofar as they insist on a shared narrative of development, insist on what Frank Wilderson calls an "intra-communal narrative [arc] of transformation" (139). Such narrative arcs determine what registers as a successful, intelligible story, and by extension determine who counts as a subject of narrative, that is, as a person invested with agency. In this way, stories participate in the definition of, and exclusion from, the category of the human. The communal knowledge built up around O'Connor's work, I argue, insists on the universality of O'Connor's narratives even as they recognize the exclusion of black people from all levels of O'Connor's fictional and critical writings. The recovery of a theological payoff from meta-narratives about O'Connor's career continues the dynamic of avoidance that characterizes O'Connor's relationship to problems attending to whiteness for most of her career.

The common critical account of O'Connor's career arc beginning with "The Geranium" and ending with "Judgment Day" is defined by competing accounts of the quality of O'Connor's narratives that nonetheless share foundational assumptions about the conditions for a narrative's possibility. This critical narrative consistently devolves into silence when O'Connor's ambiguous statements about race are brought to light because to acknowledge them would unsettle attachments to uncomfortable anti-black structures of knowing that underwrite both O'Connor's

and her critics' theological considerations. Wilderson cites Derrida in naming such moments of failure as instances of narrative aporia: "a point of decideability which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles, or deconstructs itself" (Derrida quoted in Wilderson 135). To return to O'Connor's contribution to *Jubilee,* if "the Southerner knows he can do more justice to reality by telling a story than he can by discussing problems or proposing abstractions," it is because from its inception "the Southerner" is constituted by a meta-narrative of white supremacy founded materially and psychologically on the enslavement and continuing exploitation of black people. This fundamental contradiction pervades O'Connor's work, and its dynamics can be seen to operate even in moments in which O'Connor ostensibly calls them into question.

Though Wilderson defines this narrative aporia in relation to a definition of blackness as ontological impossibility, his insistence that the meta-narrative relationship between blackness and the universal is instructive for a study of whiteness and fiction's ideological functions. There is a parallel between O'Connor's fiction and the criticism of that fiction that is defined by the same frames of narrative possibility. In the same way that O'Connor obfuscated certain fundamental abstractions in her own work to create a space in which Blackness could be treated for other narrative ends (the revelation of God's grace), the main tradition of O'Connor criticism endorses or excuses the fundamental whiteness of O'Connor's literary project by forcing the facts of O'Connor's writing into *other* narratives about the unique quality of her personal beliefs or the generational exemplarity of O'Connor's writing. Through the proliferation of narratives within and about O'Connor's fiction, the meta-narrative stasis of anti-black whiteness as a foundational ground for the possibility of narrative continues unabated. The naturalness of narrative is taken for granted at a metal-level at the very same moment that it is highlighted as an artificial point of

access to the theological real within the literary object of study. The final (or perhaps the foundational) irony of what emerges from this discussion is the fact that while O'Connor *uses consistently racialized narrative practices to produce narrative aporia for white characters*, the concept of narrative aporia has not been taken seriously as a defining racialized sub-structure of O'Connor's literary consciousness. O'Connor uses racialized narrative aporia to talk about the world, but as critics we have for the most part avoided using these same narrative aporias to interrogate the racialization of the world from which O'Connor's stories emerged. We have only tentatively begun to ask how O'Connor's statement that "I don't feel capable of entering the mind of the Negro. In my stories they're seen from the outside" (91) is *not only* a statement about her black characters, but also a statement about the nature of whiteness itself.

Put another way, whiteness functions in O'Connor's fictions as a transcendental concept operating at a quasi-religious register—an element of human experience accessible only through non-signification. In his chapter "What You Can't Talk About," John Burt suggests that O'Connor's sense of the religious-transcendental follows from a biblical logic: "there are…no ways to demonstrate the validity of transcendental claims, and to look for such ways is to mistake the nature of the claims and to extend…the rules of argument and conventions of language into areas where discourse of any sort is impossible" (125). For Burt, O'Connor's language serves "not [as] a symbol which represents a transcendental thing but [as] an indication that the limits of symbol-making power have been reached" (129). O'Connor's fiction, then, to use Virginia Wray's term, "gestures" towards a theological limit (69). Wray argues that "not until O'Connor begins to use freely her own Christian ontology as one of those points of view [necessary for dramatic conflict] does the gesture really succeed in making an entire work" (69). For a narrative to lead to a conclusion that insists "This is all I can say about God, but nonetheless here he is" requires

indication that 1) the author is talking about God and that 2) the author exercises control over the failure of signification. This attempt to control the failure of signification through "gestures" provides the basis for my re-evaluation of O'Connor's development. In the differences between "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away* we can see O'Connor doubling down on religious indications in order to mask the unsettling questions about whiteness the narratives raise. In *The Violent Bear It Away,* O'Connor thereby smothers the racial-religious indeterminacy of "The Barber" through explicitly religious narrative discourse that seeks to determine the way that signification fails. The logic of whiteness with which I am concerned is the express subject of "The Barber," but is obscured in *The Violent Bear It Away* in ways that have not been fully explored and that undermine the critical optimism—the faith that O'Connor's work offers a way out of the strictures of white/black antagonism—surrounding the "The Geranium"/"Judgment Day" critical narrative.

If "The Geranium," as Wray argues, "is the best [masters' thesis story], for it comes closest to having a clearly drawn and well-prepared-for gesture," (69) why is "the central gesture [of "The Barber"]…not particularly effective" (72)? In the critical consensus of the thematic and narrative similarities between "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day" lies a consistent evaluation of O'Connor's maturation process—a process of clarification and intensification of meaning through the refinement of narrative tropes.[8] What would O'Connor's career and its traditional capstones "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day" look like if we assume that gains in narrative clarification and intensification come at the expense of the possibility of an anti-racist imaginary not grounded

---

[8] Ralph Wood proclaims that O'Connor, "seems consciously to have reworked the material of her first published story, 'The Geranium.' And what a revamping it is!" (56). For an extended discussion of the details of the revision, see Janet Egleson Dunleavy, "A Particular History: Black and White In Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction."

in white psychic loss? For Andrew Hoberek, O'Connor's defensive commitment to a nascent Southern identity politics—wherein "Southern" served as a primary political category over and above white class and religious identity—was an attempt to negotiate new social contradictions stemming from the emergence of a more nationally-minded Southern professional class. For O'Connor, the traditional ethos of evangelical Protestantism served as a galvanizing social force for figuring ongoing modes of resistance to the increasingly rationalized New South. O'Connor's focus on the religion of poor whites, as opposed to their racial identity, was an evasive choice. Hoberek writes, "Racism, we might thus say, is…irrelevant to O'Connor's sense of Southern difference…not because she thinks that Southern culture might be better off ceding its racism (which she may or may not have), but because her unwillingness to judge Southern culture on this topic reinforces its position as an identity category" (102). O'Connor's version of Southern identity was not only explicitly white, it also cast racial difference outside the realm of the political and therefore outside the realm of human intervention. Race becomes a quasi-religious, ontological category, and its signifiers become the medium of transcendence for her characters. Hoberek's reading of "The Artificial Nigger" is instructive for my concerns insofar as "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away* fall on either side of "The Artifical Nigger" in O'Connor's bibliography. What "The Artificial Nigger" makes symbolically evident—the rejection of political analysis for theology—is likewise evident in the shift in the differences in thematic telescoping displayed in "The Barber" and *The Violent Bear It Away*.

Underlying the narrative of continuity and development between "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day" is a basic assumption that each story builds towards the same lesson and that this lesson is best articulated by "Judgment Day." The elderly white man (Old Dudley in "The Geranium" and Tanner in "Judgment Day") living in New York with his daughter is tragically

bested by the banality of urban integration values and encounters the divine dissolution of his previously held notions of moral and racial superiority. The difference between the two stories is that "Judgment Day" insists that its lesson is theological while "The Geranium" opens its protagonist to similar scenes of alienation without explicitly subordinate its racial politics to theology. I am suggesting that we read this explicit subordination in "Judgment Day" *not* as a sign of aesthetic achievement but rather as a sign of ideological obfuscation.

Compare the closing motifs of "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day." In "The Geranium," Old Dudley is thrown by his interaction with his black neighbor, and this disorientation is amplified when Dudley notices the geranium across the alley is missing. The neighbor's geranium had been a sign of continuity for Dudley, connecting him to black and white acquaintances back home. Stirred to reminiscence by the geranium, Dudley recalls time spent with Rabie, a black man who worked at Dudley's former boarding house. Lost in a memory of a hunting trip with Rabie, Dudley is warned by his new black neighbor to be careful on the stairs, an act of concern he finds deeply humiliating. Dudley "was trapped in a place where niggers could call you 'old timer'" (13). This clearly racialized interaction triggers Dudley's final humiliation, a confrontation with a white neighbor that once and for all lays bare his alienation. Dudley returns to his apartment and in tears takes his customary seat by the window. Instead of the geranium across the way, a man sits "watching him cry. That was where the geranium was supposed to be and it was a man in his undershirt, watching him cry, waiting to watch his throat pop" (13). Though we are not told, the man is plainly white; otherwise, he would be described as black. Dudley complains to the man that the geranium is fallen, and the man challenges Dudley to do something about it for himself. Dudley makes to retrieve the geranium, but encountering the steps whereon he met his black neighbor, he is paralyzed by shame. Returning finally to his window, Dudley is told off one more time by the

man across the alley: "I seen you settin' in that old chair every day, starin' out the window, looking in my apartment. What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don't like people looking at what I do" (14). This final humiliation underscores not only the difference between black people in the North and South, but the difference between white people as well. Dudley finds no intra-racial solidarity with his working class neighbor, and the absence of this racial solidarity is the note the story chooses to end on. "The Geranium" thus takes the encounter with the black man as *part of* a story about whiteness and its variances across regions.

"Judgement Day," shifts the register of black-white encounter and alienation to a religious register seemingly outside the sway of the class and regional politics that permeate "The Geranium." In "Judgment Day," Tanner's confrontation with his black neighbor is almost entirely dominated by religious conversation. Whereas Dudley had paternalistically assumed his neighbor would want to hunt and fish with him (in New York City) only to be treated condescendingly, Tanner finds his neighbor more than willing to openly push back against his assumptions. Running throughout Tanner's interaction with his neighbor is the word "Preacher," as "it had been his experience that if a Negro tended to be sullen, this title usually cleared up his expression" (544). In their second encounter, the neighbor lashes out at Tanner, grabbing him by the shoulders and whispering, "I don't take no crap…off no wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you" (545). The neighbor takes a moment to collect himself before continuing, "in the sound of an exasperation so profound that it rocked on the verge of a laugh… And I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God" (545). Tanner counters this claim with sarcastic declarations, rhetorically denying the reality of what his neighbor has said: "And you ain't black…and I ain't white!" (545). The

neighbor throws Tanner into the wall and then into his apartment, where he convalesces, unable to speak, for several days.

Alice Walker's interpretation of the "Geranium"/"Judgment Day" narrative hinges on this violent encounter. She suggests that what develops between these stories is O'Connor's awareness of "rage…*exhibited* by black people" (77). The differences between the characterization of Dudley and Tanner are secondary to the changes in the black neighbors' responses to their encounters. For Walker, then, the emerging religious clarity of the stories stems from increased anxiety attending historical changes in public forms of black freedom and self-definition. The first confrontation in "Judgment Day" is followed by a second, even more violent one, and it is in this second exchange that the religious gesture occurs. After recovering slightly, Tanner plans to leave the apartment to ship himself back down South in a coffin, hallucinating his travel as he leaves the apartment. Lost in his vision, he encounters his neighbor again on the stairs. Believing that he is in the coffin and that the coffin is being opened by a black companion from home, Tanner jokes about his resurrection, "Judgment Day! Judgment Day! You idiots didn't know it was Judgment Day, did you?" (549). The neighbor responds derisively, "Aint no judgment day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgment day for you" (549). Tanner loses consciousness but not before saying "in his jauntiest voice, 'Hep me up, Preacher. I'm on my way home!'" (549). Tanner's daughter finds him dead in the stairwell later that day, and has body buried in New York before deciding to ship it back to the South.

In this story, black rage begets an apocalyptic religious vision; the point is not *just* that Tanner clings to his racist ways until the very end, but rather that black anger causes white death. Dudley, rejected and condescended to by his neighbor finds himself sad and confused, but this reaction manifests in the narrative as an inability to make connections with the white world around

him. Tanner's death marks an escalation of personal stakes and the emergence of overt black anger in O'Connor's fiction. Important too, though, is the pairing of black anger with Tanner's dual attempts to negotiate the situation through religion. Tanner attempts to mask over his racism by granting the paternalistic title Preacher. Seeing through that hollow gesture, the neighbor and O'Connor both choose to punish Tanner for this misuse of religion. As with George in "The Barber" and Munson in *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor speaks through a black man, putting the story's ironic gesture—"this here judgment day for you"—into the neighbor's mouth. This move is complicated, as it leverages the historical truth of black anger for the purposes of an inherently a-political, a-historical end. It is thus both like O'Connor's use of George in "The Barber" insofar as it is at least partially concerned with black experience, but unlike it (and like her use of Munson) in that it merely underscores the story's first-order, religious message. Black frustration becomes a new color on O'Connor's pallet, but any reflection on the conditions that motivate that anger are absent both from the details of the story and its takeaway gesture. The circumstances of Tanner's death seem to boil down to his stubbornness and the misfortune of having an angry neighbor; the thematic importance of his death dependent on the fact that he was already inappropriately framing his experience with religious language. Both "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day" use an encounter with a black neighbor to call attention to the whiteness of its protagonist, but whereas "The Geranium" settles on a final image of a fractured *white* community, "Judgment Day" works quickly to forget its racial machinations in order to return Tanner to his native South where his paternalism still makes good sense.

As with Jacobs in the all-black classroom, the "couldn't say" of O'Connor's fiction is the incommensurability of its prescriptions for (abstract) theological narrative resolution and its descriptive awareness of intractable racial difference. Even when secular critics reject the

theological faith of O'Connor's literary project and recognize her religious framing as a mere rhetorical trope, they nonetheless maintain faith in the racial foundation that makes this particular rejection of theology possible. Such critics maintain a faith that O'Connor's irony or critical distance, when divorced from religious belief, offers a way of resolving racial antagonism without having to think about its root causes. For the most part, this faith in a gradualist approach to racial politics—guaranteed either by God's dominion or by the inevitable progress of social change—requires a refusal to see the importance of anti-blackness in creating the frame for what is politically and theologically possible for white subjects within O'Connor's narratives. In cases where race itself is noticed in criticism of O'Connor, it for the most part affirms the whiteness of the critic. Noting O'Connor's uses of blackness so as to distance oneself from *those particular uses*, the critic nonetheless presupposes the extractability of racial logics from the social totality to which O'Connor responds and thereby repeats the very same logic by which O'Connor herself naturalizes whiteness's resistance to theoretical critique. To read O'Connor's constructions of whiteness critically, one must adopt an attitude of predetermined failure vis-a-vis the inevitable narrative resolutions of O'Connor's texts. To read O'Connor as a white critic with a critique of anti-blackness in mind requires adopting Rayber's paranoid attitude, requires seeing the welcoming gestures of O'Connor-as-barber as threatening moments of interpolation into white-supremacist discourse. The white critic must be Rayber to O'Connor's barber; that is to say the white critic must unceasingly refuse interpolation into white supremacist ideology smuggled in under the guise of religion and aesthetics while inevitably failing to realize that refusal.

CHAPTER TWO

"An Obituary, not a Segregation:" William Faulkner, Black Women, and Melancholic Repetition

In early 1940, Caroline Barr, who was born into slavery sometime in the 1830s, died. In a eulogy delivered at her funeral, William Faulkner, whose family had employed Barr since 1902, remembered their relationship as "never…that of master and servant" before delving into a string of now clichéd ruminations on Barr's role as the Faulkner family "Mammy." Faulkner praises Barr for her "fidelity," "devotion," "authority," "constant affection and love," and insists that "she was paid wages…but pay is still just money." By downplaying the economic dimension of Barr's role in the Faulkner household, Faulkner melancholically holds on to "Mammy Callie's" role as a guardian of "decent behavior" even as he says goodbye to her. Barr lives on, apparently, in Faulkner's own virtue whenever he "tell[s] the truth…refrain[s] from waste" or is "considerate of the weak and respectful to age" (*Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters* 42). "She was born and lived and served, and died and now is mourned," Faulkner concluded his eulogy, condensing Barr's life into a tidy conditional narrative: "if there is a heaven, she has gone there" (42).

Barr is not the only black woman whom Faulkner sent to heaven, nor is she the only black woman through whom Faulkner imagined enlightened, enduring white male subjectivity. In the final section of *The Sound and the Fury* (1928), Dilsey Gibson tearfully quotes from the Book of Revelations following an Easter Sunday service "I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin" (185). At the end of *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Nancy Mannigoe holds on to her belief in Christian redemption as she faces execution for killing the child of Temple and Gowan Stevens, even as her white jailor quips, "I'd a heap rather believe there wasn't nothing after death than to risk the station where I was probably going to get off" (243). Across the works that contain them, *The Sound and*

the Fury, "That Evening Sun" (1931), and *Requiem for a Nun*, Dilsey and Nancy, who work in the house holds of two of Faulkner's dominant Jefferson families, the Compsons and the Stevenses, provide Faulkner with the opportunity to explore the dynamics at the heart of the white Southern landed class. These black women characters also organize a textual skepticism of the figure of the mammy and the ideological uses to which it is put.

If Faulkner's fiction is at some level skeptical of the figure of the mammy that underwrites white plantocratic patriarchy, his eulogy and the elaborate staging of the funeral in his home demonstrate that Faulkner was willing to self-consciously perform the mastery of white patriarchy while ostensibly honoring Barr's life and work. According to literary critic Bart Welling, Faulkner "publicly *performed* his grief in front of everyone he could gather from both [the Barr and Faulkner] families," in a kind of "novelist's black-face show, an attempt to bring a character like *The Sound and the Fury's* Reverend Shegog to life, even as he began imaginatively transforming the Real Callie Barr into the stuff of 'pretty good prose'" (540-541). If, as Welling argues, Faulkner's Mammy-worshipping eulogy "anticipates the windy 'universal truths' of the Nobel Prize acceptance address and later public statements, the 'truths' that smother what is most terrifying, private, local, and exhilarating in his art," (540) it also signals the unsustainability of these terrifying insights that Faulkner's fiction provides readers. As a performance of plantocratic paternalism, Faulkner's eulogy expresses more than a personal loss, taking up as it does themes of a mid-century white racial melancholy that Richard Godden argues developed as a result of the Southern "landowning class['s shift] in its pattern of dependency from black labor to northern capital" (2). In the wake of such transitions in the dependency, Faulkner's self-styling as a public intellectual *and* a plantation patriarch who inherits Barr's virtues expresses "the contradictory need of the planter class to lose *and* retain the bound body of African American labor" (Godden 119).

Through public declarations of love to the deceased Barr, Faulkner sentimentalizes what he knows to be at heart an economic relationship rooted in slavery in order to assert authority over both his and Barr's families.

In this chapter I read three of Faulkner's fictional works—*The Sound and the Fury*, "That Evening Sun," and *Requiem for a Nun*—with an eye towards understanding the melancholic dynamic of Faulkner's repeated attempts to engage critically with the figure of the Mammy. I argue that in these repetitions, Faulkner works to control the loss of the symbolic force of the Mammy in order to preserve the white plantocratic fantasy life that the Mammy upholds. In these works, Faulkner attempts to breakdown the figural representation of the Mammy, yet in doing so he remains melancholically committed to what I call a "Mammy logic" that draws white moral authority from the real and imagined psychic lives of black women. I am particularly interested in Faulkner's uneasy repetitions of themes (sexual violence, prostitution, religion, domestic confinement and incarceration) through various iterations of diminishing and dying black women (Dilsey Gibson and Nancy Mannigoe) over the course of his career. Through repeated instances of sexual violence and domestic and carceral containment faced by black women, Faulkner exposes racial and gender violence that supports the white Southern family. Yet, in the wake of the losses of white Southern patriarchal authority following demographic and economic changes in the 1940s, Faulkner returns to valorize that racial and gender violence as a moral crucible for a white Southern future.

Faulkner's engagement with the Mammy figure happens broadly in the repetition of these themes in three stages. First, Faulkner stages Quentin Compson's encounters with Dilsey and Nancy as a way of literalizing the way black women occupy places of institutional aporia within the early twentieth-century plantocratic consciousness. Faulkner stages Quentin's suicidal

depression as stemming from a melancholic reaction to the loss of Southern patriarchal power, a loss that takes on white racial melancholic dynamic in its ambivalent, sometimes therapeutic, sometimes accusatory attachments to black characters, especially black women. If, as Freud argues in "Mourning and Melancholia," "the ego can kill itself only if…it can treat itself as an object," (588) Quentin conjures such an objective view of his failed patriarchal ego through meditations on black characters. In *Requiem for a Nun*, conversely, I identify a melancholic repetition of the character Nancy, whom I read through Freud's insight in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914) that "the greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (151). As Faulkner revises the history of Yoknapatawpha County to reflect a dependency on Northern capital, he relies on a self-conscious embrace of the mammy-logic his earlier works had characterized as violent and self-deceiving. Faulkner presents the relationship between the dramatic and prose sections of the novel as a form of historical analysis. Temple and Gavin's interactions with Nancy in the dramatic sections suggest psychic resistances whose origins the prose section's expanded history "remember," in order to work through newfound feelings of dependency to national power networks. Yet this shift in class consciousness displays an ambivalence about racial consciousness, what Freud calls a "hostile or unduly intense [transference]…in need of repression" that causes Faulkner to "act out" the fantasies of Mammy logic (151).

My reading of Faulkner's engagement with black women challenges critical appraisals of the value of Faulkner's representation of black characters, which began out of a conversation about the role of racist stereotypes in Faulkner's fiction, insofar as I question the ways that Faulkner's fiction critically takes up the question of stereotypical knowledge as a problem for white self-recognition. In "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," for example, Ralph

Ellison suggests that in an era of literature that presented black people "drained of humanity" (134), Faulkner "has confronted Negroes with such mixed motives that he has presented them in terms of both the 'good nigger' and the 'bad nigger' stereotypes, and who yet has explored perhaps more successfully than anyone else, either white or black, certain forms of Negro humanity" (138). Ellison argues that in his representation of black people, "[Faulkner] has been more willing perhaps than any other artist to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides" (148). In her groundbreaking *Faulkner's "Negro*," Thadious Davis argues that in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner "innovatively and respectfully…escapes the tyranny of stereotypes by acknowledging, as no earlier novelist had, the humanity of individual black people within the family and the church—the major institutions affecting their lives" (65, 70). It is precisely this tendency in Faulkner's writing to eschew easy representational tropes that provides cover for the ongoing functioning of (and our ongoing critical discomfort with) the racist logics that these stereotypical figures enact. Most troublingly, even the institutions of black family and religion that would humanize his characters are tools in Faulkner's melancholic imagination. So while it is at some level clear that Faulkner works to demystify the mammy figure as what Christina Sharpe describes as "an indicator of desire and its absence, a placeholder, a cipher," (160) when confronted with other threats to white Southern plantocratic patriarchy, he returns uncritically to this projective construction. In *Requiem for a Nun*, critiques of the Mammy figure offered by Temple Drake and Gavin Stevens preserve the structure of Mammy logic subtending the novel's historical vision.

With this collection of problems in mind, we must ask how Faulkner understands the functioning of stereotype in his work. Despite his praise for Faulkner's representations, Ellison laments the lack in American fiction of "characters possessing broad insight into their situations

or the emotional, psychological, and intellectual complexity which would allow them to possess and articulate a truly democratic world view" (143). In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner offers such a character with "broad insight" ostensibly to find the humanity in stereotypes in Quentin Compson. Indeed, Quentin claims this ability as a white male prerogative: "Father and I protect one another from themselves our women   *Women are like that they don't acquire knowledge of people we are for that*" (61-62). As he reflects on the personality of Deacon, the black man who befriends Southerners at Harvard, Quentin ponders also what it means to be a Southerner in North.

I used to think that a Southerner had to be always conscious of niggers. I thought that Northerners would expect him to. When I first came East I kept thinking You've got to remember to think of them as colored people not niggers, and if it hadn't happened that I wasn't thrown with many of them, I'd have wasted a lot of time and trouble before I learned that the best way to treat all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone. That was when I realized that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among. But I thought at first that I ought to miss having a lot of them around me because I thought that Northerners thought I did, but I didn't know that I really missed Roskus and Dilsey and them until that morning in Virginia. (55)

Here Quentin provides exegetical commentary on Deacon, demystifying his presence for himself and at the same time demystifying himself as a Southerner in a strange Northern setting. Like Ellison's Faulkner, Quentin recognizes both the artificiality of stereotype ("a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior") as well as the human truth at its core ("the best way to treat all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone"). Quentin both acknowledges Deacon's put-on subservience and accepts that he has insufficient evidential grounds with which question Deacon's motives and actions. Quentin levels *both* black and white social performance, casting black-white relations within a realm of self-serving laissez-faire paternalism. Through this comparison, Quentin expresses a sense of his own aggrieved minority status in the North; if he can let black people be themselves, Northerners can let him be as well. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin will go on to have more intolerable insights into the history

of violent and sexual exploitation behind these "behaviors," but even the level of self-recognition on display here proves unsustainable.

Quentin loses the outside perspective granted by Northern expectations when he returns to the South. He recalls encountering a black man at a train station in Virginia, marking his return to a purely Southern social milieu.

The train swung around the curve, the engine puffing with short, heavy blasts, and they passed smoothly from sight that way, with the quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity: that blending of childlike and ready incompetence and paradoxical reliability that tends and protects them it loves out of all reason and robs them steadily and evades responsibility and obligations by means too barefaced to be called subterfuge even and is taken in theft or evasion with only that frank and spontaneous admiration for the victor which a gentleman feels for anyone who beats him in a fair contest, and withal a fond and unflagging tolerance for whitefolks' vagaries like that of a grandparent for unpredictable and troublesome children, which I had forgotten. (56)

Quentin had forgotten this paternalism in the North, even as the North had granted him insight into the truth of the paternal myth. Quentin's return to the South and to what formally resembles what Ellison calls the "human truth at the core" of the stereotype ends up reproducing a paternalistic order that Quentin's interactions with Deacon had called into question. While Quentin thinks he misses Roskus and Dilsey, the specifics of his memory demonstrates nostalgia for the relational characteristics of the Southern black-white system: "paradoxical reliability," "rob[bery]," "protect[ion]," "responsibility and obligation." Narratively, then, Faulkner does not undercut the stereotypical projection of white desire onto black people; Quentin does not really *learn* anything from his insight. Rather, Faulkner shows how conscious awareness of the functioning of stereotype is unsustainable. White self-insight is not a permanent condition, but rather one that flashes up uncomfortably, alienatingly, and then recedes into the background. Returning to the South by way of the train station in Virginia, Quentin registers his homecoming by way of his interaction with the black man. Really, though, what has dropped out of the scene is the *white Northerner* who creates the sense of discomfort about white-black relations that spurs

Quentin's realization. Forms of whiteness are at stake in this scene; its relational ties to blackness flash into consciousness and are only soothed through flight away from the other, mildly critical form of whiteness performed in the North.

Whether or not Quentin truly "missed" Dilsey, she does provide him a moment of further reflection later in the chapter. Ruminating on his family's sale of Benjy's pasture to pay for Quentin's education, Quentin thinks, "Dilsey said it was because Mother was too proud for him" (108). Here, Dilsey in her capacity as caretaker possesses intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Compson family values. Yet Quentin follows this train of thought, moving from Dilsey's individual capacity to what black people in general know of white life.

They come into white people's lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope; the rest of the time just voices that laugh when you see nothing to laugh at, tears when no reason for tears. They will bet on the odd or even number of mourners at a funeral. A brothel full of them in Memphis went into a religious trance ran naked into the street. It took three policemen to subdue one of them. Yes Jesus O good man Jesus O that good man. (108)

This last sentence—"Yes Jesus O good man Jesus O that good man"—undercuts the important Easter Sunday service scene later in the novel. That passage ends with an image that seems to build up Dilsey's claim to, if not enlightenment, at least spiritual authority, "In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze. Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb" (185). Here, Dilsey is crying; is there a reason for tears? Faulkner's depiction of the Reverend Shegog's sermon is interspersed with women's exclamations: "Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm! Jesus! Little Jesus!...I sees, O Jesus, Oh I sees!...Mmmmmmmmmm. Jesus! I sees, O Jesus!" (184). What distinguishes these exclamations from the exclamations coming from the Memphis brothel? In Memphis, what appears in retrospect as religious ecstasy functions in the moment as an invitation for police violence. This scene suggests that the women in Memphis brothel are rejecting sexual

abjection and exploitation, but Quentin's reflection positions its cause as something unknowable. It seems equally plausible that the women's "religious trance" stems from sexual encounters with (presumably white) men or from some dynamic of black women's community unseen by the outside world. Quentin does not speculate as to a cause. Rather, these particular women, black sex workers, seem to function as the limit for the white imagination. The most abjected, the most put upon, end the chain of speculation.

Reading *The Sound and the Fury* for its nascent critique of the Mammy-figure as a momentary relief from white psychic crisis cuts against much of the common sense of the value of the omniscient narrative perspective tied to Dilsey in the novel's final chapter. As the opening of the fourth section makes clear, Dilsey literally embodies the Compson family's decay over time: "She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark." (165) Beyond the ready allegory between Dilsey's body and the Compson family estate, this description of Dilsey's body points to the stereotypical figure of the mammy evacuated of her imagined maternal fleshy excesses. Insofar as *The Sound and the Fury* directly confronts the transition of this aristocratic family's transformation into a middle class one, Dilsey serves as a sign of continuity between the two regimes. At the same time, she is evacuated of the corporeal excess that characterized the most popular images of the mammy and is therefore an emptied sign that begs to be read without offering any interpretive framework or grounding content of its own. Following mammy logic, Dilsey's position as the Compson's nurse and housekeeper grants her a privileged *emotional* capacity that registers in the text as narrative objectivity. Whereas the novel's first three sections are filtered through the "distempered spirits"

of the Compson sons, its fourth section uses Dilsey as a means of escaping these subjective, modern pathologies. As I understand it, Dilsey's function as a stabilizing figure for both the content and form of the narrative of *The Sound and the Fury* is not as straightforward as mammy logic would have it. Rather, *The Sound and the Fury* is ambivalent about the fantasy by whose logic Dilsey serves simply as a sign of transcendant racialized experience. The fantasy by which Dilsey is so summoned, I want to suggest, is itself a "projection of a distempered spirit" of whiteness that pervades the entire work.

Cleanth Brooks provides an early and influential account of how the novel's fourth chapter functions: "There is…as we move toward the end of the book, the sense of coming out into an objective world, a world in which objects take on a firmness of outline and density and weight, in which objective truth, and not mere obsessional impressions, exists. Though the fourth section is not passed through Dilsey's mind, it is dominated by Dilsey; and the world in which Dilsey moves is an objective world, not simply the projection of a distempered spirit." In this passage Brooks provides an intellectual version of what I am calling "mammy logic" by which black women are granted a privileged position with respect to white life that nonetheless denies their individual subjectivity. Brooks grants Dilsey the capacity to exist in an "objective world" otherwise absent in the novel, but the tradeoff for that objective perspective is the possibility of possessing "a distempered spirit." What would it mean for Dilsey to hate the Compsons? To have an interior life? In place of black women's interiority, Faulkner substitutes an omniscience that is both religious and narrative in nature, yet he complicates the utility of presenting black women in that fashion. If Faulkner does acknowledge black humanity, though, it is still wrapped up almost entirely in white self-definition as a form of acceptable and mediated loss that makes white consciousness possible and distinct.

Dilsey remains inscrutable even through the novel's Appendix, which Faulkner wrote sixteen years after the novel and intended to be "the key to the whole book" (203). Filling the gaps of the Compson family's history, Faulkner concludes with the simple entry, "Dilsey: They endured." (215) Dilsey's Appendix entry is famous for its brevity and seems to reinforce Brooks's reading of Dilsey: "To Dilsey neither the past nor the future is oppressive, because to her they are all aspects of eternity, and her ultimate commitment is to eternity." (291) Brooks continues, insisting that the "plight of each of the [Compson] brothers constitutes a false interpretation of eternity," (291) whereas Dilsey offers the reader a "poetry" that "is neither primitive nor decadent, but whole, complex, and mature." (290) Brooks's insistence that the novel resolves its contradictions at all is symptomatic of his method, but it is more telling that his perception of Dilsey through this mammy logic is the ground of his perception of the novel's thematic closure. Dilsey solves the problems the novel puts forward, but Brooks attributes this to Dilsey herself— what she knows—without recognizing that her position in the Compson household is itself one of the "problems" the novel is working through.

In reading the second section of *The Sound and the Fury* with the concept of mammy logic in mind, we can see Faulkner manipulating the desires for closure that constitute mammy logic by attributing to Quentin a fantasy space overdetermined by castration and blackness. By understanding the way that Faulkner develops a racialized economy of knowledge in this section, we can see how the stability of mammy logic is undone by the novel itself even as it operates according to its grammar. What Quentin gains from Dilsey is different from what Brooks finds: where Brooks sees "an objective world, a world in which objects take on a firmness of outline and density and weight," Quentin sees "white facts" that exist alongside "voices that laugh when you see nothing to laugh at, tears when no reason for tears." What comes into view for Quentin is not

the world, but rather something particular about the world that underscores how unknowable the rest of the world is. We see this tendency most clearly when Quentin remembers learning of his sister Caddy's pregnancy. At this key traumatic moment in his life, he imagines a paradoxical sexual purity that translates into a special kind of positional knowledge. Importantly, it is Dilsey's son Versh that provides him with the fantasy material for negotiating this trauma. Quentin recalls,

Versh told me about a man who mutilated himself. He went into the woods and did it with a razor, sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping. But that's not it. It's not not having them. It's never to have had them then I could say O That That's Chinese I don't know Chinese. And Father said it's because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you don't know. You can't know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that *tragedy is second-hand*. (74)

Mr. Compson's insistence that virginity is "just words" leads Quentin to a lesson he cannot seem to truly hear: that virginity and purity exist only as a product of cultural negation and mediation. If Quentin can detach himself from the system of values that has caused him to experience his sister's pregnancy as a trauma, then he can negotiate its fallout by distancing himself from it intellectually.

Mr. Compson's attempt to explain the logic of Quentin's pain by way of recourse to the ontological status of the different sexes points to a problem that Quentin seems to intuitively grasp in his memory of the story of the self-castrating man. Women are never virgins because they are always already penetrated by a patriarchal power; Quentin is a virgin and therefore has never wielded that same penetrating power. But at the same time the social order in which Quentin is coming of age bars him from ever wielding that power. Quentin's virginity then places him in a queer position between man and woman, at risk of both penetrating and being penetrated but lacking the power to either act or defend himself. His fantasy of self-castration in a ditch with a broken razor works to resolve this tension by literalizing his symbolic position in such a way that

63

it can be witnessed and identified with, but still only be experienced "second-hand." But as his brother Benjy experiences in the preceding section of the novel, castration cannot close off the past. Benjy remembers an encounter with another of Dilsey's sons: "*I got undressed and I looked at myself, and I began to cry. Hush, Luster said. Looking for them aint going to do no good. They're gone. You keep on like this and we aint going to have you no more birthday"* (47). Quentin too intuits that castration as an *act* will not bring about what he wants; like Benjy, he would be haunted by a lack, even though the thing that is gone was never there to begin with. Quentin desires something like an *a priori* or ontological castration, and this, the novel seems to insist, is located within blackness.

The mode of existence under erasure that Quentin dreams of is that of the castrated eunuch described by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*: "The eunuch's sexual deformity…was the closest approximation in the human species to an androgynous being. His body, as a binary symbol, both acknowledged and resolved symbolically most of the conflicts surrounding male-female relationships." (326) Further, as Patterson argues, eunuchs were associated with high religious and political influence due to their apparently corrupted nature: "it is the very dirtiness, grotesqueness, and ineradicable defilement of the slave eunuch that explain his ritual necessity." In other words, the eunuch is so radically and irreparably outside of systems of binaries that constitute human being, he can be granted proximity to power because there is *no way he could claim that power for himself*. The eunuch is, in Patterson's terms, the "ultimate slave" whose social death is literally carved into his body. Quentin's desire to commit incest with his sister in order to protect her from the dishonor of the outside world is in this moment transformed into a fantasy of enslavement; he can serve his sister without the threat of servicing her.

Obviously, Quentin does not desire enslavement. However, this reading that I am building around Quentin and Dilsey *does* help us transpose the important final section of Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* into a more contemporary realm. Quentin's escape route from his fantasy—"O That That's Chinese I don't know Chinese"—mirrors the Orientalizing distance implicit in Patterson's location of the "ultimate slave" in an Arabic and Chinese "past," as if the symbolic logic of castration somehow died off. By placing the pinnacle of slavery in this time and place, *Slavery and Social Death* tacitly closes off the insight of his reading of slavery, sexuality and power to more recent contexts. Of course, the mode of castration I am discussing here is different in important ways than the mode of castration that we typically associate with American anti-blackness, that which accompanies lynching, but at the same time we can see how the manipulation of the perception of black sexuality serves to solidify white sociality and both provoke and assuage white fears.

The trajectory of Quentin's reflection from Dilsey to nameless Memphis women evokes Hortense Spillers on the sexual-ideological function of blackness:

The black-female-as-whore forms an iconographic equation with black-female-vagina-less, but in different clothes, we might say. From the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among black people (or sex between black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium in which the individual is suspended. (164)

Through Dilsey's knowledge about the inner-workings of the Compson family, we emerge at the openly policed secret of black women's sexual availability. As Spillers continues, "the unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put" (164). Faulkner's staging of black women's morality along these figural lines—the Mammy and the prostitute—points to a shared black female unknowability even as they offer glimpses of insight into white

social life. In effect, castration responds to the master class's fear about the slave's personal influence and ability to exert control over the household, a control that could lead easily to social and political influence, a counter-power that Faulkner's black characters are unable to articulate in the open and that, finally, Faulkner remains profoundly troubled by.[9]

Quentin's acknowledgement that the solution to his problem is "never to have had them" turns immediately into the Orientalizing digression that serves as an evasion of black-white models of racial difference. In the immediate frame of Quentin's digression, being ontologically castrated positions *sexuality in general* as foreign and other. It is not *simply* that the Orientalist other is sexually deviant, but rather that *all sexuality is deviant*. By dividing the world into two categories—the sexual and the asexual—and disavowing sexuality in general as foreign, Quentin forecloses the perversity of his own desire by stripping it of its sexual character. But at the same time the figural stability of Chinese-as-sexuality is undermined by the competing Orientalist conflation of castration with the East. Quentin's figural mediation of his perverse desire breaks down under the weight of its own symbolic ambivalence—Quentin is *both* male and female, *both* sexual and asexual, *both* white and Chinese. Within the frame of Quentin's self-consciously elaborated fantasy, permanent closure is impossible. Whatever momentary relief is achieved through the initial act of conjuring of black knowledge, of what Quentin believes Versh knows of life.

---

[9] As Patterson notes, political castration was more effective at limiting the master class's fears about what an enslaved eunuch would do than it was at limiting what enslaved eunuchs actually did—in many cases seizing control of and ruling vast political territories. Herein lies Jason's fear and rage in *The Sound and the Fury*. As the Appendix explains, Jason "was afraid of the Negro cook whom he could not even force to leave, even when he tried to stop paying her weekly wages" (212). Moving out finally from the old Compson home, "He was free. 'In 1865,' he would say, 'Abe Lincoln freed the niggers from the Compsons. In 1933, Jason Compson freed the Compsons from the niggers" (213).

If we pull back the frame from this digression, we can see also that Quentin's fantasy is *both* white and black. But this figural ambivalence is *the novel's* and not Quentin's own: it exists at the level of the text but cannot be admitted into the logic of Quentin's fantasy. It is the precondition of the fantasy. Quentin learns "white facts" from a black man, but Versh does not tell Quentin this story at a moment in which he thinks Quentin needs it. Rather, Quentin conjures this memory for himself, repeating this scene to fit his own need. In the end it is not that Versh and Dilsey possess some transcendent knowledge that would bring the world to order for Quentin. Quentin admits no possibility of uncovering Versh's first-hand knowledge of this event, and furthermore what Versh does know first-hand about sexual violence or social death does not figure into Quentin's processing of his own trauma.

For Brooks, Dilsey's appearance in the novel's fourth chapter offers an opportunity to see blackness and confidently know blackness as plenitude and unity. Faulkner expresses though Quentin's symbolic plight, though, a skepticism of such figurative use of the Mammy-as-plenitude. The novel's fourth chapter's way of knowing Dilsey evokes a structural similarity to Quentin's Chinese digression—O That That's Black I Don't Know Black. To admit "I Don't Know Black" is both honest and an evasion; it speaks to a recognition that is too painful to confront but too powerful to deny. On the other side of white facts are black experiences that are visible but not recognizable without the whole order of knowledge coming apart. Faulkner could allow these insights to come into the text in Quentin's section only because Quentin's suicide makes them pathologically melancholic and unsustainable. Yet, as Freud writes in "Mourning and Melancholia," "the essential thing…is not whether the melancholic's distressing self-denigration is correct, in the sense that his self-criticism agrees with the opinion of other people. The point must rather be that he is giving a correct description of his psychological situation" (585). That is,

Quentin's melancholic tarrying with black signs of castration and sexual powerlessness express a psychological reality that the symbolism—castration itself—cannot encompass totally. The conclusion of *The Sound and the Fury* insists on Dilsey's moral transcendence in spite of Faulkner's expressed ambivalence, demonstrating the unsustainability of Quentin's insights, both for himself and for Faulkner. Faulkner knows Dilsey is a constructed fiction that papers over inconsistencies in white psychic life, but he needs that fiction in order to tell a story of the psychic decline of a disappearing white class.

By turning to Nancy, an occasional sex worker who fills in in the Compson kitchen while Dilsey is sick in the short story "That Evening Sun," Faulkner attempts to elaborate or alter what *The Sound and the Fury* could not name satisfactorily about black women. However, Faulkner's attempt to use Nancy to correct the mythical uses of Dilsey manifest only in the creation of an entirely abjected character and not a black woman invested with full subjectivity or capable of critical thought, a person behind the stereotype. Nancy's status is further complicated by the story's narration; whereas the fourth chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* depicted Dilsey as and through a third-person perspective, "That Evening Sun" filters Nancy through Quentin's memory. "The Evening Sun" elaborates on the relationship between the Compson family and Nancy; Nancy is pregnant by a white man who will not pay her for her sexual labor. This pregnancy sets her murderous husband Jesus out for revenge against her. As Nancy pleads for protection from Jesus, Mr. Compson and his children dismiss her fears as simple paranoia, or as Quentin had put it earlier, "tears when no reason for tears." Quentin seems to point forward to this story, a story told from his perspective as a nine-year old boy, in his section in *The Sound and the Fury*. What I want to suggest is the continuity between Quentin's recognition of the "isolate[d] white facts" in the novel and its apparent consummation in the "objective" fourth section of the novel is further complicated

in "That Evening Sun." We see not only the ugly effects of the white family's basic inability to acknowledge the danger facing the black woman who works for them, but also, I want to suggest, Faulkner further undermining the mammy's status as a figure for containing what can't be known about black women, though not, ultimately seeing black women as subjects of knowledge.

Nancy serves the Compsons while Dilsey is sick, which infirmity alone shatters the ostensible indestructability of the mammy. But at the same time, Nancy connects black women's domestic work to multiple kinds of violence that the mammy figure typically serves to obscure. Nancy sleeps with white men for money and suffers violence as a result of this: "Mr. Stoval kicked her in the mouth with his heel and the marshal caught Mr. Stoval back, and Nancy lying the street, laughing. She turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, 'It's been three times now since he paid me a cent.'" (445) Here, Nancy laughs at the act of violence; why? Quentin might have us ask. Following this incident Nancy, pregnant and either drunk or high on cocaine, attempts to hang herself in jail. Following her release, she tells her husband Jesus that her child is not his and he threatens to kill Mr. Stoval. Instead, he disappears, and for the remainder of the story Nancy lives in constant fear that Jesus will come back.

The name Jesus here is deliberate—Faulkner said later it was intended to "shock" (Gwynn 21)—because it complicates the Easter service that concludes *The Sound and the Fury* (citation). In Nancy we have a mix of both Dilsey *and* the Memphis prostitutes wild in the street, the mammy and the jezebel. With this name, "That Evening Sun" challenges the religious teleology of *The Sound and the Fury*. The short story also revisits other insights gleaned from *The Sound and the Fury*. Whereas Quentin realizes at Harvard that "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior," here he reports on the authority of the jailer that Nancy's attempted suicide was facilitated by "cocaine and not whisky, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he

69

was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn't a nigger any longer" (291). This appeal to the jailer's thoughts is more than a slice of life detail; it rewrites the tone and stakes of Quentin's insight later in life, perhaps retroactively providing it with an origin. The jailer's pronouncement suggests that no black person would consider suicide unless under the influence of cocaine; simple whisky wouldn't do the trick. Captured in this sentiment is an idea fundamental to the paternal myths of white supremacy: black people are satisfied with their lot.

Clearly, this is not the case for Nancy, cocaine or no. Nancy's depression or madness manifests as what appears to the characters as paranoia, and she repeatedly chastises herself: "I aint nothing but a nigger. God knows. God knows" (297). Nancy's resigned fatalist acceptance of her position offers a challenge to Quentin's instruction that we "take people for what they think they are." What relation could come from a woman identifying as a "nigger," or as "hellborn…I won't be nothing soon. I going back where I come from soon" (298). Importantly, Quentin is the only character in "That Evening Sun" capable of seeing something other than himself in Nancy in the moment, though what he does seen in her is incomplete. At the same time, the story refuses Nancy thought and Quentin assured access to her inner world. Quentin remembers a night when Nancy slept on the floor in the childrens' room, "Nancy whispered something. It was oh or no, I dont know which. Like nobody had made it, like it came from nowhere and went nowhere, until it was like Nancy was not there at all; that I had looked so hard at her eyes on the stairs that they had got printed on my eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun" (296). In Quentin's memory, Nancy is an afterimage. In seeing into her eyes, Quentin does not gain privileged access to Nancy's interiority, but rather experiences her as an impediment to vision akin to overexposure to light.

What light does Quentin see in Nancy? Their eye contact dehumanizes her; "they looked like cat's eyes do, like a big cat against the wall, watching us" (296). Nonetheless, Quentin maintains a privileged relationship to Nancy. Immediately after losing track of Nancy's existence in her moan that he cannot decipher, Quentin attempts to disambiguate the two Jesuses:

> "Jesus," Nancy whispered. "Jesus."
> "Was it Jesus?" Caddy said. "Did he try to come into the kitchen?"
> "Jesus" Nancy said. Like this: Jeeeeeeeeeeeesus, until the sound went out, like a match or a candle does.
> "It's the other Jesus she means," I said. (296-297)

This is one of the few times that Quentin speaks in the story, and each time he does, he acts as an interpreter between his family and Nancy and Dilsey. He informs Nancy that his mother would not allow the children to accompany her back to her cabin. Later, he commands Nancy to turn down the stove so that she does not burn the popcorn she is making for the children. All of Quentin's interjections serve to clarify Nancy's place in the world, suggesting that this is also the purpose of the story. Indeed, Faulkner's gloss of the story would have us conclude that the story is about the family's inability to understand Nancy. Indeed, in Jason and Caddy's exchanges with Nancy their future pathologies are already taking shape. Jason fixates on the idea that he "aint a nigger" (297), while Caddy is obsessed with knowing the secrets behind Nancy's sexual history. In the repetition that constitutes Caddy and Jason's speech about Nancy we see privileged signs emerge in negative: Jason's reactive commitment to his whiteness and Caddy's sexuality.

In the events recounted in "That Evening Sun," Quentin too finds a memory on which to attach his own melancholy: a black woman who wants to die but cannot, whose endurance is a cross to bear and not a virtue. In Nancy, Quentin finds an alternative mammy figure, one who ushers in death instead of life. Nancy thus toes a fine ideological line. As Spillers notes of attempts to think black women within the context of their precarity, "the black female remains exotic, her

history transformed into a pathology turned back on the subject in tenacious blindness" (156). By registering Nancy's suicidal tendency and resignation to her own death as a pathology, Faulkner locates the emptiness of depression as a psychological state and not a result of Nancy's position.

She talked like her eyes looked, like her eyes watching us and her voice talking to use did not belong to her. Like she was living somewhere else, waiting somewhere else. She was outside the cabin. Her voice was inside and the shape of her, the Nancy that could stoop under a barbed wire fence with a bundle of clothes balanced on her head as though without weight, like a balloon, was there. But that was all (302).

Nancy embodies a spiritless existence whose dynamics transfer forward into the adult Quentin's final days, removed from the particular precarities faced by black women and instead relocated as a general relationship between the subject and history. This rewriting insists that black women are capable of a full range of human experiences—both eternal optimism and fatalistic self-destruction—yet Quentin is unable to connect the conditions that make the significance of either Dilsey's heroism or Nancy's depression an ideological intervention with the suffering and precarity that makes such heroism heroic or depression reasonable. Once again, Quentin meditates on black experience only to take from it what he needs—even if what he needs is a model to justify suicide as a viable negotiation of his relationship with the world.

In the suicidal identification between Quentin and Nancy, Faulkner accomplishes two things. First, he undermines a certain symbolic use of black women to affirm the stability and health of the Southern social scene. In so doing, though, he merely moves mammy logic into a new discourse. Quentin's suicidal identification with Nancy relies on Nancy's suicide not being an expression of an historical or positional consciousness. Black women *can* be depressed, "That Evening Sun" tells us, but the substance of their depression is missing. It is elsewhere, unimaginable, lost. In this dual acknowledgement/erasure we find the highest expression of what Michael Kreyling calls the "Faulkner-Quentin" model of Southern history:

The configuration of race, tragedy, moral turbulence, blood violence, and guilt and expiation…apparently so unquestionably appropriate—even natural—to southern rites of community, produced, to the skeptical mind, the result of voiding the need for cultural change or social action and was therefore seen as an avoidance strategy. Heritage was seen as organic; tampering would be death. (110)

The suicidal compulsion apparently shared between Nancy and Quentin naturalizes suffering and levels the differences between black women and white men that might otherwise be understood—and addressed—politically. In this sense, Faulkner returns to the Compson household to further develop the depression which readers would have already known causes Quentin to take his own life. The return to Nancy is melancholic in two senses. Narrowly, it serves as a racialized expression of Quentin's own disillusionment with his plantocratic origins. The return to Quentin accomplishes a transference that, as Freud writes, "creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point accessible to our intervention" (154). This individual staging of white racial melancholy—fictionally as an "artificial illness"—becomes available through allegorical reading practices to express the repressions of the consciousness of a class.

While in residence at the University of Virginia in 1957, Faulkner argued for just such a reading of Nancy and the Compsons: "this Negro woman who had given devotion to this white family knew that when the crisis of (her need) came the white family wouldn't be there" (Gwynn 21) While Faulkner was able to offer this relatively simple precis of Nancy's role in a story from several decades prior, interlocutors during a question and answer session several months later sought clarification. In his answers, Faulkner reveals a melancholic attachment to the projective fantasy of black women's lives whose limitations are acted out in *The Sound and the Fury* and "That Evening Sun." On April 13th, 1957, six years after the publication *Requiem for a Nun* (and

seventeen years after Caroline Barr's death), English Professor Frederick Gwynn asked Faulkner in a seminar, "Sir, did you feel any connection between the servant Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* and the servant Nancy in 'That Evening Sun'?" (79). Faulkner responded, "She is the same person, actually" (79). Gwynn remembers Nancy by her status as a victim of violence at the hands of a white man and prompts Faulkner, pointing out that "they both have that incident about Mr. Stovall in the street." Faulkner answers by repeating himself, then making a claim that in a certain sense grounds the entire problematic of this chapter: "Yes, she is the same person actually. These people I figure belong to me, and I have the right to move them about in time when I need them." An earlier question in this session provides some context for Faulkner's answer. An unidentified participant asks a version of my first question, "Is there any purpose in the repetition of the same types of characters throughout your writing?" (78). Faulkner's response speaks to repetition as a symptom of limited experience: "No, only that I have led a—all of my life has been lived in a little Mississippi town, and there's not much variety there. A—a writer writes from his experience, his—his background, in the terms of his imagination and his observation. That would be the explanation, I think" (78). In this answer Faulkner lays out a connection between experience ("background" and "observation") and imagination. Imagination responds to experience, presumably to "needs" generated by such experience. Faulkner's experience, and therefore his imagination, are limited (at least in Faulkner's self-styling) by his existence "in a little Mississippi town."

Faulkner's limited experience, and the "need" generated by it, nevertheless opens up to broader historical concerns that would have escaped Faulkner's direct experience. Later in the conversation, Faulkner describes slavery as a "Curse…which is a—a—an intolerable condition. No man shall be enslaved, and the South has got to work—work that curse out, and it will, if it's

let alone. It—it can't be compelled to do it. It—it must do it of its own will and—and desire, which I believe it will do, if it's let alone" (79). Here Faulkner cycles through two historical registers of experience that are not and could not be his own: the past "intolerable condition" of slavery and the future emancipation from slavery's legacy which the South "must do." His "little Mississippi town," then, contains a need met through repetition, a need that links to the intolerable past of slavery and the uncertain future of slavery's racial and economic relations.

I am struck by two aspects of Faulkner's contributions to this conversation and by how Faulkner's explanation of Nancy's repetition and the legacy of slavery resonate with his eulogy for Caroline Barr. First, Faulkner repeats himself in his explanation of his use of repetition: "She is the same person, actually," as if convincing himself of the fact. Faulkner's response to the question about repetition displays the analytic "division of labor" that Freud suggests takes place in the recovery of memories: "the doctor uncovers the resistances which are unknown to the patient; when these have been got the better of, the patient often relates the forgotten situations and connections without any difficulty. Like *Requiem for a Nun*'s exuberant prose sections, Faulkner remembers in the mode of Freud's: "When the patient talks about these 'forgotten' things he seldom fails to add: 'As a matter of fact I've always known it; only I've never thought of it.' He often expresses disappointment at the fact that not enough things come into his head that he can call 'forgotten'—that he has never thought of since they happened" (148). Second, Faulkner makes a statement of absolute ownership that hearkens back to the absolute privilege of the master's prerogative. Faulkner's characters "belong to" him; he has "the right to move them about in time when I need them." Of course, as a fictional construction, Nancy *is* Faulkner's intellectual property. The answer to this question raises further questions about the nature of repetition in Faulkner's work: what authorial "need" is met through the act of repetition, and why is Nancy the

character through whom repetition becomes a problem for his audience? Certainly, the inconsistency of Nancy's timeline and of the details of her life make Nancy is unique among Faulkner's characters. She is a young woman in the early 1900s with the Compson family and is yet "about thirty—that is, she could be almost anything between twenty and forty" in the mid-thirties in which the dramatic sections of *Requiem for a Nun* take place (43). This degree of inconsistency suggests that Nancy lacks the same kind of integrity in Faulkner's mind that other characters enjoy, characters who Faulkner declares "are quite real and quite constant" (78). This level of inconsistency and Faulkner's audience's willingness to ignore it suggests that, as Christina Sharpe argues of the figure of the mammy, Nancy has "no place in the memory of her creators as a creation [so] she becomes a realized figment of collective imagination, an avatar of the collective unconscious. A phantasmatic figure, she is everywhere, in every place" (161). In *Requiem for a Nun*, Faulkner melancholically "brings out of the armoury of the past the weapons with which he defends himself against the progress of the treatment" (Freud 151).

Much as she had left a ghostly afterimage burned into Quentin's retinas in "That Evening Sun," Nancy returns in *Requiem for a Nun* as what Kimberley Juanita Brown calls an "afterimage" of slavery (1). Such afterimages are "[places] where black women's endurances have been used against them, and their bare survival is reconfigured as a strength that cannot be altered, damaged, or destroyed" (3). Nancy, fearful for her life in "That Evening Sun" and condemned to death in *Requiem for a Nun*, narratively lives in a state of "bare survival" that Faulkner puts to wildly different uses in the two works. While Nancy's resignation to death becomes the sign of an indestructible and transcendent will available for white appropriation and exploitation. We must ask why, like Quentin in "That Evening Sun," Faulkner returns to Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun*. Freud theorizes that a patient "reproduces [what is forgotten] not as a memory but as an action; he

repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (150) Faulkner's repetition of Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* is remarkable as a story of redemption not for Nancy the character, whom Faulkner could "remember" and try to recover, but for white Southern culture whose (to Faulkner's mind) lost values he uncritically enacts.

Nancy's depiction and actions in the dramatic sections of *Requiem for a Nun* serve to establish her difference from the stereotypical mammy. The prose sections of the novel attempt justify the famously unconvincing depiction of Nancy's willingness to die for the good of Temple Drake's reputation. As James Baldwin diagnosed of *Requiem for a Nun* in 1972, "What Faulkner wishes us to believe, and what he wishes to believe, is at war with what he, fatally suspects. He suspects that black Nancy may have murdered Temple's white baby out of pure, exasperated hatred" (45). In foreclosing this possibility, Faulkner awkwardly opens up the novel to a broader historical horizon defined by precisely the same projection of suffering and moral authority that characterizes Faulkner's public pronouncements on the South's need for autonomy in addressing the legacies of slavery and present institutions of Jim Crow segregation. To state the case more strongly, *Requiem for a Nun* offers a fundamental revision of the entire history of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha county geared towards Faulkner's public-facing racially moderate position that the South must be left to address segregation on its own terms. In order to make this historical argument, Faulkner, Quentin-like, stares into the abyss of Nancy's subject position, reinvigorating his own psychic life by consuming her suffering. Yet while Quentin's engagement points to melancholy as the impoverishment of the ego, Faulkner's melancholy in *Requiem for a Nun* is ego-reinforcing, but in providing this new future he substantially redefines the past. Faulkner restages the history of Jefferson in two modes, working by way of both prose accounts of the history of the town and dramatic depictions of Gavin and Temple Stevens' sojurn within the legal

system. These two white characters are not so much interested in saving Nancy's life or freeing her from imprisonment, as in redeeming Temple for her past sins.

Nancy's first appearance in *Requiem for a Nun* echoes the opening of the fourth chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*. In the earlier work, Dilsey's body works as a synecdoche for the Compson home and is introduced by the new omniscient, third-person narrator. Act I, Scene I of *Requiem for a Nun* begin with a closed curtain and the call of a court official, "Let the prisoner stand" (43). Faulkner writes in the stage directions, "the curtain rises, symbolizing the rising of the prisoner in the dock, and revealing a section of the courtroom" (43). In both instances, Faulkner ties the presentation of the trials of a white family to the structural—that is, architectural—presence of the black domestic worker. The relationship between Nancy and the physical space of the court and jail proves central to Faulkner's negotiation of her moral position. Indeed, the novel really knows Nancy in and through her confinement. This rest of the opening scene rests on the performance of white outrage. Faulkner writes that the delivery of Nancy's first line, following the announcement of her death sentence, should be "quite loud in the silence, to no one, quite calm, not moving" (45). In reaction to Nancy's declaration, "Yes, Lord," the stage direction then calls for "a gasp, a sound, from the invisible spectators in the room, of shock at this unheard-of violation of procedure," out of which arises, "the sound of a woman's voice—a moan, wail, sob perhaps" (45). This voice, presumably Temple's, signals a transition to the novel's focus on the Stevens family, on he interior of whose home the curtain rises "smoothly and normally" on in the following scene (45). Nancy moves off stage until Act II, Scene II, at which point the play flashes back to the night of the murder. As Pete and Temple argue about their getaway plans, Nancy appears unnoticed and "moves quietly through the door and stops just inside the room, watching them" (154). Here, as in Act I, Scene I, Nancy is importantly an observer whom others fail to observe properly. When he

finally notices her, Pete is directed to "react" without further elaboration (155). He is clearly frustrated, but Faulkner offers no clear emotional content for his reaction. Later, as the three argue, Nancy stands "not looking at anything, motionless, almost bemused, her face sad, brooding and inscrutable" (156). Nancy disappears into the space of the room almost as furniture in the scene; this subjectlessness allows her to observe and record the truth of these actions.

In these pivotal introductory moments Faulkner uses both the apparatus of the stage and the text of the stage directions to characterize Nancy as a unique, challenging moral perspective that cannot yet be understood on her own terms. What we know of the scandalous elements of Nancy's life—her drug use, violence and sex work—comes only by way of generalizations and speculations. Faulkner writes in the stage directions to Act I, Scene I, "[Nancy] has probably done many things [besides work as a domestic servant]—chopped cotton, cooked for working gangs— any sort of manual labor within her capacities, or rather, limitations in time and availability, since her principal reputation in the little Mississippi town where she was born is that of a tramp" (44). Even Nancy's name is uncertain: "Her name—or so she calls it and would probably spell it if she could spell—is Nancy Mannigoe" (44). We also learn of her reputation from Temple, who speaks of her disparagingly even as she expresses sympathy. Temple explains to the Governor, for example, that Nancy is many things: "we have Nancy: nurse: guide: mentor, catalyst, glue, whatever you want to call it, holding the whole [Stevens family] together," before concluding that she had "chosen the ex-dope-fiend nigger whore for the reason that an ex-dope-fiend-nigger whore was the only animal in Jefferson that spoke Temple Drake's language" (136). The one thing Nancy is definitively not, however, is "ole cradle-rocking black mammy at all, because the Gowan Stevenses are young and modern, so young and modern that all the other young country-club set applauded when they took an ex-dope-fiend nigger whore out of the gutter to nurse their children"

(136). Nancy is to Temple a confidant, but outwardly she serves as a sign of modern paternalism, an unlikely choice for a young modern family to try to rehabilitate.

Faulkner presents Nancy as the center of the play's knowledge by having her initiate the view of the dramatic action and witness Temple's crimes, but she is unknowable in her characterization, a contradiction that highlights the thematic importance of the white characters's journey to make sense of her crime and death. Yet as the dramatic sections of the work proceed and the white characters drop the pretense of trying to save Nancy, Temple explicitly states that she had valued Nancy's company because, "we all seem to need, want, have to have, [someone] not to converse with you nor even agree with you, but just to keep quiet and listen" (137). Temple generalizes from here, articulating at the level of individual preference Faulkner's overarching belief in the South's cultural autonomy: "which is all that people really want, really need; I mean, to behave themselves, keep out of one another's hair" (137). Stevens explains to the governor that upon her first pregnancy—the paternity of which she felt unsure—Temple realized "for the first time that you—everyone—must, or anyway may have to, pay for your past" (140). Stevens continues, fundamentally endorsing the historical revision of the novel's prose sections, "That past is something like a promissory note with a trick clause in it which, as long as nothing goes wrong, can be manumitted in an orderly manner, but which fate or luck or chance, can foreclose on without warning" (140). Stevens imagines the relationship to the past as a relationship of debt. This is true in the novel of relationships *between white people*, in this case between Gowan and Temple; the relation of racial subjugation and bondage implied by "manumitted" is displaced into a white sexual and economic relation. Stevens's discourse here not only mirrors the novel's prose sections in its historical vision, but also does so in its function as a frame. Stevens concludes this speech by imploring Temple to reveal what really happened the night Nancy killed the child, leading to a

separate scene in which the interaction between Nancy, Temple and Pete plays out on stage. This scene is presented as the truth of the murder, but the truth of this scene is belied by the need to interpret it before and after its presentation. In the same way, the truth of the novel's dramatic sections, seemingly objective in their narration-less presentation of speech and action, requires the novel's prose sections to signify fully.

Temple takes on the interpretative mantel following the presentation of the flashback, ruminating on the racial disparities of crime and punishment. Reflecting on the banality of black incarceration, Temple realizes, "all of a sudden you find out with a kind of terror, that they have not only escaped having to read, they have escaped having to escape" (169). Temple's understanding of black existence is in line with that displayed in other sections of the novel: blackness's value is its unthinking negotiation of its conditions. She describes black men as "not immune to work, and in compromise with work is not the right word either, but in confederacy with work and so free from it; in armistice, peace" (170). Here again, Faulkner takes a term overdetermined by its relationship to slavery, "confederacy," and displaces it into a relationship of wage labor, drawing on fantasies of the Southern to establish a seemingly ideal, balanced relationship between black people and their labor. Temple then proceeds to recount a version of the events narrated in the story "Pantaloon in Black" from *Go Down, Moses* (1942). In Temple's version, the unnamed black man's grief manifests in an inability to stop thinking: "Look like I just cant quit thinking. Look like I just cant quit" (171). Temple's projection here is obvious, as she later reveals that she "had spent eight years trying to expiate [her past] so that my husband wouldn't have to know about it" (181). She concludes that the entire confession charade has been "just suffering. Not for anything: just suffering" (181). Stevens insists that Temple's suffering hasn't been for naught, relying on Nancy as a figure to educate Temple on the value of self-sacrifice. He

tells Temple, "you came here to affirm the very thing which Nancy is going to die tomorrow morning to postulate: that little children, as long as they are little children, shall be intact, unanguished, untorn, unterrified" (181).

Accepting this declaration, Temple brings "The Golden Dome" to a conclusion. When she and Stevens appear again in "The Jail" in Nancy's cell, Temple understands her position thus: "Any now I've got to say 'I forgive you, sister' to the nigger who murdered my baby. No: it's worse: I've even got to transpose it, turn it around. I've got to start off my new life being forgiven again. How can I say that?" (230). Temple responds to the difficulty of her attempt to assume responsibility for the death of her child by casting new aspersions on Nancy. Temple takes responsibility for her child's death, "I destroyed mine myself when I slipped out the back end of that train that day eight years ago" (240) but in so doing balances the score by recalling Nancy's miscarriage, "that you told me about, that you were carrying six month gone….and the man kicked you in the stomach and you lost it" (240). Nancy may not have cause the death of Temple's child, but Temple cannot let her completely off the hook. Nancy, too is forced with a burden of failed motherhood, even as her actions work to bring about a righting of white motherhood *and* as her failure is understood as a result of violence done to her by someone else. The key question at the novel's end, then, is what it would mean for a white woman to seek forgiveness from a black woman. Temple resolves her feeling of guilt by returning to and taking responsibility for that moment in her past that to Gowan earlier in the novel was unrecoverable, transposing her sense of accountability away from Nancy onto to the child from whom she'll need "all the forgiving and forgetting that one six-months-old baby is capable of" (240).

The question of such racialized forgiveness is notable at the conclusion of a novel which has written slavery out of history. Faulkner constructs a purely formal symmetry, built on the

ideological appropriation of black women's precarity, between the novel's opening insistence on intraracial male community anchored by black maternity and its closing moment in which *women* are forced to confront the failures of that same system. This ending relies on the transcendant love attributed to the mammy as a deferral of historical retribution. Against the backdrop of a national politics in which, Faulkner insisted, the South needed freedom to work out its own solution to the racial legacies built on slavery, Nancy offers an absolution by not seeking compensation for her sacrifices. Faulkner equates contemporary racial positions through a magical thinking, attributing to Nancy a modern pathology while simultaneously holding her up as an ideal figure for granting forgiveness. In doing so, Faulkner attributes a moral power to black women that is always expressed through their disappearance and thereby reserves for himself the responsibility of perpetuating this threatened moral order. Faulkner becomes an observer of all human weakness and suffering so as to deny black women a special position of judgment that might condemn whiteness; he deploys a perspective that he take to grant access to historical truth—but that is really a projection of guilt—to reinscribe whiteness's culture making power for a new generation.

Nancy's imprisonment and suffering in the Jefferson jail is central to the white moral logic of the narrative of the dramatic sections of *Requiem for a Nun*, but as Faulkner provides an historical backdrop in the novel's prose sections he relies explicitly on an unreconstructed mammy figure in characterizing the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha County before its fall into modernity. Whereas Faulkner's previous works had focused their geographical eye on the relationships between plantation land, wilderness, and urban spaces, *Requiem for a Nun* focuses almost entirely on the history of the civic architecture of the section. Such respatialization has consequences for the "where" and "why" of Jefferson's history, a history that Faulkner rewrites around the concept of debt instead of around the violence of slavery. This revision poses challenges to traditional

accounts of the relationship between slavery, place and race, what Katherine McKittrick calls the "where of blackness," (xviii) in Faulkner's work. Imprisoning Nancy and leveraging that imprisonment for a narrative of white redemption that casts sin as debt, and forgiveness as "manumission," requires displacing the relations of slavery from the realm of the ontological—where it serves as a structural barrier to white futurity as in Faulkner's Compson stories—into the merely social. Retracing the origins of this new vision of Southern sociality, which Faulkner had already cast in terms of white/black relations of debt and forgiveness in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948),[10] Faulkner locates the origins of Jefferson in a time before crime and therefore a time before guilt and criminality as the dramatic sections of the novel conceive of it.

The first criminals are carried in to what would become the town by a local militia "in revenge for having been evicted from it" (6). Now facing the necessity of legal organization to deal with prisoners, the town's founders are forced to put a lock on the settlement's jail. Faulkner goes out of his way to explain what this lock meant in its prior service on the mailbag carried between the settlement and Memphis. The lock is a sign of "a free government of free men…so long as the government remembered to let men live free, not under it but beside it" (11).

"So the old lock was not even a symbol of security: it was a gesture of salutation, of free men to free men, of civilisation to civilisation across not just the three hundred miles of wilderness to Nashville but the fifteen hundred to Washington: of respect without servility, allegiance without abasement to the government to which they had helped to found and had accepted with pride but still as free men, still free to withdraw from at any moment when the two of them found themselves no longer compatible, the old lock meeting the pouch each time on its arrival, to clasp it in iron and inviolable symbolism" (11).

---

[10] As Michael Millgate argues, Lucas Beauchamp's final gesture of asking for a receipt from Gavin Stevens in that novel "makes it clear that he does not intend his recent experience to affect his behavior in the slightest degree and that he will not even release Charles from that indebtedness, that sense of being always at a disadvantage, which prompted the boy to his original intervention in Lucas's behalf" (220). See also Noel Polk's chapter "Faulkner and the White Southern Moderate" in *Children of the Dark House* (1996).

In its new service on the door of the jail, the lock transforms into a symbol of the rule of law: "they didn't need the lock to protect the settlement from the bandits, but to protect the bandits from the settlement" (12). The lock aids in deliberative justice over and against the lynch mob mentality of the local settlers. The lock's capacity to contain the excesses of violence on display in the lynch mob is both necessary and ultimately the first step towards nation formation and the loss of the balance between individual and government the chapter describes. Given the importance of the lynch mob as an agent of narrative climax in many of Faulkner's other works, the novel views this transformation as a necessary negotiation of the failures of the frontier society's laissez-faire culture. The transformation of the lock into nascent municipal property is complicated by its disappearance during a massive jailbreak. The town fathers seek to collectively make amends to Alec Holston, the original owner of the lock. They plan to pay for it by writing it off as an expense billable to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, since "nobody would ever notice it probably" (19), the federal government being so distant from their daily lives. They find, however, that the lock, by virtue of its transfer to the postal service, has become federal property. The postman, Pettigrew, informs them that they have "committed a violation of act of Congress as especially made and provided for the defacement of government property" (21). Pettigrew serves as the first incursion of a nationally-oriented rationality into the County, an "ethics" (23) that seem incorruptible. The men devise a plan, incorporating the settlement as a town in order to bribe Pettigrew by naming the town after his middle name, Jefferson. In return, Pettigrew suggests they could bill the Bureau of Indian Affairs for fifty dollars' worth of axle grease and use that money to buy a new lock, thereby avoiding the necessity of admitting the destruction and loss of federal property.

The men set to work repairing the jail and converting it into a courthouse as the official center of the new town, but they are ill at ease with the transaction that has transpired. They work

"not to finish it but to get it out of the way, behind them; not to finish it quickly in order to own, possess it sooner, but to be able to obliterate, efface, it the sooner, as if they had also known in that first yellow light that it would not be near enough, would not even be the beginning" (29). This exchange inaugurates the history which the novel explores, and it is important to note that the crime in response to which the town founds itself—the destruction of federal property—was committed without the knowledge that it was happening. The very idea of federal property thus emerges as a contaminating concept. Before, Ratcliffe had resisted defrauding the government as "a matter of principle" (31). Faulkner writes employing free-indirect access to Racliffe, "it was he—they: the settlement (town now)—who had thought of charging the lock to the United States as a provable lock, a communal risk, a concrete ineradicable object" (31). Now, though, "it was the United States itself which had voluntarily offered to show them how to transmute the inevictable lock into proofless and ephemeral axle grease" (31). Through Ratcliffe Faulkner concludes that the whole affair left "the whole race of man, as long as it endured, forever and irrevocably fifteen dollars deficit, fifteen dollars in the red" (32).

Though this is "Ratcliffe's trouble," and the rest of the town "didn't even listen" (32), it is also the novel's trouble. Within the scope of this primary debt emerges the rest of the history of the town and county, including the history of the rise and decline of the great plantation families told in earlier novels. Thomas Sutpen, for example, arrives on the scene "like providence almost" with his architect in tow (32). This architect serves a prophet, warning the town that no matter how well they build the courthouse now, "in fifty years you will be trying to change it in the name of what you will call progress. But you will fail; but you will never be able to get away from it" (34). In this melancholic psychic economy, structured around a lost object—the lock—whose past enjoyment becomes shameful only after the fact, the courthouse arises "symbolic and ponderable"

(35). For Faulkner, the lock and the fifteen dollar deficit associated with it thus become a new founding loss, and the construction of the courthouse stands as a moment of Faulkner's overt self-exegesis, collapsing the difference between author and narrator. Marking the edifice as "symbolic and ponderable," Faulkner proceeds to ponder it, thereby grounding what is ostensibly "Ratcliffe's problem" in the official memory of the narration.

In the description of the courthouse, Faulkner moves into a mode of writing marked by what Hortense Spillers calls "radical discursivity" (339). Within such moments of radical discursivity, action is not narrated but described, and attached through participles to possessors of traits, not agents. Spillers identifies moments of discursivity in works like *Absalom, Absalom!*, and suggests that through it Faulkner "stages the problem of knowledge as a fiction and seems to decide that the former (at least what passes for it) is riddled with instability…it is a phantasmal tissue of misperception, passed on and embellished from one generation to the next" (351). In *Absalom, Absalom!,* this radical discursivity organizes around "the obsession [with loss] whose 'cover story,' let's say, is provided by the sign of 'race'" (348). Yet in following Spillers insistence that we "think of *style*…as a *symptom*" (339), we can see how radically Faulkner moves away from the "sign of race" to national debt as the new, foundational traumatic loss. He deploys such stylized in drawing a distinction between the white and black men building the courthouse, emphasizing first the difference of their contemporary roles then grounding their shared endeavors in a collective history stretching back to the black maternal breast:

But not altogether slave, the boundmen, the unfree, because there were still the white men too, the same ones who on that hot July morning two and now three years ago had gathered a kind of outraged unbelief to fling, hurl up in raging sweating impotent fury the little three-walled lean-to—the same men (with affairs of their own they might have been attending to or work of their own or for which they were being hired, paid, that they should have been doing) standing or lounging about the scaffolding and the stacks of brick and puddles of clay mortar for an hour or two hours or half a day, then putting aside one of the Negroes and taking his place with trowel or saw or adze, unbidden or unreproved either since there was none present with the right to order or

deny…(this paradox too to anyone except men like Grenier and Compson and Peabody who had grown from infancy among slaves, breathed the same air and even suckled the same breast with the sons of Ham: black and white, free and unfree, shoulder to shoulder in the same tireless light and rhythm as if they had the same aim and hope, which they did have as far as the Negro was capable as even Ratcliffe, son of a long pure line of Anglo-Saxon mountain people and—destined—father of an equally long and pure line of white trash tenant farmers who never owned a slave and never would since each had and would imbibe with his mother's milk a personal violent antipathy not at all to slavery but to black skins, could have explained: the slave's simple child's mind had fired at once with the thought that he was helping to build not only the biggest edifice in the country, but probably the biggest he had ever seen; this was all but this was enough)… (37)

This extensive description ties together white and black through a shared purpose: the construction of the building that would be "protector of the weak, judiciate and curb of the passions and lusts, repository and guardian of the aspirations and the hopes" (35). In the narration's telling, there is a genuine shared interest at stake here, one that even the proto-white trash racist Ratcliffe "could have explained." The town's optimism about the value of the courthouse outweighs their own economic interests (the production of crops or their hired labor) and motivates even the socially dead enslaved among them. Only Ratcliffe is outside of this official optimism, this hope for progress. Ratcliffe remains the "chief victim, sufferer" of the town's founding impulse, "since [what] with the others was mostly inattention, a little humor, now and then a little fading annoyance and impatience, with him was shame, bafflement, a little of anguish and despair like a man struggling with a congenital vice, hopeless, indomitable, already defeated" (37-38).

In his description of the construction of the courthouse, Faulkner points readers directly to the difference between Ratcliffe and the rest of the town. Faulkner grants Ratcliffe a direct line to the heart of the town's economy, characterizing him as the county's first merchant and first in a lineage of non-slaveholding poor white sharecroppers. He is unable to dress up his involvement in the scheme in the paternalist myths of the nascent plantation class. Whereas Compson, Peabody and the others had shared black women's maternal care with their slaves, Ratcliffe inherits from his white "mother's milk a personal violent antipathy not at all to slavery, but to black skins" (37).

88

His modern-seeming racism notwithstanding, Ratcliffe understands the importance of what the novel endorses as the actual shared project of the white and black inhabitants of the town: the construction of the building that would be

the sum of all and, being the sum of all, it must raise all of their hopes and aspirations level with its own aspirant soaring copula, so that, sweating and tireless and unflagging, they would look about at one another a little shyly, a little amazed, with something like humility too, as if they were realizing, or were for a moment at least capable of believing, that men, all men, including themselves, were a little better, purer maybe even, than they had thought, or expected or even needed to be. (37)

If anything in *Requiem for a Nun* disturbs, it is this depiction of what slavery was and meant for the founding of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha county. Gone is Quentin's depression and denial in the face of the traumatic fact of Charles Bon's blackness; gone too is Ike McCaslin's intuited shame over the incestuous miscegenation at the heart of his family line. If Ike McCaslin repudiated the inheritance of the plantation, Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun* attempts to sidestep the plantation's racial relations by thinking through the geographic relations of the town. No longer a relationship between individual and the land, instead slavery acts as a glue holding together a civic society of the South, under attack—black and white both—from outlander values.

The fleeting, local world of deeply felt and racially transcendent community building will be disrupted by the incursion of "progress," the advancement of federal economic and political interest in the town and county. Only Ratcliffe, not unattached to the direct power relations of slavery, sees doom in this future. Faulkner crafts a complicated memory of slavery in this first chapter. Slavery is said to be bad—its normal power dynamics must be transcended by the labor towards a shared project—but at the same time it offers the *possibility* for the realization of racial harmony through the phenomenon of undifferentiated black maternal care. Faulkner marks Ratcliffe's implicit critique of this moment in history and of the prospects for the future, though born out by the history the novel proceeds to outline, as limited, indeed racist. There is then no

possibility of a balance between the races; structural critique—recast as the felt resistance to the problem of indebtedness and federal obligation—precludes racial solidarity, while racial solidarity seems capable of arising only out of the intimacies and conflicts born of the plantation. The novel wants it both ways: to critique a nationalism defined by financial obligations and to critique the everyday business of slavery. This tension must be read in to the dramatic portions of the novel, and in particular in to the figure of Nancy, who explicitly offers forgiveness for the sins of white history.

The history of the Jefferson courthouse and jail are of critical importance to the novel insofar as they remain the vestiges of history with which the characters of the novel's present, depicted in the dramatic scenes, interact. Any reading of the racial politics of the dramatic scenes must be considered in light of the aspirational, racially transcendent history depicted in the origin story of the courthouse. So too these scenes must be read through the lens the novel provides through which to view the transmission of this history. While the façade of the courthouse changes constantly throughout the history narrated in the novel's prose sections, there remains an inscription scratched in the window of the jail: "*Cecelia Farmer April 16th 1861*" (197). This line, made by the jailor's daughter (coincidentally) on the date of the outbreak of the Civil War, captures the narrator's imagination in the final section of the novel. This inscription serves as the center of gravity of an extended period of second person address in which Faulkner imagines a visiting "you:"

A stranger, an outlander say from the East or the North or the Far West, passing through the little town by simple accident, or perhaps relation or acquaintance or friend of one of the outland families which had moved into one of the pristine recent subdivisions, yourself turning out of your way to fumble along road signs and filling stations out of frank curiosity, to try to learn, comprehend, understand what had brought your cousin or friend or acquaintance here to live—not specifically here, of course, not specifically Jefferson, but such as here, such as Jefferson— suddenly you would realize that something curious was happening or had happened here: that

instead of dying off as they should as time passed, it was as though these old irreconcilables were actually increasing in number (219)

Faulkner projects a "you" from somewhere outside Jefferson, outside the South, enraptured by the trace of Cecelia Farmer. "You" connect with the "incredible and terrifying passivity" (222) exhibited by Cecelia, "that virgin inevictable passivity more inescapable than lodestar" (224). The attractive quality of Cecelia's passivity resonates across both time and space, connecting the outlander in the present with the young Southern girl of the past "across the vast instantaneous intervention, from the long long time ago: '*Listen, stranger; this was myself: this was I*'" (225). Cecelia's endurance negotiates what is otherwise an entirely masculine history of progress mapped out through architecture. Cecelia's legacy becomes a way of seeing the novel's present; we are to be captured by the passive endurance of history shown by Cecelia and the women of the South who followed in her wake. By focusing on women, then, Faulkner reframes the experience of history as a passive process that stands in contrast to masculine attempts to keep up with it. Temple, whose own confinement first in a Memphis brothel and then as the wife of Gowan Stevens, stands as an inheritor of Cecelia Farmer's legacy. The prose sections of *Requiem for a Nun* thus teach the reader how and why to identify Temple as the moral center of the dramatic sections.

Yet despite the culmination of the entire history of Yoknapatawpha County in the link between Cecelia Farmer, Temple Drake, and the outlander reader, anxiety about the relationship between the ostensible fact of the prose and ideology of the dramatic sections disrupts the text in multiple locations. There are the several parenthetical references to Gavin Stevens in the prose passages that create distance between the narrator and Stevens, even as it endorses Stevens' insights. For instance, Stevens' thoughts serve as an alibi for explaining the importance of the jail to the thematic thrust of the novel:

(indeed, as Gavin Stevens, the town lawyer and the county Amateur Cincinnatus, was wont to say, if you would peruse in unbroken—ay, overlapping—continuity the history of a community, look not in the church registers and the courthouse records, but beneath the successive layers of calcimine and creosote and whitewash on the walls of the jail, since only in that forcible carceration does man find the idleness in which to compose, in the gross and simple terms of his gross and simple lusts and yearnings, the gross and simple recapitulations of his gross and simple heart) (184)

The absurdity of this pronouncement—its specificity and repetition—belies the narration's declaration that this is something Stevens "was wont to say." Stevens' thoughts appear to interrupt the text, not in the manner of free indirect discourse because Stevens is not a party to the narrated action. Does "Stevens" name something Faulkner wished to say but could not justify putting in to an otherwise (apparently) objective history of the town? Such an in insertion would contaminate the project of historical description and prove fatal to the success of the novel's legal plot. Or perhaps just the opposite is true, and the narrator is Stevens himself, unable to keep his own witticism off the page, though this again would suggest a crippling anxiety with regard to the moral lesson that Stevens presumably learns at the conclusion of the dramatic plot. Whether Stevens is or is not the narrator, these insertions insist on the overlapping historical dimensions of the novel. They tell us that Stevens thinks of the jail the same way the narration does, which forces us to consider Nancy's situation as part of this long history.

The second point of anxious overlap between the novel's sectioned crossovers is perhaps the most famous line in all of Faulkner's writing.

TEMPLE
Temple Drake is dead.
STEVENS
The past is never dead. It's not even past. (80)

That this insight has entered the national lexicon as a truism about history in general, and not as a response to Temple's attempt to separate herself from her personal past, reveals a popular and critical tendency to assume a conceptual continuity that ties together Faulkner's depictions of

slavery across his career. Of course, Stevens's line here *is* at once a statement about Temple's past and The Past in general, and so works to connect the dramatic and prose sections of the novel. But at the same time, it signals a new level of negotiation between these pasts: the opening of white feminine experience from immanent passivity towards historical agency. The statement "The past is never dead. It's not even past" names history's capacity to supersede individual will and agency, but also controls the complexity of this recognition by encapsulating it in a pithy aphorism. The desire for intellectual closure that this line expresses invites—rather than forecloses—critical attention to the novel's presentation of historical endurance. Indeed, the past that Temple comes to stand in for is precisely a past of perverse enjoyment. Temple, by her own admission, "liked evil," (117); in rewriting Southern history as an interracial project grounded in the intimacy of the black maternal breast, Faulkner admits he liked evil too.

Thus, interpretations of the novel like that of Dorothy Stringer in *Not Even Past* that rely on a conception of the past in Faulkner's work as always unknowable fail to see the radical historical revision taking place in *Requiem for a Nun*. Stringer argues that the novel's "prose sections unfold the impossible and the unwritten, emphasizing illegitimacy and ambiguity. They do not offer readers the capacity or the opportunity to dismantle these masters' houses, but they do explain how they were built" (53). Stringer is correct in that at the level of narrative the novel's prose sections emphasize the illegitimacy, contingency and anxiety that underpin the history of Jefferson. However, her conclusion that "the prologues radically defer questions of structural change and of justice, even of the historical record as such…and hence will not easily yield to demands for confrontations with injustice" over-estimates the novel's descriptive interpretation of this unsettled history (59). Indeed, we must read *Requiem for a Nun* for the way it registers the radical deferment of the violence of history, but only if we ignore the positioning of black women

as the bearers and victims of that radical edge. Stringer is well aware of this dynamic in the novel's dramatic sections, rightly pointing out that Nancy's role is "difficult to disentangle from the ideology and the historical specifics of gendered racist oppression" (61). Yet in response to the long history of Jefferson told in the prose sections, Stringer's view is less sure.

In her diagnosis of the town's shifting understanding of the origin of its name—after Pettigrew's middle name or Thomas Jefferson—she gets the process of historical repression exactly backwards:

Future generations will prefer President Jefferson to Pettigrew, will prefer an explicit and recognizable connection to national ideals and national origins. But with that gain they must also accept a covert, unacknowledged yet ineradicable, specifically racialized and sexualized psychic trauma. The Founding Father also will have been the enslaver of his own children and their mother. (54)

While it is true that the townspeople accept and pursue a connection to "national ideals" through the construction of the courthouse, the "trauma" underlying this decision is not specifically racialized or sexualized; Faulkner insists trauma emerges from the concept of progress itself. In place of this trauma—the debt that inaugurates civic personhood and organization—the novel *embraces* the racialized and sexualized ideological and material violence against black women. In this way, the novel uses mammy logic as a screen upon which to project the underlying historical dynamic of a progress that consumes and destroys the organic and local. Stringer runs into this trouble because she, like most critics since the novel was first published, have assumed that slavery is at the novel's heart and that the dynamics of racial antagonism the novel deploys are in line with those of Faulkner's earlier works. However, in those older works, Faulkner tied slavery's racial dynamics to his understandings of slavery as the material base for society and as a reminder of the impoverishment of the white ego in the present. In *Requiem for a Nun,* the founding material trauma is the town's forgery and debt, and the commitment to a national ideology that these entail:

94

the return to a restored white sociality in the dramatic sections' depiction of the present requires

again finding paternalistic racial intimacy in the prose sections' historical narrative.

Indeed, in *Requiem for a Nun* the slave *economy* arrives late on the historical scene, well

after the town has been founded and has passed through stages of historical and economic

development:

That fast, that rapid: a commodity in the land now which until now had dealt first in Indians: then
in acres and sections and boundaries:—an economy: Cotton: a King: omnipotent and omnipresent:
a destiny of which (obvious now) the plow and the axe had been merely the tools…altering not
just the face of the land, but the complexion of the town too, creating its own parasitic aristocracy
not only behind the columned porticoes of the plantation houses, but in the counting-rooms of
merchants and bankers and the sanctums of lawyers, and not only these last, but finally nadir
complete: the county offices too. (195-197)

Faulkner clearly imagines a time *before* the "parasitic aristocracy" whose decline his most famous

novels explore. This passage also revises the contemporary scene of the Jefferson aristocracy to

include bankers, merchants and public officials, exactly the social milieu Faulkner would go on to

explore through the life of Gavin Stevens in *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959). Through

this revision, Faulkner in effect *de*-emphasizes the role of the plantation economy in the *origins* of

the town and county. The form of slavery manifest during the cotton economy *disfigures* a prior,

more egalitarian labor with its imaged origin at the black maternal breast. Cotton's crime—at least

in *Requiem for a Nun*—was its embeddedness in the national economy. The fact that cotton ties

Jefferson body and soul into a national political economy further corrupts the balance that

originally existed. In effect, Faulkner looks past "slavery" as he had previously taught readers to

conceive of it, finding a kinder, gentler slavery in line with a political vision of Southern culture

as a homogenous entity encapsulating white and black Southerners equally under attack by

national values. Racial division in the south is a byproduct of the federal "nation." Nowhere is this

clearer than in the novel's representation of Reconstruction as a period in which the federal

government fomented racial imbalance and resentment. Along with the typical depictions of irresponsible black voting, "carpet bags stuffed with blank ballot-forms on which freed slaves could mark their formal X's," the narration lingers on the development of black colleges and their political impact:

In 1869 Tougaloo College for Negroes was founded, in 1884 Jackson College for Negroes was brought in from Natchez, in 1898 Campbell College for Negroes removed from Vicksburg; Negro leaders developed by these schools intervened when in 1868 one 'Buzzard' Eggelstone instigated the use of troops to drive Governor Humphries from the executive mansion; (96)

Black activity allied with the interests of the federal government proves the greatest threat of— indeed the only historical development depicted taking place in—Reconstruction. The prose sections of the novel clearly endorse a view of racial harmony and paternalism disrupted by Northern impositions.

The dynamic of the shift to a passive experience of history through white women—"only the aging unvanquished women were unreconciled, irreconcilable, reversed and irrevocably reverted against the whole moving unanimity" (206)—allows Faulkner to represent a position of entrapment that would preserve the founding values of the community from this march of progress. White women remained bound by patriarchal relations across historical iterations of Jefferson, and this historical dynamic is mirrored in the novel's dramatic sections as Nancy takes on the role of speaker from and through the jail and its history. In forcing this shift, Faulkner again relies on an imagined racial solidarity, this time between women rather than between the black and white men building the courthouse. Depicting such cross-racial community between women requires explaining away the kind of violence depicted elsewhere in the Yoknapatwapha novels. No longer the cast-off, neglected domestic worker that she was in "That Evening Sun," Nancy becomes in *Requiem for a Nun* a newfound moral center. In his presentation of this apparent truth about the relationship between Nancy and Temple, Faulkner repurposes the fantasy of white-black mutual

recognition that he establishes through the novel's opening chapter. Whereas white men had stood and worked beside enslaved men brought together through shared experiences at the black maternal breast and through a shared understanding of a future built around their own designs, here in the final dramatic scene stands a white woman imagining that she shares a past with a black woman.

By making Nancy's endurance and suffering *visible* as a central theme of the novel's dramatic plot, Faulkner engages in an odd game of hide and seek with the reader. We are to understand Nancy's suffering as real and historically situated but must also understand her as the author of her own situation and actions in order for her sacrifice to hold ethical value for Temple's education. Nancy is unable to articulate a concrete basis of her faith at the novel's conclusion because it has no basis; rather, narrative necessity requires a blind spot. Nancy cannot be taken as an individual, let alone, as Noel Polk argues, as a "madwoman" (xiii), because there is no legitimate ethical frame in which to locate her actions. Nancy exists as an irritant in the system, both creating and containing contradictions. Nancy is a *sign* of history, then, preserving the possibility of an intra-racial connection that founded the town but that is no longer available due to the apparatus of local and state legal systems. So while, As Leigh Anne Duck argues, Temple "recognizes Nancy's act not simply as a crime but rather as the result of profound ethical confusion—both Nancy's and her own—resulting from histories outside of which their acts cannot be properly assessed," the only capital-H History the novel is able to interrogate is that affecting white women. Nancy's history is personal and rooted in personal flaws—"dope fiend" and "whore" encapsulating, submerging "nigger" in the white characters' understanding of her. Duck continues, "Temple is somewhat attuned to Nancy's perspective because of her own past experience of sexual victimization and prohibited desires," an awareness that reinforces the novel's

"[insistence] that [Nancy's faith's] most disparaged qualities be traced to the abuse that Nancy suffered during her life as a prostitute" (229). Nancy's history only extends to *her life*. In a novel that wants to think women's position outside either subjective immanence or linear historical development, Nancy's blackness works as an impediment to fully realizing the scope of that history. To read Nancy's history of violence and exploitation *back* into the novel would require disrupting the founding myth, the black maternal breast, that brought black and white together against the imposition of federal abstraction and financial disruption. If "Temple suggests not only a post-traumatic perspective but also, more profoundly, that this history cannot be assimilated to the time of the state" (Duck 229), Nancy suggests radically that past and present, regardless of their political assimilation, operate as acts of faith committed to against the obvious fact of systematic black death. In imagining a purer politics in the novel's prose sections, Faulkner relies on the very thing that the dramatic sections seek to make visible: a love so intense and terrible that it will destroy to preserve itself. Nancy is an excuse to *stop thinking*, to return to a feeling whose ideological grounding must be denied.

And so, Nancy's lesson for Temple in the dramatic section is precisely this lesson in the management of melancholy: how to stop feeling shame for the pleasures of the past. In "The Courthouse" Scene II, Gowan reveals to Stevens, so inaudibly that only Stevens hears the line, what he finds painful about his past with Temple: the fact that she "loved" her imprisonment (63). Stevens ponders, "Is that what you can never forgive her for?—not for having been the instrument creating that moment in your life which you can never recall nor forget nor explain nor condone no even stop thinking about, but because she herself didn't even suffer, but on the contrary, even liked it?" (63). The day of Temple's imprisonment is a blank in Gowan's memory because of his drinking, yet Stevens' gloss on the experience of such an absent memory pushes beyond the

significance of a simple blackout. Indeed, if we follow Duck in granting Nancy the agency required to possess "prohibited desires," Stevens' interpretation of this particular memory can be made to stand in for history in general in a manner that reflects the potential resistance that black women's endurance represents. Reading Stevens' statement back into the logic of the mammy trope, we find a tension that the novel is unable to resolve. On the one hand, Nancy's endurance can be understood by Christina Sharpe's description of black life in the wake of transatlantic slavery; Nancy "experienced, recognized, and lived subjection…[but] did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected" (4). On the other hand, *Requiem for a Nun* conflates the "not *simply* or *only*" of the experience of subjection with the enjoyment of that subjection, an enjoyment that at once registers in Nancy's shameless sexuality and in her willing self-sacrifice. Nancy's bi-polarity serves as a model for the negotiation of Temple's relationship to the past and her particular unhappiness with living under the burden of that past. The past of slavery is thus imagined as something other than a debt which could be repaid. Conscious memory is a burden *for white people*, who stand to move forward *not* by mining history for its racial antagonism, but through a graceful, apparently emotionally open and psychologically transparent negotiation of the present, even if it means that Nancy faces execution in the morning.

Only in light of this forward-facing outlook does what Hortense Spillers suggests of *Absalom, Absalom!* ring true: "*grief* in Faulkner is not simply limited to an American region—the South of the United States—but…the sketch of a configuration of it in his work, the excruciating care to ferret it out, render it a gift to the national culture" (375). That is, in Faulkner's work a *national* dynamic of white-black relations in "modernity" emerges only as slavery is pushed into the historical background. If Spillers' reading of the importance of grief and slavery in Faulkner's fiction is an available one (and indeed it is an important one), it is so only belatedly and with an

understanding of the nation itself rooted in slavery, which is a historical truth that *Requiem for a Nun* works desperately to forget. Indeed, *Requiem for a Nun's* prose sections insist on the corrupting power of the nation *as an idea*, replacing the "sign of race" (Spillers 348) with another sign—debt—as the curse of history around which the suspension and delay of melancholic repetition organizes. Yet in rewriting the history of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha County around the curse of indebtedness to national progress, Faulkner remains melancholically rooted in the white epistemological structures that accrue around and through black women. Thus, in *Requiem for a Nun*, the turn away from thinking the structuring violence of the South in slavery is facilitated by a black woman providing absolution for the sins of the past in an extra-legal and non-economic context. No longer a paternalistic alibi for the monstrous intimacies of slavery initiated by white men, Faulkner leverages Nancy's function as an instantiation of mammy logic in the rewriting of Southern history around debt and a fantasy of white women's passivity and racial innocence. Rejecting racial exclusion as the founding white Southern grief, Faulkner himself *becomes racially melancholic*. Abandoning Quentin's depressive perspective in favor of Stevens' intellectual detachment, Faulkner becomes Quentin-like, holding out for shocking flashes of white facts around which to build a new South just like the newly re-imagined old South.

CHAPTER THREE

"Some Pain to our Particular Selves": Robert Penn Warren, White Guilt and the Progress of Narratives

"Critics are rarely faithful to their labels and their special strategies."

Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry"

"Do all analysts have an ear for *all* 'poems' and for *all* 'poets'? Surely not. But those whose message they failed to hear, those whose deficient, mutilated text they have listened to time after time—the riddles with no key—those who left their analysts without yielding up the distinctive *oeuvre* of their lives, these people return forever as the ghosts of their unfulfilled destiny and as the haunting phantoms of the analyst's deficiency."

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, "'The Lost Object—Me:' Notes on Endocryptic Identification"

In the opening pages of his 1965 collection of interviews and essays on the Civil Rights Movement *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Robert Penn Warren apologizes for his past failings as a white liberal. He disavows his 1929 contribution to the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, "The Briar Patch," which he describes as "a cogent and humane defense of segregation" (11). "Yes," he reflects later, "the essay was very humane, self-consciously humane; and that self-consciousness indicated an awareness that in the real world I was trying to write about, there existed a segregation that was not humane" (11). A few paragraphs later, Warren again reflects, "the humaneness was self-conscious because even then, thirty-five years ago, I uncomfortably suspected…that no segregation was, in the end, humane" (12). In the process of this reflection, Warren recounts the shame and alienation felt after not intervening as a white man beating a black teenager in the streets of Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1939, ten years after *I'll Take My Stand*. Warren's self-consciousness shines through in this moment:

What was clear, in the speed-shutter instant, was my own complex reaction. I had felt some surge of anger, I had put my hand on the latch of the [car] door, and then had, in that very motion stopped. Let us not discount what simple cowardice there may have been in the hesitation. But what I actually felt was not fear—it was something worse, a sudden, appalling sense of aloneness. I had

never had that feeling before, that paralyzing sense of being totally outside my own community. (13)

Warren's shame—a central point of concern in this chapter—is a barrier, but ultimately a catalyst for action. "In a sudden access of shame," he explains, "I overcame my paralysis" (13). Warren makes to intervene but is "mercifully…saved" by a white LSU football player who shames the white man into stopping his assault. "I had been saved," Warren concludes, "I had not had to get 'involved'" (13).

By apologizing for both writing a defense of segregation and failing to directly intervene in a public act of racial violence, Warren leverages "shame" as an emotional catalyst that positions *Who Speaks for the Negro?* as getting "involved" to the best of his abilities. Warren's reflection at the volume's opening signals a white racial melancholy in the form of white guilt expressed through shame and a hopelessness upon the recognition of his complicity in both a structure and a concrete moment of white supremacy. Perhaps more than any other white American intellectual in the twentieth century, Robert Penn Warren framed contradictions between belief and action as a *loss* to be reckoned with. Compounding his skepticism of the possibility of "humane" segregation, Warren declares in the conclusion to *Who Speaks for the Negro?* that, "the white man must grant, of course, that Western civilization, white culture, has 'failed.'" (441) For Warren in *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* "the Negro…is a fundamentalist of Western culture. His role is to dramatize the most inward revelation of that culture" (442). In these pronouncements, Warren remains committed to the preservation of "white culture" despite the overwhelming evidence that it has failed to produce racial inclusiveness on its own.

Yet for or Warren, "white culture" has failed because white *people* have failed to live up to its values. "Guilt," Freud writes in "The Ego and the Id," "is the perception in the ego answering to criticism" (654). Yet for Freud, even though guilt acknowledges past failures, it is not

transformative. It is, rather, conservative. In "Mourning and Melancholia" he argues that following the loss of an ideal object marked by some "real slight or disappointment…conflict between the ego and the loved [object transforms] into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" (586). The failure of the loved object becomes the failure of the ego. "We can see," Freud concludes, "that what guarantees the safety of the ego is the fact that the object has been retained" through the act of self-criticism (654). For Freud, melancholic self-criticism suggests the development of "the agency commonly called the 'conscience,'" or what Freud would later go on to name the super-ego (585). Warren's framing of shameful self-consciousness, both in response to his active support of segregation and his paralysis in the face of violence a decade later, are as Freud writes of the melancholic patient, "self-reproaches [that are really] reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego" (586). So if Warren mocks the "the white man [abasing] himself before" black men and crying out "Beat me, Daddy, I feel guilty" (433), he nonetheless does not escape representing his black interlocutors as, in the critical words of Civil Rights activist Ruth Turner, "suffering servant[s] for an American conscience" (434). Decrying "self-centeredness…obscenely cloaked in selflessness" Warren nonetheless finds in black political thought only what he hopes to find in order to re-establish white American values (434).

Warren's work is exemplary for its emphasis on the intensity—even the existential stakes—of the individual white person's experience of white racial melancholy as guilt. Throughout his career, Warren offers meditations on moments of individual white people's failure (either conscious or unconscious) to wield white power, elevating these moments to the highest levels of political and aesthetic value. Warren's symptomatic commitment to "western culture" is strongest when such analysis and prescription is offered by black people critical of liberal values

and institutions. Throughout *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren dismisses calls for something more than integration—armed black resistance, black nationalism and reparations— as excessive, unrealistic, and sentimental. Warren articulates in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* guilt as the most extreme edge of white racial melancholy, recognizing the wound of anti-blackness *at* the center of white culture but refusing to address it as such—as he puts it at one point, "the Negro, *qua* Negro" (435)—refusing to see the wound *as* the center of white culture. In *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* then, Warren expresses an assimilationist attitude towards race that blamed both white and black people for racial injustice, which it sought to correct through not only "Black adoption of White cultural traits and/or physical ideals" (Kendi 3), but also through the rejuvenation of white commitment to white cultural ideals. As Ibram X. Kendi suggests, starting in the 1950s the official position of assimilationist American liberalism began to shift towards narratives of progress: "With every civil rights victory and failure, this line of reasoning became the standard *past-future* declaration of assimilationists: we have come a long way, and we have a ways to go. They purposefully sidestepped the *present* reality of racism" (360-361). To borrow from Kendi's formulation, while Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* attempts to engage precisely with the present reality of American racism, it does so only insofar as Warren's black interlocutors endorse a present that fits into his own preferred past-future assimilationist desires.

Narrative may seem a surprising place to begin when considering the aesthetic edge of Warren's politics. Indeed, Warren himself would insist that poetry should be the privileged category for such an analysis. As Anothony Szczesiul suggests, "more so than his fiction, Warren's poetry readily lends itself to comparison with his politics," because, as Warren would say in an

interview in 1977, "poems are more *you*" (3).[11] Indeed, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren recounts that "while writing ["The Briar Patch"], I had experienced some vague discomfort, like the discomfort you feel when your poem doesn't quite come off, when you've had to fake, or twist, or pad it, when you haven't really explored the impulse" (10-11). Later in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, in a conversation with Robert Moses, Warren reflects on the civil rights slogan "Freedom Now!" "That's to say how we feel, This is the Urgency," Moses explains (99). "It's a poetic statement?" Warren asks, and Moses agrees (99). "Freedom Now!" is a poetic concept that expresses an emotional urgency that Warren worries needs "flesh in history" (99). In his conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr., Warren asks how to conceptualize the demand for Freedom Now with an understanding that social change takes time. "Some words become so symbolically charged that they cannot be used?...the word *gradual* has become symbolically charged?" he asks King (218). Warren offers an alternative: "the phrase *historical process*—it looks cleaner but it means the same thing" (218). Regardless of the wording, Warren here insists on the necessity of process, setting up politics as the realm of the narrative and poetry as the self-evidently private realm of the a-political.

While poetry and narrative (historical or otherwise) seem conceptually opposed in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, from his first textbook, *The Sophomore Poetry Manual*, Warren, along

---

[11] Anthony Szczesiul warns of the dangers inherent in reading Warren's later integrationist politics into Warren's early work and argues that "such an interpretive strategy can at times be too quick to erase points of conflict and tension in favor of harmony and homogeneity" (29). If the majority of critical treatments of Warren's racial politics have favored this notion of "continuity, growth, and unity" (Szczesiul 28-29), it is because critics are unwilling or unable to perform the same kind of critical reflection on the racial particulars of the past that Warren insists is necessary in *Who Speaks for the Negro?[11]* The tendency to create a coherent narrative of Warren's ideas and work that Szczesiul identifies is inextricable from a way of thinking about the political and subjective functions of narrative that Warren helped popularize in the middle part of the twentieth century. See Szczesiul 28-32 for a precis of the major instances of this tendency.

with life-long collaborator Cleanth Brooks, sought to differentiate poetry from other forms of narrative: "all the poems in this first section tell a story. Obviously, they differ in many ways from a straight prose account of a story" (1). The task they set out for the student was to understand "a difference in the principle of organization" that separated "a given poem…from a prose account of the same event" (1). Reading the development of Warren's literary categories in the years after "The Briar Patch" and the relationship between those categories and race can give us insights into the development of Warren's racial thinking. In the closing lines of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* return to the earliest aesthetic debates of Warren's career—sentimentality and realism: "It would be sentimentality to think that our society can be changed easily and without pain. It would be worse sentimentality to think that it can be changed without some pain to our particular selves— black and white. It would be realism to think that that pain would be a reasonable price to pay for what we all, selfishly, might get out of it" (444). Here, Warren offers the experience of pain as the proof of a historical realism that would apply equally to black and white people.

Warren articulates a shared story within which black Americans will offer the "'catalytic' of [their] courage and clarity" that might "rub off on the rest of us [so that] we may redeem ourselves—by confronting our own standards. For, in the end, everybody has to redeem himself" (442). This possibility of a shared experience was not always the case in Warren's work, especially in "The Briar Patch." At the heart of Warren's politics is the problem of narrative and story: what stories can and should be told, and how should they be told? The answers to these questions at various points in Warren's career were influenced by his changing intellectual understanding and affective management of the centrality of anti-blackness in white culture, yet despite changes in the political valence of Warren's aesthetic categories, those categories remained more or less constant from 1929 to 1965.

In this chapter, I analyze the narrative of personal enlightenment that Warren constructs as a symptomatic expression of melancholic guilt, a guilt that preserves the agency of the value system it ostensibly experiences as lost. Reading accounts of the relationship between narrative and history from across Warren's career, from "The Briar Patch" through *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* I argue that Warren's conception of narrative as a literary form whose highest achievement expresses *irony* underwrites his conception of the political limits of white anti-racism as the experience of and search for freedom from guilt. I argue that Warren's account of irony as the structure of knowledge by which literature escapes the immanent and political realms of reporting, sociology and propaganda serves first to preserve a paternalist structure of feeling whose material basis and intellectual justifications disappeared with the decline of Agrarianism in the 1930s. "Literature" becomes for Warren a protected realm for the expression of an increasingly unstable mode racialized self-fashioning. For Warren, one of the literary "functions" of irony "is to indicate an awareness of the multiplicity of options in conduct, idea, or attitude—an awareness of the full context" (*Understanding Fiction* xviii). By developing an overly formal structure to define what is and is not properly literary during the birth of New Criticism, Warren builds a crypt around a disavowed attachment to white paternalism, "a memory buried *without legal burial place"* (Abraham and Torok 141). Warren's insistence that fiction should create not definite narrative endings but rather open up to a structure of ironic indecision leaves room for the compromised enjoyment of discarded and clandestine possibilities. "Literature" protects the desires of paternalism through a language that seeks the comfort and new community through the intellectual and aesthetic appreciation of the feeling of loss without having to acknowledge in other areas of experience and action that the loss has taken place.

The distinction that Warren draws between literary and political writing by way of irony, which he defines as the textual expression of multiple possible interpretive positions and, suggests the condition of inhabitation by the lost desire and of "endocryptic identification," "exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmatic identification with the 'life'—beyond the grace—of an object of love" (142). While Warren held progressively more liberal political views over the course of twentieth century, he reverts symptomatically to these melancholically constituted literary categories in moments of interracial crisis and confrontation. I argue the disjunction between Warren's repetitive self-exegesis in his staging of Jack Burden's research into Cass Mastern's life and his expressed literary values signals a failure to breathe new life into his encrypted paternalism; Warren's novel insists on its literary qualities in order to mask its failures to achieve what the "literary" should. I then read Warren's use of narratives and appeals to literary categories as attempts to disarm the logical and affective force of black radical critiques in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* and preserve his paternalistic control over national racial discourse. Warren thus offers a project of literary education that runs counter to the presumed trajectory of educationalist theories of racial attitude change. Warren seeks not to encounter facts about black lives that will build empathy and break down barriers of misunderstanding. Instead, he seeks to use education to seal off a part of psychic and cultural life that may remain unchanged in return for sacrifices made elsewhere.

"The Briar Patch," is remarkable for its deviation from the tone and content of much of the rest of *I'll Take My Stand*, yet it deviates only in its willingness to offer the negotiated relinquishment of power that characterizes the trajectory of Warren's career. "The Briar Patch" reads as a concerted attempt—however wrongheaded Warren found it to be later in his life—to analyze the unique racial dynamics that left the South vulnerable to industrial encroachment. It

displays a flexibility on issues of economic segregation meant to preserve white Southern autonomy vis a vis the incursion of national business interests and political control. Warren's essay is the volume's only direct effort to theorize the racial composition of what Warren calls the "essential structure" of white Southern culture and to make distinction between base economic realities and social and cultural production, including manners, art and literature (264). Early on, Warren depicts racial politics in the South as a set of competing narratives. "The story of the negro since 1865," Warren suggests, is the process of learning to live independently. Following emancipation, "he [the generic black person] did not know how to make a living, or, if he did, he did not know how to take thought for the morrow. Always in the past he had been told when to work and what to do, and now, with the new-gotten freedom, he failed to understand the limitation which a simple contract of labor set on that freedom" (247). Warren expresses a conventional racial moderate belief here, blaming not biology but history for an imagined sense of black inferiority. Equality under this dispensation is to come, given proper modifications in black thought and culture. "The Southern white man's story since 1880," in correspondence with this view of history, is "the rehabilitation of the white man's confidence for the negro" (248).

The end of these "stories" leave much to be desired as Warren's essay is ultimately a defense of Jim Crow power structures. "The chief problem for all alike," Warren writes, speaking of black and white Southerners, "is the restoration of society at large to a balance and security which the industrial régime is far from promising to achieve" (264). For Warren, Agrarianism promises this balance. Even though black and white farmers might be able to enjoy contentment on their own segregated small farms, Warren writes, "the difficulty of competition between the two races is not finally disposed of; it is only transposed into terms which are more readily ponderable" (263). In his conclusion, Warren returns to actually do this pondering, though he

avoids the present reality of "the difficulty of competition" by suggesting that "the relation of the two [races] will not immediately escape friction and difference, but there is no reason to despair of their fate" (264). Warren justifies this deferral of critical thought by gesturing towards a set of social concerns apparently shared by white and black communities. He writes,

[The Southern white man] wishes the negro well; he wishes to see crime, genial irresponsibility, ignorance, and oppression replaced by an informed and productive negro community. He probably understands that this negro community must have such roots as the white society owns, and he knows that the negro is less of a wanderer than the 'poor white' whose position is also insecure. Let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree. (264)

Here Warren predictably conflates the stakes held by the white and black community in "crime, genial irresponsibility, ignorance," suggesting with a paternalistic condescension that white Southerners are motivated by black Southerners' best interest. The inclusion of "oppression" is notable as it is an acknowledgement of political reality Warren otherwise avoids. Insofar as Warren *does* acknowledge racial antagonism, he does so only as a symptom of the South's exploitation by Northern capital.[12] Concluding his essay, Warren once again makes the case for the primacy of the "essential structure" over specific changes in race relations: "Whatever good [interracial philanthropy might] do, the general and fundamental restoration will do more" (264).

Warren recalls in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, "I never read ["The Briar Patch"] after it was published, and the reason was, I presume, that reading it would, I dimly sensed, make me

---

[12] In both his account of black history in America and of the choices facing white people in the present, Warren foregrounds the relationship between Northern capital and Southern labor in an attempt to moderate Southern racism so that the "essential structure" of Southern society might be preserved. Thus privileging the South's economic base, Warren tends to eschew other dimensions of racism's power. The ultimate problem that racism poses for the white South, Warren argues, is that it artificially lowers the value of black workers' labor. "The factory may have come to be near its requisite raw materials," Warren writes, "but it has also come to profit from cheap labor, black and white" (256). Even if factory owners refuse to hire black workers, the latter serve as "a tacit threat against the demands which white labor may later make of the factory owner" (256).

uncomfortable" (10). Nonetheless, justifying his thought process, he remembers the 1930s as a time of economic anxiety:

The Depression was there, and conversation always turned on the question of what could be done to claw out of that desperation; but that meant to "change" things, even if for some people the change desired was to change back to their old unchangeableness. But that would be a kind of change, too. So there was no way to avoid the notion of change: you had to take a bite of the apple from the mysterious tree that had sprung up in the Confederate—no, the old American—garden. The apple might, incidentally, have given some knowledge of good and evil; but it certainly gave a knowledge of more profound consequence, the knowledge of the inevitability of change. (12)

Warren casts his Agrarian period as a struggle to deal with the changes brought on by the collapse of national financial markets. He posits that some dealt with this change by looking backwards—the Agrarians among them—while others dealt with it by embracing its possibilities for social transformation. "The Briar Patch" rests uneasily between these divergent positions, attempting as it does to use market rationality to preserve the old "unchangeableness" of the imagined Agrarian social order. Warren suggests that a major change in his thinking leading up to the 1960s was a movement away from a fatalistic view of the South. As he explains, "it never crossed my mind that anybody could do anything about [segregation]. When I wrote the essay…the image of the South I carried in my head was one of massive immobility in all ways" (12). Reflecting in 1965, then, Warren sees different possible ends to the stories he began in "The Briar Patch." Yet these different possible endings—full civil rights—rest on the same conditions he articulated in 1929: black assimilation and white trust.

If Warren was in fact ignorant of other possible futures for the South, he succeeds in faking it in "The Briar Patch." Warren firmly rejects cultural approaches to addressing racism—philanthropy and interracial political organizing—that would allow for the continued incursion of Northern political interests, though he is not totally opposed to cultural solutions to the problems posed by segregation and anti-black violence. In his attempt to solve racism from inside the

"essential structure" of the South, Warren begins to articulate a theory of literary education that develops over the course of the next fifteen years in a series of textbooks considered to be foundational to New Criticism. The problem of educating poor black Southerners arises, Warren suggests, from a historical deficiency in former slaves. In the era of legal slavery, "the necessities of life had always found their way to [the slave's] back or skillet without the least thought on his part" (247). Warren thus blames black poverty on a collective ignorance that, over the course of Reconstruction when black people were (by Warren's account) given an equal shake at civil society, "badly impaired the white man's respect and gratitude" (248). The contemporary racial climate then is constituted as a dual struggle for black people to learn how to be fully American and for white people to trust them to make the necessary changes. Thus, education arises early in the essay as a crucial step in what amounts to a civilizing process. Increasing prosperity in the South led to an "accelerated process of negro education," but the question, "For what is the negro to be educated?" remained to be answered (249).

At this point in the essay Warren explicitly asks a question related to the problem of literary value, offering a glimpse into his early negotiation of pedagogy as a political and racialized act. Simple literacy is not enough education for the kind of cultural change that Warren desire, for "the capacity to read" does not "[carry] with it a blind magic to insure success" (249). Warren outlines the problematic of education as follows:

In the lowest terms the matter is something like this: are most negroes to be taught to read and write, and then turned back on society with only that talent as a guaranty of their safety or prosperity? Are some others, far fewer in number, to be taught their little French and less Latin, and then sent packing about their business? If the answer is *yes*, it will be a repetition of the major fallacy in American education and of one of America's favorite superstitions. (250)

An abstract humanist education, the foundation of traditional American intellectual liberalism, here represented by the "little French and less Latin" that black students might be taught,

participates in a process of cultural abstraction and de-localization that exposes Southern culture to further exploitation by industrial interests. If elsewhere in *I'll Take My Stand* John Crowe Ransom warned that the wealthy white society he implicitly represented, "cannot recover our native humanism by adopting some standard of taste that is critical enough to question the contemporary arts but not critical enough to question the social and economic life which is their ground," (xvi) Warren argues that neither can there be a future for any economically and socially stable black society without an education system suited to solidify a coherent black culture.

What seemed necessary for the acculturation that such a humanistic program of education would create is a solid economic base for a segregated black community. "There are strong theoretical arguments in favor of higher education for the negro," Warren writes, "but those arguments are badly damaged if at the same time a separate negro community or group is not built up which is capable of absorbing and profiting from those members who have received this higher education" (251). Otherwise, highly educated black people would seek employment in northern cities, which would exacerbate the problems already caused by mass emigration to northern industrial centers, leaving the southern black community without the benefits of doctors, lawyers and other professionals willing to serve them. Such a brain drain would also lead to political chaos within the black community. A black political leader, familiar only with the plight of black people living and struggling under industrial conditions in the North, "loses his comprehension of the actual situation; distance simplifies the scene of which he was once a part, and his efforts to solve its problems are transferred into a realm of abstraction" (251). In effect, Warren fears industrialism finding a back-door into white Southern life through the flow of the region's black population. Using state and charitable resources to produce a stable and educated black economic base in the South thus stands as the only responsible defense of the region from the advance of industrialism.

We are left to wonder what the details of the "strong theoretical arguments in favor of higher education" for black students might be.

The de-localization of black political leadership resulting from offering higher education to black communities points to a broader problem on the relationship between politics and literature that Warren would explore throughout the 1930s and early 40s. If Warren found "The Briar Patch" regrettable for its segregationism, any evidence we might have for his insistence that he experienced a "slowly growing realization that I could never again write that essay" (12) comes not from revision of his racial politics but of his understanding of what theoretical arguments might be made in favor of higher education. Indeed, Warren seems most compelled in the following decades to rectify his transgressions against narratives of educational progress than against the anti-racist values to which he claims allegiance in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*.

Such changes take place throughout several theoretical and pedagogical texts, culminating ultimately in the conflation of white racial melancholy and modernist irony in *All the King's Men,* which ushers in an era of post-New Deal white liberal politics that would come to a head in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* In between "The Briar Patch" and *All The King's Men*, though, Warren works through the relationship between white Southern identity and narratives of progress and reform, especially by way of repeated readings of Caroline Gordon's short story "Old Red." These readings help ground the abstractionist cultural politics of the New Criticism as an explicit loss of white racial paternalism. The blindness to racial power dynamics that these readings willfully perpetuate provide a specific instance of the broader historical dynamic of Warren's transition from Agrarianism to New Criticism, which Michael Szalay suggests provided an enabling fantasy for white liberals nationwide, as it "seemed to constitute a rejection of a racist southern orthodoxy, in the absence of that rejection's ever having taken place" (68).

114

The final form of Warren's articulation of the political value of narrative comes in *Understanding Fiction*, the follow-up to the wildly successful *Understanding Poetry*. The singlemindedness of Warren's definition of the value of narrative in *Understanding Fiction* develops in its critical introductions and culminates in a reading of Caroline Gordon's "Old Red," a short story that allows Warren to articulate an ostensibly colorblind racially melancholic reading practice through the historical working out of Agrarianism's cultural fantasies. In the volume's "Letter to the Teacher," Warren singles out irony as the litmus test of the difference between genuine literature and partisan propaganda. He writes, "irony is intended, on the one hand, to intensify the implications of the conflict, and on the other, to raise the issue above the level of merely dogmatic and partisan vilification. But these two functions are closely interrelated and only by an act of abstraction can one, in many cases, separate them out" (xviii). Irony, apparently a timeless literary concern, functions as a central term for an a-historical modernism. Through irony, narrative conflict takes on an "even more subtle and sophisticated form, it concerns the alignment of judgments and sympathies on the part of the author—the problem of his own self-division" (xvii). Here, the textbook slips in a particular view of human experience—the self-division of the subject—as an ontological axiom. We are not told *how* or *why* the subject is self-divided, simply that he always is.

Literature's highest calling, then, is to dwell on the experience of this self-division, not on the processes by which self-division is accomplished. Warren writes,

The dogmatist who is author paints a world of black and white, a world in which right and wrong, truth and falsehood, are clear with statutory distinctness, a world of villain and hero. The artist who is author paints a world in which there is, in the beginning, neither black nor white, neither right nor wrong which can be defined with absolute certainty. The certainty can only come in terms of the process, and must be *earned, as it were,* through the process. (xviii)

In the textbook's appendix, the idea of moral absolutism as a defective alternative to irony is re-emphasized. The appendix defines propaganda thus:

Propaganda literature is literature which tends to state its theme abstractly and tends to insist on its 'message' at the expense of other elements in its structure. Usually it can be said that such literature tends to oversimplify its material in order to emphasize its meaning. (For a fuller discussion, in terms of irony and conflict, see Letter to the Teacher, pp. vii-xix).

Warren's privileged short story for the representation of irony as it relates to white Southern culture is Caroline Gordon's "Old Red." On its surface, "Old Red" captures something personal for Warren: the struggle to incorporate an aesthetic appreciation for Agrarian life into modern society. Put another way, "Old Red" closely aligns with Warren's own class position and the emergent class politics of the post-New Deal professional literary critic. "Old Red" features Aleck Maury, the subject of many of Gordon's short stories and the hero of her novel *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), a novel for which Warren expressed admiration throughout his life. Maury, an old man and retired professor in "Old Red," experiences alienation and a sense of loss upon a visit with children and in-laws. For Warren, "Old Red" captures something special about the power of narrative; it apparently conveys the appropriate level and purpose of irony through its actions and without the aid of philosophical meditation. "Old Red" and its cultural value are, for Warren, spectacularly self-evident.

Particularly vexing to Maury is his daughter's new husband, Steve, who is something of a parody of modern poetic aesthetes out of touch with the concrete world around him. Over dinner one night, Maury explains a bit of folk skill of which is particularly proud—a technique of smelling the location of fish he learned from an elderly black woman in his youth—but his family does not show interest. Unimpressed, Steve is soon staring off into space, "thinking about the sonnet...in the form in which it first came to England" (5). Maury's daughter encourages him to write a book to collect his lifetime of experiences, but he is resistant:

People, he thought….people… so bone ignorant, all of them. Not one person in a thousand realized that a fox hound remains at heart a wild beast and must kill and gorge, and then when he is ravenous kill and gorge again….Or that the channel cat is a night feeder….Or….His daughter had told him once that he ought to set all his knowledges down in a book. 'Why?' he had asked. 'So everybody else can know as much as I do?' (18-19, ellipses original)

"Old Red" ends by ironically reversing Maury's understanding of himself in the world of hunting. Recalling experiences in his youth hunting the titular fox, Maury begins to identify not with his younger self hunting, but with the pursued fox. In this ending, Gordon conveys Maury's sense of persecution in a modern world that lacks the vitality of rural life; no longer the agent of the world's action, Maury is now subject to modernity's whims. All of his knowledge of and experience with what he sees as the real world, a mix of personal experiences, classical education and black folk-knowledges, do not translate into the present. Maury is of a dying breed, capable of appreciating the beauty and virtue of an Agrarian life but unable to communicate those values to future generations. Maury, then, is a figure with which Warren might have identified in his most orthodox Agrarian moments. The good life that Maury represents, though, is predicated on paternal relations between white and black people constituted through the sharing of concrete experiential knowledge, rather than abstract literary consideration. Through the story's ironic ending, Maury is divided against himself, both the pursuer and the pursued.

Warren singles out "Old Red" in his edited volume of short stories *A Southern Harvest* as an exemplary instance of the potential cultural value of literature:

Accepting that particular category of the "important," the category of contemporary social relevance, one can maintain such an opinion, unless it can be proved that Miss Gordon…has put a libel on human nature. But if [her story does], however modestly, quicken our comprehension of general human nature and of a particular heritage, then [it has] fulfilled [its] "social" function for all possible readers except the fanatic; for if any adjustment is to be reached among the various issues at conflict in Southern life, it will scarcely be reached in disregard of those factors. (xv)

Here Warren carves out a space in the field for "Old Red." Gordon's story is not sentimental despite its use of pathos because it relates organically to "general human nature" and "a particular

heritage." By addressing Southern life in this manner, "Old Red" achieves the "social function" of literature and is therefore a valuable contribution to Southern cultural politics. In *Understanding Fiction* Warren provides the clearest statement yet that fiction gives access to an individual's experience. Fiction, he writes, "gives us character through action" (6), and thus all reading must lead to the revelation of character through the machinations of plot. Character, though unique to individuals, nonetheless names a particular way of experiencing the world. In its most "subtle and sophisticated form," character revealed through action, "concerns the alignment of judgments and sympathies on the part of the author—the problem of his own self-division" (xvii). Reading, through irony, points back to this experience of "self-division," which at its initial mention is conceived of a-historically.

Yet for all of the a-political abstractions of the *Understanding* series of textbooks, politics makes its way in through "Old Red." Specifically, "Old Red" serves as the last bastion of Agrarian sensibility in *Understanding Fiction* through the *character* of Mr. Maury and his self-division. Discussing this story, Warren writes, "The important question we have to answer, if we are to determine whether or not 'Old Red' is to be accounted an example of fiction, is this: is the method of character revelation merely expository and descriptive…or does it involve the interplay of character with action—either subjective or objective action—which is peculiar to fiction?" (83). The obvious answer to this question is *yes*. Indeed, "Old Red" succeeds in its characterization of Maury's place in the modern world. Maury "is not the thoughtless man nor the indolent man nor the disappointed man. But it is easy for other people to think him so, and because he is an observant and reflective man, he is acutely aware that they do think him so" (83). Warren *endorses* Maury in his critical reading. Maury's knowledge is the very Agrarian vision of rural life. Warren is careful to insist on the reality of Maury's experience; it is not "an amusing description of a rather

picturesque character. We are being given the character's own justification of the way of life which he exemplifies" (84). As opposed to his aesthete son-in-law, Maury's "judgment springs from his own way of living in which life has a purpose, a meaning, a way of expressing itself concretely, and yet meaningfully through a discipline which involves, not only technical skill of wrist and arm, but learning, self-control, and even a sort of ritual" (84)

Warren is anxious to make the importance of Mr. Maury and his Agrarian pursuits clear. "What is it, then, that he gets from fishing? Why does he fish, anyway?" he asks (85). "Old Red" succeeds as a story for Warren because even though "Mister Maury cannot tell us—would have some difficulty perhaps even in stating the matter himself—the author has told us, or at least has suggested it in the story itself" (85). Warren then waxes philosophical:

Man craves activity in which he can participate as a whole man, not merely as a mind, not merely as a body—an activity in which body and mind participate harmoniously. Man also craves some sort of harmony between means and ends: in other words, it is not enough for a man to give himself to some abstract activity in which there is no interest or pleasure in itself merely in order that he may gain money and time to enjoy himself some other activity. Under such conditions, the pursuit of pleasure tends to become feverish and hysterical, the pursuit of mere excitement and forgetfulness. (85)

In Warren's critical account there is a total levelling of pedagogical discourse. Ostensibly this interpretation with its focus on the theme of unity and harmony of self and world comes *from* Maury, through the story. Maury does not self-consciously state "I am now more like the fox than the young man I once was;" Gordon expresses this realization through Maury's act of dreaming. Yet, it is stated *by the editor* through language of general abstraction. What is at one level the underlying philosophy of a fictional character is articulated as a universal truth: this is what Man-in-general craves. "Old Red" then serves as an excellent articulation of the fundamental problem of fiction that Warren identifies early—the problem of self-division. Warren continues his defense of Maury:

The old man feels himself to be in a hostile world, a world which has nothing but criticism for him...Why do people think that he is indolent? Because they feel that his occupation can only be a time-killer, and do not see that it requires its own knowledge and discipline. They tend to feel that anything which gives so much pleasure must be wrong, because they think of pleasure as separate from 'work'—important work can't be pleasurable. Why did they think that he is a failure? Because they think that he has nothing 'to show' for his life. Important activity, according to their view, gains something, 'makes money,' or leaves some mark of influence on the world. They cannot understand that success may be measured in terms of inner happiness and not in terms of a bank account or public esteem. Why do people think that Mister Maury is thoughtless? Because they cannot understand that a man may use his mind, or create his own philosophy, for his own pleasure and not to 'put into a book.' (86)

Warren's eulogy for Maury is a thinly veiled goodbye to Agrarianism. The living world of Agrarian ideology is not the setting of the story; instead, the recognition of the passing of Agrarian values becomes the marker of good fiction. This is not—or Warren does not understand it to be—a sentimental melancholy. Instead, the experience of the melancholy itself is what seeks expression and what readers must attune themselves to.

Thus, Warren's final interpretive moment: "We have said that Mister Maury does not, and perhaps could not, really state his position; but the objective toward which the story moves is the realization, by the old man, of the meaning of his own life in relation to the world. This realization, however, does not come in terms of statement. It comes in terms of a symbol, the symbol of the fox" (86). Yet, even Warren's gloss of the general nature of "man" does not provide enough interpretive fulfillment. He continues, "Has this story a more general meaning than the one which we have discussed?" (87) Warren's "more general meaning" in fact *historicizes* the story more than his specific reading.

Is not the story, in one sense, a story about a basic conflict in our civilization—the conflict between man's desire for a harmonious development of all his faculties and a set of social conditions which tend to compartmentalize life and to make 'work' and 'pleasure' viciously antithetical? The question of importance is not whether or not we feel that Mister Maury's solution is ideal; it is rather whether Mister Maury might not have felt, in a more balanced society, that he did not have to take such drastic measures with his life in order to save himself as a human being. (87)

Here, Warren shows a conflicted understanding of what "our civilization" means. On the one hand, it is clearly capitalist as expressed by the rhetoric of alienation implicit in the "visciously antithetical" realms of work and pleasure. Yet, this attention to capitalism is intended to be somehow *more* abstract than his previous statement about "man" in general. Warren's reading of While Warren explicitly disavows the Agrarian particularity of Maury's situation by dismissing the question of if it is truly "ideal" or not, the interpretation implicitly insists that it is.

Warren's Agrarian politics, then, are left to be found *in* the text, not *through* it. Further complicating the politics of this reading are the discussion questions paired with the story and essay. The textbook asks:

1) Why does Mister Maury prefer the society of Negroes to that of white people?
2) Why is it significant that Mister Maury is an able and educated man?
3) Why is the conclusion with the symbol of the fox more effective here than a mere statement by Mister Maury of his 'philosophy' would have been? (87)

These questions draw the student's attention to the relationship between knowledge, race and the execution of fiction. Mister Maury prefers the society of black people because they gratify his paternal sensibilities and are, in the story, stereotypically closer to the land. It is significant that Maury is an educated man because it implies that he has *chosen* the Agrarian life, rather than simply lucked his way into it. White Agrarianism then takes on a status as an assumed intellectual and moral choice, one that leads to—at least in the paternalistic logic of the story—genuine relations between black and white people. "Old Red" thus offers a picture of the *feeling* that underwrites the Agrarian faith that rural life might remove competition between black and white people. The primacy of this *feeling*, then, is affirmed by the final question; Maury cannot state his "philosophy" because the racial dream that underwrites the story cannot be held up to logical scrutiny. Agrarianism had tried to do just this and collapsed under the weight of its own disavowals. By moving the statement

"Old Red" shows the virtue of the Agrarian life led not trying to consciously justify itself, and Warren's interpretation of it suggests that the values stemming from such a life could be sustained only if they are displaced into a timeless formal structure. If Warren was indeed struggling to deal with the contradictions of his own self-conscious justification of segregation, it comes through as the feeling of racialized alienation and loss in his reading of "Old Red" that underwrites the validity of his emerging critical program. Warren builds an aesthetic system around this story in order to elevate Maury's self-division to a universal level, transferring Maury's desires into the realm of the literary through an unmarked slippage between content and form. This aesthetic system privileges narrative conflict resolved through subjective irony, not through authorial discourse or self-exegesis. The narrative is meant to speak for itself, but it needs the symptomatic language of the critic to speak its cryptic language into existence.

The instability of the relationship between literary object and interpretive mechanism that Warren develops here undermines the narrative closure of Warren's *All the King's Men.* By defining Jack Burden and Cass Mastern's moral struggle through a language of depression, Warren shifts his focus on Maury's sense of loss into the perspective of a younger generation who choose to live in a self-consciously negotiated middle ground between plantocratic and modern political regimes. Warren acknowledges white racial melancholy *as pathology,* and thus provides an alibi for political disengagement even as he writes a novel about politics. Yet the conclusion of *All the King's Men* shows Warren's anxiety about the value of the fictional negotiations of past and present that the novel ostensibly manages to navigate. *All the King's Men* attempts to tell a story that would justify its own political and literary virtue according to Warren's express racial and pedagogical beliefs; Warren uses Burden's story to substantiate his focus on elite white *feelings* about racial liberalism accompanying the incursion of industrial modernity into the South, but

finds narrative alone unequal to the task of elevating white feelings to the realm of the self-evidently literary. Warren finds satisfaction in the production of a narrative that gratifies disavowed paternalist attitudes, then constructs a discursive crypt through repeated self-exegesis that hides the nature of that enjoyment.

By stating his own "philosophy" in the novel's conclusion, Warren violates *Understanding Fiction's* rules for avoiding sentimentality and pushes his novel into the realm of the instrumental at the very moment it most attempts to avoid instrumentality:

One symptom of sentimentality is, as we have said, the author's straining to heighten and prettify and poeticize his language quite apart from the dramatic issues involved in the story.
A second symptom is frequently to be found is 'editorializing' on the part of the author—pointing out to the reader what he should feel, nudging the reader to respond—devices which would not be necessary if the story could make its own case… (220)

At one level, we might say that if the story could make its own case, Burden would not need to summarize the themes that he has confronted. At another level, we can say that if the story could make its own case, Burden would not need to live through the personal hell of the Stark administration in order to understand Cass Mastern's narrative. Indeed, *All the King's Men* implicitly admits that for "the story" to work, readers must be primed to read in certain ways, in fact must be able to see themselves in the central conflict of the work. The cryptic specificity of Warren's disavowed paternalism speaks itself at moments of the narrative's failure to bring closure as existentially inflected language reminiscent of Warren's critical interest in self-division, irony, and critical activity. Warren's editorializing thus both draws attention to the central literary element of the novel—the importance of Cass Mastern's discovery of the foundational immorality of white slave-society—and implicitly admits that this reading is unavailable to most people. *All the King's Men* ties together the present and the past through a motif of depression resulting from the recognition of moral contamination. The racialization of this sin is explicit in the Cass Mastern

story, yet the racial troping and racist politics of the novel foreclose the interpretation of the present as defined by the same extra-economic power relations that defined racial slavery in the American South. Rather than resolving these contradictions, Warren presents a story that highlights the barriers to intellectual labor's ability to confront individual morality in a corrupted world, insisting on the centrality of individual feeling and self-transformation as the sign of moral progress and downplaying the importance of corrective political action.

In the context of Warren's critical and pedagogical pronouncements about fiction, *All the King's Men* reads as the struggle of a modern writer as Warren articulates it in 1936's "Literature as a Symptom." The modern writer struggles to "try to reason himself into the appropriate position, to perform the ritual to evoke the wayward spirit" of his age (270). In "Literature as a Symptom," Warren laments the fact that in the nineteenth century writers "had half of their thinking done for them before they even began to write," because their work was defined "in its theme and essence, by a powerful coherent culture" (265). Warren expresses this struggle to "reason" oneself into a relationship with modernity in Burden's concept of the "Great Sleep," (201) the name he gives to Burden's periods of depression, the greatest bout of which was triggered by his research into his nineteenth century ancestors. Warren connects the depression of the "Great Sleep" to Burden's doctoral research into Cass Mastern, which Burden abandons at the peak of his depression. In his life as a political operative, Burden transforms his "Great Sleep" depression into a sarcastic mysticism around the concept of "the Great Twitch" (334). Moving from "sleep" to "twitch," Burden remains in the realm of the unconscious, though he attributes a disturbing agency to the twitch. After recounting his research into Judge Irwin's corrupt financial dealings, Burden reflects on the past:

…nothing is lost, nothing is ever lost. There is always the clue, the canceled check, the smear of lipstick, the footprint in the canna bed, the condom on the park path, the twitch in the old wound,

the baby shoes dipped in bronze, the taint the blood stream. And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us. That is what all of us historical researchers believe. And we love truth. (242).

Buried in Burden's list of "clues" to history's self-preservation is "the twitch in the old wound." The twitch of his current alienation evokes this "old wound" of history. Burden's research into Judge Irwin uncovers two corruptions: that Irwin is his father and that Irwin had been corrupt as attorney general to rectify debts on his family's plantation estate.

Through Irwin's financial misdeed and the economic paradox at the heart of the Cass Mastern story, *All the King's Men* brings economic power relations to the very center of its historical consciousness. Burden's inability to finish his dissertation on Cass Mastern is not only the scene of trauma that launches him into the politics of the present first as a reporter and then as an aide to Governor Stark. It is also, finally, where Burden ends up for the first time as a man in control of his life. Following Stark's death, Burden, "felt free and clean, as when you suddenly see that, after being paralyzed by ignorance or indecision, you can act. I felt on the verge of the act" (411). Burden's chosen action is the busting up of Tiny Duffy's political machine, but it is also the decision to return to the Cass Mastern material. On the novel's final page, Burden commits to "write the book I began years ago, the life of Cass Mastern, whom once I could not understand but whom, perhaps, I now may come to understand" (438). For Burden, there is an ironic humor in his situation—living in Judge Irwin's house and writing about Cass Mastern, who, it turns out, he is not really related to. Yet, "I do not find the humor in this situation very funny. The situation is too much like the world in which we live from birth to death, and the humor of it grows stale from repetition" (438). Both of these improprieties tie Irwin, Burden's real father, to Mastern, the patriarchal figure whom Burden willingly adopts as a psychic model. By choosing a father, Burden elects to become the refined writer Warren prophesies in "Literature as a Symptom" whose

"sensibility is so attuned and his critical intelligence so developed that he can effect the true marriage of his convictions, his ideas, that is, his theme, with the concrete projection in experience, that is, his subject" (278). Mastern proves the proper subject for the book Burden is driven to write about his experiences in the twentieth century.

This shift in focus allows us to see Burden's failure to live up to his intellectual capabilities, which Michael Szalay identifies as a flaw in the functioning of *All The King's Men* as an allegorical account of the rise of professional literary criticism as instead a feature of Warren's approach to fiction at the time. For Warren, the use of irony—like that implicit in Burden's situation in *All The King's Men*—in fiction is to present a literary world modeled on an imagined cultural unity. As Warren writes in *An Approach to Literature*, "the action of fiction is different…from most things we observe in life by reason of its unity or completeness" (11). Fiction differs from real life, then, because it makes visible connections between characters and the world that are opaque or hidden in everyday experience. In this sense, irony is central to the processes of appropriation that Szalay details in his explanation of the politics of hipness: "artists and intellectuals supported by the state were 'profoundly political' less in their support of particular bills or parties than in their commitment to an existential vision of how to resist the killing abstractions of the state" (Szalay 74). Warren promotes irony as a reification of conscious inaction and/or institutional powerlessness stemming first and foremost from a buried attachment to past forms of racial consciousness. The separation of literature from politics by way of its aesthetic "completeness" attempts to reconcile racial difference with the contradictory vision of an emerging progressive racial liberalism.

With this view of irony in mind, I read *All the King's Men's* ironic undercutting of Burden's position as a way of highlighting the importance of his position as privileged intellectual interpreter

of the legacy of slavery and thus as a model for a melancholic negotiation of twentieth century politics. In *All the King's Men*, Cass Mastern is the novel waiting to be written that will bring about a balanced relationship to the past. The story of Cass Mastern is central both to the book that Burden will write *and* to *All The King's Men* itself. The book that Burden will produce about Cass Mastern will be also a book about himself, in the same way that, as Burden suggests, *All The King's Men* "has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story too" (435). Yet, Warren reduces the entire novel to a single theme: "It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way" (436), and Cass Mastern's status as historical model suggests that this too is the lesson of Mastern's story. At the novel's conclusion, Warren relies on what Cleanth Brooks would name the next year in *The Well-Wrought Urn* "the heresy of paraphrase." Not only does Warren reduce the novel's action to a several-page summary in the final chapter, he ends on the note that inevitably "we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history and into history and the awful responsibility of Time" (438). If an irony arising organically from a text is meant to show a complete picture of culture, Warren's need to draw attention to and interpret the irony implicit in his own work signals an anxiety about its effectiveness. If Burden is unable to live up to the task of critical historian as Warren is unable to let his story simply sit, it is not a flaw in either man so much as a feature of the magnitude of the requirement. In *All The King's Men*, then, Warren presents melancholy as the bleeding edge of ethical intellectual labor, an affective orientation towards history necessary for the psychic health of white modernity.

All The King's Men's insistence on its own irony highlights its ideological program and its insistence on focusing on white moral experience as the privileged subject of literature. As Warren writes in the "Letter to the Instructor" in *Understanding Fiction* "irony is intended, on the one

hand, to intensify the implications of the conflict, and on the other, to raise the issue above the level of merely dogmatic and partisan vilification. But these two functions are closely interrelated and only by an act of abstraction can one, in many cases, separate them out" (xviii). Thus Burden's final gloss of his lesson, ending with the capitalized Time, "intensifies the implications" of this particular story and "raise[s] the implications" out of partisan politics. Arguing that literary irony indicates "an awareness of the full context" of a story, Warren rebuffs "objection[s] that such an emphasis [on irony] ends in the celebration of a smug and futile skepticism" as being "at variance with the actual effect which most successful literary compositions leave upon the reader" (xviii). It is exactly this "smug and futile skepticism" that defines Burden's time with Stark and that he abandons by returning to the Mastern material. Yet, Warren's self-exegesis to this effect belies his anxiety about its achievement. Rather than simply showing the slavery material in the novel's fourth chapter, he returns at the end to, in effect, show the showing. The act of revelation becomes more important than what is revealed; it demonstrates an authorial "awareness of the full context" at the expense of the impact of the specific contradictions inherent in that context. The performance of shame attending the affective and political power of slavery is enough to justify this approach, but *All the King's Men* locates the source of this shame in its violence to white subjectivity.

That is, the exercise of the legal prerogatives of chattel slavery—selling Phebe—becomes a crisis for both Annabelle Trice and Mastern because it prevents them from dictating the terms of their confrontation the sin of their affair. Mastern's experience of powerlessness finds expression through the language of slavery considered as what Orlando Patterson calls an "institutional process" composed of interlocking networks of individual and collective agency and domination. Patterson explains, "enslavement, slavery, and manumission are not merely related events; they are one and the same process in different phases" (296). Considering slavery as an institutional

process thus challenges the sovereignty of the individual enslaver, whose power over the enslaved is constrained by the agency afforded him by the entire institutional structure. Thus, even the apparently personal interactions between enslaver and the enslaved are determined by communal symbols and values. The contradictions inherent in the production of such enslaving and enslaved subjects find their expression in manumission, in which the master maintains his symbolic authority in the eyes of the many through the revocation of his actual authority over an individual. The manumitting enslaver is self-divided in an irony specific to his local system, but in *All the King's Men* Warren generalizes the irony of the self-division in order to force connections between the obvious moral stakes of the past and the convoluted ones of the present.

Mastern's inability to exorcise his guilt over his affair attaches first to the sale of Phebe, who has witnessed his affair with Annabelle. Mastern first reflects in his journal that "all [this suffering] had come from my single act of sin and perfidy, as the boughs from the bole and the leaves from the bough" (178). He alters this natural metaphor, turning to the abstract. "Or to figure the matter differently," Mastern writes, "it was as though the vibration set up in the whole fabric of the world by my act had spread infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end" (178). Somewhere between nature and metaphysical abstraction, Mastern tries to assuage the moral guilt over the sin that the sale of Phebe helped to cover up by self-consciously adopting the power to buy and sell enslaved people in order to correct a wrong that that same power had authorized. As Annabelle complains that she cannot simply manumit Phebe because, "she'd stay right here and look at me and tell, tell what she knows, and I'll not abide it!" (175). "She knows," she warns Mastern "—and she looks at me—she will always look at me…She will tell. All of them will know—when they hand me the dish—then they come into the room—and their feet don't make any noise!" (175). Mastern believes he has tracked down Phebe to a slave

trader in Paducah, Kentucky, but strikes the man and leaves empty-handed for implicating him in the sexual economy of the slave trade. Mastern's violent reaction to the suggestion that he "got a hankeren fer yaller" stems from a rejection of a condensed set of racial-sexual meanings. Mastern *does* want Phebe for a sexual purpose: to make up for past sexual transgressions. He also might not have been in this situation if he *had* made an enslaved woman a victim of his sexual desire instead of making Annabelle the subject of it. Under the guise of an insult to his honor as a gentleman, Mastern acknowledges these two other painful dynamics of the scene.

Mastern's guilt over ruining the Trice marriage becomes an obsessive fascination with his own sin after he is unable to locate and free Phebe. But as Anabelle and Mastern both knew, freeing Phebe would not have changed the underlying facts of their situation. Warren juxtaposes the complicated agency authorized by the symbolic force of manumission with a mix of guilt and shame takes the form of depression, what Mastern calls his "will toward darkness." This depression leads to a substitutional logic of one form of power and life for another that, like manumission, Mastern ultimately rejects. Mastern refuses to kill himself because he fears damnation, "but sometimes the very fact of damnation because of suicide seemed to be the very reason for suicide: he had brought his friend to suicide and the friend, by that act, was eternally damned; therefore, he, Cass Mastern, should, in justice, insure his own damnation in the same act" (182). But Mastern cannot effect this exchange.

Stepping back from this suicidal "delirium between life and death" (182), Mastern turns again to exorcising his demons by exercising his masters' prerogative and attempting to extract himself from the slave economy by freeing and then re-hiring on a wage basis the enslaved people on his plantation. Angering his brother and other local leaders, Mastern refuses even to transform his moral transgression into legitimate white politics, informing Gilbert "Perhaps I shall preach

Abolition…some day. Even here. But not now. I am not worthy to instruct others" (182). Moral guilt precludes political participation for Mastern. Though this position leaves him out of place in his own time, it resonates across history to strike Burden. Mastern is forced to remove the freedmen from his property following a deadly failed escape attempt at a nearby plantation that adds two more to Burden's growing list of indirect victims. Burden reports, "So Cass put his Negroes on a boat bound upriver, and never heard of them again" (183). Mastern writes of the convoluted agency of this decision, "I had not flattered myself that I had done anything for them. What I had done I had done for myself, to relieve my spirit of a burden, the burden of their misery and their eyes upon me" (183). Mastern's inability to rectify sin leads to a stagnating depression and "will toward darkness" that takes the form of another will toward darkness, that is, the more readily available symbolic order of the psychic and material economy of chattel slavery.

But Mastern's burden—the burden of the master—also masters Burden. Burden repeats Cass's most abstract formulation of his guilt as he reflects, "Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider…injects the black, numbing poison under your hide" (188). This extended simile is at once a description of Mastern's entry into the world of sin and an account of Burden's looming depression as his work on Mastern progressed. Unable to fully express why he gave up his research, Burden he may have given up "not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him" (188). Mastern's tale suggests an overwhelming depression *must* emerge from the shame associated with the willing exercise of white power, but the haunting black presence left over from this shameful action are animated not by their own spirits but by an already existing

131

guilt, the self-division which Burden and Cass must each reconcile themselves to. Earlier in his life Mastern reflects on the folly of seeking self-fulfillment through his relationship with Annabelle Trice, writing that, "it is human defect—to try to know oneself by the self of another. One can only know oneself in God and in His great eye" (173). "God and…His great eye," however are quickly relegated to the black gaze.

Initially skeptical of Annabelle's anxiety that Phebe "knows" (175), Mastern concludes at the end of his life

I understood that Mrs. Turner flogged her Negroes for the same reason that the wife of my friend sold Phebe down the river: she could not bear their eyes upon her. I understand, for I can no longer bear their eyes upon me. Perhaps only a man like my brother Gilbert can in the midst of evil retain enough of innocence and strength to bear their eyes upon hum and to do a little justice in the terms of the great injustice. (184)

Mastern's conclusion here is troubling for a modern reader; initially staged as an insight into the anti-blackness of even Northern whites, this reflection turns into a glorification of paternalistic plantation ideology. Gilbert, understood by Burden to be a cynical fortune seeker, stands for Mastern as possessed of "innocence and strength" *vis a vis* the relationship with enslaved black people. Gilbert, it seems, cannot see the return of the gaze. It is Gilbert, too, who serves as the initial point of identification for Burden: "he felt that he knew Gilbert Mastern. Gilbert Mastern kept no journal, but Jack Burden felt that he knew him, the man with the head like the block of bare granite, who had lived through one world into another and been at home in both" (188). Knowing Cass Mastern is Burden's real test, though Burden only realizes this fact "look[ing] back now, years later" (188). The lesson that Mastern learned, and that Burden could only learn belatedly, is that "the world is all of one piece" (188) and that punishment will always befall those who attempt to change the status quo for whatever reason.

Obviously, this lesson presages Stark's fate. But at that time, "Jack Burden could read those words, but how could he understand them? They could only be words to him, for to him the world then was simply an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things…or one thing had nothing to do, in the end, with anything else" (189). Burden's cynicism cannot protect him from the after-effects of his venture into politics with Stark. But it is exactly the personal ramifications of failure—this disastrous attempt to reorder the racial and economic relations of the state—out of which Burden finally "now may come to understand" Mastern (438). Before his work with Stark and his realization of his family's sins, Burden was lost in a historical world that was "simply an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things gathered in a garret. Or it was a flux of things before his eyes (or behind his eyes) and one thing had nothing to do, in the end, with anything else" (189). After Stark, Burden is able to reflect, "the only way you can tell that a certain piece of knowledge is worth anything: it has cost some blood" (429) and to accept the exercise of power as a condition of existence. Mastern's story, and thus Burden's own, is literary.

Burden, then, accomplishes the literary attitude laid out in *An Approach to Fiction.* That is, it is not concerned, "*only* with facts…the man writing a story or poem or play will be interested in giving a human meaning to the bare facts—especially in dealing with the *why* of the story. This humanizing of the facts is one regard which distinguishes any literary account from" objective historical accounts (2-3). Echoing the novel's consistent refrain concerning the difference between historical facts and human truths, Burden reflects at the novel's conclusion: "I have a story. It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him it looked one way for a long time and then it looked a different way. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not" (435). Warren performs here a gesture towards the form of the novel in order to underline the "human meaning,"

forcing readers to see the outline of events expressed in its own wishful terms. This constructed profoundness sets up the irresolution of novel's conclusion. Burden attempts to "make amends" for Irwin's crime, but his plans to give his inheritance to the victim of Irwin's crime is foiled by her death. "I was denied that inexpensive satisfaction in virtue," Burden laments, "I should have to get whatever satisfaction I was to get in a more expensive way" (438). Warren insists on individual feeling through the resolution of Burden's depression and newfound sense of possibility and purpose, the sentimentality of which is tempered by an abstract fatalism and lingering attachment to white racial power rhetorically reminiscent of Mastern's writing and expressed through the language of mastery as the "awful responsibility of Time" (438).

Given the complexity of Warren's employment of irony to resolve white racial melancholy and Warren's own insistence that his life can be read as a process of development leading to *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, I read *All The King's Men* as not simply Burden's story of intellectual and moral development. It can likewise be read as the expression of Warren's wish to emerge from Agrarianism into a morally cleansing racial liberalism. *All The King's Men* is a key not only to the future of Warren's work, but to its past. I read three moments in Burden's life as narrated in *All The King's Men* as working through Warren's own class and race politics. First, Warren's attempts to use the history of slavery and Emancipation as a defense of the present in *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) and "The Briar Patch" reflects Burden's time as a PhD student seeking to move past the "sentimental reasons" (160) for studying Cass Mastern's papers in order "to discover the truth and not the facts" (157). "Then," as Burden writes, "when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts" (157). What Mastern cannot accept—seeing the romantic white past as a tragedy for the enslaved—is likewise, through history, "a reproach" to Burden (189). This

reproach haunts Burden until the end of the novel, because he "could not put down the facts about Cass Mastern's world because he did not know Cass Mastern" (188). *All The King's Men,* then, becomes ultimately a story of understanding Cass Mastern, getting into the head of the conflicted slave owner whose intellectual labor cannot fundamentally challenge a regime he understands to be morally bankrupt. The "institutional process" of slavery that Mastern's story reveals is disavowed in favor of the "personal relation" (Patterson 13) between Burden and Mastern as fellow-feelers in a necessarily self-divided world. Understanding the psychology of the elite white man becomes the proper role of historical research into the slave-holding past and serves as the sign that Burden has achieved enough psychological and social stability to enter authentically into the real world.

Following Burden's failure to confront this foundational moral quandry, he moves into the realm of politics, seeking to support a cleansing populist movement based around the needs to the Agrarian rural population as opposed to the moneyed influences of the state's industrial centers. As Szalay argues, this period is characterized by a cynical appropriation of black political potential; Stark galvanizes Agrarian reforms that ostensibly though indirectly help black farmers as a way of establishing a white rural hegemony to replace the white urban ruling class. Common ground needed to be found between poor whites and blacks, but these binding elements could not fundamentally challenge racial hierarchies. The presentism of the Agrarian class discourse that overrides racial antagonism works under the surface of both these sections of the novel and Warren's critical work in the mid 1930s and early 1940s. Finally, following the collapse of this regime, Burden returns to the Cass Mastern material as Warren returns to slavery to conceptualize contemporary class and race relations as inherently unresolvable and corrupted. Burden's promise to write the book on Mastern signals the fact that Warren has in fact already done so, but Warren's

anxiety over the effectiveness of writing comes through even as he articulates the virtue of his literary approach. The ironic melancholy of *All The King's Men* comes at the tail end of a decade of Warren's own struggles to come to terms with the relationship between racial and class politics and their proper expression in literature.

The mental acrobatics required to hold these ideas together culminate in Warren's increasing insistence on irony as a conceptual leveler of white social relations. Both poor and elite whites would be required to ironize their positions, that is, to hold themselves at a critical distance and temporarily disinvest affective energy from the structures that support them in order to maintain a stable existence in the modern world. Irony cuts across white class lines, but it is ultimately *not* an orientation that could bring about changes in the economic and social conditions of black Southerners. It is in relation to this racial dynamic of irony that *All the King's Men* must be read. *All the King's Men* works through stages of sincerity and irony in white politics, but flounders on the historical kernel of its narrative: Cass Mastern's inability to will himself out of moral responsibility for past actions expressed through the impersonal power structures of slavery's institutional processes. *All the King's Men* identifies Mastern's situation as the situation of the modern white South, yet it expresses an unfounded optimism that the revelation of this historical legacy is enough to break its insistence. Irony becomes in the final count a kind of righteous self-castigation; to feel intractably guilty about Southern racial antagonism is to be inhabiting whiteness in a moral fashion, and to talk about that feeling without addressing its causes constitutes real reparative action. In the place of material politics, Warren inserts a melancholic irony that reifies the centrality of elite white intellectual experiences even as he illustrates the political impotence of such a social position. Yet, rather than solving the problem, Warren closes with Burden promising only to write the book on it.

In *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* Warren writes his way through these same sets of problems faced by Burden, and control over narrative motivation and closure emerges in his interviews with black intellectual and political leaders as the central point of interracial tension and misunderstanding. Put another way, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren's insistence on the supremacy of white inner-transformation as the end of political narratives leads to moments of obstinacy in which he degrades lived black experiences along aesthetic lines. The motivating vulnerability that Warren's performance of shame indicates transforms into a paternalistic compulsion to domesticate black critique and to overinflate his own capacity to represent black suffering. In effect, Warren resists seeing anti-blackness as an "institutional process" and forces it into opposing logics of "personal relation" expressed through safe narrative resolution, or when that fails, a sense of aggrieved attack from radical black thinkers. Warren reads racial narratives for their essential thematic content—content that offers lessons about white moral capacity and the values of American liberalism—while obscuring the underlying articulation of forms of incapacity that several of his interlocutors attempt to make visible through accounts of structural and institutional violence.

Warren's conversation with Charles Evers is particularly revealing in this regard. Warren attempts to force Evers' explanation of his experience with systematic and structural violence into a narrative of fraternal bonding, despite Evers' insistence on analyzing institutional power dynamics. Evers tells Warren that he and his brother Medgar had made a pact to "continue the fight and set our people free—and free ourselves" when they were young: "whatever happened to one of us, the other would carry on until the same thing happened to him, until he couldn't—until physically he was prevented or until something else we couldn't help" (101). Evers himself represents this pact as one between brothers, secured by the power of a fraternal opposition to

injustice, but the need for the bond was, as Warren understands, "backed by many things" (102).

Warren's immediate response to the pact, however, localizes the affective and ethical force of the

commitment to struggle even to the point of death purely within the power of brotherly relations.

I quote his reflection at length:

I am a little disturbed by his rhetoric. He is not talking to me, across the desk, in the room above
Lynch Street. He is talking to a hall full of people, to a meeting under the blazing sky, to a crowd.
Or talking to himself. I wish he could really remember what he and Medgar had really said, word
for word. It is not a question of there being no truth behind the rhetoric. But I feel that the truth—
and the emotion of that truth—have become officialized. (101-102)

Warren insists here that the truth of Evers' experience can be finally located in "what he

and Medgar had really said, word for word." The truth of that moment, of words authentically

exchanged between brothers, stands in opposition to the "rhetoric" and "officialized" emotion of

Evers' interview. It is not that there is something inappropriately oratorical about Evers's interview

style, rather it is the quality of the narrative itself that Warren finds problematic. Warren is anxious

here of the "politicized literature...a conception of literature as an instrument," that he had critiqued

in Fascist and Communist propaganda decades earlier in "Literature as a Symptom" (274). The

problem with Evers' speech is not its essential truth, or as much of an essential truth that Warren

can imagine, but rather the way it is rendered as narrative. Warren reflects, "I felt something

contrived, arranged about the narrative, something too pat about the oath taken, something false in

the language...It all ran like a piece of fiction tediously conventional, a tissue of echoes" (108).

The issue here is cliché. Warren finds "something stereotyped in the narrative of their going

register, and in the words of Mr. Brand [the Circuit Clerk who allowed Charles and Medgar to

register to vote], in the account of their trying to vote, I felt the predictability, in the scene of the

crowd, in the conversation as the car followed down the street, the night-long wait to lay a cross

fire on the mob" (108). Warren locates the cliché of this narrative in Evers' retelling, as if the fact

that Evers' experience with an armed mob preventing him and his brother from registering to vote and waiting, armed, for their house to burned that night, was only at heart a narrative, something contrived to achieve a political end and not in itself a common manifestation of anti-Black violence that Warren is ostensibly out to critique with his work.

If this scene is clichéd it is not so because Evers fails at producing a properly literary account, it is because Warren is at once entirely familiar with the scenes of the narrative and entirely estranged from its affective reality. For Warren the violence of this particular scene is not enough to motivate a life-long commitment, and so he searches for its authenticity in the emotional logic of a ruptured fraternal bond. But for Evers, filial relations are always already foreclosed upon by the violence of white supremacy; his struggle is not so much to restore the bond but rather to establish its recognition in the eyes of the white world for the first time. Warren's framing of such experiences as cliché dates back to his earlier work on civil rights, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956), where, very early on in the work he contrasts two clichés of black and white experience. A young black woman explains that she has moved out of town in order to avoid the man who killed her husband, and Warren glosses her story as "the thing the uninitiate would expect. It is the cliché of fear. It is the cliché come fresh, and alive" (9). Along with black fear, white hatred is cliché. A young white man declares his hatred of black people while visiting an historical monument, and Warren writes, "the boy, standing on the ground of history and heroism, his intellect and imagination stirred by the fact, shudders with that other, automatic emotion which my question had evoked. The cliché had come true: the cliché of hate" (11). In both of these cases Warren aestheticizes racialized experiences, flattening the world into a system of competing clichéd and authentic representations. The implicit critique in this framing is that these individuals are living their lives in a distorted way, that they are out of sync with reality *because* of the

139

insistence on dwelling within the experience and fear of violence in the woman's case, and because of the man's construction of his identity around an idealized Southern history and its attendant white supremacist ideology. But the problem with this framing is that it gives no insight into the differences between these two experiences; the black woman should be able to think her way out of violence as easily as the white man can think himself into a demystified relation with the past. Both stand to be corrected by thought and contemplation.

In *Who Speaks for the Negro*? cliché provides Warren an opportunity to demonstrate his interpretive powers. Warren mines the "dreary clichés" of Evers' life for "the fresh, appalling vision of truth," (108) and for Warren this appalling truth is the value-negating threat of black violence. Warren concludes the section on Evers with a clipping from the *Nashville Banner* alleging that Evers had abandoned non-violence as a tactic. The article raises the specter, as Warren explains, of "not merely action in self-defense, and not merely selective reprisal, but totally nonselective reprisal" (109). Evers explicitly denies the report, claiming he was misquoted, but for Warren (and for our purposes) what matters is the undeniable logic of nonselective reprisal. Warren sees this logic not as pathological or exceptional, but rather as potential in all black experience: "For would not the potential of those words be there for any Negro living in that world of white violence? But if [Evers' words] did slip out, would the fact, however unfortunate, mean more than that this feeling is potential in the situation, for any Negro?" (110). The kind of feeling that would lead to random violence is endemic to the black "situation," and Warren imagines Evers, overwhelmed by "the lights and faces before him," letting that thought "slip out, unwittingly" (110). The threat of black negativity and violence provides a necessary energy for political activism, but also risks being "thought" in inauthentic or improper ways. So while Warren is comfortable abstractly speculating as to Evers' "situation," insofar as he imagines him as a player

140

in a family drama, "a man whose brother has been shot in the back," (110) Warren trivializes as cliché rhetoric the real manifestation of this feeling: Medgar and Charles lying in wait to open fire on the white mob they fear will burn down their father's home.

Warren cannot allow for affective negativity to materialize in violence despite his desire to theorize that negativity and claim it for his own project of white psychic reform. In effect, Warren is unable to process claims of justice that exceed the capacity of the individual white person to offer redress. Warren praises Whitney Young, then Executive Director of the Urban League, for being "one of the few people who has quite soberly put his mind on the problem of what integration might really mean" (170). Young imagines the end of racism as a subtle moment of self-realization, the gentle thought "My goodness, I guess I'm integrated" (171). Young provides Warren with a model for thinking through Southern identity and for speculating on "the wholeness of life" without having to think about the role of anti-black violence in producing a stabilizing outside to this wholeness. Warren analogizes the black and Southern "de facto inferiority" of standards of living, "a subject which many people, some Negroes and some white liberals, flinch from" (170). Young, it seems, "does not flinch from the facing the unpleasant fact of the Negro's condition," which for Warren means not blaming white supremacy for poverty and illiteracy and instead "taking responsibility to raise standards and enter competitively into the general society" (170). Young's view of black experience thus authorizes Warren to speculate as to what the white South can do to fix its social problems, and so in his attempts to be unflinching in his analysis of black specificity Warren winds up writing about the problems that face American society in toto. In a highly symptomatic paragraph concluding his section on Young, Warren connects Young's optimism to a critique of "the fragmentation of the individual through the fragmentation of function and the draining away of opportunity for significant moral responsibility—the

141

fragmentation of community through the fragmentation of the individual" (171). This fragmentation, "the great dehumanizing force of our society," is something that Young, through his political work, "is attacking, instinctively perhaps" (171).

Even in his praise of Young, whose response to systematic violence represents for Warren the height of tempered thought and moral responsibility, Warren cannot help but represent Young as unthinking. Young "seems to be undergoing a struggle toward a philosophy, scarcely articulated as yet...he has some instinct for the wholeness of life" (171). "If this is true," Warren writes, then Young has somehow managed to stumble onto a human truth that Warren has already mastered (in his own literary and critical pursuits) and paternalistically attributes to Young *so that* it can seem to be emerging from within black experience and thus have claim to a kind of authenticity that Warren alone cannot give it. Ultimately, Warren wants his analogy between Southern life, or the conditions of white modernity more generally, and black life to come from the mouth of a black man. He writes, "In the end, then, the integration of the Negro into American society would be, *if I read Young aright,* a correlative of the integration of the personality white or black" (171, my emphasis). Whatever crises of modernity Warren is facing, he wants his experience of them to be on the same order as the violence that he knows blacks suffer. Warren is self-effacing in presenting the white "personality" (including, as we are well aware, his own) as fragmented, yet in order to perform that analogy the specificity of anti-black violence has to drop from the picture, even though it is the extreme status of that violence that makes Young's testimony exemplary and appealing in the first place.

Warren's use of Young as a symbol for an authentic suffering provides Warren an opportunity, as Toni Morrison has it, to play in the dark, for "meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" even as he sits across

from a living, breathing man (17). In the same vein, Warren's macroscopic framing of integration reveals the extent to which his own melancholic attachments to white cultural values drowns out the alternative values posed by his interlocutors. At the same time, Warren is not simply putting forward a politics of simple reconciliation. His interview with and reflections on Malcolm X reveal that on an observational level Warren attempts to perceive anti-blackness as a constitutive element of American society, though at a descriptive level he resists turning this perception into a critique of foundational values of whiteness, nor does he, at a prescriptive level, embrace the transformative vision of the negativity he encounters.

For Warren, "Malcom X is many things. He is the face not seen in the mirror. He is the threat not spoken. He is the nightmare self. He is the secret sharer" (266). Malcolm X is important for "the mere fact of his existence in this moment, his role, his symbolic function," not for any of the real political consequences of his philosophy (265). In Warren's estimation, Malcolm X's symbolic function operates differently in the white and black imaginaries. On the one hand, "even the coolest-headed and most high-minded Negro, in some deep corner of his being, is apt to admit responding to" X's words (265). Malcolm X appeals to the potential violent energy Warren both courts as a sign of his own moral courage and avoids as a threat to his own moral order throughout *Who Speaks?* On the other hand, Malcolm X makes whites "face the absoluteness of the situation," (266) which Warren typically represents as an internal psychic fracturing that opens into existential speculation and ultimately provides the opportunity for radical ethical self-making.

Warren begins by offering an anecdote about a white girl who asked Malcolm X if there was anything at all she could do to be "acceptable" (265). Malcolm X tells her no outright, and the girl bursts into tears. The source of the anecdote, a Dr. Anna Hedgeman, later approaches the girl and asks her, "My dear, don't you think it strange that you couldn't stand for one minute to be

repudiated by that Negro man, when I, like all other Negros, have had to spend my whole life being repudiated by the white race?" (265). Warren uses this anecdote to illustrate the "absoluteness of the situation." Hedgeman, a non-violent Christian activist, quite clearly identifies with Malcolm X. Meanwhile Warren begins to make a claim about human experience in general that collapses into a statement of white racial solidarity. He asserts that "there is something of that little white girl in all of us. Everybody wants to be loved" (265). But, when confronting Malcolm X, "there is not anything, not a thing, you—if you are white—can do, and somewhere deep down in you that little girl is ready to burst into tears" (266). Warren insists on a model of human recognition that cannot accommodate the categorical challenges posed by black experience, and the threat to the reality of the model is experienced as a painful loss. But this is can only be expressed as a painful loss, can only appear to be mourned, when blackness speaks back through the overdetermined symbolic force that whiteness has given it.

Malcolm X qua symbol of foundational racial antagonism thus polarizes interracial discourse, but Warren places the burden of this polarization on Malcolm X, not on the symbolic field that underdetermines the political importance black life and overdetermines the psychic threat of black violence. Warren insists repeatedly on framing his discussion within the symbolic terms of racial liberalism even though he is conscious of its inability to either explain or respond to Malcolm X's position. Again defending the ideological and moral innocence of the white child, Warren asks if "any person of white blood—even one—[can] be guiltles?" (256). Warren offers a hypothetical situation that highlights the centrality of individual guilt and responsibility at the heart of Warren's melancholy: a white child of "an age below decisions or responsibility" faces "death before an oncoming truck" (256). Warren wants to know if this child deserves to die simply because he is white. Malcolm X responds by turning the question on its head: "take a Negro child

who is only four years old—can he escape, though he's only four years old, can he escape the stigma of segregation? He's only four years old" (256). X's response here totally subverts Warren's rhetorical use of the child to symbolize innocence and shows it to be a fundamental obfuscation of the moral calculus at work. The black child is not a child gifted with moral innocence and the promise of futurity because he is forced into a life that is not innocent, that is, ignorant, of anti-black violence. The white child's innocence is revealed to be, precisely, the freedom to be ignorant, and has nothing to do with the moral thinking and responsibility and the insistence on violence as transgression and punishment that paralyzes Warren's analysis.

If we step back a bit, we can see that Warren's thinking is so muddled that his hypothetical situation does not fundamentally make sense as a thought experiment for Malcolm X to respond to. That is, it is a faulty narrative without ironic closure. Having the white child be faced with death by truck collision forecloses a complex ethical response that irony would—and should—provide. Warren's logic runs: 1) white children do not deserve to be randomly hit by trucks, therefore 2) white children never deserve to die, and further 3) white children are not implicated in white supremacy or anti-Blackness. Given this extreme logical jump, the coherence of Malcolm X's response is particularly impressive. Warren later attempts to complicate the frame of his hypothetical by introducing morally redeeming white self-sacrifice, biting on Malcolm X's insistence on thinking innocence through the black child: "Let's put the Negro child in front of the truck, and put a white man there who leaps—risks his own life—to save the child. What is your attitude toward him?" (256). Malcolm X rejects the terms of the question, refusing to engage on the level of personal attitude, instead insisting on a logic structural stagnation that denies the easy moral closure Warren seeks to bring to the story. "That same white man would have to toss that child back into discrimination, segregation," X replies (256). Trading death for degraded is not

something that registers as a genuine moral dilemma, or rather, it is an obfuscation of a more pressing and more fundamental life or death struggle. Warren flounders, eventually asking outright: "But what is your attitude towards [the self-sacrificing white man's] moral nature?" (256). Moral nature, the backbone of Warren's political and literary ethos, crumbles in the face of Malcolm X's response: "I'm not even interested in his moral nature. Until the problem is solved, we're not interested in anybody's moral nature" (257).

Warren's reflection on this episode shows him doubling down on his logic in the interview. He writes, "behind all [Malcolm X's] expert illogic there is a frightful, and frightfully compelling, clarity of feeling—one is tempted to say logic. Certainly a logic of history. Of history conceived of as doom" (257). The logic of this passage is consistent with Warren's general ethos: blackness is a source of "compelling...clarity of feeling" that cannot quite translate itself into "logic." Insofar as blackness is legible symbolically, it is so as "doom." What Warren does not see are the assumptive mechanisms by which the defense of black life becomes doom. It is not Malcolm X that creates radical negativity ex nihilo, but rather the entire system of thought and feeling to which Warren is beholden that creates blackness as nothingness. Thus, when Malcolm X finally concedes that he would "shake [the] hand" of a white man who agreed that "when Negroes are being attacked—they should defend themselves even at the risk of having to kill one who's attacking them," Warren fixates on the symbolic crisis that such a handshake would produce and does not stop to meditate on his position in the constitution of the ethical field in which such a handshake signifies something unimaginable (258). Warren:

But what would this mean, this hand-shaking? If the demand Malcolm X makes is merely that the white man recognize his right of self-defense (which the law already defines for him and which the NAACP supports), then he might go around shaking many hands all day and not exhaust the available supply. If by 'defend themselves' he means the business of Armageddon, then he will find few hands to shake. But in any case, what does the hand-shaking mean if he maintains that the white man, and the white man's system, can't change from the iniquity which he attributes to

146

him? (258)

Leaving aside Warren's uncharacteristic (and symptomatic) insistence on the integrity of the American legal system, this passage makes visible Warren's inability to critically accommodate what Malcolm X is trying to show about "the white man's system." It is precisely this "system," not Malcolm X as an individual with thoughts and feelings of his own, that turns black self-defense into Armageddon. History as doom is an invention of Warren's own mind with roots in the structures of anti-blackness that foreclose the self-and other-recognition that would make interracial hand shaking a meaningful possibility. Warren finds the idea that white people cannot change, or that the system of whiteness cannot change deeply disturbing, but what is manifesting here is the melancholy felt at the collapse of recognition when it ceases to function unconsciously. The libidinal force of anti-blackness that buttresses this recognition among white people precludes the recognition of Malcolm X's attempt to speak through the symbolic role that has been ascribed to him. To recognize as human an experience represented in these terms would necessitate radical non-recognition of the self, insofar as Warren is crafting a fiction of a self that is studiously free of active participation in oppressive systems. It is Warren that cannot imagine a space in between nonviolence and Armageddon, not Malcolm X. Consequently, while confronting Malcolm X turns Warren into a crying little girl, it likewise unleashes an anger that threatens civil discourse and a violence that threatens to undo the carefully crafted, repentant ethical subjectivity Warren is attempting to produce. He writes, "there is in you too that hard, aggressive, assertive, uncompromising and masculine self that leaps out of its deep inwardness to confront Malcolm X with a repudiation as murderous as his own, saying, 'Ok, Ok, so that's the way you want it, let her rip!'" (266). But Warren immediately dials back on that fury, "we must confront that wild elation in ourselves: 'Let her rip!'" (266) While Warren is repelled by this "elation," he nonetheless accepts

it as a fundamental part of the psyche. But herein lies the inherent advantage of Warren's position. Warren has the freedom to recognize the shame inherent in this reaction as foundational to a revitalized liberal order because at the end of the interview he can step back into a world that recognizes and reinforces the connection between that shame and the possibility of redemption. After the interview, Malcolm X has to step back in front of the truck

"Confronting" this violent feeling thus becomes the first moment of ethics and self-knowledge insofar as it leads to greater communicability and an ultimate strengthening of the values of civil society that mark Malcolm X as an incoherent evil. His experience with Malcolm X reveals to Warren what the white man "has to deal with, in himself:" a temptation to violence and momentary overcoming by feeling (266). So even here, in this moment of apparent candor, Warren turns the immediacy of feeling, Malcolm X's "expert illogic," into a theory that reifies white social relations and the system that produces the specific formulation of this repressed libidinal force. Warren's response cycles through an astounding assortment of symbolic dualities: masculine/feminine, adult/child, aggression/passivity, extraversion/inversion, love/hate, community/singularity; and they are all employed to fill the lacuna of blackness. What Warren cannot confront is the failure of logic, the failure of thought, the failure of the meaning of self-mastery that thinking anti-blackness as non-narrative process demands. This failure needs a redemptive moment, a turn to moral self-knowledge, and the disappearance of Malcolm X. Warren ends his section on Malcolm X with a note on his assassination, which concludes, "Malcolm X had something of the scale of personality and force of will that we associate with a tragic hero. And he finally found himself caught on the horns of the classic dilemma of tragedy" (267). Malcolm X's death a death without the dignity of tragedy, instead a death that Warren, master of

narrative, always already foretells. Something like a tragic hero, but without the capacity for self-definition.

Warren's analysis of the "absoluteness" of black/white antagonism unhappily treads a line between understanding the force of the affect with which the antagonism is charged and desperately needing to deny the necessity of that affect. Warren marks this contradiction in *Segregation* in a similar way, describing self-division felt as "a deep intellectual rub, a moral rub, anger at the irremediable self-division, a deep exacerbation at some failure to find identity" (54). But in *Segregation* this moral rub is caused by specific failures within specific moral institutions: "the power state...clan sense...organized labor...Christianity...sense of democracy" (54). In each of these cases, Warren argues that blacks are uncritically barred from participation in the sources of value that whites cling to for cultural identity. The purpose of such a criticism is to suggest that at heart these institutions are incompatible with racial segregation, and that gradually, inevitably, this incompatibility will manifest in *internal* pressures within white institutions and psyches that will in turn lead to a time of correction and redress. For Warren this redress is not ultimately something that should be done *for or by black people*. Rather, Warren holds himself accountable to an abstract "long effort for justice" of which desegregation is but a part (64). He writes, "in a country where moral identity is hard to come by, the South, because it has had to deal concretely with a moral problem, may offer some leadership" (66). The South is Warren's hope for racial reconciliation and the re-integration of the human personality in *Who Speaks?* as well, but thanks to the acrobatics necessary to square the affective and political claims being made in 1965, the text is littered with, as Morrison argues is the case of all figurative uses of blackness, "subtext that ... sabotages the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register" (66).

149

Ultimately, Warren's work is enlightening for its tortured relation to its own undermining subtext. There is a stark contrast between the Warren of the Malcolm X interview and the Warren that self-assuredly begins his conclusion by admonishing "many of us who are white—in our moments of stereotype and cartoon thinking" for believing in "an image of *the* Negro leader—a glare-eyed robot propelled by a merciless mechanism to stalk forward over the smiling landscape, where good clean American citizens (including well-adjusted Negroes) go happily about their constructive business" (405). Warren's insistence that "there are, merely, a number of Negroes who happen to occupy positions of leadership" does nothing to challenge the picture of black political movement as a world-destroying machine (405). The seeming lack of urgency in correcting this perception gives a final insight into the lines along which Warren divides that which demands theoretical coherence and that which does not. Warren admits to the Revered Wyatt Tee Walker that he undertook the project that spawned *Who Speaks for the Negro?* because he "wanted to find out things, including my own feelings" (232). These feelings lay the largest claim to Warren's attention, and though he is frank is communicating them, his analysis consistently stops short of critically examining his own position by throwing whiteness into question in the terms that his interlocutors use.

So, when Warren is praised by Walker for being "very courageous," Warren is honest enough to report "deep down in me, a cold flash of rage" (232). But this is rage at "moral condescension. The Negro Movement is fueled by a sense of moral superiority" (232). The truth of this rage is that moral superiority is precisely what Warren clings to in the face of challenges to his ways of theorizing the problem of segregation. The symbolic threat of Malcolm X or the "merciless mechanism" of organized black politics exist only because they have been constituted as such by the white imaginary, which is a positional imaginary despite its pretension to universal

knowledge, even if that universality is positioned as a self-divided, self-undermining wish for closure. This rage threatens to undo the moral force of Warren's political argument, which rests precisely on the recognition of the moral exigency of the Civil Rights Movement in a way that nonetheless retains responsibility for defining the terms of ironic self-division. The "moral power" of black leadership is authorized by the fact that "by the American white man's own professed standards the Negro is in the right, and enough white men know it to create a climate in which the Negro can proceed with his nonviolent Revolution" (410). There is a predictable slippage here; white people "know" that black people should have a claim to moral personhood, so they work to produce a climate of non-violence. But as Warren as shown, this "knowledge" is inseparable from fear experienced as melancholy and rage. What good, then, is a nonviolent revolution when it is only the implicit or explicit threat of violence that makes black speech audible? Elsewhere, Warren describes Malcolm X's symbolic function as "the unspecified conclusion in the syllogism that all of the 'responsible' Negro leaders present the white world: 'if you do not take me, then...' Then you will have to take Malcolm X, and all he means" (266). Even nonviolent black political organization *must* trade in murder and coercion because that is the *modus operandi* of anti-blackness.

The phenomenon of black speech about and through violence thus produces what we might consider a full-fledged existential crisis for Warren. The possibility of black violence registers as both fear and anguish, where the former indicates a threatened position in the world and the latter represents a threatening relation to the self. In one sense, black violence raises the possibility of worldly destruction, the loss of property and human lives, and thus instills fear. But if as Sartre explains, "a situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without," (29) then we can understand Warren's liberal educationalist approach to segregation as an attempt to convince white people to retain control over potentially painful changes that he nonetheless sees

as inevitable. As in "The Briar Patch," economic concessions may be made in order to retain white cultural power. At the same time, if "my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation," (29) Warren's instinct to "let her rip!" reveals the latent violence that girds white-black relations even in Warren's apparently newfound change-embracing open-mindedness. Malcolm X works to lay that violence bare, and rather than accepting the critique, Warren responds with violent anger. Warren's "cold flash of rage" and immediate guilt suggests a deep distrust of his own values and his own capacity for self-mastery, or to paraphrase Sartre, a kind of racial vertigo. When confronting the structures of violence and exclusion necessary to perpetuate white institutions, Warren experiences a fear "not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over" (Sartre 29). This is the fear of abandoning the encrypted desire, giving up paternalism's facile logics and directly participating in the violence by which the white self is made free.

But Warren cannot accommodate this understanding and maintain the integrity of his moral project, and so he rejects it and limits himself to melancholic self-castigation as a way of preserving the moral order Malcolm X figuratively deconstructs. We can finally evaluate Warren's racial melancholy along a line of questioning that Orlando Patterson's conception of slavery as a structural process leads him to ask: "are we to esteem slavery for what it has wrought, or must we challenge our conception of freedom and the value we place upon it?" (342). Warren consistently dresses up the former in the costuming of the latter. While Warren can recognize and criticize the reality that blackness is "the thing on which the white man may project the opposite of all the fine qualities he attributes to himself," he neither offers an explanation as to why this nonrecognition falls along racial lines nor does he see this effect as a meaningful impediment to his own thought (438). Instead, he transposes the material dynamic of white-black antagonism into a metaphysical

realm wherein race is only of secondary importance in order to speculate on the potential for psychic unification that would relieve the ache of the unfreedom of all modernity. "Civilization thwarts us," he writes, "we are starved for instinctual and affective sensations—or at least have to locate them well down in a hierarchy of values and subject them to dreary postponements. So we turn to the Noble Savage" (438). The Noble Savage is, he admits, a fiction, but at the same time he clings to the idea that "the Negro is the Negro American, and is 'more American than the Americans.' He is, shall we say, the 'existentialist' American. He is a fundamentalist of Western culture. His role is to dramatize the most inward revelation of that culture" (442).

Warren thus concludes by making two contradictory points that he resolves through force of assertion. First, there is the implicit assumption that forgiveness in the fundamental moral tenet of American culture and that black leaders' ability to offer forgiveness in the face of violence stands as a validation of the ethical groundwork of American society. White people can solve their problems if they can get back to the moral basics that racism, conceived of as individual betrayal of universal human characteristics, tempts them away from. In this sense the black Civil Rights activist ultimately offers "the 'catalytic' of his courage and clarity," courage and clarity that is gained *through* the experiences unique to black struggle and stemming from the condition of a historically situated racialized experience that Warren's didactic interpretation crowds out (442). More importantly, though, is the existential anguish blackness provokes, an anguish that radically calls into question the basis of all values. Warren collapses a tentative articulation of an existentialist inflected account of freedom, something his calls for radical individual moral responsibility stemming from a recognition of the ironic, self-divided position of the subject seems to invite, into a monumentalization of freedom within an American political context and a re-sedimentation of the epistemological and affective structures of paternalistic anti-blackness.

Warren's melancholic use of narratives of white transformation provide a framework whereby the pains of feeling objectified before the black gaze and the anguish of white subjectivity are forestalled and channeled through narrative and symbolic agency into something universal and recognizable as, as Warren wrote in 1936, "the spectacle of human existence."

CHAPTER FOUR

Refracting Blackness: Slavery and the Historical Visions of F. Scott Fitzgerald

When Amory Blaine declares in *This Side of Paradise* that he is "for the Confederacy," (31) and when he reflects that patriotism comes easy "to a homogenous race" like the Confederacy (139), F. Scott Fitzgerald's youthful romanticism about the Lost Cause stands in full view. Fitzgerald's critics and biographers have thoroughly traced the evolution of Fitzgerald's identification as the last son of a fallen Maryland planter family over the course of his career, arguing that Southern and Civil War mythology provides an important language for the expression of Fitzgerald's sense of American modernity.[13] For Fitzgerald as for any other Lost Cause thinker, the apparently admirable personal qualities associated with the Old South—honesty, honor, self-composure—mask a desire for the racial and economic relations that subtended them. Fitzgerald's readers, even as they have noted the importance both of the South and of racism in Fitzgerald's fiction, have been seemingly uninterested in making sense of the role that the legacy of slavery plays in Fitzgerald's conception of modernity.[14] While slavery as such appears in Fitzgerald's

---

[13] As Frederick Wegener explains, "although it seldom explicitly appears as a setting in his fiction, one may argue that [Fitzgerald's] lifelong engagement with the Civil War…came to perform an essential role in the development not only of Fitzgerald's historical awareness but also of his experience of the writer's life and of his aesthetic understanding as a whole" (239). See also Donaldson for a discussion of the importance of Fitzgerald's intimate relationship with his southern father and wife, Zelda. For more extended studies of the Civil War as a theme and setting in Fitzgerald's short fiction, see Noe and Fulton.

[14] Witness John T. Irwin's glossing of Fitzgerald's characterization of the Civil War: "that inevitable struggle for political supremacy …between those people whose power and position were based on the ownership of land and those whose wealth derived from manufacturing and trade" (13). In seeing Fitzgerald as a Southerner—indeed even in seeing Fitzgerald as a sometimes-Confederate sympathizer—Irwin does not see slavery. Nowhere is this critical disinterest more apparent than John Callahan's influential *The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1972). Callahan begins his study by asserting anti-black racism as the obfuscating political myth *par excellence,* even going so far to comment on

fiction only in "The Diamond as Big of the Ritz," (1922) it nonetheless determines the scope of history explored in Fitzgerald's mature fiction. If slavery has so far been unrecoverable from Fitzgerald's fiction, it is because its secrets constitute the whiteness that grounds Fitzgerald's historical consciousness. Slavery must remain hidden in order for Fitzgerald's sense of the political and psychic stakes of the present—the domain of the white moneyed class—to cohere. For Fitzgerald, the end of slavery is the beginning of history; Emancipation implicitly proves the moment economic and racial relations become (for him) unnatural, when modernity with all of its various alienations begins.[15]

The specific historical circumstances of American chattel slavery require us to read blackness in Fitzgerald's work differently than we read Fitzgerald's uses of other racial categories. Indeed, the critical imperative must be to account for the development of a racial imaginary grounded in the relations of slavery alongside and beneath Fitzgerald's well-documented scientific racism. Racialization and its historical expressions in Fitzgerald's fiction function along the two lines Painter proposes in *The History of White People*: "the fundamental black/white binary endures, even though the category of whiteness—or we might say more precisely, a category of

---

its inseparability from the legacy of American slavery, yet his study proceeds as if this history of slavery is ultimately separable from Fitzgerald's conception of modernity.

[15] Fitzgerald's attitude in this regard is not unique but instead reflects a dominant cultural understanding of slavery as an economic and social institution. As Edward Baptist explains of popular knowledge about slavery in the early twentieth century, "the historians of a reunified white nation insisted that slavery was a premodern institution that was not committed to profit-seeking…It was an old, static system that belonged to an earlier time" (xviii). White life in the South before Emancipation, then, was not only characterized by an imaginary racial balance whose fictions could be used to police modern African Americans, but also by an equally imaginary economic balance that could justify discourses of white economic grievance. This common sense about the political economy of race would come to be challenged only in the years after *Tender is the Night,* with the publication W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938), and Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), all of which laid the foundation for our contemporary critical knowledge of Atlantic slavery and its economic and intellectual afterlives.

nonblackness—effectively expands" (396). Each of these processes of stagnation and expansion come with their own attendant anxieties that can be read through Fitzgerald's narration of economic histories in his fiction. That is, for Fitzgerald the language of economics serves as a mode of working out both a foundational white/black binary and an ever-expanding definition of racial whiteness. For Fitzgerald, the clash between these two lines of racial thinking was deeply felt. As he wrote in a letter in 1933,

"I am half black Irish and half old American stock with the usual exaggerated ancestral pretensions. The black Irish half of the family had the money and looked down upon the Maryland side of the family who had, and really had, that certain series of reticences and obligations that go under the poor old shattered word 'breed' (modern for 'inhibitions'). So being born in that atmosphere…I developed a two-cylinder inferiority complex. (Fitzgerald quoted in Irwin 12)

Fitzgerald's ambivalent class identity is repeatedly blanketed over by an insistence on whiteness, and blackness serves primarily as a sign of difference through which white experience can be reflected upon.

It is not until his final work, *The Last Tycoon* (1941), that Fitzgerald depicts anti-black violence and exclusion as a material problem for the future of capitalism and not simply an internal psychic contradiction of white class consciousness. In this final novel, Fitzgerald's awareness of the contradictory psychological dynamics of racial exclusion that he had developed over the course of his career becomes a paradoxical wish to *include* black people in the economic system that had long excluded them in order to preserve the future of that racial-economic system. This inclusive desire comes even in spite of Fitzgerald's career-long sense that financial capitalism is a sign of white cultural self-destruction. What seems like a liberalization of representational politics over the course of Fitzgerald's career is actually a process of the melancholic incorporation of racial-capitalist ideals. I read the development of Fitzgerald's representations of the pathological manifestations of slavery in his fiction as tending toward a final fatalism in line with his late-career

interest in Oswald Spengler. Spengler's theory of history in *The Decline of the West* attributes cultural and civilizational dissolution to *interior* socio-economic factors [FILL ME IN BABY]. As John Whitley explains, "in telling [Fitzgerald] that the civilization of the West was in decline, [Spengler] was, in a sense, merely giving form and scholarship to something the American novelist had always known" (159). Fitzgerald adopts the language of racial individualism in order to grant black people agency within an overarching capitalist totality whose loose ends might finally be tied up through the homogenization of fractured racial labor and consumer markets, yet even this expansion of capitalism's reach will not save western culture.

Much like Fitzgerald's romantic vision of the Confederacy, slavery occupies a place of ill-fated youthful desire in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" (1922). Fitz-Norman Culpepper Washington, the original owner of the story's titular diamond, moved West with "two dozen of the most faithful blacks, who, of course, worshipped him" (192). Fitzgerald revels in imagining and describing the world of the Washingtons, which includes still-enslaved black servants. These were, as Fitzgerald narrates, "darkies who had never realized that slavery abolished. To make sure of this, he read them a proclamation that he had composed, which announced that General Forrest had reorganized the shattered Southern armies and defeated the North in one pitched battle. The negroes believed him implicitly" (193). Clearly, then, the world of the Washingtons occupies an alternative—yet plausible—history. The enslaved in the story operate as a central piece of the story's economic and racial imaginary. The Washington diamond is an economic paradox:

The diamond in the mountain was approximately equal in quantity to all the rest of the diamonds known to exist in the world. There was no valuing it by any regular computation, however, for it was *one solid diamond*—and if it were offered for sale not only would the blossom fall out of the market, but also, if the value should vary with its size in the usual arithmetical progression, there would not be enough gold in the world to buy a tenth part of it. (193)

To capitalize on the impossible value of the diamond, the Washington family engages in several forms of economic transubstantiation. On one hand, the diamond fragments that the first generation of the family brings to market are "invested with a history of enough fatalities, amours, revolutions and wars to have occupied it from the days of the first Babylonian Empire" and thereby transformed into bearers of historical and social—rather than pure exchange—value (194). On the other hand, the second generation of Washingtons "converted [their diamonds] into the rarest of all elements—radium—so that the equivalent of a billion dollars in gold could be placed in a receptacle no bigger than a cigar box" (194). The economic reality of the diamond belies the apparent simplicity of its physical beauty, which "dazzled the eyes with a whiteness that could be compared only with itself, beyond human wish or dream" (189). Indeed, the possibility of the diamond being "compared only with itself" proves to be the family's downfall, as the secret of their wealth cannot be revealed without its destruction.

It is no accident that the diamond's beauty is described as "whiteness," as the racial logic of the story mirrors the story's more explicit economic paradox. The black men and women enslaved by the Washingtons are, like the diamond, cut off from economic and linguistic circulation. The first enslaved characters to appear in the story speak "in some language which [John] could not understand, but which seemed to be an extreme form of the Southern negro's dialect" (186). Mr. Washington explains later to John that "they've lived so long apart from the world that their original dialect has become an almost indistinguishable patois. We bring a few of them up to speak English" (198). The enslaved in the story are reduced simply to their functions— serving meals, preparing baths, driving limousines—in the maintenance of the Washington household as a place of what Fitzgerald deemed "luxury" he "designed utterly for [his] own amusement" (182). These enslaved black characters compliment the material source of the

family's wealth—the diamond—by bringing in their own kind of value. The initial reason for the Washingtons' presence in Montana was a scheme to "take out land in [the enslaved's] names and start a sheep and cattle ranch" (192). In the land-grabbing scheme as in the diamond estate, the presence of black people establishes a pretext for an outward facing white economic system legitimized through the creation of fictions of legitimacy. Without the need for productive labor in the diamond estate, though, the Washingtons hold the enslaved in a vestigial bondage. Within the story, then, there is an implicit historical recounting of post-Emancipation racial politics that struggles to find a role for black people in an increasingly financial modern economy. Indeed, as the Washington estate collapses in the story's final section, Kismine laments the loss of "fifty thousand dollars' worth of slaves at prewar prices" (209).

However absurd the fantasy of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," it is instructive for readings of Fitzgerald's later fiction because it underscores the conceptual centrality of slavery to the world that Fitzgerald felt modernity had destroyed. The novel's concluding lines present a conversation between John and Kismine that underscores the naiveté of the story's fantasy without ultimately disavowing the premise of the obscene desire for luxury. John is uniformly untroubled by the Washingtons' villainous lifestyle predicated on enslavement and imprisonment, but is shocked when he learns that he too is simply an object of the Washingtons' murderous desire. John's reverence for the Washingtons' wealth is repeated in his infatuation with Kismine, who lets slip the family's horrible secret. Unable to suspect that his fate will align with that of the enslaved black servants or the imprisoned white explorers as a victim of the Washingtons' luxury, John continues to identify with the Washingtons and remains in love with Kismine *even after* he learns he is to be murdered. Having escaped death only through the destruction of the Washingtons' compound, John declares to Kismine, "There are only diamonds in the whole world, diamonds and

perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion. Well, I have that at last and I will make the usual nothing of it" (216). The potential realization that the world the Washingtons hyperbolize destroys everything it touches—even, as John fancied himself, its rightful inheritors—is transformed in these closing lines into vacuous self-reflection, as if all that was at stake in this experience for John was the loss of an experiential naiveté.

In "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," slavery serves as the first suppressed historical secret, that with which Fitzgerald's white protagonist fails to identify either consciously or unconsciously. The historical dynamic of slavery in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" does not disappear from Fitzgerald's fiction; it is not exorcised through John's final speech about disillusion. It does not disappear because, counter to the critical consensus on Fitzgerald's racism, anti-blackness is not merely an aberration or personal failing of Fitzgerald's, that is, it cannot be fully understood in the terms of racial individualism. Rather, through John's attempt to deny historical insight by insisting on a presentism defined by a "disillusion" that is his due as a wealthy white American male, we see the mechanism for slavery's preservation in *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. While these works exhibit their own racist dynamics, the critic's task is not to analyze how Fitzgerald's racism finds expression in certain contingent historical forms, especially (as has been well documented) scientific racist discourses.[16]

---

[16] See especially early pieces of criticism on race in Fitzgerald by Gidley and Slater. Fitzgerald's interest in the science of racial difference is typical of the post-Emancipation itinerary of American racial knowledge that NourbeSe Philip characterizes in an interview with Patricia Saunders: "The experience of slavery spawned anthropology and other sciences (like phrenology) that were drafted into service of proving the 'inferiority' of black people, as well as the larger project of greed and a lust for power and wealth. So, the same sets of questions and issues are presenting themselves to us across these historical periods. It [is] the same story that is telling itself, but through the different technologies and processes of that particular period" (67).

The difference between these two registers of racism is evident in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," and Fitzgerald's negotiation of it persists throughout his career. On a tour of the Washington compound, John is struck by the "graceful Gothic" magnificence of the slaves' quarters, an architectural indulgence that Braddock Washington dismisses as a youthful "distract[ion]…from the business of life" caused by "a period of absurd idealism" (197-198). John struggles to adopt the proper tone in response to Washington's cynicism. "I suppose…that they used the bathtubs to keep coal in," John ventures, drawing on something he had heard in the presence of another wealthy family, the Schnitzler-Murphies (198). As soon as John mentions Mr. Schnitzler-Murphy, though Washington interrupts him, "The opinions of Mr. Schnitzler-Murhpy are of little importance, I should imagine" (198). Washington here echoes his son's earlier dismissal of the social value of the comically named German-Irish Schnitzler-Murphy clan. Whereas the Schnitzler-Murphies have "rubies as big as hen's eggs, and sapphires that were like globes with lights inside them…diamonds as big as walnuts," the Washingtons, of course, put them to shame (184-185).

The inconsequence of the Schnitzler-Murphy clan rests in the newness of their wealth. "Catchpenny capitalists, financial small−fry, petty merchants and money−lenders," Percy tells John during their train ride to Montana, "My father could buy them out and not know he'd done it" (184). The Washington fortune, old as it is, connects the family to a privileged knowledge of racial blackness that finds expression in the language of scientific racism. "My slaves did not keep coal in their bathtubs," Washington explains, "They had orders to bathe every day, and they did…Several of them caught cold and died. Water is not good for certain races—except as a beverage" (198). John's reaction to Washington's frank explanation marks the only moment of discomfort with the ongoing slavery expressed in the story. "John laughed," Fitzgerald writes,

"and then decided to nod his head in sober agreement. Braddock Washington made him uncomfortable" (198). Yet, given John's failures to identify with the victims of the Washington family, this moment solidifies the logic of the relationship between the expansion of whiteness and the ongoing exclusion of blackness informing Fitzgerald's racial imaginary. The social and economic pretensions of the ethnically marked Schnitzler-Murphies express themselves in an absurd racial myth, while the impeccability of the Washington family's claim to economic status and Anglo whiteness expresses itself in biological racial difference to whose veracity can be personally attested. The Schnitzler-Murphies, whose claim to social status rests on the outward signs of their wealth, likewise cast racial difference as a matter of behavior: using a bathtub the proper way makes one white or black. John's discomfort in the face of Washington's explanation comes not from the presence of the enslaved, but from exposure to the possibility that the Washington's status might actually consist of some immutable racial essence. John finds himself like the Shnitzler-Murphies, pretending to a level of whiteness that, as the story will reveal, he cannot fully possess. Washington introduces the troubling possibility that John might not come from the right racial stock, yet it never crosses John's mind that he is more like the enslaved than the Washingtons. The Washingtons are assured of their status by virtue of their absolute control over both their wealth (in the diamond) and their whiteness (by way of apparently absolute knowledge about the difference between white and black). Each element of this dynamic of racial and economic status—a fundamental black/white binary and an ever-expanding definition of whiteness—is attended by its own representational tropes that respond to its own social and economic anxieties, and we must ask how these historical forms inherit contradictions of past historical forms, and how Fitzgerald's instigation of historical discourse in his novels consistently reaches crisis when the history of slavery threatens to come into view.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick's narration is shaped by the specter of slavery whose presence

is forestalled in moments that challenge the reliability of Nick's self-narration and especially his

apparent awareness of the disillusionment in himself and his peers. The novel begins by marking

Nick's narration as an act of apparently disillusioned self-definition. Nick admits a piece of advice

from his father: a warning against being critical of anyone who has not had "the advantages" that

Nick has had (1). He connects his internalization of this advice to his success in discovering

intimate information about all kinds of people. Yet for Nick, receptivity proves a curse. It appears

that intimate information simply erupts from those with whom he is close:

> Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep,
> preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that
> an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of
> young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic
> and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite
> hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father
> snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies
> is parcelled out unequally at birth. (1-2)

Note that Nick raises the problem of "obvious suppressions" in the opening lines of his own

sustained act of self-narration immediately before engaging in an obvious suppression of his own.

Nick transforms his father's statement about "advantages" into a statement exclusively concerning

personality. Richard Godden argues that Nick's tendency to reduce complex social situations to

scenes of nostalgia or romance indicates a "suppressed ambivalence towards his class position"

(92). In his narration Nick "spread[s] empathy where analysis should be" and thereby turns "social

aspiration into 'dream,' sexual politics into 'romance,' and translates class conflict as 'tragedy'

(95). He thereby suppresses analysis of social organization in favor of meditations on the moral

and intellectual capabilities of individual subjects. Rather "obvious[ly]," for Nick, "fundamental

decencies" are distributed unequally, though his tacit appeal to a logic of inheritance retains

monetary signification. Nonetheless Nick is hyper-aware of his "snobbish" attitude. Nick attempts

to know how the world works, but in so doing he cannot but do the things he should not. Like John in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," then, Nick foregoes identification with those whom Nick knows capitalism and its attendant moralities do not empower. For Nick at least, this attempt ends ultimately in failure in the form of a retreat back to his Midwestern home. As Nick recounts in the fourth paragraph of the novel, "When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (2). Restored to the bosom of his family, Nick works through his traumatic endeavors in New York so as to re-invest in the very class stagnation that he initially sought to escape. Nick ultimately attempts to escape what he views as his own honesty towards and tolerance for others but what we might better understand as painful and irreconcilable contradictions in his own social position. Either way, Nick no longer wants to know the way the world really works, and *The Great Gatsby* must be read as an account of this eventuality that is both self-justifying and self-deceiving.

It follows from this attention to the two modes of racial anxiety, at exactly those moments when the novel most eschews connections between economic and social relations, we must insist on finding meaning. We can read this logic into Nick's explicitly racialized white characters. Nick's characterization of Meyer Wolfsheim's disproportioned face and "ferocious delicacy" (66) classically exemplifies the "personalization of fetishistic relations" constitutive of anti-Semitic tropes discussed by Michael Heinrich (186). Heinrich writes that in times of economic and social crisis, the fetishistic quality of social relations breaks down, and consequently the apparatus hidden by fetishized ways of seeing becomes noticeable through hyper-visible "'guilty' parties…behind the anonymous capitalist machinery" (186). Wolfsheim is both visibly Jewish and the novel's point of entry into the shady financial underworld subtending the gaudy surface culture. In his

description of Wolfsheim, Nick produces a "blinkered negation of fetishism" (Heinrich 186) that allows him to avoid confronting the similarity between his work as a bond salesman and Wolfsheim's financial dealings. Wolfsheim is white with a difference, and this fetishistically defined racial difference is enough to assuage Nick's anxiety about his own labor.

With respect to the negotiations of the fundamental black/white binary, though, we need to look elsewhere. The kind of forgetting on display in Fitzgerald's moments of Lost Cause nostalgia mirrors the forgetting of primitive accumulation as Marx outlines it in *Capital* (1867). Marx writes that the historical origins of both the capitalist system in general, and the origins of specific centers of capital accumulation in particular, are to be located in the forceful expropriation of property from laborers. As Marx explains, the ongoing history of violent expropriation is overwritten by economic histories that position the division of wealth as a result of a natural process that cannot be challenged through political intervention. The necessary processes of colonization and enslavement were taking place not only before, but also alongside, the development of industrial capital proper, such that "the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal" (925). To read slavery into the narrative logic of *The Great Gatsby* we need to destabilize this "pedestal." New World slavery not only provided the foundational materials, markets, and financial networks for the development of global capitalism, it also provided a convenient image for the contestation of European (and American) free labor conditions. Without the black slave, the metaphor of the white worker's "veiled slavery" loses coherence.[17] Blackness takes on a double valence in Fitzgerald's work, a sign of anxiety about

---

[17] In *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), David Roediger remarks on comparisons made in the early Republic between white industrial labor and slavery, "it was impossible to think about dependency on wages merely in comparison with the position of labor in an ideal republic; the comparison with the truly enslaved also loomed…On the one hand, the spectre of chattel slavery—present historically in no other nation during the years of significant working class

both about the creep of black culture into white public life *and also* (separately) about white culture's historical dependence on black people for its very existence. Approached thus, blackness signifies as not wholly *foreign* even as it signifies as wholly *other* in Fitzgerald's work.

My approach to reading the ideological function of black figures in Fitzgerald's fiction differs from how provisonally white figures are traditionally read because these figures—like Wolfshiem—mark anxiety about the present and future of access to social and economic empowerment. In contradistinction, the figure of the black contains within it a host of anxieties about past and present conditions of freedom and labor, anxieties that threaten to reveal whiteness to be already corrupted by violence and exploitation even before Jews and other Eastern Europeans become white. The distinction I am proposing here between, for example, the figure of the Jew and the figure of the black is in some ways plagued by contradiction from the very beginning. To start, one would need to separate the abstract figure of the international Jew as usurper of traditional economic power from other xenophobic fears focusing on the Eastern European Jew as a particularly powerful sign of the working masses. 'The' Jew exists in a state of constant but variable class tension, both overly identified with the management of capitalism's global system yet also potentially opposed to that system as a revolutionary worker. Thus my reading of the figure of the Jew as metaphor for a certain kind of capitalist accumulation can only go so far, and seeks only to set up a basic contrast with the figure of the black, which, as I show below, has its

---

formation—made for a remarkable awareness of the dangers of dependency and a strong suspicion of paternalism. On the other hand, hard thought about 'the hireling and the slave' could make the position of hireling comparatively attractive…the comparison could lead to sweeping critiques of wage labor as 'white slavery' but it also could reassure wage workers that they belonged to the ranks of 'free white labor'" (46). Likewise, "The popular working class consciousness that emerged during the later stages of the Civil War, especially in the North, saw the liberation of Black slaves as a model, and not just as a threat. Like freedpeople, white workers came to see the Civil War as a 'Jubilee' and, in the words of Detroit labor leader Richard Trevellick, to hope that 'we are about to be emancipated'" (175-76).

own unique set of symbolic and historical significances that are more or less stable across *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*.

An important foundation of this stability is the non-reducibility of the black to the worker in Fitzgerald's fiction. While the position of the worker can be occupied *both* by the non-Nordic European (the Jew, the Eastern European, the Mediterranean, etc.) *and* by the black, depending on the logic of the scene or contradiction that such a figure is imported to stabilize, *only* black figures accomplish the representational effect of the "interchangeability and replaceability" shared by the enslaved person and the commodity (Hartman 21). Black characters can be workers, but they are virtually always something else as well: a sign of total human commodification and a reminder of the force of violence undergirding white social identity. Thus anti-Semitism and anti-blackness are similar only insofar as both the figure of the Jew and the figure of the black are promiscuous signs.[18] The difference lies in the fact that the figure of the black is used to shore up not only the political present of these novels, but also their shared racial pasts and the psychic histories of the characters contained therein. This is to say that Fitzgerald's anti-blackness exceeds, and is in a way *prior* to, his anti-Semitism and Nordicism.

Two moments render Nick's ambivalent class and race consciousness typical, one from the novel's first chapter, and one that precipitates the novel's climax. These scenes bear discussion insofar as each foregrounds an account of specifically racialized intra-class conflicts through which Nick negotiates his text's contested racist ideology. As Nick describes his family's

---

[18] This formal similarity is the grounds of arguments about the function of passing narratives in *The Great Gatsby*. Meredith Goldsmith argues that "Gatsby's mode of self-definition may be fruitfully read against those of the protagonists of Harlem Renaissance and Americanization fiction of the late teens and twenties" (443). Building on this argument, Michael Pekarofski persuasively argues that Gatsby is, in fact, "a passing Jew" (52). Under no circumstances, though, would one argue that Gatsby is *really* black, and this difference is important to the novel's climax. See my discussion of Tom Buchannan's fear of miscegenation, below.

background, he demonstrates his honesty by demystifying a bit of family lore. According to Nick, the Carraways "have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother, who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on to-day" (3). Nick unmasks a family legend about the source of its wealth; the family wants to believe that its money is hereditary, indeed aristocratic, but Nick reveals its actual historical source. The allusion to the Duke of Buccleuch ironically underscores the romantic nature of this family history: the Dukedom of Buccleuch grew from lands granted by James II to a Sir Walter Scott, whose descendent (also Sir Walter Scott) would popularize historical romance. This allusion also establishes a link between Nick's desire to transform economic advantages into personal characteristics and the romantic tendencies of the South. Nick indirectly disavows an exhausted mode of Anglo historical romance only to produce a new mode of historical romance that locates the origin of his family's modern condition in a pre-Emancipation economy. Nick does not quite face this history, as demonstrated by his choice to begin his family's narrative in 1851 with a great-uncle who simply "came here."

Despite Nick's attempts to hide it, the suppressed history of slavery in the novel is not, after all, unrecoverable. Instead, Nick's historical repression can be read through a structure of repression exhibited by the novel's other characters. Nick holds himself at a distance from each of these characters, remarking on their motivations without drawing connections to his own. Nick sees himself as one who is enlightened concerning the distorted representations of racist ideology, as opposed to Tom Buchanan[19], whose "concentration" in his attempts to explain the novel's strawman version of race science Nick finds "pathetic" (13). Tom's earnestness is embarrassing,

---

[19] Note that the final president of the unified American slave republic was James Buchanan.

"as if his complacency, more acute than of old, was not enough to him any more" (13); Tom's unconscious justifications for his sense of racial superiority require explicit study and enumeration in order to continue to produce a public discourse on power that Nick would like to keep hidden away.[20] Tom participates in the manipulation of racist ideas in order to adapt them to new social demands, giving lie to the integrity of past notions of superiority and therefore de-naturalizing them even as he reaches for an ostensibly scientific justification. Tom seeks to transform racial disparities into a world-historical narrative of racial conquest and downfall, a scale of abstraction incommensurate with Nick's preferred focus on individual character traits. Tom's racist efforts are distasteful to Nick not because they are racist but because they are efforts of the wrong kind. Race—unlike white class distinctions—cannot be easily reduced to differences in individual personality, and therefore Nick pushes the issue aside.

The dynamic of repression come to a head in the novel's hotel scene in which Gatsby reveals his love for Daisy. To this declaration, Tom responds, outraged, "Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (130). Jordan Baker's "certain hardy skepticism" (15), the quality that most attracts Nick, comes through in her response to Tom's outburst: "We're

---

[20] The upshot of Nick's estimation of Tom's racist beliefs is that such ideas proceed from existing institutions of power and privilege, rather than the other way around. This explanation of the development of racist ideas is theorized by Ibram X. Kendi, who argues that "Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era's racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people" (9). This moment is important in the racial-historical logic of *The Great Gatsby* because it highlights the need of existing institutions of power to produce racist ideas that justify their existence, rather than suggests that Tom's apparent ignorance and chauvinism—purely personal traits—somehow lead to the elaboration of racist power structures. At the same time, Nick shrinks from this line of analysis, ultimately obfuscating the structure of racial power that Tom himself tries to elaborate by focusing on Tom's subjective effort to make such knowledge knowable.

all white here" (130). At a certain level, Jordan's remark is another dismissive joke about Tom's racist paranoia, an attempt to cut the tension in the cramped room. But it also raises an important truth for the characters—Gatsby *is* white insofar as he is not black—a truth that derails Tom's displaced anger. Before Jordan's remark, Tom had been exposing Gatsby's inflated or non-existent credentials and his attempts to "pass" as a member of the upper class. Meredith Goldsmith argues that for Tom and Nick "racial miscegenation and immigrant ethnic assimilation provide models of identity formation and upward mobility more easily comprehensible than the amalgam of commerce, love, and ambition underlying Gatsby's rise" (443). So, whereas Tom's initial attempts to rid himself of Gatsby focused on pulling back his rival's mask and exposing a racially coded impropriety, after Jordan's comment he focuses on elements of Gatsby's popularity and, finally— most painfully—on the possibility that Daisy really does loves him. Jordan's words change the trajectory of Tom's discourse when it hits its absurd, though logical, conclusion. Tom is shocked out of his flight towards miscegenation and back towards the reality of Gatsby's "commerce, love and ambition."

That Tom eventually gets to the heart of the Gatsby issue—Gatsby's money—reveals an important dynamic in the conflict over personal history that organizes the fight between Tom and Gatsby. The explicit problem Tom lands on is the question "is it possible for Daisy to love Gatsby?" To answer this question, Tom would need to understand the truth of Daisy's desire, a truth Nick has already deemed impossible to determine from her speech and behavior. Avoiding confronting the truth of Daisy's desire, Tom instead lashes out at Gatsby's class position. Tom cannot imagine how Gatsby could have gotten "within a mile of her unless you brought the groceries to the back door" (131). For Tom, Gatsby's proximity could have come only by way of menial and implicitly racialized labor (via "the back door"). But Tom is more upset, insofar as it

presents a greater threat to his own class position, by Gatsby's participation in bootlegging and bond schemes. For Tom to reveal the source of Gatsby's money would be to rob him of his social power, yet Gatsby is unable to effect the same revelation against Tom. Gatsby cannot unveil Tom's history; consequently, the source of Tom's family's money remains a mystery. Tom's victory over Gatsby turns on the supremacy of Tom's opaque class history over Gatsby spectacular ascendency. The opacity of Tom's wealth allows him to possess Daisy and to secure her class connection without apparent criminal labor. Tom has a stronger claim to Daisy because the source of his wealth cannot be identified and because this is an attribute of "old money". Like Nick's fetishized slippages in the novel's first pages, Tom's material advantages become personal advantages despite the fact that Tom is utterly devoid of the decencies on which Nick fixates when discussing the distribution of "advantages." Gatsby's conscious behaviors are revealed as just another kind of labor; what Tom does naturally, Gatsby must work to perfect.

In *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald returns to these same dynamics of economic and racial knowledge, exploring in greater detail just what histories lie behind the truth of Jordan's assertion that "we're all white here." As in *The Great Gatsby*, the moment of crisis that precipitates the downfall of *Tender's* characters takes place in a hotel room wherein racial dynamics are made plain. Unlike in *The Great Gatsby*, though, the relationships between sex, race and economics are laid bare in *Tender is the Night* by the narration. Nicole, for example, is described as

the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew moutfwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—there were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole and, as the whole system swayed and thundered onward, it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure. (113-114)

If, as Susan Keller suggests, *Tender is the Night* responds in part to the replacement of "old models of biological racial superiority…with a new 'cosmopolitan' model of consumerist self-fashioning," then we must call into question how Fitzgerald and his characters conjure the stability of both biological racial difference and consumer culture (130). As Felipe Smith writes, "Fitzgerald stages the Peterson murder as a quintessentially American sex/race dilemma in Paris first to demonstrate the way that Paris exacerbates disturbing American Jazz Age social trends and second to illustrate that the 'freest' of Americans…only accelerated their decline" (189). But to make Paris an American social space, Fitzgerald does more than import contemporary signs of black American culture. Rather, the history of American black-white relations are played out in this scene, signaling a failed escape from not only the present but the past as well. Revealing through psychological motifs (including Abe North's depression and Nicole Diver's incest-related trauma) an "undeniable contempt…for the commodification of human relationships" (Washington 61), *Tender is the Night* draws on the representational power of the prototypical commodified human—the enslaved African—in order to hammer home the historical production of white capitalist pathologies. Through its attention to Dick Diver, who, like John T. Unger is chewed up and spit out by the economic and sexual demands of the leisure class, the novel brings into the open the unconscious psychic forces at play in the racial and economic self-identification of the American expatriate leisure class.

Aided by a shift in narrative technique away from first-person towards third-person, *Tender is the Night* provides its own interpretive frames through which history can be read. As he did in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald sets historical scope of *Tender is the Night* by consciously linking the Civil War and the First World War, each understood as linked traumatic histories that Dick Diver, the famed psychiatrist, is unable to untangle. Central to the novel's development of the

connection between the Civil War and the First World War is the network of significations that accumulate around Abe North, who, critics have noted, prefigures Dick Diver's eventual dissolution into alcoholic obscurity.[21] North and Diver are certainly connected, but the difference in their relationships to the South and the Civil War set them on different narrative paths. Abe North is seemingly incapable of self-censure while Dick's studied forbearance distinguishes him from his peers. Fitzgerald does not attribute Dick's detachment and reserve to his general condition as a modern or to his privileged knowledge of the human mind as a psychiatrist. Rather, he attributes it to his Southern heritage: "From his father Dick had learned the somewhat conscious good manners of the young Southerner coming north after the Civil War. Often he used them and just as often he despised them because they were not a protest against how unpleasant selfishness was but against how unpleasant it looked" (164). Like Nick, then, Dick both cares for appearances and possesses an ability to see beyond them to their real foundations. But whereas this tendency constitutes a problem for the interpretation of characterization in *The Great Gatsby,* in *Tender is the Night* it exists as a trait unique to Dick that the narrative itself interrogates.

Fitzgerald's linking of Dick's ambivalent sense of propriety with his Southern roots locates Dick a continuum between Abe North (whom Matthew Bruccoli suggests "Fitzgerald thought of…as a characteristically American figure" [112]) and Collis Clay ("a Georgian, with the peculiarly regular, even stenciled ideas of Southerners who are educated in the North" [Fitzgerald 68]). Dick is thus as much like Collis Clay as he is like Abe North. Collis Clay represents another aborted path for Dick's development and another mode of inheritance of Dick's patrimony. Dick "rather liked Collis—he was 'post-war'; less difficult than most of the southerners he had known

---

[21] See Sklar and Stern for typical treatments of the allusive significance of Lincoln and Grant. For more recent treatments of this theme see Washington and Leverenz.

at New Haven a decade previously" (87).[22] Through his timely heroic actions in the novel, Clay models an effective negotiation of the histories with which Dick cannot come to terms: that of the First World War and that of romantic entanglement with Rosemary Hoyt.

If Clay is "post-war," then Abe North is in a sense pre-war. North manages the substantial impact of his own personal trauma experienced in the First World War by putting it into an historical context opposed to Dick's understanding of the conflict. In the difference between North's and Diver's sense of the history of the First World War we see how Dick fetishizes the social relations that have produced the trauma that pursues him throughout the novel. For Dick, the intensity of violence exhibited on the Western front could only be driven by a people with "a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers" (57). Dick produces a string of sentimental memories taken as characteristic of "a century of middle-class love" (57). Like Nick, then, Dick substitutes romance for analysis. Yet in *Tender is the* Night, this substitution appears as a problem to be narratively solved, rather than the ground for narrative itself. North interrupts Diver's musings by demanding that Dick consider the real history of trench warfare: "General Grant invented this kind of battle at Petersburg in sixty-five" (57). North's point here is narrowly historical, but its implications extend beyond even the scope of the novel. North's reminder suggests that the history of the fractured

---

[22] "Collis Clay" evokes Cassius Clay, the Kentucky abolitionist who served in the Lincoln and Grant administrations, suggesting a graceful acceptance—if not progressive welcoming—of historical transitions.

consciousness of modernity can be traced back at least to 1865, and that in fact the First World War might simply be a repetition of that trauma.

Civil War resonances continue as the novel's Book I comes to a close, creating a bizarre allegory for racial politics after Reconstruction. Callahan signals the centrality of this scene to the historical consciousness of novel, deeming the Peterson scene a "structural parody" of Reconstruction, a relationship that elsewhere in the novel is accomplished only though "authorial allusion and reflection" (111).[23] Responsible for the false imprisonment of a black waiter significantly named Freeman, North finds himself entangled with Fitzgerald's most elaborately imagined black character, Jules Peterson, who was a witness to Freeman's arrest. Peterson, we are told, "had failed as a small manufacturer of shoe polish and now possessed only his formula and sufficient trade tools to fill a small box" (106). Peterson, despite his failure, remains a capitalist. Indeed, the promise of investment connects Peterson to Abe North, who had promised "to set [Peterson] up in business in Versailles" (106). But Peterson's apparent status as a capitalist is something of a "rigmarole," and with only "his formula" and small box of "tools," Peterson's extant capital is indistinguishable from that of any common shoeshine (106). Thus, while Peterson presents himself as an agent of capital, he is expendable both for the novel's narrative demands and for its characters. Fitzgerald's description of Peterson follows a progression that registers the seriousness with which he is considered by the novel's white characters. Peterson is introduced ironically with an air of Reconstruction-era pretension, a "small, respectable Negro, on the suave model that heels the republican party in the border states," (106) and is granted the distinction of being "Afro-European" as opposed to the "three Afro-Americans" who are on his tail (106). As

---

[23] Leverenz is more dismissive of Fitzgerald's historical allegory: "It's Fitzgerald's own form of grandiosity, as if to say, Look at the meanings I'm making here!" (194).

Peterson explains his career and predicament, "Dick regarded him politely—interest formed, dissolved, and he turned to Abe" (107). As Dick and Abe make plans of their own, Peterson steps out of the room, deferring management of his own fate to Dick and Abe, and apologizing that "it is perhaps hard to discuss my problems in front of me" (107).

Peterson fades into the background of the scene until he almost literally rematerializes as a corpse in Rosemary's bed. Fitzgerald's exquisite description of Rosemary's "realiz[ation]" that someone else—Peterson's corpse—is in her room deserves quotation in full:

> Then, rather gradually, she realized without turning about that she was not alone in the room.
> In an inhabited room there are refracting objects only half noticed: varnished wood, more or less polished brass, silver and ivory, and beyond these a thousand conveyers of light and shadow so mild that one scarcely thinks of them as that, the tops of picture-frames, the edges of pencils or ash-trays, of crystal or china ornaments; the totality of this refraction—appealing to equally subtle reflexes of the vision as well as to those associational fragments in the subconscious that we seem to hang on to, as a glass fitter keeps the irregularly shaped pieces that may do some time—this fact might account for what Rosemary afterward mystically described as "realizing" that there was someone in the room, before she could determine it. But when she did realize it she turned swift in a sort of ballet step and saw that a dead Negro was stretched upon her bed. (109)

Given the density of overt references to the historical vicinity of slavery and Fitzgerald's penchant for highlighting the structures of suppression and revelation that selectively acknowledge connections between racial and economic power, we can read this passage as an account of commodities losing their fetishistic qualities and revealing the truth of their value that connects the racial history of the past and present. Consciousness of the materiality of the commodity comes about through a process of "refraction" that crosses between the physical world and the "subconscious." The passage runs from luxury goods (varnished wood, brass, silver, ivory) to more common items associated with clear use values (picture frames, pencils, ashtrays, crystal and china). The value of the initial items is as apparent as their reflective qualities; like the self-

referential whiteness of the Washingtons' diamond room, shine becomes the sign of value. The more pedestrian items likewise are "conveyers of light and shadow," but this quality is "so mild that one scarcely thinks of them as that." Significantly, Fitzgerald uses "refraction" instead of "reflection" to describe the way these commodities interact with light. If these objects were to *reflect* light, then the passage would indicate that somehow a single image of Peterson travelled a linear—if scattered—path to some perceptive presence in Rosemary's consciousness. But since these objects *refract* light, something else entirely happens. Refraction involves the bending that happens when a light wave passes through a medium that alters its speed. Imagine a straw in a glass of water: the part of the straw that is visible above water appears disconnected from the part of the straw that sits below the surface of the water. The result is the visual or perceptual displacement of the straw. The straw, in effect, splits—appearing to jump from one location to another.

This quasi-phenomenological description of the process of "realizing" takes on racial significance with the choice to name the corpse "Negro" in the paragraph's final sentence. For what happens is that through these commodities, a generic black corpse is displaced into Rosemary's consciousness. Consciousness of the materiality of the objects results in the materialization, the "realizing," of Peterson's body. Fitzgerald specifies that this process of refraction appeals "to equally subtle reflexes of the vision as well as to those associational fragments in the subconscious." Thus, the passage from visual displacements to material sources mirrors psychic displacements between associations and origin within some fractured psychic history. In Fitzgerald's account, Rosemary's perception moves towards the realization of the commodity as a double-bodied phenomenon involving both a physical *and* a psychological return

to a past that she hasn't yet seen properly because of her typical modes of fetishized economic and racial perception.

The key point here is that a dead black man emerges at this moment of psychic crisis for the novel's white characters, a crisis that reveals symptomatically—that is, is refracted into a different psychic and social density—the twinned trauma of incest and the accumulation of capital in Nicole's past. However, that this process is visible to the novel's narrator—indeed to Fitzgerald—does not mean that Rosemary's realization that the corpse in the room is likewise a becoming-conscious of the history of her class. Rather, the narrator denies such a realization as the next sentence tells us that Rosemary "had the preposterous idea that it was Abe North" (109). Preposterous because the initial perception of the corpse produced the concept "Negro." The characters' resistance to the racialized class realization that the passage evokes continues at a discursive level as Book I comes to its conclusion. In death, Peterson is no longer the "Afro-European" he is credited with being upon introduction. The de-particularization of Peterson's identity reoccurs several pages later when Rosemary remarks, "Do all the Americans in Paris just shoot at each other all the time?" (111) What accounts for Peterson's becoming an African American—a "Negro"—in the space of these few pages? Is the misidentification of Peterson as American a result of Rosemary's stress? The slippage is remarkable for the confusion it causes in the novel's racial logic. If, as his implicit Nordicism in this novel and throughout his career suggests, Fitzgerald operates with a working hierarchy that runs white American—white European—black, Peterson's becoming both "American" and simply "Negro" eviscerates the complexity of the real economic and racial positions that the novel's narration has worked to establish. "American" implies white, though the narration has made exceedingly clear that the major players in this affair—besides Abe North—are black Europeans. In effect, the psychic

dynamic of the situation shifts from an event taking place in a European to an event lodged in a longer American history.

Dick comforts Rosemary through a language that further degrades Peterson, insisting that she "mustn't get upset over this—it's only some nigger scrap" (110). "Nigger scrap" holds a double significance. On one hand, Dick attempts to remind Rosemary that she is not directly involved in the murder. On the other hand, Peterson is reduced to nothing more than scraps; destroyed by his aspirations towards upward mobility, used and discarded by Abe North at the cost of a thousand Francs. Here, then, black life is directly processed through a system of exchange whose output is a corpse taken out of circulation for the purpose of white social stability, much like the living enslaved in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." Peterson's death constitutes a crisis, but it is not a tragedy in any real sense because it is not a personal loss for any white character who matters in the novel's narrative logic. Peterson's death is a momentary disorder that serves as an alibi through which the novel ties together its other themes, an otherwise unremarkable end to his pretensions of social agency. No longer an aspiring business man, Peterson is reduced to "nigger scrap" to be cleaned up and disposed of by the novel's white protagonists.

Yet, this easy disposal leaves a traumatic remainder that triggers Nicole's hysteria at the sight of the blood-soaked bedsheet. In the logic of the novel, Peterson's death tests Dick's ability to maintain a mannered repose. As Dick commands Nicole to "control [her]self!," Rosemary, horrified at the sight of Nicole on the bathroom floor, slips into the suite's main room and is rescued by Collis Clay (112). It is essential that the disposal of the body is accomplished through white solidarity, the shared belief in the non-value of black life, masquerading as good manners. Dick's motions in re-arranging Rosemary's room are almost unconscious, as if he acts from a script or out of habit: "automatically Dick made the old motion of turning up his sleeves though

he wore a sleeveless undershirt, and bent over the body" (110-11). Removing the evidence of possible white culpability in Peterson's death becomes a kind of medical operation—suggesting that the very routine labor of Dick's job as a psychiatrist is to re-arrange traumatic evidence in order to establish in each of his patients, and ultimately in his wife, a new and conscious equilibrium suited to the work of their class. In the disposal of Peterson's body Dick finds "one use for all the pleasingness that Dick had expended over a large area he would never retrace...." (111, ellipsis original). The "extra effort which had firmly entrenched him" with the hotel's owner allows Dick to call in favors along specifically raced lines (111). Dick calls the owner and reports finding "a dead Negro" in the hall (111), adding that he calls out of concern for the hotelier and so that no other guests will have to see the body. The narration reports, "What exquisite consideration for the hotel! Only because Mr. McBeth, with his own eyes, had seen the traits in Doctor Diver two nights before, could he credit the story without question" (111). While Dick's history of apparently profitless manners guarantees credibility, the blood, as a sign or remainder, produced by the suturing of the social, triggers a hysterical, symptomatic response in Nicole. Like in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," then, a white woman gives up the horrible secrets that her family would keep repressed, or, as the narrator has it, the "doom" Nicole contains in herself. The dead black man rematerializes as the displaced sign of incest, another foundational violence covered over in order to preserve class stability.[24]

---

[24] The emergence of Nicole's symptom in this context resonates with another of her racialized hysterical reactions. As Messenger explains in a footnote, "Nicole posits North Africa as a site of her deflowering and conception of a child within racial difference…She states that when her daughter Topsy was born 'everything got dark', and then segues into a fantasy in which she is told her baby is black" (165). In each of these moments, the potential evidence of a white woman's sexual encounter with a black man serves as a screen for the real trauma of paternal incest. Forced miscegenation works in the novel as an exogamous violence antithetical to the real endogamous violence of incest. So whereas, as Godden argues, "[Nicole's father's] greed is such that he fails to exchange the one item he is utterly obligated to exchange," (113) Messenger

My reading of *Tender is the Night* as a work that takes up the connections between racial and class consciousness in a post-Emancipation modernity establishes two takeaway points. The first is that I find refraction a useful metaphor for expressing how something like a historical moment or trauma permeates different levels of social reality. Slavery in the American imagination is obviously not something as simple as a straw sitting in a glass of water, but the idea that different densities—we might say different forms of social, economic, and psychic resistance—can alter the appearance of the same phenomenon is an idea that travels among Fitzgerald's novels. In effect, while slavery itself remains absent from the pages of Fitzgerald's fiction, the white social and psychic dynamics it produced make up the very substance of the history that Fitzgerald explores. Through the visual metaphor of refraction, Fitzgerald's metaphor for reading these racial-historical dynamics in scenes of otherwise insular whiteness and historical presentism, we can see at the edge of *The Great Gatsby* a history of racialized economic exploitation that Nick works actively to obscure. In *The Great Gatsby* we can look indirectly *through* Nick's opaque but reflective narrative style to discover the displaced black body that initiates Nick's own familial self-fashioning.

Tom Buchanan's attempt to expose Gatsby's history recalls the novel's opening pages and exposures; read through the later scene, Nick's supposed "honesty" assumes a new valence. As Tom and Gatsby fight over control of their own private economic histories, Nick's frankness about his family's wealth appears singularly honest. Yet the novel harbors one unexamined source of value, a wealth that provides Daisy with her foundation, and therefore ultimately proves to be that over which Tom and Gatsby struggle. In Daisy we see the process that condenses economic value

notes, of Peterson and the other 'dark' men of *Tender is the Night*, that they dabble in finance thereby facilitating, despite their racial origins, the proper circulation and exchange of capital. Thanks to Richard Godden for suggesting the link between miscegenation and incest.

into personal desirability at its most efficient. If the stability of the upper class's wealth is predicated in part on its ability to forget its source (the labor of workers) without sacrificing a claim to the natural ownership of that source, then Daisy's cynicism makes a certain sense. Daisy's realization that her class casts her as little more than a vessel of social value is at once painful and empowering. Her knowledge allows her a limited power over the men she encounters and even over her cousin Nick. Her lamentation at the novel's beginning that it is best for an attractive young woman to be a fool—that is to say, to be unaware of the system that circumscribes her freedom—is in fact a statement of what Daisy knows she must do to be happy but lacks the power to accomplish. Daisy's extraordinary value and her subsequent ability to maintain the simultaneous love and frustration of Nick, Tom, Gatsby and Jordan do not simply result simply from some formal necessity for the novel to have a central figure. Rather, within the logic of racial and economic cognition that organizes the novel, the particularity of Daisy's history represents the apotheosis of these factors in American culture: the disavowal, forgetting and appropriation of the legacy of American chattel slavery.

The novel consistently describes Daisy's youth as white. Jordan remembers Daisy at eighteen, "dressed in white" with "a little white roadster" (74). Daisy's voice has long conditioned her interactions with others; Jordan recalls how, in her wild days with Tom and Daisy in Chicago, Daisy never took lovers, "and yet there's something in that voice of hers...." (77). Later in the novel, when Nick attempts to particularize her vocal quality, he begins, "she's got an indiscreet voice...it's full of—" (120). Gatsby finishes his sentence, "Her voice is full of money" (120). Nick concurs, "That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal's song of it...High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl..." (120). Later as Nick summarizes Gatsby's story of

his time with Daisy, Nick returns to Daisy's voice, "huskier and more charming than ever," a voice that leaves him with the image of "Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (150). So Daisy is valuable; indeed she so embodies value that it animates her speech, allowing her an announced distance from the laboring classes.

Simply seeing *that* and *how,* Daisy embodies monetary value (indiscreet, self-deceiving, nonetheless captivating) and what that value means for the class conflict that develops during the novel does not get us back to the foundational source of Daisy's value. But when we notice the repetition of whiteness as a descriptor for Daisy, we may glimpse how the racial structure that subtends the novel's economic class structures points us towards the ultimate source of value—black labor—that Nick does not bring into discourse. Tom believes that Gatsby could only have approached Daisy by delivering groceries to "the back door," and thus by blackening himself. Gatsby, sign of visible class striving and the work required for the maintenance of upper-class stability, becomes for Tom not only a phantasmatic black assault on the white institution of marriage, but also, in a metaphorical displacement, an assault on Daisy's childhood home. Tom's lack of nuance speaks an uncomfortable truth. In his paranoia, Tom further articulates structures of feeling shared by the novel's other characters that they nonetheless refuse to avow. Apparently serving the white family, Gatsby as delivery boy relegated to the home's backdoor also threatens to become what he actually is in the novel: Daisy's 'back door man.'

Note that Nick's account of the home in question amounts to the novel's closest approximation to an overt analysis of value as that which simultaneously promises and yet conceals itself:

> There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances

whose flowers were scarcely withered. It excited him too, that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes. He felt their presence all about the house, pervading the air with the shades and echoes of still vibrant emotions. (148-49)

But if Daisy's childhood home is haunted by past lovers and signs of social status, we also must necessarily know that the house and what it holds "realize" the labor that went into their production and maintenance. The issue of what Daisy's family does is never raised. Presumably Nick knows—he i*s* her cousin, even if only by marriage—but, typically, he focuses on Daisy's personal qualities rather than the material advantages that produced those qualities. But, through the white roadster, white dresses and big house in an old section of Louisville, a source of value begins to materialize. Given Nick's inability to trace his own family's wealth to much before the Civil War, his narration leads us *up to* slavery and leaves us to see the "obvious suppression" of that institution for ourselves. For Nick, the transaction that inaugurated the modern Carraway family turned on the purchase of another white man's military service; military service *actually* allowed Gatsby to approach the young Daisy, despite Tom's attempts to blacken him. All but forgotten, intimations of the violently coerced labor from which post-bellum America grew ensure the obfuscation of a foundational act of physical destruction and economic exploitation that carries on as Fitzgerald's worst fears about modern processes of individual commodification. Whether or not Daisy's family owned slaves (it seems likely that they would have given their status and residence in Louisville), notions of white Southern femininity hinge on the figure of the plantation mistress—under constant threat of black assault. The epoch-making revolution that was the American Civil War—the radical restructuring of a large part of the American labor and property base—is something that Nick can barely see, and certainly cannot see beyond. The source of Daisy's economic and social value thus hides safe behind an all but un-crossable historical line. Though Nick fetishizes this value through

personal qualities like voice, Daisy remains the seeming embodiment of pure value because the source of her value is always and already forgotten.

In rewriting these dynamics between *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald dramatizes in the latter the structural nature of the labor that goes into the maintenance of the material and psychic health of the class that houses both Tom Buchanan and Nicole Warren. By locating his historical consciousness of this labor in the dynamic of slavery—no doubt a result of his deeply felt struggle to identify with the Southern, paternal side of his family—Fitzgerald understands the promiscuity of the sign of blackness as an inherently white manipulation with a definite and ongoing history, one whose operations must be disavowed even as they are enacted. Fitzgerald's fiction needs to see slavery as the hyperbolic endpoint of capitalism's dynamics of commodification and sexual exploitation as well as, contradictorily, a radically different pre-historical origin, but cannot show it directly without overshadowing the present suffering of his characters. Thus, in *Tender is the Night*, "Dick's 'beautiful, safe, lovely world' that blew itself up in World War I," (Messenger 175) was not, "a non-racial, paternal, heteronormative elsewhere," (175) but rather a paternal, heteronormative elsewhere founded on the economic and psychic dynamics of a binary white-black, free-slave social schema.

Indeed, none of Fitzgerald's various engagements with slavery as a historical origin of the present suggest anything other than an expression of white racial melancholia; slavery is understood to be a disaster, but for Fitzgerald it is a disaster to come for white people. Slavery is a self-destructing kernel that disciplines enslaver and enslaved alike, and history spirals towards an elimination between the difference between the two. Tom Buchanan's obscene fears of black global dominance are absurd in this context, then, because they attribute an agency to black people incommensurate with Fitzgerald's interest in them. Black people do not hold the power to destroy

whiteness; whiteness will destroy itself. If for Fitzgerald the future held a catastrophe for white people, it was because capitalism would soon make everyone "black," in the most simple metaphorical sense. It is the centrality of the history of the black/white binary, inextricable from the history of American slavery, that grounds Fitzgerald's vision of history as a looming racial disaster across his works. Yet, this fear is not, as Chris Messenger suggests Dick's is, an "almost atavistic emotional need…to exclude the black man," or a simple failure on Fitzgerald's part to "extend a fundamental humanity" to black characters (170-171). Rather, it is a complex engagement with the historical interrelation of economic and racial power taking place in a present defined by what Painter has termed expansions of whiteness that only appears to be an atavistic fear or individual anti-black prejudice.

The anti-black telos of the expansion of whiteness persists even in Fitzgerald's final, unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941), which as John Callahan rapturously explains, demonstrates remarkable racial diversity for a Fitzgerald novel, "Stahr, a Jew not far from the Shtetl, makes a black man his moviemaker's conscience, falls in love with an Irish immigrant, and has his story told by another woman, a young Irish American who, by virtue of her father's Hollywood money and her intelligence and grace, moves among the well-to-do on both coasts" (391). Indeed, the small but important detail of Monroe Stahr's encounter with an unnamed black man on the California coast after his first sexual encounter with Kathleen comes as close to "extend[ing] a fundamental humanity" to a black character as Fitzgerald would ever come. The diversity of *The Last Tycoon* may seem like a triumph for ideologies of racial individualism, demonstrating as it does an expansion in Fitzgerald's creative attitudes. Yet, beneath the veneer of an inclusive liberal racial imaginary capable of bringing together under one economic vision a Jewish man, two Irish women and a black man in this final novel, Fitzgerald's sense of the gulf

between black and white remain. In fact, *The Last Tycoon* expresses for the first time an exasperation about black people's economic position resulting not from sympathy with the excluded but from a blame placed upon them. The emerging racial individualism on display in *The Last Tycoon* takes the form of Fitzgerald's granting agency to the novel's lone black character, though this agency reflect an embrace of the structural positioning of blackness in America and serves as an impediment to the desires of the novel's white characters.

As in the works I have already discussed, the racial-sexual-economic discourses swirling around in *The Last Tycoon* come to a head by way of a white woman, Kathleen, Stahr's lover. After Stahr and Kathleen's sexual encounter in a Santa Monica beach house, their conversation turns to Kathleen's education and fiancé. Picking up on Kathleen's many references to classical and Renaissance art and thought, Stahr questions, "You know a lot, don't you?" (109). Kathleen explains to Stahr that whatever she knows comes from the influence of an ex-boyfriend who, "wanted [her] to read Spengler, everything was for that. All the history and philosophy and harmony was all so [she] could read Spengler, and then [she] left him before [they] got to Spengler" (109). Kathleen's story here is itself an ironic take on Spengler's philosophy in *The Decline of the West;* the inevitable failure of the ex's efforts to instill in Kathleen proper philosophical knowledge by way of Spengler make him something of a Spenglerian figure dedicated to a dying cause. But this irony does not register for Stahr, who questions, "who was Spengler?" (109). Kathleen seems not to understand the significance of this situation either, responding, "I tell you we didn't get to him…and now I'm forgetting everything very patiently" (109).

Fitzgerald's reference to Spengler calls back to Tom Buchannan's struggle to make sense of the world through the lens of the *"Rise of the Colored Empires."* Yet whereas Tom's attempts to know white racial collapse took the form of attack from without, Spengler's theory of history

resonates with Fitzgerald's belief in capitalism's self-destructive tendency. Fitzgerald immediately moves from this aborted conversation about Spengler to a scene deeply laden with sexual, racial, and economic meaning. For Fitzgerald then, even Spengler fails to see something specific to the American scene. Kathleen suggests she and Stahr walk on the beach, to which Stahr exclaims "Why, it's the grunion!" (110). The appearance of the grunion, a species of schooling fish whose mating habits leave them exposed on land for up to several minutes, doubles down on the scene's Spenglerian overtones, bringing an image of an organic lifecycle whose drive towards reproduction leaves it exposed to death. But Fitzgerald complicates the symbolic meaning of the fish even further with the introduction of "a negro man…collecting the grunion quickly, like twigs, into two pails" (110). Fitzgerald underscores the historical importance of this image, writing that the grunion "came in twos and threes and platoons and companies, relentless and exalted and scornful, around the great bare feet of the intruders, as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the boulder on the shore" (110). The grunion appear as an invasive force. The unnamed black man strikes up a conversation with Stahr and Kathleen, telling them he used to collect fish in Malibu, but had stopped because of resistance from "those moving picture people" (110).

Stahr asks if it is worth the effort to collect the fish, but the man's response evades Stahr's logic of economic sense. "I don't figure it that way," he says, "I really come out to read some Emerson. Have you ever read him?" (111) The introduction of Emerson casts the man's labor as an act of self-reliance, and the black man assumes the mantle of cultural knowledge and subjective authenticity deeply in line with white American theories of the self. This is a striking moment in the context of Fitzgerald's racial imaginary; a black man stands as the inheritor of an Anglo-American philosophical tradition, effortlessly integrating his theoretical knowledge with his

economic action. By harvesting the grunion, he demonstrates self-reliance, feeding off the remnants of the fish's suicidal drive toward reproduction. The black man is totally outside of the novel's formal economy even as he organically lives American individualism. "I never go to the movies," he tells Stahr, "There's no profit. I never let my children go" (111). The attempts of the two white characters to provoke the black man to elaborate on his position are met only with "indifferen[ce]" (111). Finally, their conversation exhausted, the black man leaves, "unaware that he had rocked an industry" (111).

The black man's influence on the film industry is, despite the importance that Fitzgerald signals here, left undeveloped in what remains of the novel. What we do have access to is the intense individual impact this encounter has on Stahr. As he and Kathleen return to their house, Kathleen seeks to "drive his momentary blues away" (111). "Poor old Sambo," she remarks, appealing to the two's shared whiteness in an attempt to lift Stahr's mood. For his part, Stahr is unmoved. "What?" he asks, to which Kathleen responds, "Don't you call them poor old Sambo?" (111). The two fail to conjure a black figure to help soothe their temporarily injured whiteness. Kathleen, an Irish immigrant, calls on what she takes to be an American stereotype; Stahr, whose consciousness is totally determined by his role as a film producer admits, "we don't call them anything especially…They have pictures of their own" (111). At this point, the two turn their conversation to other topics, but Stahr returns to the problem posed by the black man on the beach.

In a significant deviation from his previous works, Fitzgerald casts Stahr's response to the black man as white grievance. Whereas John, Nick, and Dick had to make peace with variously repressed scenes of cross-racial identification in order to preserve a fantasy of an independent white domestic space, Stahr's ignorance of blackness connects his experience directly to an entire industry. Like other black figures in Fitzgerald's fiction, the black man from *The Last Tycoon* is

excluded from the white economy, but he is so apparently of his own volition (as a self-reliant Emersonian subject) and not as a victim of capitalism's racial exclusions. The black man's apparent choice to disengage from capitalism frustrates Stahr, who thinks, "he was prejudiced and wrong, and he must be shown, somehow, some way. A picture, many pictures, a decade of pictures, must be made to show him he was wrong" (114). Fitzgerald characterizes Stahr's resolve to produce a film that would capture this self-excluding audience as at heart a personal issue. The black man's indifference is a refusal "to listen to Stahr's story," not to see films, and Stahr's reveries on the subject are "bound up with" an incipient "new music that he liked and did not understand" playing in Stahr's mind after he leaves Kathleen (114). Stahr responds anxiously to the recognition of racial and cultural difference, but his anxiety arises melancholically to the black man's refusal as a personal loss, but also, potentially, as that which will save the industry he loves. Stahr's consciousness is totally integrated with the demands of his position in the system of production.

At this point, we can turn only to speculation as to what Fitzgerald might have done with Stahr's fixation on the black man's refusal to see white films. We do know, thanks to Edmund Wilson's postscript, that the labor situation in Stahr's studio was to play a central role in Stahr's ultimate decline. As Wilson explains, at the end of the novel's unfinished story, "the split between the controllers of the movie industry, on the one hand, and the various groups of employees, on the other, is widening and leaving no place for real individualists of business like Stahr, whose successes are personal achievements and whose career has always been invested with a certain personal glamor" (154). Stahr falls victim to a film industry totally absorbed by the relations of capital, disrupted along the lines of ownership and labor. The black man's insistence that there's "no profit" in taking his family to see movies resonates with Stahr's outmoded perspective on the

business of filmmaking. As Wilson notes, "Stahr has not been afraid…to risk money on unpopular films which would afford him some artistic satisfaction" (154). As Stahr states the case himself, "It's time we made a picture that'll lose some money. Write it off as good will—this'll bring in new customers" (61). For Stahr, the need to make quality films that will lose money is a "duty to the public," and he downplays the economic rationale that making prestigious pictures helps keeps the industry's reputation intact. The black man on the beach appeals to this self-aggrandizing, auteur mentality. As Stahr reflects on possible productions after their conversation, "he put back on his list a difficult picture that he had tossed to the wolves, to Brady and Marcus and the rest, to get his way on something else. He rescued it for the negro man" (114).

In *The Last Tycoon*, racial exclusion, while constitutive of a system of a system of white priveleges and social power, takes on the status of a destructive gap in the system that is no longer simply historical, but is for the first time contemporary. Even Fitzgerald moves black economic exclusion out of the past and into the present, he does not do so for anti-racist purposes. Whereas Nick and Diver experience melancholy because they cannot rectify their race and class consciousness to their historical knowledge, Stahr exhibits a melancholia of the present expressed through his white grievance. His outrage over the black man "prejudiced and wrong" opinions about the film industry is ludicrous given the fact that Stahr holds the same opinions about the quality of films his studio is making. None of his various ethnic white contemporaries can understand what Stahr thinks about the need for prestige films, but Stahr refuses to hear his own ideas echoed back to him from a black man. The textual depiction of the black man haunting Stahr is a white fantasy. Stahr is not really interested in capturing the unexploited market of black moviegoers, but *is* interested in invigorating his own creative process and rationales through an apparently racially inclusive imaginary. Like Callahan, who argues that Fitzgerald's staging of this

rejuvenating energy in a black character is a gracious liberal gesture, Stahr convinces himself that the story he has always wanted to tell can suddenly transcend racial structures. So while it may seem like a generous gesture to give this ownership of American cultural ideals to a black character, Fitzgerald in fact remains stuck mining the same psychic territory as he did in "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz."

What Fitzgerald knows about blackness, then, is not what Michael Nowlin suggests, that because of his sense of racial and economic alienation as a condition of modernity Fitzgerald "might know something of what it is like to be black in Jim Crow America" (13) and therefore have some hidden or nascent sympathy for black people we could recover from his work via the centrality of slavery to his historical vision. Rather, if Fitzgerald knew anything about blackness it was that *he was not it*, despite its various cultural and aesthetic allures, and that that certainty could allow for the play of other registers of social power and signification. In dramatizing the failures of other forms of historical disavowal to combat the psychic pressures of modernity, Fitzgerald holds on to the power of the primary, constitutive exclusion and violence of slavery that continued to ground whiteness despite the upheavals of modernity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A Southern Harvest. ed. Warren, Robert Penn. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937. Print.

Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel.* ed. Nicholas Rand. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.

———. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*: *A Cryptonomy.* trans. Nicholas Rand. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2005.

An Approach to Literature. ed. Brooks, Cleanth, John Thibaut Purser and Robert Penn Warren. New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1938. Print

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Armstrong, Julie. "Blinded by Whiteness: Revisiting Flannery O'Connor and Race." *The Critical Response to Flannery O'Connor*. ed. Douglas Robillard, Jr. Westport: Praeger, 2004.

Asals, Frederick. *The Imagination of Extremity*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1982.

Baldwin, James. *No Name in the Street*. New York: Dial Press, 1972.

Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

Beck, Charlotte H. *Robert Penn Warren, Critic*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006.

Benedict, Ruth. *Race: Science and Politics*. New York: Viking Press, 1950.

Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *Flannery O'Connor*. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 1-8.

Brooks, Cleanth. "Man, Time, and Eternity." *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. Durham: Duke UP, 2015.

Bruccoli, Matthew J. *The Composition of Tender is The Night*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997.

Burt, Harold. "What You Can't Talk About." *Flannery O'Connor*. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 125-143.

Callahan, John. *The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1972.

Carmichael, Stokely and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* New York: Random House, 1967.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Crawford, Nicholas. "An Africanist Impasse: Race, Return and Revelation in the Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *South Atlantic Review* 68.2 (2003): 1-25.

Davis, Thadious. *Faulker's 'Negro': Art and the Southern Context*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 1971.

Desmond, John F. "The Lost Childhood of George Rayber." *Dark Faith*. ed. Susan Srigley. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2012: 35-56.

Duck, Leigh Anne. *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006.*

Dunleavy, Janet Egelson, "A Particular History: Black and White in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction." *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor.* ed. Melvin Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985. 71-81.

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act.* New York: Random House, 1964.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York, Random House, 1951.

———. *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters.* ed. James B. Meriwether. New York: Random House, 1965.

———. *Novels 1942-1954.* New York: Library of America, 1994.

———. *The Sound and the Fury.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1994.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. "To Be Announced Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice." *Social Text* 31.1 (March 2003).

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tender is the Night.* New York: Scribner, 2004.

———. "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald.* ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989.

———. *Collected Stories.* New York: Random House, 1977.

———. *This Side of Paradise.* New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.

———. *The Great Gatsby.* New York: Scribner, 2004.

Frazier, Franklin E. "The Pathology of Race Prejudice." *The Forum* (June 1927), 856-861.

Frederick Wegner, "The 'Two Civil Wars' of Fitzgerald," *F. Scott Fitzgerald in the Twenty-First Century,* eds. Jackson R. Bryer, Ruth Prigozy, and Milton R. Stern. Tuscaloosa: The U of Alabama P, 2003: 238-66.

Freud, Sigmund. "History of an Infantile Neurosis (Wolf Man)." *The Freud Reader.* ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989.

———. "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Vol. XII. ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1958.

———. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Freud Reader.* ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989.

———. "The Ego and the Id." *The Freud Reader.* ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989. 630-658.

Gilman, Sander L. and James M. Thomas. *Are Racists Crazy? How Prejudice, Racism, and Anti-Semitism Became Markers of Insanity.* New York: New York UP, 2016.

Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia.* New York: Columbia UP, 2005.

Godden, Richard. *Fictions of Capital.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Godden, Richard. *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.

Goldsmith, Meredith. "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing and Performing in *The Great Gatsby,*" *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2009): 443-68.

Gordon, Leah. *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015.

Guthrie, Robert. *Even the Rat was White: A Historical View of Psychology* (Second Edition). Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2004.

Hoberek, Andrew. *The Twilight of the Middle Class.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Hooker, Juliet. "Black Protest/White Grievance: On the Problem of White Political Imaginations Not Shaped by Loss." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116.3 (July 2017), 483-504.

I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. ed. John Crowe Ransom. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006.

Irwin, John T. *F. Scott Fitzgerald's Fiction.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

Kahane, Claire. "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision." *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*. ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark. Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1985: 119-130.

Keller, Susan. "The Riviera's Golden Boy: Fitzgerald, Cosmopolitan Tanning, and Racial Commodities in *Tender is the Night,*" *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 8 (2010): 130-59.

Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America.* New York: Nation Books, 2016.

Kreyling, Michael. *Inventing Southern Literature*. Oxford: U of Mississippi P, 1998.

Larsen, Val. "A Tale of Tongue and Pen: Orality and Literacy in 'The Barber.' *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 22 (1993-1994): 25-44.

Leverenz, David. *Paternalism Incorporated*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003

Magistrale, Tony. "'I'm Alien to a Great Deal': Flannery O'Connor and the Modernist Ethic." *Journal of American Studies* 24.1 (1990): 93-98.

McElya, Micki. *Clinging to Mammy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Mellard, James. "Flannery O'Connor's Others: Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious." *American Literature 61.4 (1989): 625-643.*

Messenger, Chris. "'Out Upon the Mongolian Plan': Fitzgerald's Racial and Ethnic Cross-Identifying in *Tender is the Night,*" in *Twenty-First Century Readings of Tender is the Night*, eds. William Blazek and Laura Rattray. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007: 160-76.

Mills, Charles. *Black Rights, White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2017.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992.

Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944.

Nowlin, Michael. *F. Scott Fitzgerald's Racial Angles and the Business of Literary Greatness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

———. "The Barber." *Atlantic Monthly* (Oct 1970): 111-118.

———. *The Violent Bear It Away*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960.

———. *The Complete Short Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1982.

Pope, Robert. "Beginnings." *Georgia Review* 36.4 (1982): 733-751.

Roediger, David. *Class, Race, and Marxism*. New York: Verso, 2017.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.

Saunders, Patricia. "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip." *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 63-79.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016.

Smith, Felipe. "The Figure on the Bed: Difference and American Destiny in *Tender is the Night*." *French Connections.* ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Jackson R. Bryer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

Smith, Jon. *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies.* Athens: U of Georgia P, 2013.

Sophomore Poetry Manual. ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1936.

Spillers, Hortense. *Black, White and In Color.* Chicago, U Chicago P, 2003.

Stokes, Mason. *The Color of Sex.* Durham: Duke UP, 2001.

Stringer, Dorothy. *Not Even Past: Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen And Van Vechten.* New York: Fordham UP, 2010.

Szalay, Michael. *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party.* Redwood City: Stanford UP, 2012.

Szczesiul, Anthony. *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry.* Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002.

Understanding Fiction. ed. Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, Inc., 1943.

Understanding Poetry. ed. Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938.

Walker, Alice. "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor. ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark. Boston:*
G.K.Hall & Co., 1985: 71-81.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men.* Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jocanovich, 1982.

———. *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South.* New York: Vintage Books, 1956.

———. *Who Speaks for the Negro*? New York: Random House, 1965.

Washington, Bryan R. *The Politics of Exile.* Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995.

Welling, Bart. "In Praise of the Black Mother: An Unpublished Letter on 'Mammy' Caroline Barr". *The Georgia Review* 55.3 (Fall 2001) 535-542.

Wen, Patrick. "The Terror of Neutrality: Civil Rights, Tortured Quietism, and the Tactical Disengagement of Flannery O'Connor." *Studies in Popular Culture* 28.2 (Oct 2005): 121-147.

Whitt, Margaret Earley. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor.* Columbia: U South Carolina P, 1995.

Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence. ed. Agar, Herbert and Allen Tate. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.

Wiegman, Robyn. *Object Lessons.* Durham: Duke UP, 2012.

Wilderson, Frank. "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave.*" *Black Camera* 7.1 (2015): 134-149.

Wilson, Charles et al. *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights.* (1947). https://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm

Wood, Ralph C. "From Fashionable Tolerance to Unfashionable Redemption." *Flannery O'Connor.* ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 55-64.

Wray, Virginia. "Flannery O'Connor's Master Thesis: Looking for Some Gestures." *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 8 (1979).