QUEST FOR BLACKNESS: WRITING AGAINST WHITE VISIONING

AND BLACK SELF-DESTRUCTION

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FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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ABSTRACT

With a focus on multiracial perspectives on race, region, and sexuality, *Quest for Blackness* interrogates the efforts of diverse black subjects to transcend the objectifying limits of the white gaze and the effects of internalized hatred and destructiveness. To clarify the tenuous shift from object to subject, the first two chapters of this dissertation examine the formation of African American subjectivity within the prism of the white gaze, as it takes shape in novels by Eudora Welty, Lewis Nordan, Toni Morrison, and Bebe Moore Campbell. The following chapters probe the pernicious effects on black psyches that develop when African Americans unwittingly internalize any part of the white gaze. Tackling the controversial discourse that comedian Bill Cosby re-ignited with his comments in 2004 on the responsibilities of the black poor in improving their own lives, *Quest for Blackness* engages fully in the debate that erupted after Cosby’s speech. Taking a stand, alongside other African American voices in literature, politics, and social activism, this study not only recognizes the interrelated issue of white racism and economic inequality but also calls for greater black accountability in addressing the pathologies that affect black communities. In airing dirty laundry, African Americans only strengthen their pursuit of equality and lasting, meaningful agency, a point that Z Z Packer, Alice Walker, and others powerfully demonstrate in their fiction.
This project benefits from those who have offered me immediate and lifelong support. I want to thank Kevin Murphy for his insight and reassurance. His partnership is both a scholarly and personal gift. My mother Gloria D. McMahan, who sparked my love of language and literature, has given me a superb model of hard work and dedication. Hers is the purest spirit I know. I want also to thank my father Donnie McMahan Sr., who, along with my mother, worked hard every day, earning an honest and hard-earned wage, to create an easier life for me and my siblings. My brother Brian McMahan and sisters Brandy McMahan and Anna Marie McMahan all have my gratitude for their support.

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Introduction

“Education, Edification, Exposure:” Combatting the Cultural Forces of Defeat

Education, edification, exposure, whatever you want to call it . . . whatever it is you used to think wasn’t real, wasn’t strictly for the N.I.G.G.A.s. You think to yourself: If only someone had told me all this was out there, I would have paid better attention in school! -- Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Losing My Cool: Love Literature, and a Black Man’s Escape from the Crowd*

Toward the end of his memoir *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man’s Escape from the Crowd* (2010), Thomas Chatterton Williams recounts his decision to break away “for an extended period of time” from “the miasmic influence” of his black friends and, in general, African American culture (195). Williams reasons that such a departure afforded him a reprieve from a culture that since the peak of the Civil Rights movement had been dipping toward a routine despair and defeatism. Breaking off from his black familiars “was something [he] had begun to do in fits and starts but couldn’t do more than halfway while remaining at home” (195). Throughout *Losing My Cool*, Williams documents his struggle to balance his intense academic studies with a compulsion to “keep it real,” that is to uphold stringent notions of cultural authenticity among his black friends. In the end, though, Williams levels the full strength of his complaint against these forces of authenticity, recognizing them as patently false, oppressive, and spiritually lethal. Interestingly, Williams compares his decision to move to France with the wave of black expatriates, who in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, moved
abroad to escape Jim Crow and second class citizenship. The irony of the reversal not lost on the memoirist, Williams commends the memory of these earlier expatriates as a readymade model for his own relocation. Describing James Baldwin’s passage to Europe as an essential first step in reinventing himself as a black, gay, American artist “in ways that he could not while he was at home” (193), Williams recognizes Baldwin’s flight from institutional racism as an unforeseen but indispensable template for his own transplantation.

Williams also recalls a time when two black friends, twin brothers, visited him in Paris and suddenly come to terms with their own participation in the repressive powers of black authenticity. Their epiphany—wrenching, overwhelming, and wondrous—reminds Williams of his own, all of this taking place during a day of touring:

The twins, under the influence of a day of discovery and not a little wine, were going through this revelation in front of me, I could see it in their faces, their searching, contemplating faces, and I knew it at first glance because I had gone through it too, many times before. At last, they could see the lie, which they had never previously glimpsed: it was right there in the room with them, tethered over the table like a fluorescent helium balloon, and no more impenetrable than that—they could puncture it with a fork or a toothpick if they wanted. And that hurts. (211)

In the following passage, Williams comes to the core of this hurt, what he calls “The Supreme Lie”:

[When you think there must be some exculpating explanation, some scenario that will allow you to pass the blame—. . . racism is what it’s really all about, . . . you realize this isn’t a skin thing, a color thing, a hair-texture thing, or even a money thing anymore (your childhood was comfortable enough). No, this is a culture thing, and yours has limited and cheated you profoundly. And then the final realization: You have been lying to yourself all this time—The Supreme Lie—you have been an accomplice, a co-architect of your own ignorance. (212)
Williams’s characterization of “The Supreme Lie” centers on his perception of it as laying waste to the possibility of uplift and growth among so many of his young black friends.

In the end Williams’s account speculates that “The Supreme Lie” emanates exclusively from within African American culture, when, as I see it, the deception manifests from a rather long, complicated narrative that involves white supremacy, black resistance, and black self-destruction. While Williams is fair in discounting white racism and economic disparity as the primary culprits of black self-limitation, any dismissal of these corrosive societal forces would foster a less than accurate comprehension of the problem. The scene that Williams paints of himself and his friends rediscovering themselves in Paris speaks not only to a lack of cultural awareness and exposure within much of black culture but more importantly to an array of destructive conditions sustained in black communities across the United States. These conditions may have originated from segregation or from the most honorable intentions—black separatism, for example, enacted to effect political change—but the failure to move forward from such a position or even observe the need for change has proved counterproductive. All told, Williams’s memory forcefully illustrates three significant planks of the millennial black experience, all of which establish the focus of this study:

1) the psychic absorption of the white gaze,

2) black self-destruction and defeat, and

3) the quest to expel racist visioning and black victimhood.

Textual De-Visualization and the White Gaze
Underlying Williams’s discussion lurks the presence of the white gaze, the significance of which proves multifaceted and unceasing. Laboring for years under the presumption that black people had to have divided sensibilities in order to take interest in any culture deemed “white” or “nonblack,” Williams shows that such self-isolation derives from an undetected feeling of diminished self-worth and from a delimited sense of belonging. Propagated by literature, film, and television, this diminishment originates in the hegemony of the white gaze. Drawing discriminately from Frantz Fanon (Black Skin, White Masks), Charles Johnson (“Phenomenology of the Black Body”), and Toni Morrison (Playing in the Dark), I locate, among other points of agreement, a consensus appraisal of the white gaze as a hegemonic perspective (a force in literature and society) that defines its majority status through a purposeful or unconscious alienation of nonwhite subjects. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison concludes that within these perimeters blackness functions as a reflection of the spectator/writer, not the spectacle/written, and as a reflexive exploration “of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame” (17) on the part of the white seer. Operating with or without the reinforcement of terroristic violence or the institutionalization of racially biased laws and ordinances, the white gaze exists as a controlling/colonizing force, exerting its presence in the lives of white and nonwhite subjects alike. As Fanon and Johnson (and others such as Maurice Wallace) have noted, when the black subject is not fully realized in a white-authored media production, he becomes, seemingly by default, an exaggeration of his body, (his genitals in Fanon’s Freud-inflected analysis), his physical prowess, and his (imagined) menace to white dominance made gross and spectacular. In this literary paradigm, the
black subject serves as little more than a shadowy distortion—blackness as mystery, blackness as innocence, blackness as wickedness, blackness as forbidden desire.

These observations go far in elucidating the eroticized excesses of E. E. Cummings’s depiction of fellow prisoner Jean Le Nègre in his creative memoir *The Enormous Room* (1922), which recounts the author’s incarceration at the French Precigne. Cummings’s image of Jean Le Nègre shows that even when the white gaze falls on the black body with affection, the white seer’s presumption of supremacy predetermines a fetishized attachment with the seen. Presenting a massive body and vacant mind, Jean figures as a fibbing, singing, thieving man-child with superhuman strength, quick aggression, and wildly erratic emotion. Cummings’s fetishistic vision of Jean culminates in a masochistic death-sex fantasy:

—Boy, Kid, Nigger, with the strutting muscles—take me up into your mind once or twice before I die (you know why: just because the eyes of me and you will be full of dirt some day). Quickly take me up into the bright child of your mind, before we both go suddenly all loose and silly (you know how it will feel). Take me up (carefully, as if I were a toy) and play carefully with me, once or twice, before I or you go suddenly all limp and foolish. (169)

Imbuing the black body with immense sexuality, chaos, and a touch of oblivion (while describing himself, in telling contrast, as a definite, small, fragile thing), Cummings’s cartoon fundamentally flattens perceptions of Le Nègre, the actual person, robbing him of thought and feeling.

Informed by varying aesthetics and a range of literary objectives (Cummings’s oblique modernism, for instance), racial representations from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Sam and Topsy, Mark Twain’s Jim, and far worse creations by William Gilmore Sims and William P. Kennedy) construct the
precedent out of which subsequent, white-authored black characters emerge, hovering sometimes between subject and object. More complex but still controversial, these characters, I believe, reflect the authors’ attempts to wade through their own preconceived notions of blackness (and the prevailing notions of other white Americans) to create breathing, living subjects. With *Quest for Blackness* pertaining mostly to literary texts published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I want to trace how a number of white authors navigate the tricky passageways of the white gaze, their own and that of other white seers. Specifically, I am looking at the crucial moment when the black body, as projected by a white seer within a white-authored text, approximates a more fully realized subject.

Undoubtedly, the socio-political watershed of the 1950s and 60s would indelibly imprint the psychology and positionality of white authors who were trying to imagine black lives. William Faulkner’s fraught depiction of black Americans in the 1920s and 30s (e.g. Dilsey, Clytie, Joe Christmas) differs remarkably from his characterization of Lucas Beauchamp, who appears in his 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust*. Falsely accused of murder, Lucas bides his time in jail with a stoicism that bedevils the young, suitably named Chick, who, upon visiting Lucas, grows more and more agitated with him for his refusal to act the part of the broken, degraded nigger. For this lapse, even Lucas’s racial being (both his physical and sociological identity) becomes questionable in Chick’s eyes: “the face pigmented like a Negro’s but with a nose high in the bridge and even hooked a little and what looked out through it or from behind it not black nor white either, nor arrogant at all and not even scornful: just intolerant inflexible and composed” (13).
reckoning of Chick’s racist consciousness, far from resolved, speaks extra-textually to the convulsive social upheavals soon to befall the nation, most certainly the South.

Writing in the 1960s, straight into the eye-teeth of black-white discord, William Styron composed and published his most controversial novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a quasi-historical narrative that dared to imagine the viewpoint of the nineteenth-century slave insurgent. By his own admission, Styron, the grandson of a slave owner, had to battle the enforced view of slavery as a “quaint,” “benign” institution (95). Stories told to him by his grandmother about black subsistence and ragamuffin slave bodies would go a long way in supporting his supremacist white gaze, even to the point of him doubting the intellectual equivalence of newfound friend James Baldwin. Styron confesses, “I still possessed a residual skepticism: could a Negro really own a mind as subtle, as richly informed, as broadly inquiring and embracing as that of a white man?” (97). Styron’s friendship with Baldwin and their long, late night talks about literature, politics, and social change (during a time when Baldwin stayed at his house) would quickly settle Styron’s doubts and lead him to recognize in himself an “appalling arrogance and vanity” (97). Incidentally, Baldwin would encourage Styron’s cross-racial imagination (as would Styron for Baldwin), and Baldwin would continue to support *The Confessions of Nat Turner* upon publication, despite the objections against the book, sung vehemently by a choir of black intellectuals and political leaders.

This cross-racial, at times cross-political, literary model that Styron and Baldwin construct stands as a critical touchstone for my exploration of the white gaze, especially where it bisects the political consciousness of the author. Within this split, what I regard as the breakpoints of representation, the political ontology of the black subject merges
with the phenomenological construction of the seeing white eye. The narrative vision splits, illuminating a rift between the third-person perspective of the narrator and the vantage-point of a white character. Spanning the rift, protracting and agitating it, the presence of the black subject captures the existential differences between author, narrator, and character. To what extent one determines the scope and depth of these differences will continue to concern historians, biographers, and literary critics for years to come; my attention remains fixed on the perceptions generated by the text itself and on the functional limits by which the white gaze asserts its influence. As a genre, fiction can be especially evocative of these functional limits. Fiction writers are able to manipulate a reader’s perception so profoundly so as to craft a literal breakpoint in the text in which a black character falls utterly and conspicuously out of the white seer’s sight and, consequently, from the reader’s ‘vision.’ That these incidents of ciphering happen in times of crisis, pronounced conflict, and physical or psychological shift proves equally telling. The reader understands from contextual clues that the black body has not left the scene but can no longer perceive its presence: the body becomes absented. The first two chapters of this study examine novels by Eudora Welty, Toni Morrison, Lewis Nordan, and Bebe Moore Campbell, all containing instances of black ciphering that subtly but powerfully demonstrate the political and phenomenological disparity between the white seer and the black seen/unseen subject. In one remarkable sense, the de-visualization of the black body offers a kind of visual counterpoint to Ralph Ellison’s insider-perspective of black invisibility. White-authored works presenting white protagonists bypass the leap in imagining or signifying on the white perspective, a particularly evocative effect in the phenomenon of black de-visualization. More so than black-authored works, these white-
authored texts provide a direct line of insight into the white seers’ assessment of black humanity, figured less as a thoughtful, feeling subjectivity than as a negligible body-object.

The internalization of racist visioning poses a sinister and pervasive problem for the black subject. Through internalization, African Americans become a new formation, or more precisely, a deformation, absent a healthy, balanced psychology and self-appropation, consequently, enacting some facet of the object that the white seer projects onto him. When Fanon asserts, “The educated Negro . . . feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him” (16), he is preoccupied with the class of black Antilleans who immerse themselves in the colonizer’s culture, going so far as to reject their black selves in favor of what he calls the “white man’s artifact” (16). Nevertheless, his discussion applies to a variety of texts and interroga-tions featuring native or subaltern subjects who develop what Fanon calls the “epidermalization” of their economic and political inferiority (13). Evidence of this epidermalization occurs throughout Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), a novel that dramatizes the psychic horrors of eugenics, intra-racial color bias, and interracial passing among upper-class Negros in 1920s New York. While white-completed Clare Kendry passes into white society—marrying a white man, having fair-skinned children, and living among mostly white people—Irene Redfield passes only occasionally to avoid social inconveniences and enforced segregation. Clare’s desire to socialize with Irene’s black friends does little to protect either woman from the virulent racism of Clare’s husband, much of it peppered by his ‘playful’ taunts of Clare—he nicknames her “Nig” in response to her skin slowly darkening over time. Irene thoroughly admires Clare’s beauty, largely because it mirrors her idealization of
whiteness, though she would never allow herself to admit this. In the novel, “Irene thought: ‘She’s really almost too good-looking. It’s hardly any wonder that she—’” (14). Irene’s inferiority complex resurfaces strongly at an interracial party in Harlem where she dismisses to a white friend even the possibility that the dark-completed Ralph Hazleton could be as beautiful as how the female guests (black and white) regard him. In her eyes, his attractiveness can only be a sign of his dark exoticism. Obsessed with Clare’s white skin and Caucasian features, Irene restricts beauty to a European model, one that in the end ravages her psychic health.

Taking It All In: Black Self-Destruction

These episodes of internalization in Larsen’s novel prove emblematic of the larger narrative of black self-destruction. In defining black self-destruction, my discussion probes the paradox that lies at the heart of such a lived experience. If, paradoxically and as a literary concept, self suggests subject and subjectivity, the suggestion also contradicts the assumption of blacks as merely projected objects of a racist imagination, furthering the perception of African Americans as wholly or eternally victimized by white supremacy. Yet, I contend that the concept of the self that is forged among many African American subjects inheres an insidious absorption of white supremacy and that the physical and psychological violence enacted against black people in the Jim Crow South and elsewhere has left an indelible mark on black consciousness. Self-destruction happens at every economic level, not solely among the educated—like the black Antilleans in Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks—and involves every gender and sexual identity. Although white racism and economic disadvantage contribute enormously to black self-destruction and defeat (I use these terms and others like them interchangeably),
as do a myriad of other realities, I am more finely interested in the extent to which African American culture clings to attitudes and conceptions that inhibit and block the advance of black people. To be sure, the intricate ties between white supremacy and black defeat relate to any number of contributing factors, not limited to personal psychology, economics, and education, or to the varying specifics of any given situation. To suggest that every, or almost every, black person in America internalizes white supremacy to the point of enacting self-destructive tendencies would perpetrate a grossly exaggerated characterization of the black experience, just as the concept of the white gaze does not comprehensively describe the motives, thoughts, and actions of all ‘white’ Americans.

That so many African Americans are accountable in these matters has become the proverbial elephant in the room of literary criticism. But why has this critical lapse lasted so long? (Sociologists and Cultural Studies scholars are far more daring in this discourse and are eager to delve where literary critics fear to tread.) My own suspicion is simply that black critics would rather turn a blind eye to this discussion than expose the race to the most insensitive elements of the white gaze, while nonblack critics fear accusations of reinforcing racist attitudes about black subjectivities. Whatever the reasons for this critical dearth, I want to trace the toxic consequences of black dysfunction and chaos back to the oppressive regime of segregation. Regardless of the reasons, reified and conjectural, I must insist that a good many black Americans are susceptible to a culture of defeat and that to ignore or deny its happening only magnifies its currency and potential for expansion.
Although literary criticism usually treads lightly on this subject, the literature itself has long responded to the reality of black defeat. Both Clare and Irene enact self-destruction, their racial passing demonstrative of their psychic surrender to the social dictates that surround them. Their wealth hardly saves them from white dominance or from the psychic torments that stem from their absorption of the white gaze. The very instance that Irene, hyper-conscious of color, judges Ralph Hazelton as vaguely “repugnant” (60) and the many times she finds herself seduced by the “soft lustre” of Clare’s “ivory skin” and her “tempting mouth” (19), Irene signals the ruination of her black self. Ann Ducille’s mining of the homoerotic entende of this text in her essay “Blue Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen” brilliantly captures the double meaning of Larsen’s title, but I would add to that a third meaning, that of social and psychic death, inasmuch as racial passing—passing being synonymous with dying—leads to these destructions as well.

Among other contemporary black writers, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, Yusef Komunyakaa, ZZ Packer, and Edward P. Jones all expound on the topic of black defeat, as so much of their writing attests to the intra-racial horrors of inner-city violence, rampant sexism, homophobia, child neglect and abuse, and self-loathing. Morrison routinely novelizes the impact of the white gaze, first in The Bluest Eye (1969) with Pecola’s fixation on blue eyes and her father’s trauma at being forcibly watched by white men during an act of sex. In a more circuitous examination of the white gaze, her novel Paradise (1997) depicts a brutal attack on mostly black women by the moral brigade of an all-black town. Armed with guns and rifles, these men are really acting out of an oblique sense of racial inferiority. Collectively, they convince
themselves that they are attacking these supposedly wicked women as a way to protect their town, initially settled out of the founders’ traumatic memory of being rejected by other blacks because of the founders’ intensely dark skin. Like *Passing*, *Paradise* concentrates on the intra-racial dysfunctions of its black characters. Typical of Morrison’s approach to telling stories, the novel pinpoints her black characters’ connection to white racism but dwells on the drama and strife that her black characters wreak on themselves and on each other. While in no way minimizing white supremacy, Morrison’s focus on black subjectivity indicates the need for a similar approach in critical literary analysis. These characterizations highlight a vast dispersion of cultural pathologies that constitute or spiral out of black defeat. Registered in the psyche and on the body, many of the problems that plague black communities—drug addiction, debilitating rage, anti-intellectualism, and violent criminality—are not isolated to African Americans, but the sheer explosion of these afflictions point beyond economic and political influences, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century when racism became less and less institutionalized. These problems denote defects and deformities so deeply embedded in the culture that addressing racism and economic disparity alone would hardly begin to solve them.

I must also disclose that I approach this topic of black defeat not entirely as an academic matter but one that I know from personal encounters and negotiations. To put it plainly, I have seen evidence of black defeat and dysfunction from the very beginning of my conscious life up to the present moment, and I have long wrestled with the significance of these instances, few of which fit comfortably in the familiar arguments of literary analysis. As much as personal experience and recollection catalyze
understanding and the possibility of change, I can recall several incidents that have stirred such interests in myself. I remember how as children my brother and I trampled plastic wrappers in my grandmother’s backyard. For sport, we would sometimes hurl them at each other or toss them onto a set goal on the porch. Years would pass before I learned that the shells that littered the yard were actually the remnant containers of crack cocaine, a chilling discovery but not a shock, given the criminality of my grandmother’s neighborhood. The danger of her drug-addicted neighbors (and our own) never struck my family as anything unusual or extraordinary, and my mother and father would hardly discuss the precariousness of this situation with their children, not that they knew anything about the game my brother and I played. On hearing this story, scholars tend to harangue me about the economic underpinning of mass drug addiction, and in the midst of their argument, the black subject becomes a helpless, hopeless, endlessly manipulated object without the slightest ability to think or choose for himself. Although I would not in any way deny the impact of economics on the plight of the addicted, I would also emphasize the psycho-social aspect of the problem, in other words the cultural reality that enables this horror to continue not only in my grandmother’s old neighborhood but in African American communities nationwide.

At the same time that my brother and I unknowingly handled drug paraphernalia, I came to know my grandmother’s lifelong friend Margaret. From what I could tell, she was a kind, gracious woman, and my mother even told me a story of how Margaret once saved her young life, rushing her to the hospital when she accidently swallowed kerosene. Hearing this endeared me to Margaret, although one thing about her always disturbed me, her name, not her birth-name but the moniker by which she was best
known in the community. People—almost everyone I knew in that space—called her Coon. At age ten, I did not fully understand my disagreement with this nickname (and, as a child, I knew better than to air my views). I later discovered that she acquired it not from some vile, racist white person but from her own mother, who called herself Mole, called one son Rat and another son Crow. People tell me that these nicknames were in keeping with the family’s dark skin, and I could see that the motive to give these names and the neighborhood’s nonchalant acceptance of them coincided with an active absorption of the white gaze, with “Coon” and “Crow” clearly recalling old anti-black slurs. Anyone trying to spin this story into some twisted vision of agency might suggest that the mother sought to empower her children by having them embrace their blackness and by giving them the opportunity to control the negative perceptions of dark skin. A colleague actually put this argument to me, but I detect in its reasoning at least three fallacies that demean the complexity of this particular black experience. First, this argument wants to fly freely over the reproduction of a racist visioning among African Americans—over the grim impact of labeling. Second, this argument wants to pretend that African Americans cannot cause or perpetuate their own dissolution or that in discussions of race, self-infliction only figures nominally whereas white bigotry matters most. Finally, this argument extends a fantasy of permanent black victimization and helplessness, a fantasy that does far more harm than good.

Fortunately, African Americans are more and more willing to contend with these issues, privately but sometimes publicly as well. Williams’s memoir Losing My Cool lends proof to that point, as do other writings, speeches, conversations, and interviews. Without the complication of literary ambiguity, their bell-like voices ring out fresh and
clear against the noise of those who oppose or seek to stifle them. Early on, Williams’s memoir shows a young person in full engagement with hip hop culture, but it also records his preparedness to question its power and influence over his life. Eventually realizing its snags and pitfalls, especially its inclination toward separatism, anti-intellectualism, and virulent sexism, Williams successfully rethinks his entire being, putting an ocean between himself and a musical culture that at times revels in mindless materialism and dead-end acts of cultural resistance.

Sometimes, though, the voices decrying black defeat are just as likely to impede their own message of self-empowerment. In the summer of 2013 CNN newscaster Don Lemon courted controversy when he tweeted that African Americans needed to take greater responsibility in reducing the high incidence of crime among black people. Lemon’s agreement with staunch conservative Bill O’Reilly on this issue merely deepened the controversy. In 2005, Bill Cosby scandalized the nation when he gave an unscripted speech at a ceremony in the nation’s capital marking the fiftieth anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education. Cosby criticized the black poor for not taking full advantage of the privileges and opportunities made possible by the sacrifices and gains of Civil Rights protestors. I have to agree, at least in part, with the criticism of those who argue that both Lemon and Cosby chose inappropriate spaces in which to air their grievances. This topic is one that people should speak about anywhere and everywhere (and their arguments are not unfounded), but the reality of that happening in a way that promotes insight and open, continuous dialogue diminishes greatly with the cramp of Cosby’s impromptu speech or the 140 character limit imposed on tweets. Nevertheless, the fact that more and more African Americans are stating their objections signifies a
critical pivot in this racial discourse. The willingness of the well-known and the virtually unknown to publicize their concern, however controverted and unwanted, must encourage others, who also dare to vocalize the need for cultural reformation.

The people calling for change are indeed raising thorny questions. Often they ask: why, after such historic gains and such momentous progress toward racial equality, has the movement stalled? How, for instance, does contemporary black culture alone figure in the fact that black men are statistically more likely to become incarcerated than attend college? How do we answer this last question without resorting to a stale recitation of social and economic inequities, a shrinking reality in the wake of the Civil Rights movement? Why do so many blacks squander their talents during a period of unprecedented opportunity? How do these individuals via their own motives, thoughts, and actions further the chronicle of victimization from within the race? Certainly, these questions are disconcerting because they eschew blaming outside forces as the only valid explanation for black failure. These questions redirect the focus of the discussion, intimating that African Americans have to assume greater responsibility for their dysfunction. Furthermore, these questions place African Americans at the center of a discourse that has almost always placed white subjectivity in the position of ultimate, unending power.

Victims No More: Peering Beyond the White Gaze and Black Self-Destruction

Just as any absorption of the racist white gaze may lead to a crumbling of the black self, a conscious repudiation of the pathologies that evolve from this interpenetration of identities has the power to liberate black subjectivity from a racial imaginary that seemingly has no bounds in terms of mutability and distortedness. To
arrive at the root of self-defeat, writers, performers, and artists often look South, where they locate the origins of dysfunctionality. Practically every paradigm of Southern history—including slavery, the Civil War, sharecropping, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement—consists of African Americans striving to transform themselves from objects, possessions, and pawns into full-fledged citizens. How do black people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries contribute to this historic model? What many African Americans have come to realize and publicly acknowledge in this post-Civil Rights period is that white racism plays an increasingly secondary role in the story of black self-determination. With a vigilant eye on criminal justice and on protecting civil rights, these new writers— theorists, journalists, poets, and fiction writers—are breaking new ground for a centered black presence in the South and elsewhere. These futurists, as I prefer to view them, jettison bitterness and blame as well as old, outmoded notions of black victimization, fashioning, instead, complex subjects—hurting, searching, healing subjects—who are distinctly aware of historical indignities and traumas but who are otherwise unbound by them.

None of this is to suggest that the South (or any other region) has completely overcome its history of racial injustice. As John Lowe reminds readers in The Future of Southern Letters, “the South continues to be a very conservative region, and it would be foolish to pretend that conservative elements in southern literature—and, indeed, literary criticism—have disappeared” (10). What the South presents, therefore, is a site of uneasy compromise, not unlike the reality of black Southerners (or any ethnic minority for that matter), whose identity derives as much from cultural difference as from assimilation. In reading Fredrik Barth’s theories on ethnic distinction within predominant culture, Lowe
makes a useful argument in positioning the whole of the South as well as its ethnic parts as “boundaries and what they touch, . . . not content . . . but a constantly shifting line” (12). Discursively, *border identity* implies the permeability of black and white subjectivities, this new social formation undermining rigid binaries of hierarchy and status that linger on from the Jim Crow past. Thadious Davis, Lee Ann Duck, Riché Richardson are a few New Southern Studies critics who have mapped this shifting line of the South in recent scholarship framing the American South’s comparability to the histories of African enslavement and marginalization in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. I would maintain that much of this historical/regional parity stems from the toxic interaction between the imperialist powers of white supremacy and the self-annihilating action of the subaltern subject.

Advances for African Americans in political efficacy and economic prosperity since the 1960s call for fine-tuning the critical lens along the borderlines of white hegemony and what novelist, essayist, and autobiographer John Edgar Wideman calls a new Middle Passage of black malaise. In *Fatheralong* (1994), which documents Wideman’s turbulent relationship with his father and with his Southern roots, Wideman discusses the cultural wasteland that many young black people experience. Identifying “a conflagration of devastatingly traumatic forces”—presumably historical white violence—as the leading causes of this malaise, Wideman writes, “The poor are most immediately at risk, though economic class alone doesn’t determine which young people feel rootless, deserted, adrift in a world no one has prepared them to understand. . . . We are witnessing the spectacle of cultural breakdown, the precarious struggle of a people to emerge, to negotiate a Middle Passage with something valuable of themselves intact” (xxii). Like
Thomas Williams, Wideman identifies the core of the problem within a set of cultural norms. None of these norms have manifested in black culture (since and, to some extent, before the tumult of the 1960s) to instigate or ensure “breakdown.” Moreover, as Wideman catalogues this breakdown in various attitudes and behaviors, namely, “the celebration of self, of the sensual body, . . . the militant energy, the refusal to be disrespected” (xxiii), readers may discern uplift, or some kind of positive shift, in these cultural traits. What objections can there be to people wanting to be respected? The problem lies in the execution, especially where it morphs into blind defiance, wasteful violence, and senseless separatism. When and where does militancy backfire on the militant? How does a celebration of the self and the body devolve into self-objectification? Without guidance from the older generation, as Wideman rightly contends, these missteps in redefining black culture, post-1970, begin to constitute a new, widespread source of dissolution.

That Wideman refers to this dissolution as a new Middle Passage reinforces its origination in white supremacy; however, I would also stress the potential inherent in the celebration of self and body for empowerment and redress. Counter to the missteps, the most contemporary African American literature shows the strides some blacks are making toward recuperation and a redefinition of the black self. In the fictional worlds that Alice Walker, Randall Kenan, and ZZ Packer create, African Americans contend with white racism and black defeat while forging new beginnings that hinge on this re-conception of the self. Attentive to this shift, *Quest for Blackness* works from an inside/outside prism, moving from the contact gaze of white Southerners on black bodies to an inside examination of how black Southerners, having both resisted and absorbed
white supremacy, return the gaze, directing it toward (and against) their white and black counterparts. In the final chapters, this study charts the millennial effort toward a spiritual liberation whereby African Americans repudiate the white supremacist gaze and the crumbling of black culture.

Examining black defeat from multiple angles—the dialogic of black and white authorship, the movement of the Southern border and Southern culture, and the impact of cultural dysfunction on both black men and women—is one way this study differs from others that approach the diversified topic of black pathology. In the past few years, projects concerning some aspect of black pathology have concentrated on African American men and black masculinity, to the exclusion of black female dysfunction. Riché Richardson’s *From Uncle Tom to Gangsta: Black Masculinity and the U. S. South* (2008) explores multiple contexts in which novelists, filmmakers, and gangsta rap performers recycle and repackage the most disparaging stereotypes of Southern black men. Treating the beastly rapist, the backwater geechie, and other perjorative images manufactured throughout Southern history, Richardson’s project mounts a striking inquiry into black Southern masculinity. So does Abdul R. JanMohamed’s *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (2005), a book-length excavation of Wright’s entire oeuvre that plumbs the author’s rendering of the impact of social death on his characters and how these characters, confronted with the lethal determinism of their oppression, *choose* imminent death—vis-à-vis criminal or insurrectional violence—as “the only exit from the confinement of social death” (19). Subsequent projects, centered on the death-bound subject, such as Aimé Ellis’s *If I Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (2011), continue this trajectory of reading deathly violence as a
desperate (and intentional) act of agency for African American men who fear white terror and resent their own marginalization.

As thoughtful and convincing as these investigations are, I want to cast a wider net of analytics that include black men and women (and to a lesser degree their white counterparts) and move the discourse about black pathology away from the stricter confines of death to the less tangible definitions of self-destruction that I have outlined throughout this introduction. The characters and personae explored here do not embrace death, nor do they intend their own ruination. Their defeat—in death or life—is more insidious, manifesting without the benefit of the kind of cultural awareness that JanMohamed and Ellis describe. Some of these characters actively oppose white supremacy, like Root M’Hook in Welty’s *Delta Wedding*, but others, like Horace Cross in Kenan’s *Visitation of Spirits*, bear a more complex, ambiguous relationship with whiteness. The fundamental difference in their experiences derives in part from the political sea-change occurring after the 1960s. Pressing this change, *Quest for Blackness* examines how black writers are beginning to challenge the weary, threadbare conviction that white oppression holds an all-powerful grip on black life and that African Americans exist within the same deterministic paradigm that shapes the lives Richard Wright mines for his stories and novels. I would be remiss not to interrogate the subjectivity of the black thug or gangsta, but unlike Ellis, JanMohamed, and Richardson, my attention fixes less on social parasites and pariahs and more on the unequivocal refutation of the thug by black writers, artists, and entertainers who also reject white oppression and black victimhood as the paradigm by which this figure holds sway over black lives.
The sharp opposition to black self-destruction among African American authors, artists, and critics has spawned a multilateral confrontation between generations, each assessing the contribution of the other to the state of black dysfunction. Shattering the tradition of the revered ancestor—a custom reaching back through time and place to African beliefs and practices—the new discourse comprises an open mediation with the older generation, with young people negotiating the values of their elders, accepting some and rejecting others as unproductive. A natural and arguably necessary endeavor, this “cultural breakdown,” to borrow Wideman’s description of it, exposes how the contempt for black youth can be similarly severe and equally justified. In The Warmth of Other Suns, which follows three separate black families during the Great Migration from the South to the West Coast, Chicago, and Harlem, author Isabel Wilkerson recounts the late-in-life thoughts of Harlemite George Starling, who knows that “[a]s hard as the going has been up in Harlem, he has been free to live out his life as he chooses, been free to live, period, something he had not been assured of in Florida in the 1940s” (492). Starling’s recognition of the political changes in time and space are undeniable. The troubles menacing black people then are not altogether the problems affecting black people now, and yet they are connected. He makes this salient point crystal-clear when he tells the author during a 1997 phone interview:

*I’m sitting out front now . . . and I’m ducking down these drug holes. They come here so beautiful, and in a few weeks look like they climbed out of a garbage can. We’re the ones killing ourselves. I don’t see one white person in this block selling drugs. They got the nerve to be mad at the blue-eyed devil. You don’t have to take those drugs and sell ’em. Nobody’s making you sell drugs. We’re the ones that’s killing ourselves. They won’t learn in this century and maybe not in the next one.* (493)
Starling is unwilling to dismiss individual responsibility on account of poor education or economics alone. He may or may not know that the drug trade begins far outside his block in Harlem, masterminded by black and nonblack drug-lords (likely Starling does know), but his insinuation that a culture of waste fosters Harlem’s mass addiction captures the frustration of many who seek recognition and redress of the problem from within African American culture.

Echoing but also complicating Starling’s sentiments, actress and poet Ruby Dee faults her own generation in part for the plight of the younger people. In a preface to a cycle of poems addressing black male dysfunction, Dee writes, “Some young men—I think of them as my “sons”—grew up when I wasn’t paying attention. I turned around too late, and they fell through my outstretched arms. . . . Some got caught in other arms or on tree branches. Some are still falling” (53). Imagining a bond forged by history and experience, she affirms the mislaying of a social contract between herself and scores of young people (“sons”) she may never meet or never know personally. As Dee suggests, the symbolic act of falling speaks to countless forms of destruction and generational detachment. In A Visitation of Spirits, Horace’s struggle to accept his sexual otherness is made all the more difficult by his family’s deep homophobia and fearful rejection of his white friends. The book builds tremendous tension between Horace and the older folk of his family, leading to missed opportunities of connection and to the tragically missed prevention of catastrophe. Similar (though less tragic) patterns appear in ZZ Packer’s story collection Drinking Coffee Elsewhere in which Laurel, Spurgeon, Dina, and Doris, all coming of age, must put off the harmful instruction of the older generation. Both Kenan and Packer tie the failure of the older people to their traumatic contact with
whiteness and the myriad psychic damage that ensues from such contact. Reversing this pattern, Kate Talkingtree Nelson, the protagonist of Walker’s *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* instructs a slave ancestor in a visionary encounter with him to forgive his white tormentors so that his subsequent healing will radiate through the lineage of his people. Whether or not Walker’s New Age plot and sensibility fails to persuade some readers, the scene offers an imaginative rejection of black defeat as well as the racist white gaze from which this defeat diversely manifests.

Chapter One interrogates black representation in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*, exposing a strange yet significant slippage between black self-assertion and self-destruction in the novel. While my discussion primarily pertains to Welty’s text, I draw meaningful parallels between it and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. These two novels extend my connection between white supremacy and black self-destruction, showing how some African American characters internalize Jim Crow’s toxic intent, their individual acts of self-defeat indicating a broader cultural pathology.

Chapter Two surveys a traumatized Southern landscape with a comparative analysis of two novels—Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* and Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle*. Both books offer blues-soaked depictions of Emmett Till’s murder in 1955 and give a foundational rendering of black oppression in the Mississippi Delta. Although this chapter centers on literary evocations of white violence at the cusp of the Civil Rights movement, the discussion peripherally acknowledges the presence of black dysfunction.

The third chapter pans out to a scene of Southern Gothicism in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*. The protagonist Horace Cross hates his gay body and engages in a
process of self-destruction, leading eventually to his suicide. A few critics gloss over the suicide as a tragic but crucial sacrifice in the making of a new queer subject in the rural South, construing Horace’s death as a crack in the homophobic sameness of Tims Creek, North Carolina. Others have tried to mine Horace’s signification on other black gay characters in American and African American literature. While these readings produce provocative insights, I find more compelling the novel’s subtle critique of white-authored Southern Gothic texts, in which Gothic narrations merge with queer white voyeurism and an exoticization of the black body.

Divided by a focus on political discourse and literature, Chapters Four and Five, similarly titled Airing Dirty Laundry, explore the contemporary, intra-racial pathologies tearing at the seams of cultural productivity. Chapter Four inspects a new political debate centering on who precisely bears responsibility for black criminality, cycles of poverty, and the achievement gap in education. This chapter clearly asserts my stand in support of African Americans resisting victim mentality and moving beyond a mostly anachronistic model of white oppression as the default position in assessing various crises of cultural dereliction. Chapter Five examines the portrayal of these crises by artists as far afield as Ruby Dee; rap lyricists Kool Moe Dee and Chuck D; and contemporary fiction writer ZZ Packer, whose story collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* proves especially daring in its unapologetic depiction of black defeat. Remarkably, these artists engender an interregional discourse—one rooted in but not limited to the South—that adds a new depth and dimension to the scope of the artistic conversation.

Reprising my attention on Kenan’s work, the penultimate chapter explores the writer’s signification on the Southern Renaissance, specifically the work of Truman
Capote and Tennessee Williams. In Visitation and in stories from his collection Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, Kenan uncovers the collapse of voyeurism and violence underlying many early and mid-century Southern narratives. As both a prism of Southern race relations and an agent of interracial, same-sex desire, past and present, the Southern Renaissance presents an indispensable frame in reading Kenan’s fiction. Ultimately, his characters partake of a transformed black gaze that enables them to refute pornographic appropriations of the black body.

The final chapter moves from an interregional focus to a globalized one. My analysis of Alice Walker’s novel Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart marks a seminal change in the narrative of self-destruction. With a persistent use of border imagery—most of the story happening riverside, first along the Colorado then the Amazon—the heroine’s adventures reposition Southern black subjectivity within a globalized, trans-cultural milieu. Critics of Alice Walker’s work have recently noted her continuing shift toward depictions of international pursuits of sexual and spiritual freedom. My primary interest in the novel involves its double imaging of the South as a repository of traumatic memory and as a trans-cultural, transportable space wherein black subjects, striving for selfhood, reject racist visioning and victimhood, reimagining the segregated past as a preparatory space for building recuperative lives in and beyond the South.
Nowhere does Eudora Welty disparage agitprop more than in her essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?” (1965), in which she compares such fiction writing to a rabble, adding, “Nothing was ever learned in a crowd, from a crowd, or by addressing a crowd” (153). In the same piece, Welty promotes quiet authorial voices that balance subtle calls for justice with incisive observations of persons, places, and events. Commenting on the historic killings of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Cheney, Welty writes, “To deplore a thing as hideous as the murder of the three civil rights workers demands the quiet in which to absorb it. Enormities can be lessened, cheapened, just as good and delicate things can be” (153). Since the original publication of “Must the Writer Crusade?” at the height of the Civil Rights movement, critics have regarded the essay as a guidepost in recognizing the thorny position of white Southern writers who face inherent limitations to their cross-racial literary imagination. To this end, François Pitavy, in his reading of Welty’s story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” remarks on the writer’s reluctance “to explore the black consciousness . . . a territory she does not consider hers. A white woman, she will not tread there” (60). The accuracy of Pitavy’s judgment resonates throughout David McWhirter’s contention that “Welty’s black characters are ‘let go’ (and let go of) . . . in a manner that calls attention to all that she doesn’t know,
and doesn’t claim to know, about them” (119). McWhirter takes his claim further, asserting that “Welty is always attuned to . . . [her characters’] desire not to be known or tell or be told” (119). For Pitavy and McWhirter, the black presence in Welty’s writings is almost entirely obstructed, if not inscrutable. Their claims stem from the fact that Welty’s black characters routinely lack backstory, their inner thoughts rarely expressed.

Not that McWhirter’s argument lacks persuasion, but in my reading of *Delta Wedding* (1946), I would call attention to the fallibility of reading the novel’s black characters as inscrutable. I am not ready to let them go, not without inquiry into the part of their presence Welty seldom obstructs—their bodies. When Welty *does* obscure the black body, the effect stresses the narrow perspective of the novel’s operative white gaze. What the black characters say and do, how they appear and disappear in the text, communicates not so much the specifics of their daily lives but the specified reality of their existence in the segregated South. To see and know these figures more fully, if not completely, the reader must be willing to decipher the signs of their bodies, a challenge that almost every white character in the novel fails even to attempt. Their failure to investigate casts the black body into a state of strange, unknowable disruptiveness, an ontic force to fear, control, or dismiss but not understand. Despite the white characters’ failure to see and know their black counterparts, readers retain an opportunity to situate them in the larger context of segregation and to examine their evocations of play, rebellion, distress, and (self-)destruction. Even as Welty’s black characters refuse, as McWhirter claims, to tell their stories, their bodies prove less reticent.

Deciphering these signs requires seeing around the obstructive view of the white gaze. In her essay “Place in Fiction,” Welty describes viewpoint “as a sort of burning-
glass, a product of personal experience and time. . . . It is an instrument--one of intensification; it acts, it behaves, it is temperamental” (124). Here, Welty describes her active, prismatic sense of perspective, one where I detect a shrewd, subtle separation of narrator and character and, in the case of the novel, a preliminary closeness between protagonist and author. Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* relates an intimacy between her younger self, excited by her family’s summertime travels, and Laura McRaven, who, arriving on a train, has come to Shellmound to witness her cousin Dabney Fairchild marry overseer Troy Flavin. In the memoir, Welty writes, “The trips were wholes unto themselves. They were stories . . . When I did begin to write, the short story was a shape that had already formed itself and stood waiting in the back of my mind. Nor is it surprising to me that when I made my first attempt at a novel, I entered its world—that of the mysterious Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—as a child riding there on a train” (68).

Dispatched in Laura’s character, the voice of the young Welty contends with that of the more reflective, authorial Welty. A motherless, poor relation, Laura senses her status as an outsider and throughout her visit to Shellmound presents a double vision, relaying her reality as set apart from that of her rich, tight-knit relatives. Even the colorful contrast of their last names, Fairchild and McRaven, indicates with racialized overtones their fundamental difference. As this name-play illustrates, any critique Welty levels at Shellmound must abide by the demands of her quiet, non-polemical voice and by her writerly conviction that the storyteller “is always seeing double, two pictures at once . . . his and the world’s, a fact that he constantly comprehends; and he works best in a state of constant and subtle and unfooled reference between the two” (Welty, “Place” 125). Occupying the space between narrator and various viewpoints, the black body exposes
and agitates the writer’s double vision, dilating the difference between how the novelist perceives and judges the world and how her characters make such assessments.

This agitation quite possibly led Welty to reimagine the Southern pastoral, a genre that in its original form began appearing in print as early as the nineteenth century. Published in 1832, John P. Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* set the standard for much of the pastoral plot, populated with gallant white planters, dutiful wives and offspring, and contented black slaves, the old, familiar feudal system with every participant put in his rightful place. Evidently dissatisfied with this model, Welty quietly but radically altered it. Harriet Pollack’s essay “On Welty’s Use of Allusion” uncovers the complex ways Welty “has freely appropriated legend, history, folklore, myth, ballad, and poetry” and in the process “has reworked the Southern gothic, romantic, and pastoral formulas” (312).

In her study of the Southern pastoral, Elizabeth J. Harrison explores how Willa Cather, Zora Neale Hurston, and other female pastoralists moved the focus away from male-centered spaces of political and economic power in order to illuminate shifts in women’s relationships with men, other women, and the land itself (3-9).

Welty ultimately devises the pastoral as a narrative in transition, in which the precepts of the past give way slowly, inexorably, to the future while African Americans hover between subject and object, between Welty’s personal vision and the more restrictive outlook of her white characters. Like *Delta Wedding*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) probes the dislocation of black subjectivity in pastoral settings, but where Welty has to negotiate the restrictedness of her subject position, Morrison has only to embrace the advantage of her African American perspective. At the same time, Morrison rejects the notion that subject position alone limits a writer’s capacity to
penetrate social boundaries. In an interview in 1980 she compares her ability to capture black male subjectivity in *Song of Solomon* with the cross-racial imaginations of Nadine Gordimer, Lillian Hellman, and Eudora Welty. These authors, Morrison argues, depict blacks “with . . . astounding sensibilities and sensitivity,” their representations “not patronizing, not romantic, just real” (qtd. in Neustadt 91). Affirming her admiration for Welty’s writing, Morrison explains that Welty lived in a “totally racist” location, and in striving to take a leap away from its perceptions, she had to “make it totally” (qtd. in Neustadt 91). Given Welty’s dispassionate use of the white gaze, readers might regard her opposition to it as somewhat less apparent than Morrison does; however, I would argue that Welty reveals her objection to the racialist lens by working within its purview to interrogate and undermine its presence. Before publishing *Delta Wedding*, Welty had unveiled in “Powerhouse” and “A Worn Path” a keen awareness of black Southern life, awareness she extended throughout her career. In the novel, Welty’s astuteness comes across at an angle, the black characters no less complex for their placement in the white gaze, which in some instances further complicates their figuration.

Their presentation in the novel changes dramatically, marking Welty’s manipulation of the fixed, white lens imprinted in the narrative’s shifting viewpoints. To explore these changes, my discussion focuses first on those black figures who all but vanish in the text as well as those who become mesmerizing and ghostlike. These disembodied figures differ spectacularly from their subversive counterparts, who act of their own accord, their actions evoking the futility of their defiance and the damage that such futility places on their individual psyches. The same hegemonic view that transforms active, breathing bodies into nonentities shapes the lives of the rebels.
However much they confront and challenge the view, they also abide counter-intuitively by its devastating forces. Refusing to portray African Americans as uniformly agential or heroic, Welty depicts the psychic damage black subjects incur when they unwittingly accept and absorb the white gaze. That depictions of psychic damage in *Delta Wedding* (and, as I discuss briefly, in *Song of Solomon*) develop from mutable displays of black self-assertion, defiance, and rage all the more verifies the historic pairing of white supremacy and black self-destruction.

In the opening scene of Welty’s novel, Laura’s arrival at Shellmound aboard the *Yellow Dog* illustrates the tendency of the white gaze to blot out the black presence even to where it dematerializes on the page. Welty describes the formation of the *Dog* as an engine fronting “four cars, freight, white, colored, and caboose” (309). That Laura sees but does not see black passengers is a matter of no small consequence. Despite racially designated cars, she would observe these travelers at the station, on the platform, and possibly passing through the train’s aisles. On board, she notices the engineer, the conductor, and a drummer wearing a straw hat. Debarking, she sees only Fairchilds: “Each mane of light hair waved like a holiday banner, so that you could see the Fairchilds everywhere” (4). Can the black travelers be standing so far away? Possibly *felt* but not acknowledged or imaged, they become spectral entities amid Laura’s excitement in returning to Shellmound, where the Fairchilds practice a similar blindness toward their black servants and fieldworkers.

In *Constructing the Black Masculine*, Maurice Wallace refers to this act of seeing and not seeing as *spectragraphia*, a phenomenon whereby African Americans, imaged in photographs, advertisements, and literature, figure as little more than spectacles of the
body. This process of selective vision contains an inverse scale in which the subject’s humanity (or *humanness*) diminishes proportionately with a hyper concentration on surface features—skin, hair, clothes, build, and voice. Whatever the medium or format for looking, the spectragraphic viewpoint sustains a stereoscopic disposition, swooping the individual into the generic and delimiting the black body to a frame that exposes the exterior but denies the existence of—or access to—the interior. Wallace thus defines spectragraphia as “a chronic syndrome of inscribed misrepresentation” that enfolds an “iconic simultaneity of the spectral and the spectacular” (30). By this estimation, the spectragraphic subject materializes in the eyes of the seer mainly as a specimen, a suspect, a body without thought, principle, or sensitivity.

Aligning indistinct or distorted images of the black body with depictions of temporary blindness in her white characters, Welty signals spectragraphia as a central element of the Delta mindset. Traveling with her cousins to the farm in a car that Welty pointedly describes as encased in a “cloud of dust like a blind being” (5), Laura makes only a fleeting observation of black life in the Delta. In a catalogue of geographic markings, including a railroad track, cemetery, cotton gin, and compress, the Negroes of Brunswicktown enter Laura’s thoughts only marginally and generally, “smoking now on every doorstep” (5). At the farm, in a crush of memories from a previous summer, Laura recalls “the Negroes, Bitsy, Roxie, Little Uncle, and Vi’let” (8), servants, who all but for a moan that Vi’let makes, remain disembodied in the passage. From the train station to Brunswicktown to the plantation, the black presence at the onset of the novel lies mostly in the disclosure of names and in brief descriptions of action. Later, when Ellen Fairchild happens upon a runaway girl in the woods, Welty reveals how the spectragraphic view
confounds the color line, further complicating reality. Not seeing the child fully in the day’s light but assuming her to be black, Ellen is surprised to learn otherwise: “So she was white. A whole mystery of life opened up” (90). The revelation of the girl’s whiteness forces an immediate shift in Ellen’s attitude about the child, suddenly piquing Ellen’s interests—where did the runaway come from, and where is she going, and how did she come to wander about in the woods? Departing, Ellen tells her, “I reckon I was the scared one, not you. . . . In the beginning I did think I was seeing something in the woods--a spirit . . . —then I thought it was Pinchy, an ignorant little Negro girl on our place” (93). Ellen collapses her fear of spirits with her disregard of the black Other, a collapse that fixes her concept of blackness with that of an otherworldly, ghostly threat. This wild child may be a runaway, penniless and unaffiliated with any of the respected families in the bayou (a conclusion Ellen herself comes to), but the girl’s whiteness alone makes her a person of relevance, worthy of Ellen’s time, thought, and feeling.

When Pinchy does show up in the text, she indeed evokes a spectral presence, a figure detached from any discernible narrative. What is told, what does penetrate the white gaze, is her uncanny ability to unsettle the perceptions of those around her. Upset with her husband George, Robbie forces Pinchy to stand outside a cotton shack while she takes refuge inside. From a window she intently watches Pinchy “dangle as if suspended in the light” (194). The text’s description of Robbie’s eyes as “fastened hypnotically” (194) builds tension between her and the narrator’s view and demonstrates Robbie’s dazed perception of Pinchy as a nebulous entity, as not quite there. Riding up on his horse, Troy reinforces Robbie’s narrow view, telling Pinchy, “I get tired of seeing you everywhere” (196). To be seen “everywhere” occasions offense—black bodies must be
continually positioned. In truth, Troy and Robbie only partially see Pinchy, her body quickly dispersing in the day’s light, as when she walks away, “out into the light, like a matchstick in the glare, . . . swallowed up in it” (197). The tendency of the black body to dissolve into earthly elements continues at novel’s end, where Laura accompanies her cousins and their servants on a picnic in the bayou. Welty cloaks the scene in night, into which Little Uncle, driving the buggy that carries Laura, becomes “invisible” (315). A seemingly insignificant detail, the servant’s disappearance underscores the absenting of nearly every black figure in the novel: no exception, Little Uncle’s body signifies a cipher, a nonentity.

If Little Uncle, Roxie, Bitsy, Pinchy, Vi’let, and the train’s black passengers personify absence, appearing more as shadows than as vital subjects, they also validate McWhirter’s argument that Welty’s refusal to present the black mindscape marks it as withheld. The inscrutable presence of these characters inscribes the extent to which their bodies are absented, put away, materializing mainly during acts of servitude to the Fairchilds. Pinchy’s unspecified religious conversion provides a rather minor distraction to the family, while Little Uncle, Roxie, Bitsy, and Vi’let rarely, if ever, interrupt the flow of daily life on the plantation. However, other black characters in Delta Wedding openly oppose this shadow formation in that they do not consistently conform to the behavioral norms set forth at Shellmound. Consequently, they do not appear as ghosts; they are not disembodied, and, to be sure, they do not evaporate into daylight or dark of night, nor do they dematerialize on the page. These rebel figures enter the white gaze as spectacular beings, their menace distorted and electrified by an excessive sense of their
presence. While some rebels subtly dispute the dictates of their oppression, others resort to violence as a way to smash against their confinement.

Emerging from the cotton fields, Man-Son models Wallace’s notions of *specimen* and *suspect*, notions that instills fear and fascination in the seer. For Man-Son’s encounter with Dabney, Welty turns again to the motif of blindness to emphasize the narrowness of Dabney’s viewpoint and, more specifically, her inability to perceive Man-Son as anyone other than a field laborer or as a bloody, scrapping child. Welty suggests that Dabney’s apprehension about the looming changes in her life triggers her temporary vision loss. On horseback, she and her younger sister India cross Troy’s path, and Dabney “saw a blinding light, or else was it a dark cloud—that intensity under her flickering lids? She rode with her eyes shut” (38). On their way to visit their unmarried aunts, the sisters pass several black fieldworkers who “lift up and smile glaringly and pump their arms” (37) in honor of the coming nuptials. Man-Son’s greeting, however, is unexpected and disconcerting, his manner unlike the customary addresses Dabney receives from the other black workers. That Dabney persists in riding “[b]lindly and proudly” with “her eyes shut against what was too bright” (42) adds a telling frame to her unforeseen meeting with Man-Son, whose transgression is not simply that he tips his hat or that he wishes her and Troy well on their wedding day but that he does so standing directly in front of her. For Dabney, he has broken the frame for which he is made: “How strange—he should be picking cotton, thought Dabney” (43). In her eyes, Man-Son’s existence, emanating entirely from his body’s labor, prohibits the very possibility of his intellect and emotion, and his active disruption of his role as a cotton picker imparts his shift from spectral to spectacle.
Contrary to his gentle (gentlemanly) manner, Man-Son arouses Dabney’s memory of him as a child fighting another black boy, his brother. In the flashback, Dabney recalls how “[t]wo of their little Negroes had flown at each other” (44) with knives and how Uncle George, intervening, gets blood on his hands and legs. All menace and violence, the black body envelops Dabney’s temporary purview of the text. During the fracas, the two boys become a blur of “thrashing legs and arms” (44), first subdued then “hollering,” one’s face “crumpled” and the other bearing a wounded back and a “black pole” of a chest (45). These fleshly images, including the sight of spilled blood, clinch Dabney’s memory of the brothers, distinguishing them from the other workers: “Dabney had never forgotten which two boys those were, and could tell them from the rest” (45). Except for his single bid to Dabney that “you’n and Mr. Troy find you happiness” (46), Man-Son has little else to say, so that his existence becomes for Dabney his imposing, bodily presence. “Nodding sternly” and admonishing him to “get to picking” (43, 46), Dabney can only dismiss the experience as an aberrant one, the “song of distant pickers” (47), adding a more familiar, acceptable element to the sisters’ outing. The depiction of Negro voices “start[ing] up like the agitation of birds” (43-44) confirms for Dabney the proper place for black bodies—as atmosphere, as geographic marking, and not much else.

Although Dabney regards his gesture as an imposition and as potential mischief, Welty allows the reader a wider view. And while Dabney may not realize the existential entendre of her question “Man-Son, what do you mean?” (46), the nuances prevail, growing out of the break between Dabney’s thoughts and the narrator’s perspective. What does Man-Son mean? Judging even by this tiny box of time, what do his actions say about him? If nothing else, he would understand the hard and tacit rules controlling
the proximity of black men’s bodies to white women on the farm. That he does not stand back, staring and waving like the other cotton pickers, indicates his readiness to take a risk, to crack the boundary between his black male self and Dabney’s white womanhood. Besides bestowing good wishes on Dabney’s wedding day, Man-Son’s greeting exposes his desire to be seen, to be acknowledged as an individual, not merely part of a collective. As a risk-taker, he has to balance his nonconformity with his obvious awareness of the possible consequences to his wayward behavior, which involves at the least losing his job—his own brother “had given trouble . . . and [Dabney’s] father had let him go” (45). Designated “a good Negro” (45), meaning obedient, inconspicuous, Man-Son stays on at the plantation but flouts such perceptions of goodness. Whether he tips his hat out of earnestness or as evidence of a placating mask or as subversive play, the text does not make plain. Nor does the novel resolve the contradictory images of him as a garish brute and gallant youth, two polarizing categories of his physical presence. Remarkably, Welty combines her barrier to the black perspective with Man-Son’s act of obstruction, particularly his attempt to redefine his body, the only part of his being available for review in the Fairchilds’ eyes. To what end his efforts impact Dabney’s outlook remains indeterminate. What becomes clear is his resistance to being contained, physically and conceptually—by Welty’s readers, by his brother, and by his white employers at Shellmound. All the more evident is Man-Son’s essential difference from the disembodied black characters in the novel. Even as Pinchy receives attention for her wanderings, for her knack of being seen “everywhere,” her position in the white gaze shifts only slightly from geographic marker to phantom. Apart from her religious transformation, her character lacks an outward show of self-assertion. Unlike Pinchy and
Little Uncle, who mostly accept their roles, *staying in their places*, Man-Son slyly refuses to play his scripted part.

Yet, for all its strangeness, Man-Son’s conduct pales in comparison to the outrage exhibited by Root M’Hook, who stabs his way into Troy’s office and the text, tearing at the permanency of the Fairchilds’ idyll. Bursting into Troy’s office, Shelley acts as a spectator to the violence and finds the sudden and grisly appearance of black men so alarming she initially mistakes a key detail of what she sees: “Shelley walked into the point of a knife. Root M’Hook, a field Negro, held the knife drawn; it was not actually a knife, it was an ice pick; Juju and another Negro stood behind, with slashed cheeks, and open-mouthed; still another, talking to himself, stood his turn apart” (257). Shelley’s correction stresses the instability of the scene, if not also her view of it. Although Welty never fully explains the origin of the commotion—which comes in *medias res*—one of the other fieldworkers, Juju, says that it traces back to Pinchy’s “coming through,” or religious conversion (257). The text relays few additional remarks from the men, but their actions and the state of their bodies provide telling glimpses into their experience, defining their individual connection to the violence. The attack on Troy implies his prior involvement in the conflict, possibly at its inception. Why does Juju blame Pinchy for instigating the fight? Has Root discovered a sexual indiscretion between Troy and Pinchy? Or does this dispute pertain to the payment of wages? As the aggressor, Root unleashes a murderous rage against white authority while the other men look on like bystanders. Obviously, the dynamics and focus of their fight have changed with Troy’s inclusion; now the men “stood behind,” awe-struck by Root’s audacious charge and Troy’s reaction. “Open-mouthed,” they are shocked to witness Root’s refusal to
surrender to this figure of white power. If Root’s aggression has an unspecified
beginning, his defeat is more definite, as the loss of his finger furthers the scene’s display
of injured bodies. One of the unnamed men, standing apart from the others and “talking
to himself,” signifies a psychic injury, his distress intimated by his distance from the
others, by his anonymity, and by the sheer desperation of his distracted speech.

Repulsed by the spill of black blood on the doorsill and determined to avoid
touching it, Shelley, the novel’s would-be visionary, fails to look past her own privileged
disposition, showing little insight into the fieldworkers’ discontent. Adding absurdity to
the disturbance, a man calling himself Big Baby admits to having a backside filled with
buckshot. If Shelley were to look more thoughtfully at the workers, she would realize
that like Dabney’s inevitable subordination to a husband—a “what was going to happen
was going to happen” (258)—the men’s lives bear as severe a fait accompli, their
destiny broadcast by Root’s rage and by the small tragicomedy of Big Baby’s
predicament. Between one man’s hostility and the other’s humiliation, the showdown in
Troy’s office conveys a range of responses to white dominance. Despite the men’s
individual demeanor, they dramatize in total a crisis of the black body, a body on the
brink, confronting a political and economic advantage it cannot break. Preoccupied with
Troy’s marriage to her sister, Shelley does not grasp the parallel between her fear that
Troy will suppress Dabney’s independence and the impact of white paternalism on the
affairs of the black workers. Her racial shortsightedness hinders the discernment that
drives her feminist vision, and as a result, the black men, alternately violent and
laughable, become spectacular objects, seen and unseen, relegated to the shadows. The
scene in Troy’s office ends as abruptly as it begins, the dénouement left unspecified. By
denying a resolution, Welty does not suggest that none exists but that Shelley does not anticipate its occurrence and that the fury that fomented this outburst must linger on in the dark of the workers’ un-narrated lives, in the same darkness where the racial discord and economic inequality of the segregated South would continue to grow.

Entering this darkness through little Roy and Laura’s fascinated eyes, Aunt Studney figures as the most complex projection of the white gaze. In almost all aspects of her spectragraphic figuration, Aunt Studney becomes a study of contrasts, her spectral identity merging at times with her ardent, bodily opposition to white dominance. Going even further than Man-Son’s boundary-crossing, Aunt Studney sets her own itinerary, irrespective of property lines and racialized restrictions, challenging the controlling intent of the white gaze—but with marginal success. Explaining that Aunt Studney hails from “Back of the Deadening,” a location that clearly literalizes the old woman’s ghostly presence, Roy tells his cousin, “You’ll see her walking the railroad track anywhere between Greenwood and Clarksdale” (228). Retracing Aunt Studney’s peripatetic steps, Roy intimates the panoptic lens the white community fixes on her movements as well as her self-determination in making the journey. The mere sight of her mesmerizes Laura. By virtue of her wanderings, color, and age, Aunt Studney engenders for Laura a spectacle of the black body: “coal-black, old as the hills, with her foot always in the road” (228). In the child’s eyes, Aunt Studney’s skin color becomes an object of exhibition, one more detail in a canvas already crowded with oddities.

Divided by the polarizing force of the children’s fascination, Aunt Studney’s ontological formation—as body and phantom—come into sharp focus. A roving spirit, she rambles through the rooms of Marmion, the vacant house the newlyweds plan to
inhabit after the ceremony. Exploring the extravagant foyer, the children do not see her but sense her presence through disembodied noises: “There was an accusing, panting breathing, and the thud of a big weight planted in the floor” (230). An imposing bodily presence, the woman lifts her arms “balefully” and hovers over her sack, guarding it “like an old bird over her one egg” (231). Like a conjurer, casting a spell over the house, Aunt Studney transforms Laura’s perceptions of the place and her position in it: “‘Is it still the Delta in here?’ Laura cried, panting” (231). Laura's re-vision of Marmion and the Delta as a physical and cultural space threatens to shatter the limits of the white gaze that in this instance cannot contain Aunt Studney's emergent self. To no avail, the children voice their desire to know the contents of the woman’s bag. When the children are not looking, Aunt Studney opens the sack and releases a cloud of bees into the house. Setting the terms of Aunt Studney’s otherness, the attack figures as the most fanciful act of black aggression in the novel. To be sure, the sudden swarm of bees leaves the children all the more confounded, with Roy laughing and asking, “Aunt Studney! Why have you let bees in my house?” (232). Sphinx-like, Aunt Studney has no response for him; her actions stand alone, her strangeness multiplied within the mechanism of her control.

The mystery deepens when after fleeing the house Roy pushes Laura into the Yazoo River:

As though Aunt Studney’s sack had opened after all, like a whale’s mouth, Laura opening her eyes head down saw its insides all around her—dark water and fearful fishes. A face flanked by receding arms looked at her under water—Roy’s, a face strangely indignant and withdrawing. (234-235)

Laura’s imagination of the water as the interior of Aunt Studney’s sack distinguishes her from her relatives, especially Dabney and Shelley, in that Laura, her eyes “opening,” tries
to see past her own limited view. However, her failure to see or truly know emphasizes her lack of experience. Laura is transitioning, no longer the distracted person arriving on the *Yellow Dog* but by no means the enlightened individual she may become. Harriet Pollack refers to river baptism in Welty’s work as “an immersion in female nature” (328), but how does race inform, if not thoroughly impede, the redemptive change implied by baptism? If Laura’s interest in Aunt Studney resonates with her own sense as an outsider, she has yet to fulfill her potential of perceiving black bodies apart from the racist characterizations that saturate the Delta mindset. Her general lack of compassion becomes clear when her cousin Maureen in an earlier incident pushes a woodpile onto her, an act that physically and psychically marks her. Looking down at the abrasions on her skin, “lick[ing] the blood away,” and feeling excluded from the other children, Laura regards herself as “black and ugly as a little Negro” (97). Laura mitigates the pain of her alienation by comparing herself to a predicament and a body she considers worse than her own; consequently, her ability to envision life beyond the Fairchild perspective progresses only as far as her wavering desire to do so.

Whatever Laura fails to see, whatever lurks in the dark, the narrative implies she can hardly comprehend its contents, a failure that adds new depths of purpose to the novel’s delicate interplay between strategic restriction and rich suggestion, between blindness and foresight. The blending of the river and the sack, the merging of a shadowy black existence and the water’s undertow, marks the apogee of Welty’s attempt to splinter her characters’ myopic perspective with her own wider view. Unlike Ellen’s and Dabney’s, Laura’s bout with blindness does not erase the reality of what eludes her sight but renders its mystery all the more vivid. More to the point, Welty’s depiction of
the black ghost re-invokes the half-hidden history of the Delta, specifically the Yazoo, or “River of Death” (256). This sobriquet is not Welty’s invention, and its use by other Mississippians precludes definitive origins, although many historians attribute the name to the outcome of several Civil War battles that transformed the river into a warehouse of sunken ships. Newspaper reports from the turn of the twentieth century relate that the river burst its banks and filled its floodplain many times before the catastrophic flood of 1927 (four years after the time of *Delta Wedding*). However, true to Welty’s aesthetic, the novel never traffics in the cold light of these facts, relying, instead, on atmosphere and historical trace, not least the practice of consigning black bodies to Mississippi’s waterways. In *A Festival of Violence*, Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck comment on one case in which a black insurrection on a plantation in Yazoo County led to the killing of the three ringleaders Minor Wilson, C.C. Reed, and Willis Boyd: “As so often happened, . . . the wheels of formal justice were not allowed to grind this case to its natural completion. While being transported to Silver City, Wilson, Reed, and Boyd were taken from law enforcers by a mob of determined whites. The three men were shot to death, then their bodies were weighted down and thrown into the Yazoo River” (41).

Prior to arriving at Troy’s office, Shelley passes by this River of Death. Her unease in the bayou, “filled with its summer trance, its winter trance of sleep” (256), redoubles the deadly impression of the river that Partheny, the old Fairchild nurse, gives one evening while lying on her cot, confessing her suicidal thoughts to Ellen:

> I were mindless . . . I were out of my house. I were looking in de river. I were standing on Yazoo bridge wid dis foot lifted. I were mindless, didn’t know my name or name of my sons. Hand stop me. Mr. Troy Flavin, he were by my side, gallopin’ on de bridge. He laugh at me good—Old Partheny. Don’t you jump in dat river, make good white folks
fish you out! No, sir, no, sir, I ain’t goin’ to do dat! Guides me home.

(101)

Partheny’s suicide attempt furthers Welty’s formulation of the self-destructive Negro. Not unlike Root and Big Baby, Partheny retains enough distinction from the novel’s dominant viewpoint to evoke a separateness of being, one that bends inchoately between self-assertion and self-defeat. Drawing on various theories by Mikhail Bakhtin, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Homi Bhabha on the development of subaltern identities into formidable cultural forces, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber asserts, “When those marginalized in a culture become subjects through articulation of identity difference, they begin to fashion an emergent culture” (6). The emergence of a minority subjectivity illustrates what Schreiber calls “the double process” of cultural shift, whereby the dominant “weakens from encounters with otherness” and the marginalized eventually “[reject] . . . their subordinate status” (6). However, as Welty’s novel suggests, this process of emergence meets with countless social and psychological impediments. As social change triggers violent reprisals from the dominant culture, it also uncovers a tendency toward self-destruction in the subdominant. Here, then, Morrison’s commendation of Welty’s black characters as “not patronizing, not romantic, just real” seems particularly salient (qtd. in Neustadt 91). Perhaps the “realness” Morrison appreciates lies in Welty’s willingness to weigh the agency of her black characters against the absoluteness of their oppression, demonstrating that in the segregated South not every act of subversion is constructive or that subversion itself can camouflage a defeatist sensibility. This defeatism reifies a fundamental failure in the black subject to disconnect fully from the white gaze. Without this disconnection and without the mobilization of organized
resistance, the black characters in *Delta Wedding* emerge partway, expelling the pernicious influences of the racialist lens nominally and with dubious effect.

Like the projected image of the black body metamorphosing from apparition to fleshly spectacle, self-destruction in the novel manifests both as a spiritual and physical phenomenon. Whereas Partheny’s suicidal longings present the most forthright expression of self-destruction, the incident in Troy’s office offers a more complex picture of the problem, staging an intricate interchange between insurrection and foregone defeat. Without narrating the origins of the fight, Welty places focus squarely on unanswered questions in the falling action. How positive, for instance, is Root’s future after his confrontation with Troy? Even if he survives his gunshot wound, even if he achieves some sense of victory in challenging Troy, he now faces a greater risk of vigilante justice, imprisonment, or, at best, a fugitive status, *ramifications he would have known*. The cost to Big Baby’s humanity is similarly steep. In name and action, Big Baby resorts to infantilism as his primary mode of survival. Even if he acts out of a deliberate strategy to inflate Troy’s ego in order to spare the men from any retributory violence Troy might inflict, Big Baby has, nevertheless, to sacrifice his own ego. His presence in Troy’s office summons three possible scenarios: a masked performance, an internalization of his supposed inferiority, or an active permutation of these two possibilities. In any case, his actions (performative or not) denote a stunted subjectivity. Either donning the mask of racial inferiority, or worse, embedding it, Big Baby obliterates any notion of self-worth he might have. Although spectacular, his appearance contrasts the reckless mode by which other black men in the novel come into view, their bodies embroiled in bursts of wasteful aggression, their masculinity fashioned out of fury, desperation, and brutish
force. The two relevant scenes that Dabney and Shelley witness relay a pattern of black-on-black violence, first between Man-Son and his brother, then between Root and the other workers, and possibly between Big Baby and whoever has shot him in the buttocks. The spilling of black blood by other blacks refocuses (without entirely transforming) the historic paradigm of violence in the segregated South—from interracial to intra-racial. Such violence emphasizes the absence of the workers’ agency. Root’s rage imparts a patina of power, a sideshow that in the end points up his ineffectualness in resisting Troy’s dominance.

Although Aunt Studney’s situation seems less immediately dire than Partheny’s or Root’s, her subversive doings amount to little more than derision for Shellmound’s white residents. To be sure, her defiance hardly predisposes her destruction but by no means do her actions alter or improve her plight. That she opens and closes her bag as she chooses and controls her verbal exchange with the Fairchilds indeed confers agency to her character, but such agency is so diminished that it doesn’t disrupt in any genuine way the habits and routines of the people she scorns. Nevertheless, her destruction seems certain, imminent, and interwoven with the strange obscurity that defines her life. Soon after Laura’s plunge in the Yazoo, Roy shows her where Aunt Studney lives, pointing out “through a screen of trees a dot of cabin; it was exactly like the rest, away out in a field where there was a solitary sunflower against the sky, many-branched and taller than a chimney, all going to seed, like an old Christmas tree in the yard” (235). While these “seed,” “sunflower,” and “Christmas tree” images suggest regeneration, they hardly mitigate the reality of her ruinous state, nor do these images communicate what may be regenerating, other than an ongoing existence in the margins. At the same time, any
recognition of Aunt Studney’s misery must remain speculative, given the children’s insular view, a constraint accented by the phrase “screen of trees.” Still, the ruinous state of her dwelling place—the “dot of cabin . . . going to seed”—stresses the reality that for all the fascination the old woman generates, her poverty and implied degradation override her uniqueness, consequently making her home and dual depiction as spectacle and specter “exactly like” like that of any other Delta Negro.

Tantalizing yet restrictive, the “screen of trees” highlights the narratological split between Welty’s insight and her characters’ shallower vision, typifying both the purchase and the problem of the novel’s use of the myopic white gaze. How, then, does the reader consider these contradictory elements, and how useful can the novel’s gaze be in a reading that tries to interrogate black interiority? Obviously, these questions demand an expansion of analysis. If Welty’s “screen” precludes a wholly reliable interrogation of black self-destruction, Morrison’s Song of Solomon adds a corroborative comment on the matter, taking Welty’s use of the white gaze beyond its limits while retaining the ethos of its design. Just as Delta Wedding routinely probes the thoughts and feelings of its white characters and relegates the black psyche to the implications of speech and action, Morrison’s novel plumbs the thoughts and actions of its black characters, all but to the exclusion of whites, who in reverse of Welty’s text are cast as shadow and atmosphere. Imparting an insider’s view of black life, Morrison’s depiction of self-destruction bypasses the issue of authorial credibility.

In Song of Solomon, protagonist Milkman Dead squares off with his one-time friend Guitar Bains, who has recently joined an outfit called Seven Days. The radical group resorts to killing unsuspecting whites as restitution for the unjust killing of blacks.
Extolling the effectiveness of this covert operation, Guitar tells Milkman, “It’s about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch” (160). Ironically, Guitar poses more of a threat to Milkman than white vigilantes, now that lynch mobs have given way in their lives to a new violent focus, the brute force of enraged black men. Rewriting the paradigm of Welty’s novel in which white men stand at the center of black male aggression and wield the ultimate stroke of power—George’s intervention, for instance, in the knife fight between a young Man-Son and his little brother—Morrison suggests that even without a prevailing white presence, black male violence contains significant connections to Southern history. Guitar bases his code of violence on a bloated sense of self-importance, asserting that “Everybody wants the life of a black man” including white women, who, he says, fail to grasp fully the legacy of historical white violence: “‘You tell them, ‘But they lynched my papa,’ and they say, ‘Yeah, but you’re better than the lynchers are, so forget it’” (222). Distilling his vengeful disposition from the vestiges of history, Guitar tells Milkman, “‘Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master’s name. And I’m all of that. Slave names don’t bother me; but slave status does’” (160). His words prove more telling than he realizes in that they suggest his internment to the past—he has not really reconciled himself to Southern history despite his delusion that he has.

Both men are trying to reinvent their lives, to recreate black masculinity—Guitar with his thirst for revenge and Milkman in his quest for ancestral roots—but their adverse approaches put them on a collision course of ultimate violence that regardless of any declaration of victory will result in the destruction of one or both men. After shooting and killing Pilate, Milkman’s aunt and spiritual guide, Guitar turns his crosshairs on
Milkman. In the novel’s final image, Milkman finally inhabits the myth of the flying black man that he traces along the path of his family’s Southern roots in Shalimar, Virginia. In his reenactment with Guitar, Milkman does not retrace the legendary return to Africa but soars into “the killing arms of his brother” (337). Staging the men’s clash on such a grand scale and on Southern soil—Solomon’s Leap, where Milkman’s great grandfather Jake began his airborne journey back to Africa—the scene belies the agency to which the men aspire. Milkman’s possible flight into death obviously undercuts his potential to develop and relish his newfound spiritual awareness and cultural connectedness. As in Delta Wedding, violent exertions against white power engender defeat, and in the cases of Root M’Hook, Aunt Studney, and Guitar, such opposition leads to—or corresponds with—an immediate or impending destruction of the self.

Morrison’s most direct and telling intertext with Welty’s literary landscape involves Milkman’s encounter with Circe, the former servant of the wealthy Butler clan, whose trickery and murder enable them to steal the Dead family’s property. Drawn from European myth and classical literature, like many of Welty’s characters, Morrison’s Circe proves Odyssean in both deed and name. Following the critical paths of Marilyn Mobley and Jacqueline de Weaver, Tracey L. Walters avers that “Song of Solomon reads as a conflation of Greek myth and African American folklore” (106). Just as the sorceress helps Odysseus in Homer’s epic, the black woman in Morrison’s novel discloses crucial information to aid Milkman in his quest to uncover his family’s slave origins in America, and like Homer’s figure, Morrison’s Circe appears to possess superhuman powers, defying death with a determination that ignores the progression of time and the will of other people. J. Brooks Bouson views Circe as “a deliberate parody of the traditional
white representation of the black servant” (95). Actually, Circe presents a parody of the loyal black servant in *Southern* literature, women like Dilsey in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Mammy in Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, and Bernice in McCullers’s *Member of the Wedding*, all of whom sacrifice their lives in the service of their white employees.

Her despair reminiscent of Partheny’s, Circe complicates this pattern of loyal servitude in that her entire being revolves bitterly around her plan of wreaking revenge on the Butlers. Continuing the novel’s theme of retaliation, though with actions less randomly perpetrated than Guitar’s murderous campaign, Circe pushes the score-settling process beyond the grave, supervising the utter destruction of the property long after the death of the last Butler, Elizabeth, who kills herself because, as Circe tells Milkman, “[s]he couldn’t stand to see the place go to ruin. She couldn’t live without servants and money and what it could buy” (246). Intent on destroying even the remnants of white privilege, Circe lingers in the house to ensure that “[e]verything in this world [the Butlers] lived for will crumble and rot” (247). She tells Milkman, “And I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up” (247). Critics who accept Circe’s stance tend to celebrate her life as an on-going act of self-assertion, will, and protest, “a mission” executed, as Margaret I. Jordan puts it, “in the service of honor and righteousness—a justice denied by law and society” (225). However, Jordan overlooks or minimizes the fact that Circe, notwithstanding her fortitude and dignity, lives a life embedded in destruction, not least her own, and that her commitment to justice demands her physical and psychic exposure to the literal waste and decadence of a bygone era. As
with Guitar’s narrative, the strands of retaliation and self-destruction become entangled, so that one reality hardly threads apart from the other.

The crux of this intricacy lies in Southern history. Enshrining her narration of Circe in fairy tale, myth, and magic with explicit allusions to Hansel and Gretel and Odyssean witchery, Morrison also offers a more subtle reference to the plantation myth, the romance that preserves idyllic perceptions of the South. Though set in Pennsylvania, the old Dead/Butler property evokes the faded grandeur of Southern homesteads. Before he follows the trail south to Virginia, Milkman’s arrival at the Pennsylvania farm presages his family’s southern beginnings with a reference to the Dead farm’s peach harvest: “real peaches like they had in Georgia” (234). The scene turns Gothic when Milkman stands outside the Butler house, “[d]ark, ruined, evil” (238), and thinks he sees a child staring at him from a second-story window. The overstated façade could be a fixture in a Southern pastoral: “Four graceful columns supported the portico, and the huge double door featured a heavy, brass knocker” (238). All but empty, the home bears a dilapidated resemblance to Marmion in Delta Wedding. The sound of the knocker, “soaked up like a single raindrop in cotton” (238), resonates with the cash crop image of the South. As the most apparent allusion to the Southern pastoral, Circe’s servitude signifies on at least two Faulkner women, Clytie, whose act of arson destroys the Sutpen mansion in Absalom, Absalom! and Dilsey, who weathers generations of Compsons in The Sound and the Fury. To whatever extent Circe invokes Homer’s epic or a German fairy tale, her link to Southern romance remains no less convincing.

In sustaining this link across time and place, Circe has to endure not only generations of Butlers but, more importantly, the forfeiture of her individuality and wider
connection to humanity. She has lived such an isolated existence that when Milkman urges her to leave the house and “sell the damn dogs” (246), she rebuffs him, saying she has stayed only to see the Butlers expire. Yet, Circe’s rebuttal hardly discharges the validity of Milkman’s argument, however incomplete or flawed it may be also. In truth, there may be no love in Circe’s heart for her former employers, but her dedication to the narrative that binds her to them creates a loyalty that belies her pursuit of conquest. Milkman’s remark “And you still loyal” (247) implies that the old woman’s devotion to ruin has left her empty, incomplete in herself. Here Milkman’s accusation reifies Morrison’s discourse with earlier Southern writing. Circe’s connection to Welty’s Partheny, for instance, rests in the wastefulness of the women’s imminent deaths. After exhausting themselves in caring for their employers’ children, and in Circe’s case, for Milkman’s father and aunt as well, their own lives now fade away without serious or thoughtful notice from anyone. Ultimately, Milkman’s critique points to the ambiguity of Circe’s reward. She herself shows disappointment when she realizes that Milkman is not the boy or his sister that she saved after the killing, and she expresses contempt for the county’s black population, who, nevertheless, venerate her protection of Macon Dead’s children as a monumental, heroic deed. Wary of the people’s praise, Circe claims, “I don’t like those Negroes in town” (246). That her attention fixes so completely on the Butlers confirms Milkman’s claim that even now she is committed to the white gaze, that she is “still loyal” and still relational.

Recalling the ghostly, invisible formations of Pinchy, Little Uncle, Bitsy, Roxie, Vi’let, and Aunt Studney in Delta Wedding, Circe’s presence in Song of Solomon redefines the limits of black invisibility. As a housekeeper, she maintains an invisible
status, with the Butlers making no observation whatsoever of her life apart from her duties to them. Their negligence enables her to hide the children in the Butler house without drawing notice, the children’s concealment underlining the difficulty—or in this case, advantage—of black invisibility. To this end, Reverend Cooper, Milkman’s first solid contact in Pennsylvania, tells him, “Best place, I’d say. If they came to town, somebody’d see them. Nobody would think of looking there” (232). The Butlers do not “see” or “look” for what they habitually ignore, and the town’s blacks do not imagine that the children would dare place themselves so close to the source of danger. And yet, when these black people learn of Circe’s trickery, their reaction is one of relief and confidence, not simply in Circe’s machinations but also in the possibility of the children escaping discovery even while living in the house of their enemies. Nevertheless, even as Circe’s deception enables the children’s safety and raises the black townspeople’s spirits, her continued stay in the Butler home long after the family’s demise diminishes her power; eventually she figures as the phantom of her younger self. Without a shred of doubt, the community believes she is deceased, and if the magical element of the novel holds any literal credence, she may, in fact, be dead. Morrison signals Circe’s otherworldliness by way of her impossibly advanced age and by Milkman’s dreamy introduction to her, the woman’s frail body emanating from the literal darkness and the dark of his childish nightmares, “dreams every child had, of the witch who chased him down dark alleys” (239).

Circe’s stark isolation and pinched agency are evocative of Aunt Studney’s. In name and body, Circe and Aunt Studney collapse within the white imagination they struggle to defy; their identities and their existences determined by the very forces they
oppose. Just as Aunt Studney’s defiance falters because of her remoteness, vulnerability, and because she is unwilling to speak more than a single, repeated sentence, Circe’s antagonism stops short of an unqualified triumph. At their most powerful, Aunt Studney and Circe figure as paradoxes. Their autonomous coups distinguish them from other subjugated blacks but not so far as to liberate either woman from their oppressors’ control. To be sure, the women’s rebellion touches the threshold of their all but negated relationship with white dominance, though not beyond and not without destroying the women’s prospects of creating more productive, fulfilling lives. Circe’s occupation of the Butler house re-invokes Aunt Studney’s preoccupation with the Fairchild residence at Marmion, her liminal presence within the white gaze there and elsewhere comparable to Circe’s literal fixedness to the white imaginary of the old, crumbling property in which she readily expects to perish.

Like Welty’s black characters, Guitar and Circe give an insider’s view of the struggle for selfhood, spotlighting the slippages that both separate and synthesize feats of agency with acts of self-sabotage, especially in an environment already opposed to their empowerment. Both Guitar and Circe redefine black invisibility; both draw strength from being incognito (Circe at the Butler house and Guitar a Seven Days agent), but both suffer from their obsession for retribution, and in their campaign to right the past, they lose perspective of their expansiveness as people. Both become the shadows they purposely embody. Consumed by a moral imperative, they devote their lives to the pursuit of justice, with Guitar resorting to wasteful, black-defeating violence. His shooting of Pilate recalls Root’s slashing of Juju’s face and Man-Son’s knife fight with his brother.
These images of black annihilation ultimately indict the insidious legacy of America’s color line. Searching the murky, peculiar spaces where empowerment verges on self-defeat, Welty and Morrison deftly mark the psychic damages incurred by opposition. Morrison’s signification lends focus and cogency to Welty’s thematics of limitation, an aesthetic that commemorates the Southern pastoral while critiquing the racialist ethos that frames it. Undoubtedly, the black presence in Delta Wedding casts more than a collective shadow over the Fairchild clan. The signs of vanishing, fighting, and wounding in the novel chart not only the crucible of the Jim Crow South but also an intriguing instance in Welty’s imagination, in which the author counterbalances the absented black body with an emergent, rebellious black subject. Welty’s characterization consequently exemplifies a new beginning in cross-racial representation, occupying a seminal break between object and subject, between shadow and character, and—most daring for Welty—between self-assertion and self-destruction. In a conversation with Mel Watkins in 1977, Morrison, evidently struck by Welty’s sensitivity and boldness, declared her “fearless,” adding, “Welty write[s] about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write” (“Talk” 47). Echoing Morrison’s sentiments here, François Pitavy argues that, as women, Welty and Morrison “could see through the male system of unseeing, could see what was in plain sight” (52). Possibly as women, with something to gain from un-writing the male vision of the pastoral South and rural North, Welty and Morrison could present African Americans without the distraction of romance or patronizing control, conceiving, instead, realistic black people who reflect the widest possible range of human behavior.
In contrast to the fieldworkers in *Delta Wedding*, Phoenix Jackson, the ancient protagonist of “A Worn Path” (1941), proves that not all of Welty’s assertive black characters suffer for their defiance and that not every defiant act deteriorates into self-negation. In the story, Phoenix etches out an indelible impression of her life-force as she undertakes an arduous journey along the Old Natchez Trace to obtain medicine at a doctor’s office for her ailing grandson. Unlike the halcyon fields of Shellmound, the path she follows winds through a wintry terrain that eerily reiterates the South’s rhetoric of racialized violence: “Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard” (142). Phoenix remains undaunted, even while staring down the gun of a white small-game hunter. Her lack of outward fear denies the hunter a satisfactory sign of her surrender. Persistent in her journey, she rebuffs his menacing gaze as well as his verbal threat (disguised as advice) to “stay home, and nothing will happen to you” (146). Nothing about Phoenix’s response, “I bound to go on my way, mister” (146), suggests a masked performance or self-sabotage. Yet, she and Aunt Studney possess a similar trajectory: old peripatetic survivors of the Southern landscape, both undeterred by white eyes and both beset by trying tasks, the full meaning of which only they can know. As racialized subjects, both women embody Welty’s prismatic sense of perspective. With Aunt Studney appearing faintly tragic and Phoenix triumphant, the controlling vision alone—the seen subject and the process of seeing—illuminates for the reader a flickering significance, ever expanding and refracting.
Chapter Two

(Dis)embodying the Delta Blues:

Wolf Whistle and Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine

As two fictionalized accounts of Emmett Till’s murder, Bebe Moore Campbell’s Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine and Lewis Nordan’s Wolf Whistle, published in 1992 and 1993 respectively, could not be more dissimilar. While Your Blues spans three decades, Wolf Whistle focuses primarily on the events of 1955 when Till, a black child from Chicago, ostensibly broke the cardinal rule of the South by soliciting a white woman, Mississippi shopkeeper Carolyn Bryant. Nordan’s tale captures the stillness of that moment as well as the terror of the child’s abduction, torture, and murder that in real life soon followed. Accentuating the farcical element of the actual trial with the image of a parrot flying over the courtroom and defecating on the accused, Nordan, here and throughout his novel, seamlessly fuses brutal realism and burlesque, balancing the act of his unruly telling between comedy and compassionate fantasy. By contrast, Campbell’s less experimental, less risky narration chronicles the continuing implication of Till’s death on segregation culture in the rural South and urban North long after 1955.

Despite their differences in writing styles and ways of design, Nordan and Campbell similarly cull their characters from the complex psychological prism of the blues, promoting the social prevalence of blues music as a metaphor for what Barbara
Baker, in discussing *Wolf Whistle*, terms “interracial consciousness” (20). Baker’s phrase “interracial consciousness” vividly describes the tendency of the blues to transcend racial boundaries and to weave a bicultural mesh of shared experiences. At the same time, Campbell and Nordan have acknowledged their indebtedness to the memory of Till, Campbell in interviews, and Nordan at the end of his essay “Growing Up White in the South” where he emphatically declares, “In *Wolf Whistle*, Emmett, Bobo, holds the same position as he held in my heart. He is the fixed center … [the] *terra firma*. He is the reality, he is the rock. [H]e touched [my life] without … me ever meeting him” (vi). *Terra firma*, foundational, and “fixed,” Emmett Till signifies for Nordan, by his own admission, the very body of historical shift. Nordan and Campbell alike build into their representations of Till—as well as other black bodies—contradictory symbols of political compliance and social resistance. Centrally, I am intrigued by the novels’ schismatic presentations of African American bodies as phenomenologically present and absent, there and not there, bodies vital and dying, abject and rebellious, whose textual representations combine images of a segregated and violent South with the cathartic and regenerative rhetoric of the blues. Nordan and Campbell essentially meld the black body with the musical concept of a silent break, a rest measure, revealing instances in which the white separatist gaze, apart from acts of torture and killing, attains fulfillment through a continuous and pathological overlooking of the black presence.

Seeing as how “white only” justice (and consequently black absence) coincided historically with the production of blues music, here is where the novels make their most subtle and profound use of the blues metaphor, where, in fact, two
cultural systems—blues ethos and Jim Crowism—merge in the signifying figure of the black body. While *Wolf Whistle* suggests how these black musicians ontologically and with their lyrics resisted the ongoing threat of white violence, *Your Blues* characterizes mid-century black migration through the complex blues trope of locomotion, racialized impediment, and freedom. Obviously, Nordan and Campbell are employing divergent strategies in their treatment of the blues. Drawing on the music’s familiar theme of death defiance, Nordan, in the most visionary section of his novel, imparts a magical look at Till’s murdered body, conferring on the child a prophetic consciousness that persists beyond the instance of his death. Campbell’s more realistic storytelling synchronizes paradigmatic events and individual neuroses, the repression and sublimation that her characters experience—sitting at a train station or watching fieldworkers pick cotton—framed implicitly in relation to blues song. In both books, the blues surface and operate seminally as an interventionist text, or counter-narrative, necessarily complicating the recorded history of the era as well as readers’ perceptions of it now.

The act of the black body slipping into absence bestows an opportunity for empowerment and healing: it is a crisis moment, a challenge to the performer to transform bad into better. To be absented physically and subjectively in the making of popular American cultural consciousness and to invest that positionality of absence with vitality and purpose is, in many respects, to sing the blues. In brief, the blues articulate a cosmic loneliness, an affliction that Campbell and Nordan carefully and cleverly entangle with the matter of racial alienation. Both novelists, however, push their analogies beyond such “tidy” configurations of blues music, solitude, and race.
In a conversation printed after the text of her novel, Campbell comments, “I certainly feel that [all people’s] blues are intertwined. Lily’s blues of being a subjugated, molested white baby girl directly feed into Armstrong Todd’s blues of being this murdered black boy.” Clearly, Campbell objects to territorializing the blues and blues ethos to strict phylogenetic constructions of race and art.

Meanwhile, in an interview in 2001, Nordan would state, “[T]he same year my book came out, *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* [came out]. It was very hard for me to give myself permission to do [my book] until I realized that people like me … poor middle-class whites … we have a voice too. And our voice was too silent during the fifties” (qtd. in Bjerre 375). Thus, as a *de-territorialized* text, *Wolf Whistle* not only reflects Nordan’s youthful and immutable contact with blues music, but also emulates blues song lyricism and structure by way of its riffs on the sexual, the tragic-comic, and the absurd. Nordan situates the music as a black and white cultural product, a strategy he has used throughout his fiction writing career, marking his reliance on a performance ethos that, as he attests, has impacted not only his creativity but also the (re)making of the biracial South. In the same interview, Nordan states, “When I wrote *Wolf Whistle*, I don’t know I wrote a word of it first draft without blues playing,” and then about the scene where child killer Solon Gregg sings blues with his family, the author explains, “It’s the only language he’s got” (qtd. in Bjerre 375). Nordan’s statement stresses the cross-infiltration of language and culture in his text and the humanity that blues music bestows even on the story’s worst villain. By extending the blues lyric from a solely black space into a multiracial one, Nordan and Campbell expose the falseness of segregation, not obviously the material premise of
its reality, but its failure to erect in the heart and mind an impenetrable wall of racialized difference. Nordan is simultaneously able to bypass charges of cultural and textual appropriation by construing Till’s death as a quintessential event in white terror, one that indicts the complacency of Money, the small Mississippi town, where the atrocity began to unfold.

In *Seems Like Murder Here*, Adam Gussow contradicts the popular belief that traditional blues songs only evoke scenes of wanderlust, lost love, poverty, drunkenness, and lovers’ quarrels. Theorizing that in addition to these themes racialized murder pervades many blues lyrics, Gussow further explains that the fear of white reprisal forced black singers to use veiled references in order to express their rage and lament. Like every other person of color living or traveling in the segregated South, blues musicians existed in a panopticon of white surveillance, founded mainly on white fears of the black beast rapist, a phenomenon that Grace Elizabeth Hale examines throughout *Making Whiteness, the Culture of Segregation in the South 1890-1940*. Hale also reminds readers that among the intended effects of race killings the most important was to ensure black subjugation, as sharecroppers, as manual laborers, as uneducated, as un-uppity. Consequently, no other space for black bodies could exist. In making whiteness, race murder and segregation culture achieved the concomitant goal of annihilating a vital black presence. Making up the periphery of most small Southern towns, blacks virtually became invisible. As far as many whites were concerned, African Americans could be seen and easily overlooked, heard and not heard. The covert killings that lasted long after the decline of public slayings reasserted the rule of white oppression, the rule that kept black
bodies in their rightful place. Quiet as they were kept, these secret acts seemed as “unreal” and were as uncoun ted as the bodies that were destroyed.

*Wolf Whistle* and *Your Blues* demonstrate how Till’s death, his disfigured corpse especially, countered this narrative of oppression and began the work of re-authoring the body politics of the South. To communicate this change, Nordan transfigures and redeems Bobo’s flesh, setting it above the old lynch narrative and placing it, instead, in the recuperative framework of the blues. In a feat of magic, Nordan binds the image of the blues singer, strumming and singing into the jagged splinter of his life, with that of the slain boy’s body singing out into the lush void of the Mississippi Delta. Bobo becomes with beatific grace the body of the blues. His song reaches far, eventually changing the landscape and the people who inhabit it.

This waterways singer represents the apotheosis of Nordan’s undead blues artist. Before returning to this scene in the marsh, I wish to examine the other singers—The Rider, Rage Gage, and Blue John—who in their own way, rewrite the South, at least the part of the South they have been given. These men perform from a “joyful” reformation of their despair as non-entities, or ciphered spaces, or to borrow Houston Baker’s phrase “from the (w)hole of blackness” (5). Their lyrics permeate Nordan’s text, commenting on it same as a Greek chorus, or more apropos, like a “signifying” audience who in turn propel the next phase of the story.

The blues artists make their debut in the novel, strumming their instruments and sitting on the porch of Red’s Goodlookin’ Bar and Gro. Their constant playing abruptly breaks off when “[Bobo] said what he said” to Lady Sally Ann Monterbeclair: “The blues singers had already stopped playing. They must have
heard the children talking, must have suspected that the boy from Chicago didn’t know no better” (*Wolf Whistle* 34). Bobo’s fatal indiscretion opens up a blues measure of chaos, with the singers on the porch and everyone in the room recognizing the shift. The silence marks the inability of art and language to absorb immediately the breaking of social boundaries. Stark and abysmal, the silence encloses the gap, or blank, of the black body. And, if nothing more, this breaking quiet portends the horror to come.

What the patrons and musicians understand is the imminence of white violence, how it lurks behind every corner, how it stalks the shadows, awaiting its next victim. These people also understand the code that governs when and where violence is unleashed and that Bobo has just violated that code. Earlier in the scene, the blues singers give an encrypted foretelling of eruptive violence, utilizing Robert Johnson’s verses, “*Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail*” (32). The song insinuates itself into the very narration of the text, moving outward from the men’s thoughts: “the blues were falling down all around … like hail” (31) with an obvious pun on *hail* and *hell*. In the meantime, Johnson’s song articulates the menace of the men’s daily lives:

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I got to keep movin’
I’ve got to keep movin’
Blues fallin’ down like hail.
Blues fallin’ down like hail.
And the days keep on worryin’ me
There’s a hellhound on my trail.
Hellhound on my trail.
Hellhound on my trail.
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The song and its performance also suggest an interior dialogue among the blues men, an exchange heard and *not heard* by Red and his customers. Invisibility here grants a
shield, and the blues men take cover, permitting themselves and the music a language of high intelligence that for its disguise is indecipherable to its audience of oppressors.

A widespread trope in the rhetoric of the blues, the *hellhound* image connotes perilous pursuit and salvation. To elude hellfire—the lit torches of a lynching mob—the individual draws on the virtue of his wit and will to survive. But the confrontation with death is elaborate and always impending. Again, the music anticipates and responds to the menace of racialized murder; one reality counterposes the other. Except, the blues, as Houston Baker asserts, smashes simple dualities (2-3), and in this light, the performer purposely locates the impetus for his music in the hazards of white fury. The blues performers do not hide from the white townspeople in Arrow Catcher; they do not physically remove themselves from white consciousness. On the contrary, they place themselves at its center, forcing a daily confrontation with their reality, spinning their blues lyric out of the potential risk inherent in the encounter. Regardless of the threat of violence and the absenting of bodies, the blues men take their positions in the store. What imperils also inspires, and vice versa.

Ironically, while safeguarding the artists, the singing also stresses their alienation. Practically everyone in *Wolf Whistle*, not just these blues performers, feels the sharp pinch of loneliness. Alice and Runt Conroy and Mrs. Gregg, some of Nordan’s loneliest people, all grapple with this problem, and all experience, at various moments in the narrative, blues performances and are thereby comforted, if not also wholly transfigured. Part of the performer’s work, then, is to recognize his
alienation and that of others and add to his vision the consoling meaning of melody and rhythm.

Nowhere is this tie between violence and loneliness more pronounced than in these blues passages. Literalizing the disposition of the outsider in the stock symbol of the wandering artist, Blue John articulates the paradox of living an un-life. Blue John “sang about waking up in the morning and seeing the blues walking like a man. He sang, ‘Come on, blues, take my hand’” (24). Typically on the go, the Southern blues artist must stay two steps ahead of trouble, hellhound trouble. Blue John’s words crystallize the concept of the absented blues persona, who defies death and fills the cipher of his life with music. The line “the blues walking like a man” serves as a metonym for the victims of racist villainy, and the constant threat of violence, and functions as a mitigating force against the despair that white terror breeds. Blue John’s song also affirms the need for personal attachment and companionship. John depicts himself keeping company with a fellow artist, someone able to sympathize with his plight in life. Paying tribute to friendship and the strategic use of invisibility, both the song and the scene it mirrors operate profoundly as coping devices.

Perhaps most remarkable about John’s lyric is its use of myth-making. Blue John mythologizes himself and his friends, a tactic that lends mystery to his own persona, safeguarding himself—at least in his fantasy—from daily pitfalls. The myth that surrounds The Rider, a pink-skinned albino, depicted in the same scene, recapitulates the notion of death defiance: “Everybody was scared of The Rider. Everybody said The Rider had done been brung back from the dead by a hoodoo woman” (24-25). But again, as Nordan’s anecdote about The Rider suggests, the
denseness of blues aesthetics undercuts the facileness of duality. For even amongst
his friends, The Rider is a person of isolation: “Wouldn’t nobody talk to him.
Everybody said The Rider had pink eyes like a grave rat” (24-25). He is an outsider
among outsiders but always, nonetheless, at the core of his coterie.

Runt’s son, Roy Dale, takes on the role of the outsider when he sneaks out of
his house late one night to sit and jam with the blues artists, as now they have all
moved over to Rage Gage’s barbershop. Racial difference remains the reason for
exclusion; only now the material space has shifted from white to black. At the shop
Rufus McKay candidly disapproves of Roy Dayle’s company. Rufus asks Rage
Gage, “How come you be letting white trash set around in your house?” (95), and
then at Roy he snarls, “I got a razor in my shoe … I’ll cut your little white-trash,
cracker-ass throat” (96). To this, Roy replies, “You and whose monkey?” (96). In
spite of the fracas that erupts between them, or perhaps because of it, because it is so
frank, so unhampered by racialized deferment and sycophancy, Roy Dale is allowed
into the confidence of the barbershop singers. His love for the blues outshines his
racial difference.

If the scenes at the store and the barbershop present inverse sides of the
segregated South, then they also render, aesthetically and historically, an internal
resolution. Contrary to the blues-spun myths of death defiance, black bodies in real
time “keep their place,” careful not to disrupt the order of daily routine at Red’s,
where, for instance, Rufus puts on the stereotype of “the old shoeshine boy ... who
slept all day and woke up singing songs from a former time” (95). But in the shared
discourse of the barbershop, these men, most notably Rufus, are bodily transformed.
No longer a passive shoeshine boy, no longer asleep, Rufus has literally shape-shifted into a new person, “tall and skinny and mean” (95). Also, the style of the men’s singing changes, as the need for ambiguity has all but vanished at the barbershop. Protected by the night, the blues are transfigured alongside the men’s bodies, appearing and sounding bolder, less disguised or hidden in plain sight, though no less artful.

Throughout the performance, the conversation continues, blurring the boundaries between art and unadorned speech, blending plain talk and blues tropes. Generating a “magic hour” effect, the musicians gain sweet release and a fullness of expression unattainable at Red’s. But are these men as blameworthy of Bobo’s murder as Solon and the other white men at the store? When Blue John tells a derogatory joke about the town’s blacks, calling them “spear-chuckers,” and The Rider laughs, Rufus fires back, “You make joke like that and you jes part of the problem. All y’all just guilty as sin … guilty as me” (102). In reading this scene, Barbara Baker concludes, “Everyone in Arrow Catcher must share in the guilt of Bobo’s tragedy” (37). What Baker fails to acknowledge is a more complex collective psyche in which the men’s feelings of helplessness further exacerbate their sense of blame. Displacing his own responsibility, Blue John repeatedly provokes Rufus, asking, “What did you do…?” adding, “Act like you’s asleep and sing show tunes?” (99). But the provocations are self-implicating, further impelling the musicians to rehearse the scene at Red’s, exhausting, at least temporarily, their pent-up anger and frustration in, as Houston Baker notes about the blues, “a veritable playful festival of meaning … a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative,
nonsequential meditation—of species experience” (5). Houston Baker’s idea of blues performance as “the experiencing of experience” captures the men’s struggle to make meaning of the morning at Red’s, or at least to lend it an indestructible priority in the psyche, a painful subject to revisit, re-experience, possibly transmute into pleasure and solace. Finally, the men strum and sing with the presentiment that Bobo has indeed died even before Solon sets out to kill him. And their humor, Blue John’s joke in particular, albeit crass and self-effacing, suggests, like their music, the need to laugh before crying, to evade, on the emotional level, open displays of vulnerability and defeat.

Away from the barbershop, Nordan powerfully probes the psychosocial damage of black bodies absented by second class citizenship. Patterned in an identifiably white and alternately privileged and underclass point-of-view, the novel, notwithstanding the barbershop scene, routinely portrays African Americans as “disembodiments.” These characterizations keenly inscribe Nordan’s strategic use of the 1950s white gaze, placing the reader inside the mindset of one such as Solon Gregg, permitting, above all else, a visual and historical insight into the killing mind. Nordan, at the same time, complicates the gaze, showing how white individuals, conditioned by racism, could demonstrate kindness and compassion toward African Americans, while still perceiving black bodies as specimens of negligible existence. When, for instance, Runt Conroy walks to the Belgian Congo to warn Bobo’s caretakers of impending danger, he is certainly acting out of a beneficent impulse. Yet, his supremacist worldview informs him that he can simply show up in the streets and “holler up a nigger” (44). The people of the Congo decline his call until finally
he hears a voice from behind a closed door:

    Didn’t nobody come out, and Runt couldn’t see nobody, neither one, but then a disembodiment answered him, he reckoned that’s what it was, old woman’s voice through the closed door of the house. … Runt spoke with ease to disembodiments. (45-46, emphasis added)

Runt assumes the voice belongs to an old woman, but because he cannot see the speaker, he cannot be altogether sure. He simply observes the speaker as a “voice,” a “disembodiment.” Pointing out Runt’s “ease” in speaking with absented persons (46), Nordan’s narrator confirms the conditioning of Runt’s separatist (if not virulently racist) outlook, his willingness not to see. In the meantime, the black speaker takes advantage of the situation by telling Runt that the man he is looking for does not exist (“Ain’t no Uncle”), that Uncle is dead (46). She uses her invisibility strategically to absent a member of her community against the potential threat of violence. Only after Runt explains the situation, that Uncle’s nephew “had a piece of white trash mad at him” (46), does the speaker relent, supplying reliable information about where Uncle lives. And only after Runt promises not to hurt anybody does an actual black person appear, whole and fleshed, from the dark hull of the shack:

    a girl about nine years old came out. Behind her, a long, skinny black arm materialized from nothingness and poked out of the dark shack to try to grab her back inside but too late, that little ninny was already on the porch, sassy, what you talking bout. (47)

The girl, Doe Rinda, dramatically “figured,” and perhaps the daughter or granddaughter of the disembodied voice, who is only partially “materialized,” rebelliously matches her face with her words, defying the practice of avoidance and denial set in motion by the older voice.

    Inevitably, the white construction of black invisibility forms a crucial
narratological element in the capturing and killing of Bobo. During the scene of his abduction, he *appears* in the text only once, when “Solon pulled Bobo out of the bed by his feet” (140). Nowhere else in the chapter (the sixth) do we *see* Bobo fleshed out on the page, even as Solon commands him to get dressed and walk down the steps of Uncle and Auntee’s house into the waiting El Camino. Throughout the old couple’s stalling tactics, what Solon calls “chit chat and foot dragging” (144), the narrator omits all description of Bobo’s reaction to Solon or to his aunt and uncle. Even while he is forced to accompany Solon in the long car ride across the rain-soaked Delta, Bobo all but in a few passages *disappears* from the text. These erasures highlight Solon’s racist tendency to see and not see black bodies, as his viewpoint takes over in these moments as the operative perspective of the novel. (The omissions also eerily re-evoke the instance of the blues artists riffing on Bobo’s death as a foregone conclusion.) Readers see and do not see Bobo simply because Solon’s gaze has already absented him, because it has already marked him as deceased. As the tragedy looms closer and closer, Bobo’s textual death prefigures his actual one.

Bobo’s removal from the page accentuates other conflicts in Nordan’s narrative. Hours before the abduction, Alice sees in a raindrop the image of a drowned child. Assuming the child is Glenn Gregg, an absentee fourth grader suffering from third-degree burns, Alice inadvertently binds him bodily with the story’s other child victim, Bobo. Glenn incurs his injuries, trying to torch his father, Solon, a man who attacks bodies everywhere he goes, from “rolling queers in New Orleans,” to habitually beating Glenn’s mother. Solon’s misdeeds toward Mrs. Gregg
incite the boy’s aggression, one that holds such a disastrous backlash for him. Solon, then, is at least partly responsible for his son’s death whereas he is totally accountable for Bobo’s demise, the two boys’ bodies further linked by the magnitude of their hideous ruin. My conflation of Bobo and Glenn is not to suggest that they share exactly the same lot in life: Glenn’s whiteness obviously grants him social privilege, albeit conditional, given his family’s abject poverty and the predicament of his health. The point is that both boys, both bodies are bound up in the net of white violence. Conversely, Glenn and Bobo have a rendezvous with blues music, Bobo at Red’s, his boasting and showboating juxtaposed with the singers’ tunes, and Glenn on his deathbed listening to his family perform a Blue John song that he “had once loved” (75).

Unlike Glenn Gregg, Bobo returns, not of course to the full force of life but in the thriving rhetoric of blues resurrection. Nordan collapses into the moment of Bobo’s dying what I read as an enchanted blues performance and an empathetic landscape that listens and responds. Prior to this moment, the narrative amasses images of a primordial underwater consciousness, “transformations, angels and devils, worlds invisible to Bobo before death” (175). These magical depictions remake the murderous history of the Delta while at the same time suggesting a blues ethos and aesthetic. The rain-soaked land rehearses daily events, reworking, the way a blues artist does, the ordinary and the tragic into ornate cadence:

The water was pouring down over the spillway like music. (163)

The water was pouring over the dam, making its musical sound, different from the rain on the roof, though that sound was music, too. (165)
The music of the spillway water in the swamp sounded like soft, faraway plucking on the strings of the guitars of the blues singers on Red’s front porch. (166)

Oh, there was music in the swamp, … the wheezy, breathy asthma of the compress, the suck and bump like great lungs as the air was squashed out. (176-177)

Significantly adding to this link of earth and body is the image of the black cadaver consigned repeatedly over time to the Mississippi waterways. When Alice tells Runt about her vision of a drowned child, he responds, matter-of-fact, “These Delta rivers are full of niggers, honey” (88). Evidenced in Alice’s vision and in Runt’s remark, the swamp does not obliterate but recycles, constantly penetrating the psyche of the living with reminders of the slaughtered. In this light, Bobo literally and magically fleshes out the implied blues subject of the traumatized black body.

Nordan’s fantastical image of Bobo’s corpse captures the racial antithesis of the Jim Crow South, as encapsulated by the scenes at Red’s store and Rage’s shop. Bobo’s spillway performance reiterates the audacity of his verbal stunt inside the store while aggrandizing the blues men’s transfigurations at the barbershop. In a limbo state of semi-consciousness, with a blown-out “demon eye” and chanting mermaid voice, Bobo synthesizes those qualities that make up the individual musicians of the novel. For one, his submersion in the lake imparts special insight into the reality of absented bodies: “The gin fan was … the weight to hide Bobo’s body” (emphasis added 178). But, of course, he does not stay hidden: he uses his dead space creatively. Like The Rider, Bobo in the spillway is a re-originated life force, a body shrouded in mystery and defiant of the finality of death. Where he does not sing in the conventional sense, his body sings, the verse as varied and vatic as it is
compassionate. Just as Blue John and Rage Gage draw their subjects from a universal frame of loneliness, Bobo pulls into his sight some of Arrow Catcher’s loneliest individuals: Solon in all his doings, Glenn, “disfigured in his bed” (180), and Alice, heartbroken over a married man but sensitive enough to foresee Bobo’s drowning in a raindrop. This vision inside a vision, out of sync with chronological time, reflects the nonlinear, nonsequential structure of the blues lyric. Bobo’s vision and song exemplify the cross-racial appeal and relativity of the blues: regardless of when or where suffering happens, all pain and all desire—black, white, male, and female—are entangled and responsive to the other.

Besides posing a humanistic response to a wounded South, the scene mythically removes the black artist from a more typical performance space. “Blues song,” Adam Gussow notes, “was [a] way of reconstituting the pleasure of racialized torture … redistributing it away from a sadistic white lynch mob and toward the ‘suffering’ black blues subject and his community” (29). Nordan’s magic essentially compresses the amount of time that usually separated Negrophobic violence and black musical complaint. Bobo’s song, therefore, transcends the rigors of temporal space, an indication of the extent to which the child’s death embodies, much like the blues artists, the psychic and physical trauma that informs black life in the 1950s. Gussow observes, “[T]he blues singer in one characteristic guise proposes him—or herself as an abject, isolated, tortured but articulate sufferer, the voice of a black body’s aching parts refusing to be scattered and silenced” (29). While citing several recently published memoirs of blues singers, complete with eyewitness accounts of white terror during segregation, Gussow fingers the music’s redress of the black
corpse. His analysis locates the blues’ paradoxical recognition of the “utter
dissolution” (28) of the tortured, dismembered body and the body’s figurative rebirth
and subversive continuance in the life and lyrics of the singing artist. One such
account, that of Texas singer Mance Lipscomb, recalls the 1906 lynching of a black
man in Navasota, Texas: “Man didn have a face! Body near about like mush. …
And I’m still here, playin on this old gittah” (qtd. in Gussow 28). Lipscomb’s
recollections and statement of defiance focus the relationship between a distressed
black populace and its chosen recourse of musical invention. Although metaphorical,
Bobo’s transformation embraces the work of many blues artists such as Robert
Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Bessie Smith, the child’s verses turning up the
volume of social protest encoded in the lyrics of many of their songs. But where in
life blues singers commonly traversed the waterways of racial alienation and fear,
Bobo counter-codes the fatalism of the spillway as well as the wound of racist
violence with his very being, or nonbeing.

Without question, Nordan takes a considerable risk portraying Bobo as a
death, a nonentity, the boy’s actions and thoughts primarily missing from earlier
scenes but his death magnified in the text by the spectacular display of his body’s
destruction. This textual representation of Bobo’s nonbeing has long troubled readers
and critics of the novel who deliberately ask, where is the historical Emmett, his
consciousness prior to his demise, or any depiction of his character as a black teenage
boy? Randall Kenan, in his memorable review of Wolf Whistle, back in 1993,
articulated what many consider a critical neglect in Nordan’s creative interest:

In the words of Douglas Ward’s play Day of Absence, ‘Where de
nigars at, Luta?’ One cannot help but sigh in regret, imagining what
profundity might have been attained had the author attempted to imagine what is apparently still unimaginable to too many Americans.

(594)

Until now, I have centered my reading of *Wolf Whistle* on the intricate rewards available in analyzing its purposeful absenting of the black body, but Kenan’s complaint cannot be roundly dismissed. If Nordan’s creative design contains any limitations, they are perhaps most pronounced in the murder scene, where without the racist gaze (Solon soon departs the waterway), Bobo might be expected to come alive as a character, as fully human, his thoughts touched less by mythic charm and more by realism. The scene at Rage’s shop evinces Nordan’s ability to render such portrayals. Throughout the barbershop scene (that Kenan himself glosses over), Nordan effectively negotiates his way into a sustained, interior representation of the black subject. By temporarily jettisoning the lethal view of Solon and other racists, Nordan is able to endow Rufus McKay and the blues singers with uncompromisingly complex personalities. The same may be said for Uncle and Auntee, whose lovemaking Nordan tenderly narrates moments before Solon’s fateful arrival at their house. The author’s claim in “Growing Up White in the South” (iii–iv) that Bobo (Emmett) occupies the firm moral, emotional ground, around which the novel’s fanciful, unearthly action revolves, rings true. Less convincing is Nordan’s suggestion in the essay that Bobo’s ground is untouched by the strange, the unearthly, or that because he retains the use of “Bobo,” Till’s real-life nickname, or that because he authentically reconstructs the events surrounding the child’s lynching, Bobo as a *literary character* constitutes the picture of reality or realism. To be fair, in a book where buzzards engage anthropomorphically in human-like dialogue and a parrot
sounds off like a cash register, a murdered child singing in the spillway appears more mundane—by comparison only. But I would hardly describe Bobo’s death song as realistic; the singing, I find, more precisely reflects Nordan’s regard for Emmett Till as *terra firma*, as his most precious and sacred link to the historical events. Either way, Nordan’s reluctance to interrogate in *Wolf Whistle* the boy’s feelings and thoughts leaves the child a holy object, a centerpiece lacking in the many nuances of human consciousness and experience.

What readers find in place of the child’s interiority is a rendering that stylizes a stalwart perception of Till’s murder as unfathomable, as incomprehensibly heinous. Instead of inventing Bobo’s anguish, Nordan re-articulates the significance of Emmett Till’s highly publicized corpse as an iconic epiphany of racial injustice. Here then, if nowhere else, *Wolf Whistle*’s magic best mirrors its historical source. Sounding the battle cry for the Civil Rights movement, the unsightly image of Till’s corpse would immensely impact United States history and social policy, a matter well documented by historical narratives as well as the accounts of those who experienced firsthand various aspects of the social revolution. Seizing the authority and command of this watershed event, Bobo’s body sings out to Sugar Mecklin and Sweet Austin, the two boys who discover his corpse, “I am the mermaid, I am the lake angel, I am the darkness you have been looking for all your sad lives” (184). Then, suddenly, transposed into a Gospel aesthetic, “with a choir on the far side of the lake” (183), Bobo’s song harmonizes all the “voices” of the anonymously or half-forgotten lynched, converting covert murder into public spectacle. A reconstructed corporal identity, Bobo undermines the authority that spectacle killings once held for white
society: “In death, Bobo was patient. … Soon enough they would see the weight, the wire, the bullet holes, the magic eye” (185).

As Grace Hale explains in *Making Whiteness*, each known instance of lynching, perpetrated publicly as a spectacle event or clandestine in the dark of night, furthered a script of fear and loathing in which white Americans labored intensely to maintain unquestionable dominance over the black population. The social script usually contained scenarios comprising first of allegations of sexual or physical infraction against most often a black man, followed by his arrest, and next the wrestling of the man from jail by an irate white mob. Consistent with cuffings, stabbings, pokings, burnings, and countless other torments used to force confession, the mob violence routinely culminated in the slicing off of ears, fingers, and genitals, as well as the torching of the entire body. By way of epilogue to what passed as entertainment, an underground market of black body parts began to flourish. Skin, digits, and hanks of hair all became fair game in the trade. Newspapers, telegraphs, and film clippings extended the script of white supremacy by announcing, endorsing, and celebrating the practice of exhibition killings. Eventually, the phenomenon lost widespread support in the 1930s when the NAACP “capture[d] the lynching narrative” with their distribution of anti-lynching pamphlets and through their appeals to local, state, and national legislators (Hale 226). Merely thwarted, though, the narrative persisted, mainly now in the vagaries of the media and in the imagination of its audience. “[S]outhern whites,” Hale states:

no longer needed to “dirty” their towns with actual lynchings. The spectacle circulated in detailed written accounts of tortures, pickled and dried body parts, a radio announcement, an Edison recording, a film, and even a gruesome picture postcard sent and saved: these
artifacts did the cultural work of othering southern African Americans, of making whiteness… [T]he image of the “black beast rapist,” providing a foundation for the culture of segregation beyond the reach of rational discussion, remained[,]… and by the late 1930s representations of lynchings worked almost as well as lynchings themselves. (226-227)

In the white imagination, the lynched black body eventually subsumed the meaning of the savage crime enacted on it while many white Americans clung to pristine characterizations of themselves as inherently civilized and virtuous. But without accusations of rape or assault, without even the delusional script of justice, the spectacle of Till’s corpse would reverse the effect of clandestine killings and only verify the barbarism of a small Southern town. The enchanted song that Nordan bestows upon his memory of Emmett Till, who, incidentally, did not fall into the hands of buyers and dealers trafficking in lynched body parts, anticipates the possibility of a new social order. *Terra firma*, Bobo invites Sugar and Sweet to see his ravaged carcass, trusting prophetically that the sight will begin the work of dismantling the paradigm of rampant racist fury.

*Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* similarly explores the crumbling of white supremacy following a cataclysmic contact across the color line, namely the lynching of Armstrong Todd, Till’s counterpart in the novel. Like Nordan, Campbell refers to a haunted childhood as a compelling reason to look back at the Emmett Till case, telling interviewer Jane Campbell in 1999, “I was five when he died. … I’d hear my dad talking about him… He was not an historical figure. He was not like Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth or Fredrick Douglas. He was my age just about” (958). The novelist further explains how Till became “a reference point” (958) for her family in a society on the brink of convulsive change. To recreate an atmosphere of
historical shifts, Campbell weaves throughout her narrative the aesthetics, aura, and subject matter of the Delta blues. In that blues artists typically, as Graeme Boone asserts, “distill the theme of self-determination … in a context of social adversity” (85), Campbell’s novel contextualizes personal struggle and psychological torment within rather transparent instances of social crisis.

The novel is largely a forum of cross-experiences, a crossroads dynamic of yours versus mine, which Campbell exploits at various levels of identity, including but not limited to black and white masculinity and white womanhood. The narrative also examines the depth to which racial and economic oppression impact virtually every sexual relationship in the segregated South, from Marguerite and Clayton, to the Todds, but also Ida Long’s parents, even Lily and Floyd, the interpolation of race and sex in each case instancing yet another preferred subject of the blues. Moreover, the novel invokes *vis à vis* its very structure the historical migration of blues music from Mississippi and Memphis to Chicago. By cross-sectioning her story, moving it repeatedly from the South to the North, between white and black, male and female perspectives, Campbell duplicates the multidirectional vocalism of a call and response blues performance.

Reinforcing this twin concept of mobility and change, of lives in transit and transition, is the novel’s provocative use of railroads, one of the blues’ best-trafficked tropes. Particularly telling is the way in which the text combines distinct concepts of locomotion and the absented black body to evoke the motive force of budding social revolution. The novel, for example, dramatizes the importance of movement and change in Delotha’s insistence to transport by rail her son’s remains to Chicago where
an open casket at the funeral would broadcast to the world Mississippi’s brand of backwater justice. In anticipation of Delotha’s plan, Stonewall Pinochet proposes a counter-offensive during a meeting of the Honorable Men of Hopewell, Campbell’s reproduction of the real-life Citizens’ Councils of Mississippi: “We can’t let that body outa Hopewell. No telling what all might happen if she gets to Chicago with it. She might have a notion to call the newspapers up there; she might call the damn NAACP … [. ] That body’s got to stay right here” (91). Betraying an inherent sense of self-correctness, Pinochet locates in Armstrong’s murder hard evidence of white Southern atrocity. Mamie Till, Emmett’s real-life mother, did in fact permit pictures of her deceased son to be published, the grotesquely distorted body of Emmett Till furnishing a banner image for the race revolutions of the 1960s.

Roughing up the heroic surface of these historical events, Your Blues charts the psychic toll Delotha continually pays in dealing with her loss, days and months after her dead son’s exposure in the media and her intrepid train ride out of Mississippi. For her, Armstrong’s body lives on, invading her thoughts and nightmares. Unable or unwilling to channel her anguish into a more recuperative expression, as Blue John, The Rider, and Rage Gage are able to do, Delotha descends into a pit of post-traumatic insensibility, turning to dead-end schemes of revenge against the Coxes and her estranged husband Wydell for his negligence as a father. Traveling as far back as Memphis, Delotha gives up her homicidal enterprise, eventually returning to Chicago. While Campbell celebrates the idea of movement, she suggests through Delotha’s breakdown that as a signifier of social disturbance mobility alone does not always yield positive change. The novel’s tableau of the
impoverished, miserable lives of black exiles, formerly living in the South, keenly illustrates this reality. Just as Delotha’s crisis in Memphis signifies her inclusion in this predicament of the disillusioned black northerner, her ultimate immobility also echoes the thwarting of other Southbound women whose lives hang in transit/transition. Lily has long set her sights on a romanticized Memphis, but by novel’s end she has given up her hopes of traveling there. Determined to spare her son the death that befalls Armstrong, Ida endures many setbacks to her plans to escape the South; eventually she settles into a life in Hopewell, Mississippi where she channels her desire for travel and change into a burgeoning political activism.

Delotha’s activist transportation of her son out of Mississippi only brings her temporary satisfaction: the simple truth is Delotha cannot accept her son’s death. When her plans of revenge fall through, she embarks on a seemingly fruitful plot of reconciling with her husband, starting a business, and having more children. But upon giving birth to her fourth child, a second son, Delotha finds:

He was so much like her first boy. “Armstrong,” she said softly, pressing her lips on the nape of his neck, the side of his face, next to his little ear. “Armstrong,” she repeated, and her fierce voice rose. “No white person will ever hurt you.” (220)

Delotha has suspended her acceptance of Armstrong’s death in an irrational hope to reconstruct him bodily. In her mind, Armstrong’s death simply signifies an untimely (and temporary) absence, inverse to the absenting which predetermined his lynching in the South. Her happiness rests in the illusion that she has conceived and birthed a second son to replace and redeem the death of the first, to fill up the void left inside her body and mind. Inclined by grief to favor her new son over her daughters, she immediately demonstrates her bias, hoarding the child from Wydell (whom she still
secretly resents), breastfeeding her baby boy when she gave the girls Similac.

Delotha’s preoccupation with W.T. worsens through the years, as her sharper judgment gives way to an obsession to shelter and protect his body from the dangers of the world. Spoiled and undisciplined, W. T. turns to the streets in search of a surrogate family. Ironically, as Suzanne Jones points out, Delotha’s failure to heed police warnings and the advice of W.T.’s white teachers further places her son in fatal danger, not necessarily from whites, but from other delinquent black boys (*Race Mixing* 27).

Like Delotha, Wydell does not foresee the emergence of gangs and black on black crime; nor does he predict the havoc they soon wreak on black families. His judgments arise from the former paradigm of white violence; he, like his wife, has stalled, his life put in limbo by his inability to transport himself mentally from the ravages of his Southern past. Unlike Delotha, he is far more apprehensive at the birth of their second son: “Another boy, he thought. They kill the boys, the men. Hang them by their necks and then torch their lifeless bodies. Throw them on the chain-gang for nine hundred years” (222). Clearly, Wydell’s trepidation harks back to his youth, one full of fear and imprinted by a world antagonistic to his survival. As a result, he has a very limited, mostly negative concept of black manhood, specifically black fatherhood. In the South he has left behind, black fathers are mostly powerless in the protection of their children and themselves. Scripted almost entirely by their bodies, but in inferior, subordinate roles, these black men, as field and factory laborers, caretakers, and attendants, formed twinned trajectories of physical and economic subjugation. But their victim status tells half the story, for some black
men, Wydell’s father included, would mimic their white masters, borrowing their violent customs, particularly the practice of whippings. After Armstrong’s killing, Wydell recalls:

how when he was a boy, his father would walk out of Pinochet’s fields with the expression of a whipped dog. It didn’t take much, not much at all, for his father to grab him by the elbow, yank him behind the house, and make him strip down. He would stand in front of the big man, naked and shivering, and his father would walk toward him, holding the whip high in his hands, saying, “Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I tell you?” Didn’t I tell you to put lime in the outhouse; to weed the garden; to put more paper in your shoes and not go barefoot in the rain? To not throw in your daddy’s face everything you learned at that fool schoolhouse, “’cause it ain’t gon’ do you no good no way.” (emphasis added, 155)

Bolstering his father’s defeatist outlook, the beatings mangle Wydell’s general perception of himself as a black man. He sees himself as a punished body, shamed and shameful. In Wydell’s mind, the black male body inevitably attracts violence and destruction, if not from whites, then perhaps from one’s own damaged father. Beginning a cycle of dependence, recovery, and relapse, Wydell turns to alcohol, absenting himself in his drunkenness from the stark reality of his flesh.

Inevitably, Wydell perpetuates in both sons’ lives a pattern of fatherly absence. Not even a strict regimen of working, eating, and sleeping—all done to block out the pain of memory—can prevent Wydell’s mental collapse in which he imagines his deceased son, fleshed and alive, giving chase and calling out, “Daddy” (157). Actually, Wydell’s breakdown engenders a new start, his longest phase of recovery. He and Delotha seem to be on the mend, and yet they never thoughtfully work through their agony as much as they conceal it with material success. On one hand, Armstrong’s phantom body proves vital in the re-membering of his parents’
marital life together. Nevertheless, his murder continues to cast a shadow over their lives, compelling Delotha’s fixation to reproduce a dead child while aggravating Wydell’s uncertainty about his ability to raise boys. Without the benefit of a generative backward glance, Delotha and Wydell build an empty future by repressing the dense mesh of their past and current grief. To re-invoke Houston Baker’s performance philosophy of the blues, Delotha and Wydell do not fully experience the experience of their loss. The couple’s commercial success yields a superficial riff on the deafening pause and chaos of their first son’s death. Wydell takes up drinking again, while Delotha chronically and willfully denies W. T.’s gang and drug-related activity.

Realizing at last the hollowness of their lives, Wydell takes W.T. on a retreat to Mississippi. His attempt to wrest his son and himself from a sequence of self-destructive behavior reverses Wydell’s usual response to crisis. Traveling back to his place of origin, he begins the task of experiencing the experience, of confronting the center of his psychic terrors. Only by evacuating their hold can he achieve a more capable engagement with fatherhood. Integral to Wydell’s definition of roots is a love of the blues. He tells W. T.:

We picked that cotton until our fingers bled. And sometimes when it got bad—and boy, it could get real bad—we’d be in them fields just a-singing, you know. ‘Cause them songs, them songs could get you right. (332)

For Wydell, geography and song do not figure as the same but as highly intimate representations of the other. The music disperses feelings of racial cohesion through an otherwise tattered network of labor, the base of Pinochet’s agrarian empire. In sojourning South, father and son underscore the cultural integration of black physical
identity and musical performance. As impulsive and tactical as a musical riff, this journeying back to the land of original blues production signifies not so much perfect resolution as it does a viable, new beginning. As Wydell craves a drink, W.T. reaches out to comfort him, asking, “Dad, what did you useta sing?” (332).

Contradicting this rehabilitative association of body and song, of travel and new beginnings, is Campbell’s portrait of pool hall manager Jake McKenzie. In both the South and North, Jake disrupts the novel’s twofold design of blues ethos and black mobility. A casualty of internal racism, Jake has heard the same taunt since childhood: “Black Jake. Ugly as a snake” (64). Embittered, he informs on Armstrong and later relocates to Chicago to sing blues in a bar that caters to a predominantly white clientele. In the city, Jake embeds under his skin his sycophantic costume, performing blackness and waggish sexuality as one and the same for an audience of white college types and yuppies:

The more the people hooted, the harder he twirled his hips, too lean for his pants. He turned around, unbuckled his belt, and his pants began slipping and sliding down, revealing his scrawny, naked behind, until there was no music, just yelling and screaming as the old blind man stumbled around the stage, twitching and shaking his ass. (317)

Patronizing the crowd’s prejudices, Jake’s song and dance resemble Rufus McKay’s ingratiating routine at Red’s store in Wolf Whistle, except Campbell’s bar scene stages an added element of wild, derisive spectacle, eerily reminiscent of a public lynching. Jake is still a joke, but now by his doing and according to the misbegotten logic that he controls the laughter. In truth, he is a wasted figure, “who looked as if he didn’t weigh more than 120 pounds” (317). Although Jake takes control, he distorts the freedom spirit of the music he sings, renegotiating its purpose through the degrading manners of minstrelsy. Where Nordan’s singers protest lynching, Jake
reaffirms its cultural intentions; by de-literalizing the act of murder, he in essence lynches himself.

Even more complicated is Lily Cox’s relationship with the blues, as she can only appreciate it through the barrier of her prejudice. Jake has absorbed the white gaze to the point of transforming himself into the object of its projection. Lily, on the other hand, possesses the gaze, but like Jake, her use of it comes at the expense of her own intuition and sense of self-awareness. Also, neither by Jake nor by Lily do readers obtain an unobstructed picture of these anonymous fieldworkers and singers. What we find, instead, interspersed throughout the novel are scenes that bind absented black bodies with the Southern landscape. Campbell frames her narrative with images of a singing earth, a chorus of fieldworkers, but by the book’s end with Wydell and W.T. looking out on a flooded plain, what used to be a cotton field, the land is only ghostly populated, peopled via memory and imagination. The singing bodies, imaged so vivibly in the novel’s first scene, have literally vanished by the last.

As the novel opens, Lily wakes, taking pleasure in the black song performance of the Pinochet fieldworkers: “Colored people’s singing made her feel so good” (9). Lily finds her morning serenade as special and ordinary as “sunshine” and “rain” and “rich like the alluvial soil that nourished everything and everyone in the Delta” (9), a perception that chimes with Nordan’s descriptions of a musical landscape.

The field singers might as well be physically absent in the novel’s first scene: however devoted Lily finds herself to the “colored people’s singing,” she retains the advantage of detachment. The singing happens at a distance, lessening the likelihood of physical contact, which, in Lily’s mind, avers her social privilege. Lily’s
dependence on distance, symbolic and literal, persists, especially during personal crisis. As a child, during an incident of molestation she learns to displace her feelings, to distract herself from her pain by focusing on the field songs. Years later, sitting on her back porch with her daughter Doreen, Lily, much older now, confesses, “I wish I could shut my eyes and see them fields full of singing niggers. It’s beautiful when they make background music for your life” (233). Without the romance of the singing field, Lily’s life, at middle age, has lost its air of superiority. Looking back and idealizing her youth, she elides the scarring memory of her uncle molesting her while she watched fieldworkers just as easily as she overlooks now the reality of the workers’ exploited labor. To act and feel otherwise in either case would divide her from her husband and all the other white men in her life. As a result, the black body surfaces in her thoughts strictly as a “singing nigger,” as innocuous entertainment. Only “the voices” of these disembodied persons “seemed to be inside her” (9). Indeed, Lily’s attraction to the sensuality of the singing, the sexual connotation of its sound and rhythm, “loud and searing, almost violent” (10) stresses the divided nature of her consciousness. A fantasy safe from her husband’s fumbling touch, Lily’s separate existence, as she lives it vicariously through the art of the “other,” draws vibrancy from the very taboo of its imagination. No black man has actually intruded upon the private space of her marital bed, the classic threat of unconscionable transgression. And yet, Lily’s attraction to the singing has developed into a sublimated desire that effectively transports African American bodies across the field into her bedroom.

Parenthetically, at the same time the music excites her libido it also confers
religious comfort. The sexual and sacred facets of the music combine, suppressing the usual binarian distinction. Also, remembered trauma and remembered joy intermix. The singing field that Lily hears now, while reminiscent of her molestation, exerts a more positive therapeutic effect on the wounds of her childhood. Listening, she “began to feel strong and hopeful, as if she was being healed” (9). This healing cannot last, however, as it simply postpones her confrontation with her past trauma.

Lily’s sublimation of carnal desire into “colored people’s singing” holds devastating implications on the race and power dynamics of the Mississippi Delta. Specifically, Lily’s unconscious longing informs her sex life with Floyd, which consistently proves disappointing for her: “he had to push hard to enter, because she was like a desert inside” (47). Floyd’s insensitivity perpetuates a pattern established by Lily’s molestation. Confronted by his own insecurities, Floyd struggles with his father’s imperious model of masculinity, steeped, as it were, in the cause of white supremacy. The pool hall incident merely elevates Floyd’s nervousness to critical proportions; his homicidal actions continue the already long chronicle of white male fear and sexual angst: “What made terror slam into Armstrong like a lash across his back was the fear he saw in Floyd’s eyes” (37). Armstrong, at this point, figures as the incarnation of projected hate, his flesh bearing the brunt of white patriarchy, epitomized by the Coxes, but also by the Pinochets and even Wydell’s father, who, as I have suggested, simply interpolates the white standard of dominance and violence into his own code of masculinity. The image of the lash breaking over Armstrong’s back reverberates with Wydell’s memories of his father beating him, drawing upon the theme of economic control and threatened virility in both black and white men.
Campbell further complicates her canvas of race and sex with her portrayal of Lily and Armstrong in the pool hall the night he mouths French sentences to a crowd of onlookers. For Lily, Armstrong signifies erotic allure and exotic adventure. She interprets his French through the same fetishizing filter that conditions her appreciation of the field songs. In all fairness, Armstrong does attempt to set himself above the poor, Southern crowd, performing foreign exoticism in an attempt to show off his regional difference as a marker of personal cache. As for Lily, Suzanne Jones duly notes the rarity with which the young wife “experiences a powerful moment of sexual attractiveness and social daring” (24). Even with his pretensions, Armstrong is still a young, vital black boy, and Lily’s interaction with him, up close and in the flesh, lends a brief but culminating expression to her latent sexual curiosity across the racial divide, all but shattering the pervasive social fantasy—to which she herself subscribes—that types white women as sexless angels, their bodies inadvertently triggering the lusts of marauding black men. However, this truth-telling moment, like many in this book of poly-mobile shifts, proves all too fleeting to benefit its characters.

Lily discovers her only continuous outlet from white patriarchy during a short-lived friendship with Ida Long, who, same as Armstrong, poses in Lily’s gaze as a quasi-sexual figure. On the cusp of friendship, Lily regards Ida with a look of incredulity and manic fascination, remembering that her sister-in-law Louetta once said, “colored women were like men, that their private parts were different from white women’s” (32). Perceiving “flames in [Ida’s] eyes” Lily feels tempted to touch her (32). But if Lily’s initial, fetishized view of Ida borders on the erotic, it quickly
crosses over to the safer, more socially acceptable space of the spiritual and the
festive: Ida’s free spirit “sparkled before [Lily] as bright as a Christmas ornament”
(32). Lily vows to safeguard her friendship from Floyd: “She thought, He ain’t ever
gon find out” (32), sealing the time she and Ida share with the kind of secrecy one
entrusts to an illicit affair. Ultimately, though, this metaphor of amorous excitement
speaks less to an actual case of veiled homosexual lust than it does to Lily’s
inclination to exoticize the black body. In Lily’s view, the black body, when not
absented, represents danger and social rupture. What really fascinates Lily, then,
about Ida is her boldness and sexual independence: “[s]he don’t have no husband
telling her what to do” (32). The women bond, if only for a while, over their dream
of escaping the stifling atmosphere of Hopewell, Mississippi.

Campbell literalizes the sympathetic attachment of the two women through
the town’s train junction, what Houston Baker calls the “way-station of the blues” (7).
In Railroad: Trains and Train People in American Culture, theorist James Alan
McPherson captures the multiple historical meanings of the train station, which
during the nineteenth century thrived semiotically and tropically in the imagination of
the black working class. The blues, born in the cash crop fields of the South, would
expand, as McPherson explains, via the promise of freedom, democracy, and mobility
that became synonymous with the very sound of steam blowing whistles and churning
wheels (6-9). Ida and Lily likewise draw hope from the sign of the crossroads, the
opposing tracks, and the station itself, as all these markers signify impelling force and
escape. Even their relationship bears a crossroads design in that over the years the
women move toward each other, then away, then toward each other again through
Doreen’s budding friendship with Ida.

Like Delotha and Wydell, Lily represses her true feelings about Armstrong’s lynching. Not until the morning of Floyd’s imprisonment does she finally begin to uncouple herself from her husband’s worldview. This same morning, Floydjunior blames his parents as the source of their family’s misery; his outburst forces Lily to confront “for the first time that the death of Armstrong Todd was not behind her. She felt his memory growing inside her like a new life” (200). Only now does Lily begin to experience Armstrong’s death, allowing it to enter her body, granting it due space in her consciousness. With the memory of Armstrong comes the hard realization of her complicity in his murder and in her husband’s acquittal. Lily’s repression points up Delotha’s. Although from very different angles of the tragedy, both women suffer greatly from repressing the pain of their blues. As suggested by the crisscross trace of the narrative design, only until Delotha and Lily recognize and embrace their troubled and connecting history, pushing through the tacit racial barrier of “yours and mine,” seeing how their blues bind them at the more immediate level of experience, can they gainfully move forward. However, these women never fully reach this point.

Withholding closure but implying its possibility in the instance of Lily’s growing remorse, Campbell emphasizes the urgent necessity of healing (between the races and of the South) by evoking the poignancy of its incompleteness.

Part penance, part attrition, Lily’s memory of the singing bodies, soon vacated by time and the black migration north, morphs into a lyric “seep[ing] into the land like spilled blood” (9). It is Armstrong’s blood that Lily considers; it is his blood that reverberates in the absence of the colored peoples’ song and singing, “in the dry wind
whispering through the grass” (328). Her frustration grows at not remembering the words or melody, her memory of the music diminished and replaced by the void of Armstrong’s death. The murdered body and the song entwine, spiraling over Lily like a “vanishing echo . . . just another shadow on her soul” (9).

Campbell’s fusion here of blues song and the absented black body parallels Nordan’s depiction of Bobo in the spillway. Like Armstrong’s, Bobo’s empowerment happens posthumously, and in both instances, the black body accomplishes in death what it cannot do in life: it rewrites the political culture of the South. That these two novels of such contrasting imagination are, nevertheless, able to capture faithfully the historical significance of Emmett Till’s murder, not so much by restaging the actual event but by invoking the impact of artistic response on cultural memory, speaks powerfully to the convergence of cultural reform and blues performance. Where Campbell’s rail scenes witness the blues spirit of freedom/motion, Nordan’s work stresses the ministrations of the Mississippi landscape in its molding of a collective musical mindset, the senseless destruction of black bodies reiterated in raindrops and lyrics.

*Your Blues* and *Wolf Whistle* also concur on the ruinous nature of the racist gaze, which Campbell uses to map out the black body as a taboo subject, indicating how for Lily the black body, when absented from view, grows in sexual menace. Nordan, meanwhile, pushes the gaze toward its most violent occupations, toward its capacity to negate, to disembody, to stabilize scorn and admiration in equal quantity as when Solon tells his accomplice Poindexter Montberclair, “Muddy Waters might be a nigger, but he spoke the truth” (127). Here in the El Camino where Solon and
Poindexter are making their way to Uncle, Auntee, and Bobo and where Solon has
tuned the radio to WOKJ, “the all colored station in Jackson” (127), blues music
suffuses the men’s thoughts. How the music enables black survival and undermines,
if not undoes, white terror conveys in these novels the gritty rhythm and rhetoric of
Southern consciousness in the 1950s. In the momentous killing of Emmett Bobo Till,
black and white culture collided at the crossroads, the blues emblem of a bustling and
fluid paradigm. The fictions intricately document the buildup and fallout of the this
crossroads collision, suggesting, most importantly, the richness of the blues as an
iconic art and intervening historical record that at the time of Till’s death bestowed an
illuminating focus on the interracial turmoil occurring in the Delta and throughout the
country.
At first glance, Randall Kenan’s 1989 novel *A Visitation of Spirits*, set in North Carolina in the imaginary town of Tims Creek, hardly reads as a hard-hitting account of the segregated South. Although the narration flashes back occasionally to the Jim Crow era, the primary events take place in the 1980s, two decades after the high point of the historic Freedom Movement. No Klansman stalks these pages, burning crosses or brandishing ropes. Tension between blacks and whites arises but not to the point that it threatens the daily lives of the town’s residents. Nevertheless, Tims Creek insists on staying segregated, a reality emanating, as Suzanne Jones notes, “from both sides of the color line” (294), and such resistance among the black residents to integrate, I would argue, indicates a posttraumatic response to whiteness. The novel’s teenage protagonist Horace Cross cannot help but notice the bodily transformations of persons invoking the past: “the look on their faces as the menfolk spoke, the tension, the veins popping out on their foreheads” (90). Far more pressing for Horace, however, is his preoccupation with the fact that his homosexuality puts him at odds with the rampant homophobia of Tims Creek, where the black community routinely synthesizes *white, queer, and perverse* as rationale for
remaining racially and culturally separate.

Desperately wanting to shape-shift into a hawk and soar above the constraints of his Christian fundamentalist community, Horace turns to witchcraft. His predicament assumes new urgency when the demon-spirit he conjures orders him to fire his grandfather’s shotgun at an oncoming truck and then strikes him in the gut when he refuses. Clearly, Horace has suffered a psychic break with reality. Close readers will undoubtedly recognize the similarity of this scene in *Visitation* with one depicting Joe Christmas aiming a gun at a moving vehicle in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. In an interview in 1998, Kenan commented on how the “mountain” of Faulkner’s writing can be both crushing and inspiring, adding, “In many ways I feel [my work] is a continuation” (qtd. in Rowell 141). Later, in affirming the essentialness of reading, Kenan observes, “No one said it more eloquently, I think, than Eudora Welty … when she talks about how she started out reading and how, for her, writing came out of a desire to continue the conversation with the book. … [T]he more we’ve read, the more we have to talk back to, talk back with” (qtd. in Rowell 148). Chapters 3 and 6 explore how Kenan is “talking back” to and with specific passages of Southern Renaissance writing. I have created this division in order to signify the movement of Kenan’s literary vision from one of black self-destructiveness to one of burgeoning enlightenment and progress. The present chapter pertains mainly to the former concerns of black dysfunction and generational detachment, while Chapter 6 focuses primarily on Kenan’s subtle rejection of such pathological constructions in favor of a more rehabilitative, subversive visioning of the queer black self. Informing this shift toward representing a healthier black self is
Kenan’s engagement with and, to some extent, renunciation of a toxically racialist, white Southern literary outlook.

Through mimesis, signification, and subversion, Kenan presents a collision of two Southern paradigms, two overlapping, yet separate realities—mid-century and pre-millennial, traumatic and posttraumatic, a fear of whiteness in one generation of African Americans set against a desire for it in another. At the same time, Kenan builds a discursive forum with black authorship (namely Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin) and with the earlier period of Southern, white-authored literature, charting new paths in representing the interrelatedness of Southern Gothicism, interracial same-sex desire, and a posttraumatic landscape. However, Kenan’s excursions into literary whiteness offer more than a demonstration of mimetic reversal, producing, instead, a dialogic space which in turn resists and reiterates the insights and conclusions of his white Southern predecessors. In addition to inscribing the racial polarity of the rural South, A Visitation of Spirits charts Horace’s calamitous rendezvous with black segregation, projecting his vague perceptions of the earlier era, which “sat there murkily in his mind” (89) into a carnival of memory, anguish, rage, and violence.

Trauma, Memory, and Rage: “A Permanent Emergency”

In the essay “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” bell hooks discusses how the black gaze marks whites as signified subjects, a social position, hooks argues, many of her white students reject. Referring specifically to those who oppose seeing whiteness as a qualified difference, she writes, “Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference
subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear” (167-8). Dispensing with “universal subjectivity” while highlighting the hazards of othering from any racialized viewpoint, Kenan’s strategic use of the black gaze undertakes a rigorous self-critique. Unlike many previous attempts in literature to penetrate the heart of darkness, largely motivated by Eurocentric presumptions of enlightenment, the best of Kenan’s prose conveys the fallibility of any generalizing view, including that of his own positionality.

Witnessing the scene with Horace and the truck driver, readers enter not only the glaring whiteness of the headlights but also the white gaze, as refracted across a rural roadside and through the prism of Horace’s psychotic break: “The yellow-white orbs focused ferociously as the dragon took off in full gallop toward Horace. … As the headlights became brighter, illuminating him in full, there was the sound of tires screeching and the truck lurched to the left” (66). Reassessing the fixity of Southern subjects—black and white, straight and sexually other—the confrontation operates from multiple points of contact. Horace’s “radiating ache” (67) from the demon’s gut-punch reflects the teenager’s sense of failure in asserting his presence as black, queer, and masculine to the truck driver, an unidentified but nonetheless potent symbol of the hegemonic white man. In charting the permutations of racialized trauma, this scene rewrites itself throughout the novel, deploying various characters and conflicts around the metamorphic realities of black rage and, albeit to a lesser degree, the white male perspective.

The truck driver’s reaction to the sight of a naked, gun-wielding, black teenager imparts vital insight into the ways whiteness gathers meaning throughout the
narrative. Generating a dual viewpoint, the scene balances Horace’s out-of-body aggression with the truck driver’s incredulity: “Perhaps the driver, his eyes maybe bloodshot from driving twenty hours straight … had dozed for a mere second, just a second, only to wake to a wraith standing in the middle of the road; and perhaps now he rubbed his eyes and face, considering what he had beheld, or he thought he had beheld” (emphasis added, 66-7). The hypothetic characterization of the driver’s condition places him in a limbo state between the real and the imaginary, only his maleness and his whiteness outlined in solid, unavering terms. A stereotyping comment about his “stupendous belly full of coffee and doughnuts and two eggs over easy and toast” rounds out the narrator’s strategically hollow sketch of him. For Horace, the truck driver occupies a ghosted space, a hologram, so thoroughly emptied of humanity that only the truck, what the demon calls “it” and “beast” with its intense “yellow orbs,” figures as real (66-7). Reciprocally, the driver tries to rid Horace’s image from his consciousness: “he would touch on the idea of a ghost, which would make him smile nervously, then he would realize it was nothing more than a deer” (67). The spectacular oddity of Horace’s appearance, its “illogical” and absurd placement in the center of the road, obviously accounts for the break between seeing and believing, but beyond that, Horace’s person and body are absented, seen and not seen. No one speaks during the standoff, except the demon, suddenly metamorphosed into the irreproachable manliness of a Masai warrior, whose insistence to Horace, “Kill it! Kill it! …Why didn’t you kill it?” (66, 67), exists only in whatever parallel universe Horace’s sorcery has placed him. Otherwise, the incident occurs on a subsemantic level—mostly within Horace’s unarticulated
longing to be seen and acknowledged—evoking a penumbra of race, sex, and violence, while also revising the trope of black invisibility.

In works by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, more recently Lewis Nordan, and others, blackness typifies a presence-absence in the white Southern gaze. However, Horace’s literal and social invisibility reconfigures the concept of political disembodiment, signifying an alternation between the dangers of white terror and black homophobia. As Robert McRuer points out, Horace manages to segment his life along rigid lines of disidentification, apportioning his “black self” for his family, his “academic self” for his friends at school, and his “gay self” for his clandestine liaisons at the summer theater company (*Queer Renaissance* 83). In spite of his efforts, Horace cannot complete the task of splintering himself into multiple identities, or more pointedly, he cannot locate within all of his articulated selves a reliable center that will hold. Hence, *Visitation* explodes the tropic potential of black absence through parody, subversion, and expansion, exploring the practice of absenting as it happens within the boundaries of Southern blackness.

Policing themselves within “blacker than thou” borders, African Americans in Tims Creek conflate white identity with (sexual) otherness so that any friendly contact with white individuals is liable to arouse suspicion and innuendo. During one of his sermons, Reverend Hezekiah Barden fuses a fear of whiteness with a fear of sexual wickedness. Addressing the topic of “live-in lovers,” Barden criticizes six talk-show guests he has recently seen on television, saying matter of fact, “they was all white you know,” adding, “They was talking about men and women, men and men, women and women… Like it was nothing. Tolerable. Righteous” (78).
Queering whiteness provides an emotional bulwark against the memory of past intercultural contact. That this memory is accessible in only a few potent moments in the novel indicates the degree to which the older generation in Tims Creek has struggled to contain and repress their recollection of the past. Thus, mounting a mutable African American gaze, Kenan troubles the murky depths of interracial trauma, projecting Horace’s sexual marginalization through the aftermath of the Jim Crow experience.

Certainly, Kenan’s strategic black gaze—specifically the ghosting of white bodies—holds precedent in contemporary Southern literature and criticism. In “Representation of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” bell hooks identifies a paradoxical tendency among African Americans, especially during segregation to emulate the cultural values of their white counterparts. According to hooks, “wanting to be white” rarely involves the desire to be an actual white person but rather an idealized version of whiteness, a fetishization of white culture, power, and agency. Simultaneously, this fetish points to an internalization of white supremacist logic, revealing, as hooks explains, a hope “to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet … [would] ward away the evil, the terror” (166). In the essay, hooks writes intimately of her childhood fear of whites, recalling the occasional appearance of a Bible or insurance salesman, declaring, “They were strangers … Did they understand at all how strange their whiteness appeared in our living rooms, how threatening? … Did they come to our houses to meet the Other face-to-face and enact the colonizer role, dominating us on our own turf?” (170-1).
Hooks’s memories resonate with those of Maya Angelou, who experienced as a child in the South the seeming contradiction of white terror/absence, accepting a matter-of-fact disregard of white people while acting in accordance with a mysterious dread of their power. In her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou writes, “Other than that they were different, to be dreaded … I remember never believing that whites were really real” (25). Even white terror, as in cases of clandestine killings, could exist beyond any recognition of—or reckoning with—actual white bodies, the violence and destruction that whites waged happening away from optical proof of their physical involvement. Instead, for the young Angelou, “these others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife, weren’t considered folks. They were white folks” (26).

And yet, paradoxically, whiteness produces a powerful and warping influence on Angelou’s childhood psyche, projecting the “proper” standard of beauty for her to fantasize about, impersonate, and ultimately embody. Early in the memoir, Angelou recalls wanting to impress her family and church congregation, gathered on Easter Sunday, with the notable “improvements” of her appearance:

> Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about “my daddy must of been a Chinaman” … because my eyes were so small and squinty. … I was really white and … a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. (2-3)

Angelou’s fairy tale dream of awakening into whiteness reflects her absorption into media products which reinforce whiteness as ideal, typified by the kind of dolls,
films, and *Dick and Jane* books Pecola Breedlove encounters in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, published, incidentally, in 1970, the same year as Angelou’s memoir. While Pecola prays for blue eyes, a young Angelou similarly fantasizes that Kay Francis, a popular white film actress is her mother. Sitting in a movie balcony, designated for “coloreds,” Angelou prefers the glamorous, empowered Francis to the sycophantic black maid “who went around saying ‘Lawsy, missy’ all the time” or the imbecilic chauffeur “who rolled his eyes and scratched his head” (*Caged Bird* 118).

Although Angelou is writing about a period prior to Horace’s lifespan, the codes of white supremacy which helped to shape black perceptions of self during the Jim Crow era continue to exert their influence in the time that follows. Only now, for Horace, these codes have come to mean not so much a fantastic escape from his black (or queer) identity but a tentative acceptance of one or the other. While he can never quite secure acceptance for all the parts of himself, Horace imagines whiteness as a blank slate in which to write himself anew, a position of agency and, ironically, safety. Much like Pecola and the adolescent Maya, the studious, book-loving Horace Cross is drawn to the products of popular culture and to the “magical blue box” of television, which was “soon to become the yardstick against which he measured the world” (*Visitation* 89). Before Horace seeks white friends and abruptly distances himself from his black ones, and before Horace has an affair with a Puerto Rican/Italian actor at a summer theater company, he begins his reassessment of the world through a copious consumption of television programs, where “all was right with the world” and where “[t]he bland humorous shows contained no racial controversy, no strife, no pain. … Poverty involved no malnutrition; injustice was
sure to be righted” (89). In truth, Horace is searching for a *wider*, not *whiter*, engagement with the world than his small, fundamentalist community would otherwise allow, but in the rural South, Horace finds that *wider* more or less signifies *whiter*. In his young mind, he conflates power, agency, virtue, beauty, and spectacular heroism with whiteness, saying forthright in his Confessions, “I remember wanting to be rich and white and respected like Bruce Wayne and invulnerable and handsome and noble like Clark Kent” (247). Contrary to most of his relatives’ wishes, Horace moves swiftly and casually into his associations with whites, looking at last to merge his academic achievements—which many of his black classmates spurn as an effort to embody whiteness—with a life of ease, a life unburdened by questions of political and social inequality.

Revering whiteness as the personification of freedom, sexual and otherwise, Horace’s presence in the pews inverts the basic intent of Barden’s incriminations, undercutting the presumption of fear and hetero-sameness among all the other church folk. Begging the title question of his essay, “Are You Black First Or Are You Queer?” Gregory Connerly deftly surveys the problem of what precisely to emphasize and what to elide in a multiple minority identity, insisting that “some constructions of black lesbigay identity … should be discouraged, such as those rooted in internalized racism” (21). Connerly specifically indict black lesbigays who date exclusively in non-black communities as well as those who condemn plurality on the basis of maintaining racial authenticity. As thoroughly, then, as politics and power relations inform black sexual otherness, history and region similarly impact its formations. Horace’s recognition of the South’s turbulent race record, for example, compels him
to alter his interracial involvements so as to include friends who hail from outside of the South.

In the autumn before his death, Horace comes closest to living his dream of ease with a new coterie of white friends, Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted, all well-traveled, non-Southerners who are “quick to set themselves apart from the tedious banality of East York Senior High School” (237). Their status as regional outsiders initiates an instant and binding attraction for Horace as he, also an outsider, being “smart and black,” appeals to them (237). At first, Horace worries that his friendship signifies mere tokenism, that he embodies their sense of rebellion and nonconformity with the town’s de facto segregation—in actuality the reverse may also be true. But as their friendship deepens through simpatico interests in tennis, film, comic books, literature—Hesse, Beckett, Kerouac, Hemingway, Camus—rock-and-roll, and impromptu jaunts to the beach, Horace begins to bask in his friends’ “singular, infectious freedom, […] believing the world owed him what it owed them” (237). This newfound entitlement confirms Horace’s low opinion of his black self as well as his acceptance of the closet’s limitations. However brief and conditioned by his concealment of his sexuality, the teen’s white idyll affords him his happiest, most fulfilling respite in the text. Besides television programs and library borrowings, these autumn months with Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted provide Horace his one retreat from “racial controversy, … strife, … pain” (89). Although his friends can clearly see that Horace is African American, their conversations with him rarely, if ever, concern race, which suggests either their indifference on the subject or a belief in its irrelevance. One other striking possibility is that they are taking their cues of silence
from Horace, the default “leader” of such talks by virtue of his racial difference. Whatever the reasons for their reticence, the arrangement greatly accommodates Horace’s interests, granting him a kind of hiatus from his painful, problematic sense of blackness, allowing him to take shelter in a benign whiteness. Deracinated and detached from regional affiliations, Horace finds a way to realize his television comforts, while his conflicts with his racial and sexual identity are temporarily suspended.

No outlook could be more dissimilar from that of Horace’s grandfather, Zeke, whose race consciousness, like that of many others in his generation, remains locked inside a paradigm of fear, suspicion, and subordinated rage. Long after Horace’s death, when his memory weighs heavily on Zeke’s mind, and even as Zeke realizes the importance of forgiveness, of “lay[ing] things down,” he admits to his nephew Jimmy of his inability to do just that: “Zeke sighed and looked into the rain. It takes right smart of a man to forgive, and I’ll tell you, boy, I don’t know if this old man is man enough. Strong enough, to walk to way I ought” (206). Zeke’s lack of forgiveness entails his failure to confront and thoughtfully process his feelings about the past, including his disapproval of Horace’s association with white people, which he considers to be an aberration of the teenager’s black, male self. Nor does he understand Horace’s reluctance to work in the fields; however, he does take solace in Horace’s decision to run track. For Zeke, a black man is his body—brawny, procreative, hardworking, athletic—and any deviation from these proscriptions becomes suspect. When Horace pierces his ear, a sure sign to Zeke of white influence, Zeke’s temper erupts, his underlying fear of whites and their ability to
pierce and scar the black body rushing to the surface of his thoughts. At Thanksgiving dinner, Horace defends his white friends, crying out, “You all don’t understand! You’re all bigots” (186). Zeke simply cannot abide Horace’s outburst, not its insolence nor the logic that frames it. He tells Horace, “Well, I do believe you have lost your mind. Get up. I think you have forfeited your Thanksgiving dinner” (187).

Zeke’s sister, Jonnie Mae, the matriarch of the family, vocalizes what Zeke and other older Crosses suspect—that Horace’s liaison with white boys may be in some way sexual. Saying, “He just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts” (184), Jonnie Mae aligns whiteness within a slippage of sexual otherness and perversion. For her these white boys must be cunning, criminal sadists, whose satisfaction in their toying with Horace will culminate only with his death: “Who knows what them boys will have this fool do next? Having him out stealing. Wind up in jail. Dead. And them sitting back and laughing at him” (184-5). Like Zeke’s rebuke, Jonnie Mae’s remarks betray a sensibility steeped in the racialized trauma of the past, her perception of whites forever imprinted by the indignities of a segregated South—mortifying, treacherous, deadly. All of the possibilities she mentions—criminal activity, incarceration, and untimely death—recall scenarios all too familiar to black men, especially in the South. For Jonnie Mae, the possibility that similar circumstances could befall her grandson remains as intensely imminent as before the historic progresses of the 1960s. A permanent menace, the specter of whiteness looms prominently in her worldview, and only by keeping one’s place away from whites, by forming a self-enforced separation, can one escape the vagaries
of white manipulation and destruction.

Jonnie Mae’s bitter aria rehearses a chorus of trauma and rage Horace has heard many times: “He had heard the menfolk around the barber shop and in the fields talk about the white man; he had heard his aunts and the womenfolk hiss and revile the name of whites; he had heard his grandfather lecture and spin yarns about how black folk had been mistreated by the white man” (89). One story Zeke tells involves his confrontation as a teenager with his white employer. During the standoff, the young Zeke levels a shotgun at the man, asserting his claim to fair compensation for two weeks labor: “And I looked him square in the eyes and said, ‘Feller I done worked in your fields for thirteen days. You keep telling me: I pay you end of the week. … End of the week come and you don’t pay me. … I stuck that gun closer to his face and said, ‘Now you think on this a spell’” (157-8). Zeke spends a day in the county jail for his stunt, experiencing undue violence from the officers. By Zeke’s account, “they roughed me up a right smart, but they didn’t punch me or kick me or lay into me with a stick or nothing like that. But it won’t pretty” (158). While Zeke’s incarcerated body is spared the worst of Jim Crow justice, the mere mention of these abuses indicates the commonality of their occurrence. What transpires at the courthouse encompasses the public part of Zeke’s ordeal. In Zeke’s words, Old Judge Flint:

looked over to Paw and said, ‘Boy, this youngin of yours is got to learn his proper place. And respect for the law. I’ll let him go, but you know we can’t let little black boys run around pulling guns on grown white folks. We just can’t have it. What kind of country would this be? … [Y]ou and that other one there with you got to whup him, right here before the court, before me. And you be sure to whup him good, too.’” (159)
Complying with the court’s orders, Zeke’s father and uncle “whup” the young Zeke, who recalls how his father Thomas exerted extra effort in “hurting … [his] behind,” speculating that Thomas’s ire stemmed from having to pay a twenty dollar fine (159). In the end, Zeke never receives his salary, and his family suffers further financial loss from having to pay the court-ordered fine. The public beating puts a fine point on the social and economic castration black men suffer under Jim Crow law.

Remarkably, Zeke’s memory exemplifies several facets of Jonnie Mae’s forecast for the outcome of Horace’s biracial friendships: falling prey to white deceit, landing in jail, and becoming a figure of white sadism and amusement. In whatever ways Jonnie Mae and Zeke misinterpret Horace’s pierced ear, the traumatic image of a damaged black body, struck, or in this case, “penetrated” by white power casts a vast, unmovable shadow over their collective consciousness. Despite the fact that Horace’s ear piercing and Zeke’s court-ordered beating occur over forty years apart, the presence of whites continues to point up for many of the older Crosses the Foucaultean concept of power as ultimately fluid, a force (in this case, a malevolent and sadistic one) unlimited by time, location, or any external structure of authority and surveillance.

The twin issues of power and control pervade Zeke’s very telling, reshaping the trauma, reconfiguring the roles of authority and subjugation. In both “Let the Dead Bury their Dead” and A Visitation of Spirits, Kenan portrays Zeke as a gifted raconteur, capable of telling tall tales and fabled histories which encapsulate the remembered joys and sorrows of his family, friends, and neighbors. In the novel, Zeke is also the subject of an intense interior monologue, his recollections
terminating in a ruminative fear of being buried alive: “they lower the lid, dead men burying a live man, the lid coming down, please Lord, don’t, click. Nothing but water and gurgling and that damn rat crawling up, up” (59). This nightmarish vision, which he experiences during a road trip to visit a relative in a Fayetteville hospital, disguises (as much as it reflects) Zeke’s feelings of guilt and anxiety about his role in Horace’s suicide, to say nothing of his marital infidelities. Despite Zeke’s determination to repress and deny, he also showcases—when he chooses—his command as a storyteller and memory keeper. On the night he relates the incident of his beating, Zeke is especially mindful of the “men gathered about him” (157). With “one eye on Horace, the other on Lester,” Zeke leads their enthusiastic call and response: “You didn’t do that, now did you Cousin Zeke?”—“That I did.”—“[A]nd you know two dollars and fifty cents was right smart sum back in them days”—“Yeah, it was” (157). In telling the tale, Zeke sketches out a familiar portrait of villainy in his employer and in the judge, the former countering Zeke’s threat of violence with that of his own, couching his rebuke in racially emasculating language: “Now, nigger, a little colored boy like you, pulling a gun on a white man is a good way to get yourself kilt” (157).

Zeke’s listeners understand the peril of his predicament and that Southern lynch mobs organized for offenses far less egregious than his. In his book Dark Journey, Neil McMillen explains how “the record abounds in lynchings for … ‘insubordination,’ ‘talking disrespectfully,’ striking a white man, slapping a white boy, writing an ‘insulting letter,’ a personal debt of fifty cents, an unpaid funeral bill of ten dollars, $5.50 payroll dispute, organizing sharecroppers, being ‘too
prosperous,’ suspected lawlessness,’ horse killing, conjuring, and, of course, mistaken identity” (235-36). Undoubtedly, Zeke’s listeners also understand that the implicit challenge in his contention with white male authority revolves less around obtaining an overdue salary than achieving a measure of dignity through defiance—to achieve that dignity during the experience then again in its telling and retelling. Hence, Zeke stresses how he stared his employer “square in the eyes” (157), essentially breaking the Southern code of black sycophancy while placing Zeke on equal terms with his social “better.” Zeke further indicates his bravery by telling how he faced the judge, responding to the charges with a flat, unaffected admission of his guilt. To stress his show of courage, Zeke confesses that behind his mask of cool detachment, “I ain’t never been that scared in my life” (158), and in rounding off the story, Zeke answers one of his cousins, who asks, “Bet you didn’t do that again” with a reply that sums up both his spoken and experiential subversion of white dominance: “Well, let’s just say I got more sense than to get caught after that” (159). Amid the ensuing laughter and before launching into yet another story, Zeke winks at his grandson, his way of punctuating his success at negotiating Jim Crow systems of power and punishment.

More important for Horace than any single event that has irrevocably conditioned his grandfather’s view of whites is the way in which Zeke tells the tale, what he chooses to include and exclude, accent and gloss over, invent and report as fact. Trying to control the discourse of his lived experience, Zeke is clearly rehearsing, or more appropriately, redressing a psychic wound, but in doing so, he also shores up his manhood by suppressing any remnant feeling of humiliation that might otherwise undermine it. As important as what Zeke verbalizes—and what his
cousins ask him—is what he omits, mainly his reaction then and now to his beating in the courthouse. Although Zeke is willing to admit his fear of being locked up—since this admission serves his larger purpose of playing the intrepid hero—he falls silent on the falling action of his public thrashing, replacing an inevitably sad dénouement with a trickster’s quip and signifying wink. As displays of male bravado, Zeke’s storytelling and quick-witted quips project a rather limited illustration of black male strength. Admiring Zeke’s example, Horace intuitively realizes the importance of wearing a macho mask, learning from his grandfather’s model to control the discourse of one’s lived experience. By running track and pursuing young women, Horace begins a misguided attempt to transform himself into the paragon of heteronormativity—ultimately to no avail.

The strain of wearing the mask is perhaps most apparent during Horace’s Walpurgisnacht when he fires his grandfather’s shotgun at a group of rebel-yelling white men who separately shout, “A naked nigger. … With a gun? … Get him!” (167). Stereotypical embodiments of white Southern machismo, these good ole boys guzzle beer, blast Charlie Daniels on the radio, and talk auto shop. Reenacting Zeke’s heroic clash with white masculinity, Horace shoots twice, wounding one man in the foot, before trying to escape in Zeke’s “puke-green Buick” (167). The chaos degenerates into an action film sequence as the men pile into their cars and give chase. Through clever footwork on the gas and break pedals, Horace orchestrates a kind of dance with the men, eluding capture and causing their cars to ram into each other. Despite handling the Buick with poise and manly assurance, one rebel yell from the men is enough to make Horace’s “blood [run] chill” (167). Kenan makes
clear how even in this moment of triumph, Horace’s death is a fait accompli, and that his performance with “the puke green Buick” (166) merely regurgitates his grandfather’s ordeal, reprising the cataclysm of past interracial relations without providing much resolution in the present.

Even while Horace’s actions betray a sham bravado, his spectacle appearance exemplifies Patricia Yaeger’s theory of the “hyperspatialized body,” typified in Southern literature as the outcast body, which “map[s] an array of social crises … [becoming] a sign of a permanent emergency within the body politic” (222). These carnivalesque bodies often disrupt social establishments, and in Visitation, Horace’s flagrant nakedness—with his testicles starting “to ache from flapping so hard between his legs” (166-7)—rearticulates a catalogue of paradoxes concerning black male subjects, at once broken and invincible, emasculated and macho, anonymous and stereoscopic. These paradoxes also encapsulate what Maurice Wallace terms “the spectragraphic impulse,” a kind of “willful blindness” which “protects the bemused from ever having to know” the enframed subject (31). In other words, the seer, relying on stereotyping, draws upon a hypersexual, excessively violent projection of the black subject so as to deflect any sense of parity between the seer and the seen. The black other, thus, becomes an unknowable entity, limitlessly forbidden and forbidding. Hyperspatialization and spectragraphia further illuminate just how Horace’s presence in the scene, split periodically between his gay and black self, “contribute[s] to the literary body’s capacity to give testimony, to bear witness to trauma” (Yaeger 222). In other words, Horace’s gay self pries open the narrative of interracial Southern trauma while Southern trauma complicates and inevitably
overrules his ability to experience companionship regardless of his companions’ race.

Probing the black male psyche from a philosophical and personal viewpoint, Charles Johnson’s essay “Phenomenology of the Black Body” addresses the temptation of many black men to internalize a “black as body” pose, and thus “become an object, no longer the subject” (126). In such cases, the black subject surrenders his idea of self, becoming, often against his own will and awareness, the prescribed object, the thing by which the racialist white gaze identifies him. (When the subject purposely puts on the black as body costume, he inevitably runs the risk of embedding it). In any case, this insidious form of self-sabotage leads to varying degrees of physical and psychological destruction. Throughout his interactions with the white male gaze—first from the truck driver then the five rabble rousers—Horace conforms to the spectral/spectacle phenomenon, the shotgun he handles symbolically integrating criminal, pathological rage and sexual insecurity. The stark contrast between these isolated incidents of aggression and Horace’s otherwise passive demeanor demonstrates not merely a compulsory spectragraphia but also the perilous ease with which Horace, or presumably any black male, slips into the “black as body” stereotype.

In “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin likens black rage (and the racism that fuels its existence) to gangrene and amputation, a choice of nightmares for the infected patient. Baldwin writes, “The idea of going through life as a cripple is more than one can bear, and equally unbearable is the risk of swelling up slowly in agony, with poison” (112). The author substantiates this prognosis with an assessment of the 1943 riots in Detroit and Harlem and from intimate observations of his father, a man
Baldwin describes as demented from a lifetime of anger and bitterness. In her essays on the subject of black rage, bell hooks acknowledges such cases of pathologization but also criticizes the dismissal of all black rage as inherently and uniformly pathological. While somewhat divergent in their views, Baldwin and hooks agree that rage can be alternately liberating and destructive, insightful and myopic, suggesting that if not allowed to fester to a degree of debilitation, rage can offer clarity, awareness, and a desire for greater agency. If Zeke’s use of the shotgun reveals a limited and problematic display of masculine power and self-assertion, the gun in Horace’s hand repositions the meaning of Zeke’s male posturing. Where Zeke controls his narrative and, thus, appears as someone justly defending his rights, Horace’s gunplay appears absurd, chaotic—an entropic collapse of his grandfather’s model of manhood. In either scenario, Kenan’s identification of black men through violent opposition indicts both generations of Crosses as well as the culture of white male violence, a constant source of antagonism.

Horace’s initiation into biracial conflict begins conflict in elementary school. In one incident, he is summoned to the principal’s office after scuffling with Willy Smith, a white classmate, who wrongfully accuses Horace of stealing his comic book. Learning of Horace’s trouble, his three aunts Rachel, Rebecca, and Ruthester descend on the scene with fantastical fury, overwhelming the “easily flustered” principle, Mr. Stubbs (91). As the women demand that Mr. Stubbs contact Willy’s parents, the scene stages yet another interracial standoff, this time between “a white Southern gentleman” and “three black regal Furies” (92), roles prearranged and etched out in the cultural imagination of the region. Besides the obvious shift from man-to-man
violence, this scene demonstrates how even slight misunderstandings can spark a powder keg of racialized resentments which, in turn, alter the bend and shape of the black body, turning three mortal women into mythic powerhouses. Ironically—poignantly—Horace sympathizes with Willy, “no longer the mean and hateful accuser, but a mere boy with a busted lip, alone and with no lion aunts to rush to his aid” (92). What Horace ostensibly lacks at this point is the “armor he heard in the edge of his grandfather’s voice, in the stoop of his great-aunt’s walk, in the glint of their eyes when they encountered white people” (93). But this armor is hardly without its knocks just as the Crosses’ attitude about race is not without its faults, specifically their tendency to totalize all white persons as purveyors of injustice. The image of “three regal Furies” re-inscribes Yaegar’s notion of “permanent emergency,” the rage and protest of the women’s bodies hyperspatialized by the remembered ignominies of the Jim Crow era. Only now Horace’s aunts conflate past and present, their uproar overblown and out of sync with the current, and relatively minor, conflict.

If Kenan’s depictions of rage and retaliation evoke a Southern epoch of continuous racial discord, then the novel’s use of a distinctly Gothic idiom furthers the examination of these issues, placing particular emphasis on Horace’s breaking of sexual and racial taboos. In their discussion of Kenan’s treatment of Gothicism, Lindsay Tucker and Maesha Wester tend to downplay the significance of Southern geography, focusing more on the author’s attempts to appropriate the genre from its
early nineteenth century uses in America and Europe.¹ Rather than parrot the main
points of their arguments, which overall prove convincing, I aim to shift the focus of
their discussion to a consideration of Southern Gothicism, taking into account the
region’s distinct literary voice as well as its precedence in imagining the American
South in Gothic terms and aesthetics.

Southern Gothicism: Envisioning a Queer Place

As several critics have noted, Gothic aesthetics flourished throughout the
Southern Renaissance, permeating William Faulkner’s fixation on interracial discord,
class wars, and an aristocracy in decline, and further proving its preeminence in
Carson McCullers’s obsession with sideshow freaks and sexual outcasts. Drawing
upon the work of these two writers as well as that of Eudora Welty, Truman Capote,
Harper Lee, and other architects of mid-century Southern fiction, Kenan’s writing
inherits the classic structure of a distorted landscape, haunted by historical atrocity,
family scandal, and ongoing attempts to repress or rewrite a continually eruptive past.
While these themes certainly loom large in Kenan’s fiction, his Gothic imagination
marks a seismic shift in the genre on at least two fronts, first in his alteration of
subject positions in that he enters Southern Gothicism with an African American
point-of-view. Secondly, Kenan pushes the form beyond the macabre into the realm
of patent fantasy and magic, returning the literature to a more overt invocation of the

¹ Maisha Wester’s “Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan’s Reinscription of Difference in A Visitation of Spirits” from Callaloo 30.4 (Spring 2007) applies a wide range of Gothic tropes to Kenan’s novel, reading Horace’s demonic possession as madness and his sexual difference as a signification on the grotesque. In “Gay Identity, Conjure, and the Uses of Postmodern Ethnography in the Fictions of Randall Kenan,” from Modern Fiction Studies 49.2 (Summer 2003), Lindsey Tucker focuses on Kenan’s evocations of slavery in Gothic terms, occurring briefly in Visitation and in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.”
occult, as found in earlier American literature by Edgar Alan Poe and Nathanial Hawthorne. In short, Visitation sets a new benchmark in Southern Gothicism, simultaneously rupturing the implicit barrier between past white-authored Southern texts and his own. Subsequently, the novel opens new, discursive passageways in interpreting the entanglements of race, queer desire, and Southern geography. Even with the shift in authorial view, what links Kenan’s text with previous Southern works—and my particular interest here—is their shared portrayal of conflict between place and person, between historically informed geography and the unsettling presence of the sexual other.

The Southern Gothic elements of the novel culminate in its portrayal of Horace’s summer fling with theater actor Antonio Santangelo, many of their meetings occurring in an abandoned, “dilapidated shell of a house” (223), not an old planter’s mansion but no less reminiscent of the large, white columned houses appearing in a bygone Southern landscape and in many Southern Renaissance works, notably by Faulkner, Welty, Capote, and McCullers. Adding to this architectural metonymy of the antebellum past is the high school in Visitation where Horace’s cousin Jimmy Greene presides as the county’s first black principal. Despite being a mere sixty years old, the school reminds Jimmy of a decaying plantation “with cobwebs and cracked plaster, the way the structure sags here and there” (40). Providing lodging for the Crosstown summer stock players, the school emanates the aura of “an old Southern mansion with its gothic heights and columns and corners” (226). In each setting, especially in the abandoned house where Horace and Antonio rendezvous,
Visitation achieves a rather intimate intertextuality with Southern Renaissance literature.

In Other Voices, Other Rooms, Capote, like Kenan, signifies through Gothic crumbling and ghostly footfalls the doomed decadence of antiquated racial economies which dominated the Southern ethos long after the antebellum era. Toward the end of Other Voices, when young Joel Knox and his eccentric uncle Randolph visit the all but collapsed Cloud Hotel, Randolph and Little Sunshine, the former employee of the place and now its sole inhabitant, spend time reminiscing about the heyday of the hotel. Their conversation memorializes delicate white belles, their suitors, and dutiful Negro servants—principal images of a cavalier South: “folding fans, the brute fall of male boots, and [...] Negro girls tiptoeing through the vast honeycomb” (224). To be sure, none of the characters in this scene belong to the mythography it evokes, however much their imaginations revivify the details of a gallant and pastoral South. A closeted transvestite, Randolph resigns himself to a life of alienation, relative inconspicuousness, and nostalgia. Little Sunshine’s marginal existence in the mildew and cobwebs of the hotel underscores the more commonplace condition of black subjugation, his presence an amenable prop in the earlier paradigm of Southern feudalism. While the men converse, Joel, whose queerness has yet to emerge from the shadow of his uncle’s more flamboyant expressiveness, peers into a blazing fireplace, imagining the former hotel guests, longing to satisfy his search for companionship. When his imaginings materialize, ghoulishly, as a silhouette in the flame, “a painted, disembodied head [that] remained unborn beyond its mask,” the boy asks, “[A]re you dead? [A]re you my friend? [D]o you love me?” (224).
Ultimately, Joel rejects his fantasy, realizing its futility, hoping, instead, for a real-life counterpart that might prove more fulfilling: “If he recognized the figure in the fire, then what ever would he find to take its place?” (224). Remarkably, the older men’s immersion in fantasy coincides with Joel’s rejection of it, marking more broadly his eventual emergence from the haze of Southern myth. At any rate, Capote’s juxtaposition of character and setting marks the collision of two incompatible systems—white patriarchal romance pitted against a coterie of sexual and racial outsiders.

Although Joel’s search for self-acceptance appears muted compared to Horace’s search for metaphysical transformation, both boys share a preoccupation with ocular discovery. Surrounded by the surviving members of his family, traumatized black servants, and the deteriorating mansion at Skully’s Landing, Joel assumes the part of a would-be detective, searching, observing, and divining. Spectators to their own lives, Joel and Horace must decipher truth from illusion, fact from fantasy. While Joel dismisses his vision at the hotel, he affirms his sighting of a mysterious woman (Randolph in drag) skulking about the mansion. Joel’s growth reflects his willingness to choose reality over pretense and consequently escape the strictures of Southern repression. Recognizing Randolph by novel’s end as the mysterious woman now “beckon[ing]” to him from a window in the house, Joel declines the invitation, knowing “he must go: unafraid, not hesitating,” only stopping to look back at his former self, “the boy he had left behind” (231). Joel’s moment of clarity balances his position as spectator with a newfound independence: “His mind was absolutely clear. He was like a camera waiting for its subject to enter focus. All
of him was dumb except his eyes” (231). Most remarkable in this passage is the camera simile, pairing Joel’s vision and growing consciousness with his repudiation of the social and sexual paralysis that curtails Randolph’s life.

Retracing several pathways into his past, Horace, as spectator, never escapes the paralysis of repression; instead, his despair increases as the spectrum of his life unfolds. As in Other Voices, the act of looking—literally and figuratively—becomes the most prevalent thematic device in Visitation. Announcing his intentions to force sight and acknowledgement, Horace’s demon tells him, “This is the effluvium of souls that surround men daily. All you have to do is take the scales off your eyes and look and see. You are seeing. I have removed the scales from your eyes” (73). As Horace revisits his experiences, he has to observe them through a psychedelic prism, observing not only what is plainly visible but also what is ephemeral and unavailable to the naked eye. As Robert McRuer has observed, this narrative design makes broad use of Dickens A Christmas Carol, in which the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge takes a guided, ghostly tour through his own lived experiences. Kenan offers significations, foremost his attempt to draw exaggerated attention to the ostensible offense of Horace’s sexual otherness, presenting the teenager naked, and consequently, transforming his usual social invisibility into brazen spectacle. In one other crucial signification, by allowing Horace to appear to a selection of Tims Creek folk, Kenan reifies Horace’s lifelong tendency to present and absent aspects of his identity to his friends, lovers, classmates, and family. With these added touches to the Dickensian

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model, Kenan literalizes social absence as an alternating force, further emphasizing the extent to which the teenager has internalized his racial and sexual disembodiment.

Horace figures as spectator and spectacle, subject and object, in the scene with his lover Antonio. Through the hocus pocus of a transparent mirror, Horace watches apparitions of Antonio and himself having sex. The scene further echoes the Cloud Hotel episode in *Other Voices*, stressing the allure of prohibited spaces for sexual outsiders, who seek not simply to embrace these spaces and but also be embraced by them. Where in *Other Voices* Joel and the older men reinvoke the legend of the old gallant South, Kenan adds the far more subversive element of interracial gay sex to his Gothic setting, converting the romance of Cloud Hotel, Skully’s Landing, or some likely space, into one of open contention, agitation, and irony. Presenting the men’s primary ontological difference, the lovers’ sexual intimacy counterposes the cultural significance of the antebellum house, itself an ideograph of a white, hetero-dominant past. Ironic still, Antonio expresses admiration for the house’s architecture, particularly for an alcove, its “delicate wooden ribbing that he was sure dated back to antebellum craftsmen” (223). Horace feels no such admiration, only reluctance and fear. At the start, he resists entering the house, his fears of a possible haunting substituting his greater misgivings about his social trespass with his white lover.

That Horace and Antonio disagree about entering the house adds nuance to an already multilayered look at post-segregation race relations. Indeed, the very presence of spirits and demons literalizes the novel’s theme of a landscape haunted by history, interposing Horace’s generational concerns with those of his elders, as Horace’s sexual difference and suicide also haunt the lives of his surviving elders.
Throughout the road trip to Fayetteville, Zeke and Ruth trade vicious verbal barbs, their fight climaxing in Ruth’s condemnation of the Cross family as wicked and self-destructive, citing Horace’s demise as extending an already lengthy list of casualties. Ruth warns, “you’ll see yourself one day, Ezekial Cross. See what you and your family … have wrought” and “the truth will come to the light” (197, 198). Ruth’s reproaches announce her antipathy for Zeke and Jonnie Mae’s stronghold efforts to suppress family secrets, no matter the consequences, and for their overriding interest in maintaining status and prestige in Tims Creek’s black community. Attacking the willful blindness of her in-laws, Ruth’s rebuke restates the demon’s command to Horace to “take the scales off your eyes and look and see” (73).

Similarly, the insistence to look back and recognize one’s past emanates from the communal voice of the narrator throughout the novel’s ADVENT section. Urging the residents of Tims Creek to remember the rituals of agrarian life, the narrator posits the possibility of cultural preservation in simple feats of seeing and hearing, reminding the older generation not to relinquish the verifying power of their senses: “But you’ve seen this, haven’t you? When you were younger?” (9). The phrases “Surely someone told you” and “But I’m certain you witnessed all of this, of course” (7, 8) underpin themes of forgetting and cultural shift in a rhetoric of nostalgia, speculation, and presumption. The narrator explains, finally, that “the ghosts of those times are stubborn,” suggesting how Kenan’s characters, despite the juggernaut of change, contend constantly—sometimes violently—with the ghosts of memory, the “effluvium of souls which surround men daily” (73). The point is that both Horace and his elders have been blind to the plights of each other’s lives and to the implicit
meanings of their own experiences.

To be sure, Kenan’s touch on these matters is light, subtle, almost semiotic, and here I must reiterate how throughout the novel Horace’s body functions as a template of continuous interracial distress, a predicament nowhere more patently obvious than during the teen’s initial encounter with his phantom doppelganger, who covers his duplicate face with white greasepaint and colors his lips “midnight black” (220). Wearing a white mask, the phantom’s being telegraphs the life and times of Horace’s forebears. Underneath the greasepaint lurk multiple generations of the Cross family, appearing as facets of Horace’s face, a sign of their defiant regeneration and continuance literally in the face of white supremacy. That Horace peers beneath the paint to “recognize the face, the nose folks said to be just like his great-grandfather’s, the lips rumored to be like his grandmother’s, his father’s determined chin, his maternal grandmother’s sad eyes” (220) reveals his willingness to acknowledge his elders’ physical legacy as well as his sympathetic attachment to their individual sentiments (“determined,” “sad”). Ultimately, Horace’s double image represents his identity crisis, his inability to reconcile the disparate parts of himself in a way that might further his family’s continuance as well as his own survival. This “whiting out” of Horace’s identity assumes a distinct sense of abjection with the doppelganger’s formation of reverse minstrelsy, his skin white, lips black. The fact that the double appears backstage at the community theater reinforces Kenan’s suggestion of reverse minstrelsy, the phantom’s presence exaggerating and distorting Horace’s performance as socially white through the conceit of the stage.

Appalled by the grotesque sight of his double, Horace vehemently refuses the
phantom’s offer to wear whiteface. Horace’s disgust elucidates Julia Kristeva’s discussion of the abject as a revolting version of the self. Kristeva, thus, writes:

The abject has only one quality of the object—that of becoming opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (1-2)

The part of himself Horace rejects in this scene and later when he shoots and “kills” his double remains provocatively ambiguous, but to read the “killing” as purely a declaration of sexual self-loathing, or as Eva Tettenhorn asserts as “a metaphoric suicide” borne out of a melancholic homosexuality (262) disregards Horace’s repudiation of the minstrel as a grotesque and historic projection of his racial “inferiority.” To accept the greasepaint, to wear a white mask, would, indeed, confirm the dissolution of his black, ancestral self, a perilous prospect that reappears throughout Horace’s tryst with Antonio.

However frail the lovers’ affections, or indeed because of this frailness, the relationship imparts an indirect allusion to interracial violence, blurring taboo sex with the cultural memory of lynching. While the men’s lust signals a triumphal ascent over the historical forces that would have otherwise destroyed them, their sexual activity also incites the troubling memory of interracial violence. On a mostly subsemantic level, the men’s sexual intimacy manipulates a slippage in the text between violence and lovemaking, lust and bloodlust, mapping onto their queer bodies the “haunts” of Southern history and geography. Like “you,” the implied reader in the ADVENT section, Horace occupies an interstitial space of spectator and
participant, the recovered text of his life demonstrating formidable control over his present state of mind, directing his movements, shaping his perceptions, and revitalizing his memories. Already an avid book reader and watcher of television, Horace now must “read” and watch his experiences, and like any other text, Horace as narrative, as text, gathers meaningful resonance through a juxtaposition of images, happenings, and remembrances.

Evident in the doppelganger’s presence and in Horace’s affair with Antonio, these images and happenings, real and surreal, physical and metaphysical, build a complex dialogic on race and power and offer a telling conflation of two paradigms, two realities—segregation and post-segregation. Re-seeing the haphazard course of his summer fling, Horace recognizes with new awareness the aggressive nature of the sexual engagement, how “almost violently” he and Antonio interact, “their hands grasping, clutching” (221). The slip from carnal pleasure to carnage intensifies when typically “the lovemaking reached a fevered pitch, [ending] in a fit of predatory growls and purrs and exhalations” (222). Horace’s “voyeuristic” (222) fixation with the display adds eerily to its metaphoric overlap with lynching events. In the previous episode at the theater, the doppelganger daubs an accusatory white mark on Horace’s body, forcing the teenager to smear his face with the white greasepaint. Imaged as a spectator of race killing, Horace, marked and accused, moves momentarily but painfully in his subjectivity toward embodying a racially ambiguous voyeur of violence. The lovers’ “growls” and “exhalations” moreover remind Horace of the racial and sexual twinning of his sins, the transgressive act of gay sex inextricably tied with his sense of ancestral betrayal. To Horace’s “embarrassment”
(222), he is not simply having wild gay sex—he is sleeping with the enemy, willingly submitting his body to the violent, white Other.

As the narrative shifts yet again to the old, dilapidated house, the lovers themselves verbally communicate the nearly unspoken, unspeakable under-text of historical interracial violence and same sex attraction. Repeatedly referring to Horace as “boy”—a deliberate use of a racial epithet—Antonio physically pins Horace to the floor. As plainly as these maneuvers assert Antonio’s physical and sexual dominance, they also affirm his license to act freely, without any personal hindrance, an entitlement Horace would later covet in his white high school friends. A version of the quality that Horace sees in Antonio, “his bullish, unthinking way” (222), he also admires in his classmates, specifically the willingness to act, to explore, to break social boundaries. Resisting the restrictive “boundary” of the antebellum house, the lovers demonstrate a playful engagement with the pre-inscribed power dynamics of their interracial relationship. When Antonio demands, “Come here, boy,” Horace responds by “unsuccessfully suppressing a smile,” then he “snaked his leg around the man’s body in a wrestling hold” (225). All told, these moments of play, parody, and physical prowess offer Horace a reprieve from the millstone of history, an opportunity to dominate—or at least disregard—the yoke of his Jim Crow legacy.

Eventually, the tightrope balance between banter and insult collapses into sheer vitriol. Unlike his “defeat” of the five white men who lure him into a riotous chase, Horace is unable to overpower his lover, and ultimately his tenuous jouissance with history turns bitterly abject. No longer willing to comply with Antonio’s mock belligerence, or to recognize it as sexual titillation, Horace senses the inevitable drag
of historical precedence, experiencing his body as a trapped object in the derisive exchange he ironically has helped Antonio devise. The drift from repartee to fracas happens quickly when Horace tells his lover:

“Don’t call me boy, punk.”

“Why?”

“Cause I ain’t one.”

With three deft moves Antonio flipped Horace, pinning him down. He bit Horace’s lip and said through clenched teeth, “Oh, yeah? Well, you’re going to be treated like one.”

“Stop! Damn it!”

“Naw, I think I’ll rope you up. You’ll like that, won’t you, boy?”

“I’m warning you, Tonto.” (225)

Not to diminish Horace’s faux pas completely, his protests, however, seem rather feeble in the face of Antonio’s domineering strength and verbal quickness. Odious as they are, Horace’s retaliatory barbs “Tonto” and “punk” pack less of a punch on Antonio’s psyche. By the time Antonio imitates a murderous Southern bigot, the “effluvium” of the segregated South has overwhelmed the lovers’ banter, warping their exchange into one of invective and verbal violence. With its reference to lynching (and possibly slavery), Antonio’s threat “I’ll rope you up” spectacularly undermines Horace’s academic ambition, offsetting the spoken force of the teenager’s determination “to make [his] family proud of [him]” (224). As a bit of chaff, Antonio’s comment trivializes the travails of those who lived daily in the shadow of atrocity and institutionalized oppression. In the end, Antonio appears mostly indifferent to Horace’s pride—“[n]ot about the slavery stuff, but to know where we’ve gotten”—and to his ambition to achieve higher levels of notoriety—“I’m the next generation,” he tells Antonio (224). Horace takes offense to Antonio’s taunt, “Look out world. Superfag is on the move” (224), as it pinpoints the teenager’s
anxiety about what the future holds. Horace may be “the next generation,” but given his preoccupation with his family’s suspicions and imminent disapproval of his so-called perversity, he lacks the confidence to pursue his goals of professional success. In a sense, then, Horace is “roped up,” though now the rope represents the melding of at least two meanings—racial hatred and sexual self-loathing.

Antonio’s impersonation of a Southern hatemonger captures his interest in sexually exploiting Horace’s blackness from the perspective of white supremacy. Contrary to Horace’s troubled ties to race, history, and geography, Antonio’s performance of Southern whiteness reveals his relative ease in playing off his identity, his “proximity” to whiteness (as embodied and imagined by the English and German speaking people who settled much of the pre-twentieth century South) imbuing his subject position with an “advantage” impossible for Horace to duplicate.

In light of the fact the lovers are playing a game, my analysis here in no way fixes Antonio in the same historical frame that envelops the bigoted figure he mimics; nevertheless, his mocking comments open up unforeseen nuances in the reality of race killing. Uncovering the psycho-sexual dynamics of the act, Antonio offers a radical rewriting of lynching narratives. Antonio’s imagination of Horace as an eroticized lynched body points up the widely overlooked issue of same-sex voyeurism as an unspoken, unspeakable element in the matter of lynching. Supported by a consumerist incentive to advertise on the radio and in newspapers and enabling an underground market trafficking in body parts and postcard memorabilia, the practice of lynching, which flourished for decades prior to activist interventions in the
1930s, scattered black bodies along a pornographic grid of public obliteration and private fetish.

The ‘Queer’ Subtext of Race Killing: Kenan, Baldwin, and Wright

In re-imagining these events, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, with varying degrees of explicitness, depict a homoerotic impulse in white men to touch, control, and consume black men’s bodies, their erotic fascination masked by a gory sideshow of murder and mutilation. In the title story of Baldwin’s 1965 collection Going to Meet the Man, the author places Jesse’s momentary impotence alongside his failure as a virulently racist deputy to squash the singing of voter registration protestors. Only the visceral childhood memory of a spectacle lynching, what his father calls “a picnic,” helps Jesse realize the full measure of his sexual powers, and thus recapture the mantle of his manhood. In the flashback, an eight year old Jesse fixates on the dying man’s penis, “the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest” (248), noting also how “the man with the knife” preceded the first cut by fondling the man’s genitals.Erotically, the “white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them” (248). Typical of actual spectacle killings, the lynchers in Baldwin’s story repeatedly lower the victim, tethered to a tree, onto a fire, while the unruly mob scream and swear at him before tearing away his flesh with a mélange of weapons, including their bare hands. The final state of the victim, an immolated carcass, lying “spread-eagled with what had been a wound between what had been his legs” (248) satisfies—at least temporarily—the mob’s appetite for a literal death and for a figurative extermination of the black race. After the people disperse, the fragmented corpse remains at the site of horror, a multivalent display, marking the rule of white
supremacy, eugenic “purity,” and black abjection.

And yet, in Jesse’s mind the indelible image of a vital black phallus vies continuously for prominence against that of the dismembered body. His recall of the victim’s privates arouses his libido, provoking him to tell his wife in an instant of sexual excitement, “I’m going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you’d love a nigger” (249). Invariably, critics stop at reading the castrator’s fondling and Jesse’s fetish as attempts to infuse white masculinity with hyperbolic perceptions of black male virility. To this end, Trudier Harris maintains, “Jesse’s reference to doing his wife ‘like a nigger’ reflects the place of subservience, sexual abandon, and general disrespect to which he has relegated all black men and women. Ironically, and subconsciously, it also reflects his envy of the sexual and spiritual manhood he attributes to black men” (93). As ably as these claims address the efforts of white supremacists to contain fears of a hypersexual black masculinity by siphoning off black men’s virility into the white body politic, the argument bypasses the possibility of thwarted queer desire as an underlying facet to this particular ritual of white terror.

Challenging Jesse’s commitment to racial hatred are three sets of memory from his youth, the first being that of his close childhood friend Otis, a black boy with whom he “wrestled … in the dirt” (240). Eight year old Jesse, unaware at the time of race killing, notices an absence of black people as his family and others make their way by car to the torture site—thoughts of Otis cause him to shake. The second memory involves Jesse’s stint as a soldier, during which time he projects his darkest secrets into the shared silence of his comrades, who grapple with their own secrets.
None of the men can come to terms with an unspoken, unspeakable truth which threatens “to reveal itself, […] while remaining unreadable and inaccessible to themselves” (238). Like other soldiers in his outfit, Jesse covers up the ambiguity of his “private” deeds with the detail of military duty, one that provides him an unequivocal regime of order and correctness. Later in life, still seeking moral clarity, Jesse trades in his military uniform for that of a police officer. Try as he might, neither occupation can efface his latent sexual interests or the traumatic memory of the man’s lynched body. Jesse’s most profound recollection, his empathic notice of the victim’s hair, a widow’s peak, similar to his father’s and his own, and the victim’s mangled eyes staring “straight into Jesse’s eyes” (248) changes over time, mutating into a raison d’être of hate.

Underpinning Jesse’s thoughts is his lifelong fixation with black men’s bodies, his predilection permanently entrenched in a cosmology of exploitation, fetish, and fear of castration. Reinforced by a social climate of intense racial distrust, Jesse’s libidinal impulses align the forces of anxiety and sexual compulsiveness, a pattern established at the “picnic” site. Watching the man being castrated, young Jesse feels “his [own] scrotum tighten” (248). Years later, after tormenting one of the protesters with a cattle prod, Jesse suddenly stands still, and “[f]or some reason, he grabbed his privates” (233). Choreographing the vagaries of sexual stimulation and shock, these two scenes indicate that for Jesse one biological reaction spirals upon the other, suggesting all the more how an outward revulsion of the black phallus can mask an opposite case of sublimated attraction. To maintain his position of power in the segregated South and, more importantly, in his own mind, Jesse can access his
feelings of queer Negrophilia only furtively through the more widely accepted
practice of Negrophobia.

Concerning the curious tangle of hate and desire, Kobena Mercer has made
evital observations. Against his misgivings about some of the “problematic” aspects
surrounding Freud’s theory of fetishization, Mercer affirms that its “central notion …
as a metaphorical substitute for the absent phallus enables understanding of the
psychic structure of disavowal, and the splitting of levels of conscious and
unconscious belief, that is relevant to the ambiguous axis upon which negrophilia and
negrophobia intertwine” (184). As for Jesse (and quite possibly the castrator as well),
I would argue that in addition to this race-related paradox, *homophobia* and
*homophilia* similarly intertwine. Accordingly, then, Jesse’s fear of castration
subsides with his pneumatic rehearsal of black phallus—what he publicly abhors he
privately, subconsciously, reveres. That he feels compelled to transport psychically a
black man’s naked body into his marital bed in order to make love to his wife, his
sexuality at least teeters on same-sex attraction, if not total queer formation.

Whatever burgeoning suspicions Jesse may have about his sexual inclinations, he can
simply deflect his doubts by placing his fetish in the socially sanctioned space of the
“picnic.” Violence and destruction, disguised as instruments of law and order, give
Jesse and others like him permission and opportunity to play out their fantasies and
hidden desires—*phobia* fronting *philia*.

Recounting his deeds of torture to his wife, Jesse “began to hurt all over with
that peculiar excitement which refused to be released” (232). This “peculiar
excitement,” which I am reading as sexual tension, grows as Jesse tells of the tortured
man lying on the jailhouse floor in his own urine and defecation, Jesse repeatedly asking him, “You had enough yet?” (233). Placed in a context of overt sexual discourse, the question and its repeated use clearly doubles as dirty talk. As usual, the inmate’s body fulfills Jesse’s fetishist focus on black virility. Stunned by the man’s physical endurance for pain, Jesse, calling on a stock symbol of virility, likens him to “a goddamn bull” (233). As violence in this scene camouflages erotic fascination, so is case with the castrator and the crowd. The castrator is allowed, encouraged even, to “stretch,” “cradle,” and “caress” the victim’s scrotum and penis as long as he makes the counteractive cut, as long as the veil of violence remains complete and leaves not even the slightest trace of the body’s forbidden capacity to provoke sexual consideration.

Essential to these incidents of torture is the torturer’s demonstration of absolute command and mastery and the black body’s simultaneous show of submission. Theorizing that the racial-sexual dialectics of Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial art-house photographs Black Males (1983) and The Black Book (1986) link otherness, mastery, and isolation to form the imperial base of the pornographic gaze, Mercer asserts:

The fantasmatic emphasis on mastery also underpins the specifically sexual fetishization of the Other that is evident in the visual isolation effect whereby it is only ever one black man who appears in the field of vision at any one time. As an imprint of a narcissistic, ego-centred, sexualizing fantasy, this is a crucial component in the process of erotic objectification, not only because it forecloses the possible representation of a collective or contextualized black male body, but because the solo frame is the precondition for a voyeuristic fantasy of unmediated and unilateral control over the other… (Welcome to the Jungle 177).
Beyond the immediacy of its context, Mercer’s critique of Mapplethorpe’s art lends useful insight into the white-on-black violence of the segregated South. If, as Mercer argues, Mapplethorpe “affirms his own identity as the sovereign I/eye empowered with mastery over the abject thinghood of the Other” (176-7), the imperial white eye of the Southern white supremacist similarly constructs black otherness through isolated “frames” of pornographic exploitation.

These frames recur in literature as both living and remembered phenomena and “as an imprint of a narcissistic, ego-centred, sexualizing fantasy” (Mercer 177). Given that his wife may or may not be listening, Jesse’s recounting of his day at the jailhouse bears the mark of narcissism, highlighting his constant need to rework his feelings of power and predatory control, forwarding his memory of the day’s events into a pliable, reusable fantasy, not unlike that provided by any caliber of erotic art. Both the lynch mob and Jesse’s conduct in the jail cell effect an isolating control and mastery over their subjects, limiting their vicious focus on one black man at a time.

Where Mapplethorpe’s glosses posit sex at the fore of their expression, with threshold suggestions of sado-masochism marking some of the pictures, the white men in Baldwin’s story transpose the order of interest in what I have argued is an unconscious effort to disarticulate queer desire through massive exhibitions of blood and gore. In enacting this reversal, the men solidify their complicity with the South’s enforcement of patriarchal power and, against the grain of their impulses to touch, caress, or contemplate the black phallus, indemnify their “manly,” heterosexual selves.

Couching an S/M routine in a depiction of lynching, Richard Wright’s story
“Fire and Cloud,” originally published in the 1936 collection *Uncle Tom’s Children*, confronts sublimated same-sex voyeurism through the more clear-cut problem of race-related violence. Expounding on seminal work by Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass, Angela Davis characterizes race-killing as “undisguised counterinsurgency, a guarantee that Black people would not be able to achieve their goals of citizenship and economic equality” (185). In Wright’s story, four white “counterinsurgents” capture and torture black community leader, Reverend Taylor, on the basis of his “play[ing] around with Reds” (196). The men force Taylor to undress, tie him to a tree, then take turns beating him with what one assailant calls “a nigger whip” a whip he first taps “gently against his trousers’ leg” (195). Behind the veil of violence and the men’s fears of Taylor’s political agitation lurks a force of unmentionable sexual tension and exploitation. Extending the Freudian entendre of the whip, with its cross implications as weapon and phallus, the depiction of the man tapping the whip against his pants suggests a case of sublimated attraction/revulsion, reminiscent of Jesse’s mentality. A metonymic projection of white male consciousness, the “nigger whip” clearly represents the men’s obsession with, to borrow Mercer’s colorful phrase, “the abject thinghood of the Other” (177), a thing for white men to fear, to handle, to master, to crack and flick repeatedly.

The sadomasochistic aspect of the violence enters the ritual almost immediately. First, Taylor’s naked skin substitutes for the universal S/M costume of black leather. “Get that Goddam vest off!” the men yell at Taylor, alerting him to re-envision his naked skin as an object signified on by his white captors, to see his flesh as their playground: “A night wind cooled his sweaty body; he was conscious of his
back as he had never been before, conscious of every inch of his black skin there” (198). Taylor’s raised consciousness tightens the link between lynching and S/M sex-play, his black skin the central fetish. Pinpointing the parallels between black skin and leather, Mercer writes, “When one considers that such clothes are invariably black, rather than any other color, such fashion-fetishism suggests a desire to simulate or imitate black skin” (184).

Requiring no substitution for black skin, Taylor’s assailants relish the real thing as they execute their routine. Telling Taylor that he and his cohorts intend to teach him “a nigger lesson” (197), one man firmly invokes the master/slave convention of erotic bondage, which rapidly intensifies when the men demand that Taylor beg and pray for mercy. What the men seek, besides a simple demonstration of Taylor’s submission, which their appearance alone elicits, is an expression of consent, however falsely engineered and meaningless. This consent must come through Taylor’s spoken word and through an illustration of his broken, degraded body:

His arms went limp. He rested his face against a cold tree-trunk. A rope cut into his wrists. They tied his feet together, drawing the rope tight about his ankles. He looked around; they stood watching.

…

“Please, Mistah! Don’t whip me! Ah ain done nothing. …”

…

The whip cut hard, whick! pouring fire and fire again.
“Have mercy, Lawd!” he screamed.
“Pray, nigger! Pray like you mean it.” (198, 199, 200)

Although Taylor’s constant begging and the men’s demands for prayer simulate yet another side of S/M, the reverend’s obedient responses only partially satisfy their hunger for his humiliated acceptance of his “nigger’s place” (197). Motivated by a
curious mix of sarcasm and true intention, the men want Taylor to “mean” what he says. While grappling with each other over control of the whip, the men push Taylor to the point of “back-talk,” possibly to award themselves a higher score of victory by beating any remnant of resistance out of him:

“We’ll git yuh white trash some day! So help me Gawd, we’ll git yuh!”
The whip stopped.
“Say that again, Goddam you!”
The whip lashed, *whick!* …
“Say it!”
He relaxed and closed his eyes. He stretched his legs out, slowly, not listening, not waiting for the whip to fall. … He groaned. Then he dropped his head and could not feel any more. (201)

Achieving at last Taylor’s complete “consent” by way of his body’s mortification, the attackers leave him alone in the forest. In any ordinary, voluntary case of S/M, be it hetero, homo, or otherwise poly-sexual, the demand for capitulation adds an erotic charge to the aggressor’s pedestal of power. In the context of Wright’s story, the black man’s surrender confirms not simply his unmannimg but more specifically his penetrability, his femininity, the black body construed as mutually abject and desirable. For Taylor, the whip and the rope signify his physical disgrace, and whether subconsciously or not he intuits the erotic connotations of the crime, the remainder of the text focuses on his recuperation and his resolve to mobilize his followers against Jim Crow tyranny.

For Horace the sexual connotations of Antonio’s imaginary rope become crushingly clear with the comment “you’re gonna like it,” which, playful intentions

aside, impugns his gay black body as a potentially willing participant in the ritual of race-killing. In exploring this pathology, Kenan captures the most fleeting and fluid facet of the hangman’s rope, the castrator’s knife, and the whip, exposing the erotic undercurrent of past atrocities and their lasting effect on the queer black psyche. As “haunted” property, the antebellum house stresses Horace’s difficulty in negotiating the sexually overdetermined space of the South, defined not simply by its racial stratifications or Horace’s closeted homosexuality but also by the reverberations of a tumultuous history. For many gay black subjects such as Horace, the ongoing competition between black and white masculinity assumes strange and indefinite levels of complexity and ambiguity. The added element of violence produces both clarity and confusion, on one hand diluting Horace’s ambivalence about belonging—reminding him of his “rightful place” as an African American—but on the other hand, confounding his attraction to white men, as his sense of their entitlement and agency harkens back in the moment with Antonio to the horror of the lynch mob.

Reminiscent of Yaeger’s theory of the hyperspatialized body, Horace’s signified presence in the house re-evokes the “permanent emergency” of the South’s race relations, his naked, homosexed body reconfiguring the meaning of the lynched black body.

But to what extent are we able to read the queer subtext of vigilante justice? The simple answer is as far as any individual text will allow. But, then, how does one interpret this closeted queerness? Also, how do these narratives of sadistic torture upset our literary impressions—stereotypes, really—of the white gay Southern male and his nonwhite counterpart? To be clear, my analysis does not propose that all
literary depictions of lynching present pretexts for white same-sex voyeurism, or that all or any of the assailants neatly fit into a definitive category of homosexuality, but that these incursions by Wright, Baldwin, and Kenan into the historical record provoke new and thoughtful interrogations of the violent white gaze and its development in the expansive domain of the closet. Describing the epistemology of the closet as unbound by time or place or lacking “a superseded regime of knowledge” (67), Eve Sedgwick identifies the closet’s operation within the “deadly” dictates of compulsory heteronormativity, arguing “every [social] encounter … erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact … new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure” (68). As obviously as the closet informs the lives of sexual others, its influence on heterosexuals proves no less enormous. Pressing the point, Sedgwick declares, “The epistemology of the closet has also been … inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture and history at large” (68). To this end, Kenan’s implicit conflation of the South’s history of lynching with the making and remaking of sexual secrecy.

The clash of chronologies in Kenan’s text, particularly in the antebellum house, powerfully challenges the South’s positioning of the closet in the cozier realm of “other voices, other rooms” that is, the clandestine, claustrophobic (often Gothic) spaces which repeatedly turn up in texts by Lillian Smith, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and Carson McCullers. Opposite of these discrete queer spaces loom the public platforms of homoerotic lynchings. Even clandestine lynchings, mainly made up of homosocial gatherings of white men and the victim, subtend the Southern, mid-century stereotype of gay white men as introverted, “soft,” fiercely insular, and/or
effeminate. Insofar as Antonio and Horace queer the lynching narrative, Antonio also revises perceptions of white Southern masculinity, his imitation of Southern whiteness re-embodying Jesse’s violent libido as well as Taylor’s assailants. Crucial to Kenan’s evocation of the closet is its link to earlier writing from and about the Southern landscape. In the end, the transformation of the antebellum house into a gay retreat turn battlefield constitutes a closet within a closet, a South within a South, one literary and historical paradigm competing with and complementing the other.
Chapter Four

Airing Dirty Laundry: Cross Currents on Black Self-Destruction in Political Discourse

The Negro, too, for his part, has idols of the tribe to smash. If on the one hand the white man has erred in making the Negro appear to be that which would excuse or extenuate his treatment of him, the Negro, in turn, has too often unnecessarily excused himself because of the way he has been treated. The intelligent Negro of today has resolved not to make discrimination an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance, individual or collective; he is trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts. --Alain Locke “The New Negro,” 1925

Bill Cosby’s unsparing, and apparently spontaneous, reprimand of the black poor at Constitution Hall on May 17, 2004 signaled a deep division among black scholars, activists, writers, politicians, and media pundits, many of whom had gathered to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education. Leaders lined up swiftly on either side of the furor. During several weeks of televised interviews following his speech, Cosby appeared indifferent to his critics and to the fact that he had broken a public code of reticence among black leaders regarding inner-city black culture, that by putting his prepared remarks aside that day at Constitution Hall, he had veered off a broader social script as well, informing his multiracial audience of his frustration and disgust with “these knuckleheads,” who refuse to learn standard English, who drop out of high school at a national average of 50 percent or more, who turn to a foreshortened life of criminal activity, who surrender any sense of responsible parenting to an already overwhelmed
welfare state, and, perhaps the cruelest cut of all, who skulk about alleys and street corners without the slightest sign of shame or recognition of their personal failing. Cosby’s blast sounded as blunt and unapologetic as his portrayal of urban blacks:

“Looking at the incarcerated, these people are not political criminals. These are people going around stealing Coca Cola. … And then they stand there in an orange suit, and you drop to your knees, and say, ‘Please, he didn’t do anything…’ Yes, he did do it.”

For many listeners, then and now, Cosby’s characterization of the black poor seems classist, monolithic, and, if nothing else, too plainspoken, especially at such a hallowed occasion, about which he barked, “What the hell good is Board v. Board of Education if nobody wants it?” Since the time of the speech, sociologist Michael Males has questioned Cosby’s use of statistics. NAACP Legal Defense Fund organizer Theodore Shaw argues that the speech elides the significance of white racism in the lives of the black poor, while writer/professor Michael Eric Dyson positions Cosby’s views within what he perceives as a larger historical effort of the black middle class to distance themselves from their working class brothers and sisters. Conversely, Cosby’s supporters make up a wide array of conservative and liberal black leaders, from Jesse Jackson, Juan Williams, and Alvin F. Poussaint, Cosby’s co-author of Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors, to Kweisi Mfume, former Director of the NAACP. Telling the press, “The issue of personal responsibility is real. A lot of people didn’t want [Cosby] to say what he said because it was an open forum. But if the truth be told, he was on target,” Mfume affirms Cosby’s critique of the black poor (qtd. in Juan Williams 13). In the end, whatever one’s position in the controversy, critics on either side of it maintain
that silence can be noxious, if only to the extent that it fortifies a continuation of the social problems publicly aired at Constitution Hall.

Mfume’s phrase “open forum” stirs up the long-standing belief that African Americans generally dislike airing dirty laundry for fear that revealing intra-racial struggles, failures, and embarrassments to a potentially hostile, non-black audience will make the race all the more vulnerable to attack or misrepresentation. Whether this assumption holds up as fact or merely perpetuates a minor myth, Cosby’s critics bristle at his decision to speak his mind in public, and as Juan Williams notes, for not “explaining to white people—especially conservative white people—that he wasn’t talking about all black people” (14). Any impetus to stifle discussion of such intra-racial strife signifies, at least in the case of Cosby’s most outspoken detractors, a preoccupation with white approval, whereas for others an historic distrust of the white perspective. On this point, Williams reminds us how “As a group, black people are sensitive to any reinforcement of the racist characterization of them as stupid, lazy, violent, and lacking in moral character. Those stereotypes have persisted across the years in minstrel shows and music videos, and have led to a negative self-image” (18-19). Does this fear of worm-worn labels automatically preclude a discussion of black self-defeatism? Does the distrust of whites and fear of reinforcing stereotype mandate a black-only discourse, excluding non-blacks from the conversation? How do African Americans engage in this kind of critique without destroying a credible sense of fealty to the success and progress of black people? In any event, the Constitution Hall speech and the polarized response it generated has set the stage for a new model of black criticism and analysis, pitting leftist writers such as Michael Eric Dyson and Peter Gamble against more conservative thinkers like Juan
Williams and Shelby Steele. Like earlier times of major disagreement—Du Bois vs. Washington, for instance—this current period of contention contains various, seminal insights into twenty-first century black leadership and culture.

** Debating Black Self-Destruction: the Academy vs. the Street **

Entering the fiery debate about black self-destruction, I am compelled to acknowledge the many facets of the controversy and stake my claims not only on scholarly convictions but also on personal interests. This debate cuts a deep, wide swath in the black community; among my own relatives and friends, the divisions are plentiful and intricately structured. People frequently differ on the degree to which African Americans cause their own problems and the degree to which white racism still looms in black people’s lives and at which point the reality of white racism and black self-sabotage overlap. Notwithstanding these disagreements, no one, as far as I know, willingly states that all interracial conflicts in the twenty-first century prove identical to those occurring thirty or forty years ago and that to conflate the race narrative of the Jim Crow south with the contemporary moment would foster a gross miscalculation of the changing times, just as turning a blind eye to the lingering ministrations of white patriarchal power would engender perilously false impressions of society achieving perfect egalitarianism. If the truth lies somewhere along the seams of these polarized perspectives, neither view is fully acceptable or dismissible. As the son of a mother and father who survived Jim Crow, both working and raising their children in decidedly working class neighborhoods in the desegregated South, I find that my experiences have given me a firsthand view of the jagged edge at which white racism and black self-destruction intersect.
I am not the only one: in fact, much of the post-Civil Rights generation is beginning to take a long look at this intersection and essay on its meaning. In his book *Racial Paranoia: the Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness*, John L. Jackson asserts that the overt racism of the recent past has mostly given way to covert forms of discrimination and that a profound racial distrust emanates from all sides of interracial contact, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. With a more emphatic tenor than Jackson’s, linguist and cultural critic John McWhorter argues in his book *Loosing the Race* that African Americans routinely cling to a victim mentality at the cost of accepting personal accountability. Both McWhorter and Jackson concur that political correctness, albeit well intended, harbors certain crucial hazards, specifically its capacity to deaden a more productively forthright racial discourse. McWhorter suggests that political correctness instructs whites to view blacks as categorically other and for blacks to view themselves in the same way, as “a pitiable, weak, and unintelligent ‘other’” (xiii). Although similar, Jackson’s reading of the issue offers a deeper nuance, as when he writes, “The demonization of public racism is clearly a social and moral victory, but it has come at a cost. Political correctness has proven tragically effective at hiding racism, not just healing it” (91). In the absence of honesty and forthrightness, distortions abound about the vastness of white racism and the futility of subverting it. A watermark of political *incorrectness*, Cosby’s speech rang out across the generational divide, chorusing with the younger voices of McWhorter, Jackson, and others. All of their statements relay the importance of rethinking the scope and reach of white power, not to deny its lasting presence in the twenty-first century, but to implant in the discourse a new tactic in evaluating the enormity of white racism. This re-evaluation involves the recognition of a
shift—a massive shift—in paradigms, permitting Cosby, McWhorter, and Jackson to declare that the horrors that happened then and the inequalities that outlined daily life then do not necessarily define the present and that denial of this fact only exacerbates the many challenges in education, work, public safety, and healthcare that black Americans, along with everyone else, must confront.

Why so many academics distance themselves from discussing black self-destruction, I do not entirely understand. Based on readings, conversations, observations, and sheer intuition, one or two hypotheses that I put forward may in some way explain this scholarly reticence. First, many critics are engaged in other work and, besides, may not fully trust their colleagues and students to treat this discussion with compassion or without applying preconceived judgments. Secondly, white scholars would hardly want to incur disdain from their colleagues, black and white, or worse, stir up suspicions or accusations of racism. They want to protect their status as enlightened and culturally aware, and any interrogation of this kind might cast doubt on their reputation. Literary critics generally relegate the subject to the rank of untouchable, discouraging others from even considering it. Conversely, the talk on the street has been braver, sharper, and in some respects, more informed, with preachers (my own grandfather being one), cooks, barbers, custodians, factory operators, housekeepers, and other so-called blue collar workers (the social space I know best) willing to say the unsayable, to call to account everyone responsible, blacks and whites, for the disasters Cosby discussed in his speech. These workers live intimately with the threat of crime, the repercussions of negligent parents, and an anti-intellectual climate that poisons the future of their neighbors and loved ones. These informed, working class individuals join the ranks of community
leaders, organizers, and volunteers who wage battles against senseless violence, substandard education, and inadequate healthcare. The people involved have to respond to the macro-size forces of economic disparity, a biased legal system, and underfunded schools as well as to the micro forces of self-destruction. Visiting New Orleans in 2013, I was struck by the vehemence of a local Stop the Violence campaign that gained vigor after a mass, gang-related shooting at a Mother’s Day parade on May 12 of that year. Willing to say the unsayable at rallies and on the radio, community organizers commented on the immediate need to alter a culture identifying with gangs and guns, and the anger and frustration of these grassroots organizers resonate with the outrage of similar community protests across the nation.

Willing to say the unsayable, these organizers occupy one side of a great schism with many people in academia making up the other side, a side that more often than not wants to focus exclusively on the macro-size forces of white power. Being the first person in my immediate family and one of few in my extended family to attend college, I regularly felt ill at ease in college and graduate school classes and seminars, no more so, oddly enough, than during discussions of race. Who are these black people we are talking about, I sometimes thought but dare not vocalize. Who are these utterly wretched victims or purified angels of mercy? I thought, where in the text of this poem, story, or novel may we not look for greater complexity? I was constantly reminded of a scene in Annie Hall in which Allen’s character Alvy Singer tells his pretentious, scholarly wife how “intellectuals . . . prove you can be absolutely brilliant and still have no idea what’s going on.” Admittedly excessive, Alvy’s quip highlights a crucial gap between the paper reality to which too many critics retreat and the ground realities of life outside the
academy. To be fair, this gap is steadily closing with community outreach programs forming at colleges and universities nationwide.

Until the gap closes completely, I hope to find in political discourse and literary analysis—and I am writing in general terms—an ever wider view of the social problems that plague black life. This new discourse acknowledges the continuing presence of white racism but also calls attention to how in this post-Jim Crow period African Americans, perhaps unaware of the changes or distrustful of their permanence, sometimes multiply their own burdens. This discourse also shows that not every act of defiance or resistance is warranted or agential, that sometimes an adversarial or subversive disposition, especially one forged in defeatism and unexamined self-loathing, can stymy personal and collective progress toward justice and equality. What community leaders understand is what my grandfather, addressing his congregation from the pulpit, meant when he said that waiting on white people to do right does not mean black folks have a free pass to keep doing wrong and thinking wrong. Finally, this discourse does not replicate the obstructive partisanship that already informs discussions of black self-destruction but, instead, dares to cross political barricades, borrowing and rejecting ideas from self-declared conservatives like John McWhorter and far-left liberals like bell hooks. I want to ride the words of my grandfather’s no-nonsense rhetoric into academia, and I see no purpose in preserving the political allegiances of the left or right when lives hang in the balance and solutions are hard to find. One does not have to accept every idea or insight from a political adversary in order to see that some ideas from that adversary are sound and productive. Centered on the Cosby controversy, this discussion moves across a wide berth of scholars, political pundits, writers, and literary critics to
unearth the most provocative and practical arguments opposing black self-destruction. In doing so, conventional wisdom must be checked and sacred cows sacrificed. Cosby’s comments, however crude and caustic, place African Americans at the controlling core of their own subjectivity, while making way for a robust and dynamic dialogue.

**Cosby, Dyson, and the Black Poor**

Michael Eric Dyson, possibly Cosby’s severest critic, lays out a book-length rebuttal to the Constitution Hall speech in *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Middle Class Lost its Mind?* Framing Cosby’s remarks as the latest salvo in an age-old war between black generations and economic classes, what he colorfully terms as the Ghettopcracy vs. the Afritocracy, Dyson characterizes his own argument as “a principled defense of poor black folk, one rooted in clear-eyed acknowledgment of deficiencies and responsibility but anchored by an abiding compassion for the most vulnerable members of our community” (xvi). Giving a nuanced definition of class, Dyson perceptively meshes economic status with less calcified determinants of social standing. In his view, class transcends the possession of wealth, becoming performative, disjoining privilege from outlook and behavior. “Hence,” Dyson explains, “it is not uncommon to hear ‘that’s so ghetto’ used to describe behavior associated with poor folk . . . And the charge of ‘acting seditty’—or putting on airs—can be leveled at the poor and rich alike” (xv). In his defense of the black poor, Dyson suggests that the black middle class has embraced an elitist, “seditty” dismissal of the blue collar bottom, deepening the emotional schism between the classes while strengthening the black elite’s endeavor to win approval and support from a dominant white majority.
According to Dyson, the black elite, in its quest for clout and status, actively ignores or downplays any display of racial inequality that continues to surface in twenty-first century America. By his calculation, the closer to white privilege black elitists find themselves, the more “embarrassed” they are by “the bad behavior of the poor” (182). This embarrassment, Dyson believes, drives Cosby’s charges. To this end, he writes that “Cosby is so obviously embarrassed by the masses of black folk that he has taken to insulting and, truly, intimidating them from a bully pulpit that stretches across the media . . . Cosby’s intent appears . . . to be to get rid of the scourge of unwashed masses whose language, thinking, behavior, clothing and bodies are irredeemably offensive” (202-203). However, Dyson offers no evidence to bolster his assertions about Cosby’s psychology or deep-seated intent. Throughout his argument, Dyson relies on a mostly structural (subtly Marxist) model to account for why the black poor continually fail at improving their situation, with Dyson pointing to low wages, inadequate housing, bad schooling, limited employment opportunities, and racist policies in any number of social arenas—predicaments and problems that Cosby and others like him refuse to recognize or have conveniently forgotten.

This external model predisposes Dyson’s critique of the distinctly American concept of individualism—what he derisively describes as a “myth” (203)—one that desensitizes the middle class to the realistic difficulties hindering economic uplift. Individualism, as he sees it, operates as a master narrative, dreamed up and disseminated by privileged whites with little or no regard for the unique troubles of the less fortunate. Dyson divides along racial and economic lines the different attitudes and approaches people take in evaluating the causes of poverty. Citing studies and reports in sociology,
Dyson suggests that while a majority of the black poor view poverty as the result of insufficient wages, housing, and education, just as many blame bad luck, illness, and other inscrutable forces of fate (203). Largely discounting these outside realities, many well-to-do whites, Dyson argues, attribute success to personal vigor, meanwhile perceiving the black poor as lacking thrift and ambition and as having “loose morals and other character defects” (203). Dyson admits that within this wide rift of perceptions many working class blacks similarly indulge the “romance” of individualism, the notion of crossing economic boundaries but only as proof of the narrative’s cultural hegemony (204). Like the black and white elite, the poor have evidently surrendered to the seductive idea that most people in America possess the opportunity or the means to succeed and that talent, diligence, and drive, more than fortuity, inheritance, and filial connection, level an otherwise uneven contest. Cosby, too, must be seduced, Dyson believes, by such an identifiably conservative position. Whether or not Cosby chooses to acknowledge his support of conservative politics, Dyson charges, the entertainer’s pontifications have, nonetheless, “emboldened white conservative interests in their public attacks on the poor” (221). At the heart of Dyson’s complaint is his fear that Cosby has somehow enflamed and legitimated the racist rhetoric of the far right against the black poor. Dyson asserts:

The effect of white conservatives on Cosby’s thinking is unmistakable, especially as he lashes out at leaders and thinkers with a more complex vision of how one truly helps the poor. ‘The poverty pimps and the victim pimps keep telling the victim to stay where they are,’ Cosby told an audience in Detroit in January 2005. ‘You’re crippled, you can’t walk, you can’t get up, you can’t do this, you can’t do that. And I’m saying, you’d better get up.’ That quip so pleased conservatives that it made both The O’Reilly Factor and Hannity & Colmes on the Fox News Network. Of course, if Cosby were willing to actually explore the social
responsibility for the suffering of the black poor, and to stop telling a narrow truth about them, such a statement might signal the possibility of helpful, hopeful dialogue—and put to rest his need for off-the-cuff ranting and raving. (202)

Beyond the fact that Cosby assumes a decidedly different view from his own, arguing against white and black liberals as so-called “victim pimps,” Dyson apparently finds irritation with the incendiary use of “pimp,” an image that, he suggests, keeps up the pernicious stereotyping of inner-city black youth, serving as shorthand for even more incendiary terminology.

That Dyson objects to virtually every aspect of Cosby’s stance—what, how, and to whom he speaks—crystalizes not only the men’s polarized positioning, but more importantly, Dyson’s intractability in the debate. How can Cosby, or anyone, be fairly blamed for the misappropriation of his words? All communication can be distorted, misconstrued, or misinterpreted—picked up, transmuted, and retransmitted to any intended or unintended audience. To suppress—or to try to suppress—the impact of Cosby’s criticisms casts doubt upon whom the black poor truly embarrasses, Cosby or Dyson. Indeed, Dyson’s preoccupation with white conservatives on this issue—his focus split between Cosby’s offensiveness to blacks and his occasional appeal to insensitive whites—reveals in Dyson a sign of double consciousness. On August 1, 2004, Henry Louis Gates published “Breaking the Silence,” an editorial in the New York Times, in which he writes, “Any person who frequents a barber shop or beauty parlor in the inner city knows that Mr. Cosby was only echoing sentiments widely shared in the black community” (4-11). In response to Gates’s statement, Dyson remarks that “most brothers in the barbers’ chair are not invited to appear on CNN to spread their views, and neither does that qualify them to take a position—or, for that matter, to be offered one—on
Professor Gates’s black studies faculty at Harvard” (224). What precisely “qualifies” a person in this respect? These would-be denizens of the barber-shop might have only anecdotal evidence to share, while others might possess insights that come from scholarship as well as the street. One can only imagine his reply if such offensiveness had spewed from Cosby’s lips. At any rate, Dyson’s response suggests a haughty disregard of the people he claims to champion and a coveting of power in the media and ivory tower—he himself has made numerous appearances on CNN and other media outlets. In the shadow of so much of his discussion, his accusations of elitism against Cosby and the black middle class become unquestionably ironic, if not utterly laughable.

However, Dyson does not unfairly misrepresent or distort Cosby’s speaking style. Whatever the occasion, Cosby’s language has remained acerbic and abrasive. At Constitution Hall, on television, and throughout his 2004 nationwide tour in which he confronted and challenged the poor in town hall meetings, Cosby breathed fire at his audiences, who, by all accounts, received his heated message enthusiastically. In Houston, he shrieked to ripples of applause and sporadic standing ovations, yelling, “How many government programs have you waited for and when they arrived, nothing happened? […] I’m not denying systemic racism. I’m not denying that, never have. I’ve lived it. I don’t need to show you a card about what has happened to me” (qtd. in Williams 188-189). In Pittsburgh, he laced his tough-love lecture with glimpses at past models of black leadership: “You teach your child that this message that is coming today […] teach your child that Malcolm X said it forty-two years ago! Du Bois said it! Bethune said it! Education!” (qtd. in Williams 190). Chicago had Cosby roaring full-blast: “Let me tell you something. Your dirty laundry gets out of school at two-thirty
every day. It’s cursing and calling each other nigger as they walk up and down the street. They think they’re hip. They can’t read; they can’t write. They’re laughing and giggling and they’re going nowhere” (qtd. in Williams 19). Certainly, Cosby’s rhetoric turns inflammatory, even abusive, and, in these moments, it may be less effective than he desires. However, his remark about pimps and prostitutes should in no way impugn his intent or discredit his message. For one, Cosby is not inventing the problem of sex trafficking in the inner city where pimps have established a pervasive stronghold. (Nor is he lying when he lambasts the failure, nationally and locally, of many governmental programs instituted to assist and relieve the poor.) The fact that the black poor overwhelmingly applaud his critique of them reveals a racially constructed contract of intimate trust between speaker and audience. His familiarity and his intimacy derive as much from his celebrity as from his willingness to publicize his own struggles on the mean streets of Philadelphia and in high school. Cosby draws favor from the poor because his speeches partake of the wisdom of the barbershop and beauty parlor, an ethos they all share. That white conservatives overhear and reproduce Cosby’s words probably has negligible impact on their view of black culture, other than perhaps to affirm their worst impressions, and even less on the plight of the poor who probably ponder infinitely less the attitudes of white conservatives than Dyson apparently does.

Not that Dyson’s argument lacks consequence, but the issues he addresses often require more complexity than his unilateral position allows. (To be fair, the same may be said about Cosby’s speech). Instead of looking more intently at black society to locate and examine the causes of black self-destruction, Dyson focuses almost exclusively on the efforts of racist whites, real and imaginary, to extend a history of economic and
political oppression into the twenty-first century. He re-invokes the accusation of racism against Ronald Regan’s so-called “War on Drugs,” pointing out the “foreseeable consequences” of racial profiling and increased penalties for drug violations (88). Dyson makes perfect sense in highlighting the horrors of profiling, yet he fails to mention that none other than the Congressional Black Caucus advocated for an implementation of laws designed to prosecute the traffickers and users of crack-cocaine, a drug that utterly devastated inner-cities throughout the 1980s. This elision shakes the ground under his argument. These Black Caucus representatives were merely responding to the outcries of their constituents who watched their neighborhoods mutate into war zones with rival gangs battling for turf. Stressing the violence (and not the drug) as the legislator’s principle target, John McWhorter argues, “Indeed, the sentencing laws were not designed to catch white users although there are more of them—because the whites were not part of the murderous culture that was decimating blacks . . . The people who put these laws into effect—prominent blacks among them—were quite explicit about having the inner-city crack culture in mind rather than the white investment banker doing some lines after work in his apartment” (14). Even as McWhorter’s statement admits a clear racial bias within the enforcement of these drug laws, it also reminds readers of the attempt by the Black Caucus to push black communities back from the brink of annihilation.

The new question is whether these draconian measures have run their course, becoming more hindrance than help. Here Dyson (and others) possess the more convincing argument that he fortifies with a compelling case against state governments that prioritize incarceration over educating its young people. Asserting, “[W]e have a lethal public policy of prizing prisons over education,” Dyson adds, “There is a swelling
prison industry that is sweeping ever larger numbers of blacks into local penitentiaries. The more black bodies fill the jails, the more cells are built and the more revenue is generated, particularly in the rural white communities where many prisons are located” (91-2). A number of university studies do, in fact, reveal that private prison owners regularly reap the benefits of a cheap labor force, drawing sizable profits from the inmates and that state governments receive tremendous revenue from the prison industrial complex. Michelle Alexander’s 2010 book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* expands on these studies by arguing that state governments enact law enforcement policies that target black and brown people for mass incarceration as a new-fangled strategy of racial control and containment. One of Alexander’s major contentions rehearsing the claim that the War on Drugs disproportionately ensnares minorities, but Alexander adds to this claim the assertion that even one-time felons lose forfeit, by writ of law, the right to vote or hold publically elected office. This disenfranchisement, Alexander claims, manifests from a continuous effort by white supremacists to institute a new era of Jim Crow. To this end, Alexander writes, “What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it” (2). According to Yale Law Professor James Forman Jr., one of Alexander’s most prominent and outspoken critics, she mischaracterizes the present situation and reduces the permanent terror of the past. The son of a prominent 1960s Civil Rights activist, Forman takes issue with Alexander’s tendency to categorize all black people as victims or potential victims of mass incarceration and her failure to note the interventions of class difference in the making and maintaining of the prison industry. Much of Forman’s argument hinges on the fact
that the poor (of all races) comprise the majority of those who are incarcerated and that Jim Crow laws pinpointed African Americans more than any other ethnic group and were irrespective of class and social status. Also, this so-called “new Jim Crow” traps and incarcerates a prolific number of the white poor, and no one should ever argue that poor whites suffered the same indignities as their African American counterparts during the actual Jim Crow era.

I would add that the actual Jim Crow laws were irrespective of a person’s action or (lack of) criminal activity. My parents and grandparents, who lived Jim Crow, did not have to commit any level of crime, neither misdemeanor nor felony, to be subject to the ignominy of the law. Nevertheless, I am willing to concede the significance of the problem of mass incarceration—to a point. The worst mistake would be to ignore it or suppress its importance. On this issue, John McWhorter reads like he is writing from another planet. Attacking the longstanding assumption that African Americans receive harsher prison sentences than other convicts, he writes, “When prison records, gravity of crime, and use of weapons [are] taken into account, there is no sentencing bias against blacks” (13). This remark controverts countless studies (including Alexander’s) that say otherwise. McWhorter returns to earth when he (along with Juan Williams and others) report that African Americans constitute only 13 percent of the US population but account for approximately 40 percent of the violent crime, including armed robbery and murder (Williams 116, McWhorter 13). McWhorter convincingly states, “The reason they commit more crimes is surely traceable to racism, which left a disenfranchised people on the margins of society and most vulnerable to antisocial behavior. However, this does not mean that the percentage of the black prison population above 13 percent
[was] put behind bars for no reason” (13). To link the exploitative economies of the past with present-day prisons signals a real triumph of analysis, except, in doing so, Dyson and Alexander sidestep the inconvenient fact that blacks commit more violent crime than other Americans. The scene they paint all but omits an array of intra-cultural influences that affect black incarceration and, most telling, their analyses downplay the primary importance of the black subject in participating in criminal activity. These convicts, just as Cosby and others maintain, are not political prisoners; neither are they dupes of the penal system. However biased the system, however unfair, African Americans, like other identity groups, enter the system mostly as a result of their own misdeeds. African Americans must mobilize forces to protest these imbalances, but they must not lose sight of the fact that black criminality contributes starkly to these challenges.

This discussion of jails as the seat of the so-called new Jim Crow calls to my mind a tragic case in 2008 in which Demario Atwater and Laurence Lovette invaded the home of University of North Carolina student body president Eve Carson, kidnapped her, robbed her, and left her bleeding in the street, fatally shot in the head. I know this case received tremendous media attention in part because the assailants were black and the victim female and white, all the more that she was attractive, popular, and a promising scholar. I also know that most violent crimes occur within a race and that Carson’s killing only intensified the fearful hallucinations of anti-black bigots by reinforcing the iconic image of the beastly black man who lives solely to maim or kill the Southern white belle. Here then was a single-case projection of the panic that propelled a lengthy succession of lynch mobs across the Jim Crow South. None of that happened in this case. The murder did not engender mob hysteria or rioting or any of the other familiar race-
related riptides of the recent past. Instead, their legal convictions took an expressly 
mundane course of action, leading to their individual life sentences. At the time, I 
resided in Chapel Hill, where the crime occurred, and I taught at the university, and as an 
African American male, with a working class background, I could not resist wondering 
how the killers’ lives had taken such an abject turn or why the great number of schools 
and universities in the area had failed to attract or sustain their interest. What economic 
barriers had they faced? They may not have received the same quality of education as 
their privileged peers, but how had these two murderers contributed to their defeat? With 
an ever-mounting heap of financial aid now available, with so many paths to trade work 
and professionalization, and with all the ameliorations afforded to blacks and others with 
the passing of the 1960s Civil Rights Acts, how can Dyson still make the case that the 
poor have only limited means to advance the economic status of their lives? Every life is 
complicated and none of it is reducible to antithetical answers, not Dyson’s, 
McWhorter’s, Cosby’s, or mine. But what has become truly evident is the sea change in 
paradigms, from the time that any white person could kill any black one and stand a 
reasonably good chance of acquittal—or forgo trial altogether in some instances—to a 
time when the prevailing threat to black life comes not so much from marauding whites 
but from other African Americans.

The single greatest flaw in Dyson’s attack on Cosby stems from his persistent use 
of a political lens that everyday proves more and more anachronistic. Due to his outdated 
outlook on race, Dyson refuses to accept this adjustment in American politics and culture, 
his discussion becoming most obsolete during the few instances in which he agrees with 
Cosby. These harmonious moments happen whenever Dyson looks back at statements
and writings that Cosby produced in the late 1960s and mid-70s—a one-off television program in 1968 called *Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed?*, his 1976 doctoral dissertation, and an interview with *Playboy Magazine* in 1969. Quoting long passages from the interview, Dyson applauds young Cosby’s grip on white supremacy as “intelligent and unsparing” (195). High on his list of praise is Cosby’s notice of the demoralizing effect of poverty and racial inequities as when Cosby asks his interviewer Lawrence Linderman, “Did you ever eat green meat and green bread? How many winters have white people spent with rats scurrying around their apartment at night, with windows boarded up but not keeping out the cold, . . . Try to get a ghetto slumlord to fix up an apartment and you’ll know what frustration and bitterness is” (qtd. in Dyson 193).

In the interview, Cosby also espoused his belief that maintaining a nonviolent mode of protest had become untenable for many blacks and that a race war could be imminent: referring to “the white man,” Cosby remarked, “He is at the point now where he will either have to allow the black man his civil rights or to try to wipe him out” (192).

Although Dyson briefly observes the despairing effect Martin Luther King’s assassination obviously had on Cosby, he makes no further recognition of the impact that other prominent killings, including that of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, James Cheney, and Malcolm X might also have had on the interviewee. Rather than exploring the intense headiness of the time or the specific causes of the feeling of crisis that Cosby expressed then, Dyson blurs the politics of the late 60s with those of the present moment: “Cosby’s . . . [1969] dissection of white supremacy . . . holds stirring testimony against his present refusal to hold white society responsible for its role in black suffering” (195). Yes, in the forty-plus years since
giving the interview, Cosby has had an apparent change in focus; he acknowledges the vestigial presence of white supremacy but not as a justification for abjuring personal responsibility, initiative, and self-empowerment. By contrast, Dyson shows almost no sign of reassessment and blames Cosby because his vision counters the ideological dictates of black intellectualism circa 1969. According to Dyson, the “white man” of 1969 is the “white man” of today; the political realities of the black poor and the opportunities for uplift in their lives have scarcely progressed since the year of the *Playboy* interview.

This conflation of times reinforces the notion of an eternal racism, a condition that never yields and that resists in every way the great sweep of history. Dyson reads Cosby’s criticisms of the poor as a victimization of them: “Even as Cosby further victimizes the poor, he seems to be a victim himself, of compassion fatigue” (234). Is Dyson’s rhetoric of victimization really enabling the poor? Without a fervent, substantive challenge to what even he occasionally concedes as “self-destructive behavior among poor folk” (212), does his discourse not rationalize the problems Cosby identifies in his speeches? Far more than any fiery speech, Dyson’s assertion that Cosby “victimizes” the poor impairs the perception of them as whole, capable subjects, sealing them in an impenetrable vacuum of want and need. To be sure, the history of this country bears a long list of black victims, dating back to slavery, sharecropping, and widespread vigilante violence. Undoubtedly, more than other classes the poor suffer from a glaring lack of resources, most notably in education and healthcare. The abysmal state of inner city schools have served as the basis of several thoughtful discourses, and the search for practical resolutions can be challenging, to say the least. I know firsthand
poverty’s brutal impact, but poverty alone does not victimize. To refer to the poor as victims, Dyson transforms disadvantage into identity, exhibiting a mindset that grinds the poor into an intractable position whereby economic status converts to individual character. Poverty merely describes what people possess materially, not necessarily what they think, how they think, or, most importantly, their ability to think independently.

Where in some instances poverty does cage a person’s mind, distorting it, that person has accepted the terms of being poor, handed down from his surroundings and from a political climate of patronizing pity. The prison of poverty does not necessitate a life sentence. To argue otherwise is to disadvantage the poor all the more, adding to the adversities to which they must contend. Cosby’s criticisms presume the readiness of the poor to hear them. These criticisms hold the potential to empower them as subjects, whereas Dyson’s discussion only furthers the failed tradition of pandering and condescending to the poor.

A Pivot in the Racial Discourse: Juan Williams, bell hooks, and John McWhorter

Judging by the consistency and adamancy of his views, Dyson’s argument surely emanates from a sincere desire to defend the poor against slander and what he considers “further victimization.” His intent to direct attention to the continuing problem of low wages and insufficient housing is likewise admirable. But to suggest that public rebuke will further undercut the social position of the black poor by “keep[ing] them from a connecting to a venerable legacy of social action . . . [as] symbolized in Cosby’s Playboy interview” (197) once again presupposes that their most important struggle in life revolves almost solely around “the white man.” Not so, says Juan Williams, who celebrates Cosby’s speech but regards the occasion of its delivery as a sad commentary
on the paucity of vibrant black leadership in the twenty-first century. In his book *Enough*, Williams points out that the speech should have come years and years ago and from a number of speakers.

Cutting to the central problems in contemporary black culture, especially among the poor, Williams poses hard-hitting questions that indict self-sabotaging black youth and a largely unresponsive civil rights leadership:

> Where is strong black leadership for those looking for direction? . . . Who will tell you that if you want to get a job you have to stay in school and spend more money on education than on disposable consumer goods? Where are the black leaders who are willing to stand tall and say that any black man who wants to be a success has to speak proper English? . . . It would be a bonus if anyone dared to say to teenagers hungering for authentic black identity that dressing like a convict, whose pants are hanging off his ass because the jail prison guards took away his belt, is not the way to rise up and be a success. (26)

The unstinting force of these questions obviously builds from a number of derelict spaces in black culture, gathering urgency from what Williams recognizes as the awful pall in vision and moral certitude following King’s assassination. Williams argues that while many black leaders—namely Jesse Jackson, Julian Barnes, and the NAACP—made terrific strides in the 1960s, “they are still fighting the battles of the 1960s . . . and sending the same signals even as poor people are stuck in a rut and falling further behind in a global economy” (28). In her essay, “Refusing To Be A Victim: Accountability and Responsibility,” bell hooks delves further into the making of this awful pall, explaining how “[s]uddenly a spirit of resistance that had been grounded in an oppositional belief that white power was limited, that it could be challenged and transformed, had dissipated” (57). Here hooks hones in on the causes of “the formation of a psychology of
victimization” (57), while Williams assesses multiple generations of poverty, addiction, and criminality as the manifestations of this victim psychology.

Williams’ words virtually blast off the page with a succinctness and cogency that belies the complexity of his critique. His use of the term “rut” characterizes a misperception of lived reality, an acutely relevant phenomenon for African Americans who place undue value on wasteful acts of rebellion and subversion. Portraying these rebels, especially the youth, as misguided and unfairly marginalized, Williams takes a more sensitive, tactful approach than Cosby, stating that “When young people—and older people—take on a spirit of rebellion with their clothes, language, music, and other forms of expression, they’re only responding in a fairly rational way to a society that has first insulted and degraded them” (26). Here Williams clearly comprehends the importance of black self-expression, especially as it resists white privilege and an often hostile mainstream culture, but he also understands the significance of substantiating acts of resistance with strategies and goals that implement actual change and progress. For Williams, these strategies far outweigh “throwing up a finger in the face of the oppressor . . . the easy emotional satisfaction of ultimately pointless acts” (26). Protesting, acting up, or acting out means little if it alters little or moves little in the self, in others, and in one’s surroundings, especially in surroundings where such movement is not only possible but desired. Williams also suggests that rebellion can become habituated to the point of inculcation in which case the rebel acts without conscious or deliberate hope for change or even notice of meaningful cultural difference. The rebel in this scenario lacks even “the emotional satisfaction” of his rebellion, his behavior signifying as “unexamined gestures . . . that never rise to the level of true resistance or long-term revolution” (26).
Either situation, in which the protester acts consciously or unconsciously, deprives the protest of any telling shift in thought and reality, mind and body. Without diminishing or downplaying the enormous difficulties that people face in the inner city, where economic prospects alone can appear bleak, the need for questioning rebellion—culturally inculcated rebellion—has reached a critical mass. Hence, Williams’s questions about knowing proper English (and speaking it at opportune moments), about not wearing prison-style fashions, and so on, reflect not so much a middle or upper class embarrassment at the inner-city masses, as Dyson insists, but frustration at the black establishment for their acceptance of the attitudes and behaviors that inhibit most black people in these circumstances from carving out safer, healthier, more productive lives. Who are these rebels fighting if not themselves, and, most importantly, to what end, to what purpose? What reward does the fight present the fighter?

In anticipation of any argument that Williams promotes a broad capitulation to whiteness, that learning to speak standard English and adopting more mainstream styles of dress signify sheepish conformity, I would suggest that Williams’s depiction of “teenagers hungering for authentic black identity” (26) offers a much needed, thoughtful rebuttal. His phrase “hungering for authentic[ity]” illustrates a chronic condition of dissatisfaction among African Americans hoping to cultivate a system of thinking, behaving, and ritualizing that validates a specific and categorical black experience in ways separate from their white counterparts. Hence, authenticity, or “keeping it real”—the common neologism on the street—asserts power by fashioning an appropriated, monolithic black thought and demeanor in—and as—opposition to those of other ethnicities and identity groups. As an act of resistance, keeping it real ostensibly
provides the black subject a claim to cultural accountability and a feeling of protection from any invalidating effect of the white mainstream. But if authenticity protects black subjects, it also strangles an individual’s potential with suffocating, impossibly rigid proscriptions of identity. As in the mainstream, though perhaps more intensely enforced among blacks trying to keep it real, varieties of temperament, thought, and behavior get indelibly marked as commendable, suspicious, or forbidden.

Obviously, those who embody or enact the forbidden incur the severest censure. The focus of this discussion, however, centers not so much on social heresy—I have already addressed authenticity, homosexuality, and self-destruction in my chapter on Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*—but on those individuals who consciously embody the concept of authenticity and the very ones who are celebrated as doing so. Here the balance between realness and self-destruction shifts according to the intensity by which the black subject holds to feelings of cultural accountability. In one instance, a woman decides never to alter her demeanor or use of grammar no matter the occasion, that to do so would present a false image of her black self, she has already locked herself into an all-too-narrow notion of blackness that allows for little or no investigation of herself, others, and the space they inhabit. Meanwhile, an adolescent rejects college preparatory tracking in high school in order to strengthen his bonds with his peers who are all tracked in non-preparatory classes. His fears that he will be cast out of his circle of friends stems from the fact that even now they call him “Oreo,” “white-black boy,” and other disparaging names indicating his inauthenticity. While the first scenario is hypothetical, one that, I would argue, lies fully in the realm of possibility, the second example comes not from my imagination at all but from my recollection of a classmate
whose life over the years followed a downward spiral as he traded in his academic talent for popularity. In both cases, the need to keep it real gives way to self-sabotage.

By propagating a mostly adversarial concept of blackness, the African Americans in these two scenarios have disregarded the opportunity for a more strategic form of resistance in which blacks adapt unpredictably and autonomously to the demands of any given situation. The same principle of adaptation must be true for any racial minority—Latinos, Asian Americans—as well as for marginalized white Americans. No one uses precisely the same face, the same voice, or the same discourse in every social and job-related situation. Admittedly, this process of adaptation inheres difficult, individualistic decisions as to what to accept and reject from the dominant culture as well as from one’s own cultural origins. Nothing about adaptation is uniform, nor does it mitigate against even the subtlest expressions of white supremacy. Framed by the trans-Atlantic discourse on black identification, Stuart Hall’s wrestle with the notion of articulation—in which black identity surfaces as a volatile mix of ideologies, meanings, and influences—contributes immensely to the discussion of white dominance and black resistance. After tracing different theoretical objections to the concept of articulation, citing its reductionism and lack of connotation concerning cultural dominance, Hall “insist[s] on the potentially generative value of the term and its cognate concepts, which give us a start in thinking about the complex unity and differentia specificae of social formations” (41). To be sure, my use of the term adaptation, as a cognate of articulation, retains much of the same objectionable lack of connotative nuance, and in the absence of specificity in either term, the threat that black culture will be subsumed within the larger, predominant one begins to lose its signification. Just as white Americans express at different times a
fear of encroachment by the black Other, African Americans have similarly put forth an effort to safeguard the values and sensibilities they perceive as uniquely theirs from an impactful white majority.

Cognizant of the hierarchal structure of cultural influence, driven mainly by a multi-layered imbalance of power, African Americans developed after slavery the widest range of responses to whiteness, fluctuating from fear and distrust to resigned or enthusiastic acceptance. As two pivotal figures in the history of black leadership, Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X illustrate an important polarity in their responses to white power and influence. During the Reconstruction years, Booker T. Washington devoted himself absolutely to the vocational policies of General Samuel C. Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute who privileged trade-work over professionalism for freed blacks. Washington’s embrace of Armstrong’s ideas proved most unsettling for W. E. B. Du Bois, who convincingly decried such policy as limited, limiting, and impractical. Less than sixty years later, at the highpoint of the Civil Rights battle, Malcolm X, so disdainful of Martin Luther King’s alliance with whites, referred to him as a patsy of white power (The Hate that Hate Produced). He denigrated King’s philosophy of non-violence as woefully inadequate and scoffed at his 1963 March on Washington as masterminded by white power. Shortly thereafter, during Malcolm’s growing dissent with the Nation of Islam, the two leaders reconciled, providing the public an open display of mutual affirmation. I would argue that the distrust of white influence, either in the nineteenth century or in the 1960s, stemmed not simply from a resistance to white hegemony but from a more profound alarm at the threat of cultural erasure. Even in the present context of unprecedented progress in civil rights, for some black Americans,
Malcolm’s initial, separatist sentiments still ring true. For other blacks, separatism, so closely linked to the thought of an authentic black self, makes less and less sense. For those blacks living in post-1960s America, the cultural landscape filled with diverse and mutable influences, especially from Hispanic and Asian Americans, authenticity becomes an absurdly antiquated, if not completely extinct, concept; realness figures as a myth fading to black.

In his memoir *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man’s Escape from the Crowd*, Thomas Chatterton Williams examines the extensive toll that authenticity has exacted on his life and on his community of friends and family. As both a student of philosophy and as someone trying to keep it real, he felt himself waging war with himself—his interests and personal disposition strenuously bifurcated. Invoking Martin Heidegger’s concept of They, the unrecognized but nonetheless felt collective that impacts the concept and will of the self, Williams explains that he felt, as he believes other African Americans do, the thrust of They into an “‘averageness’ and a ‘leveling down’ of all possibilities and varieties of being” (194). By virtue of his academic father, his quest for answers, and his appreciation of Heidegger, Williams began to make sense of his divided self and the divided selves of other blacks, not just those quarantined in the “hood” but middle class blacks as well, even those attending prestigious universities like Georgetown, as he was doing in the 1990s. He recalls one incident at college in which he published an editorial in the black newspaper calling on black students at Georgetown to participate in the clubs and organizations the university had to offer. He was particularly perplexed as to why black students were absent at the chess tournaments, especially after his experiences of playing the game in Dupont Circle, “which are dominated by black
men, many of whom appear to come from the ‘hood and are self-schooled and, for a few dollars, capable of taking out the occasional Russian master who wanders over in search of some action” (197). To Williams’s surprise, he received no backlash for his article; in fact, he received no response at all, the paper editor telling him, “the thing is that not so many black students actually read this newspaper” (199). This entire episode—the chess club, the editorial, the lack of response, the discovery of the absence of black readers of a black-centered publication—imparted to Williams the expansive doggedness of black authenticity, a doggedness that superseded class, activity, and location.

What Williams basically argues here is how easily authenticity translates into (and out of) separatism. Williams observes that while black students “came out in droves to join organizations like the Black Student Association, the Caribbean Culture Club, and the black dance troupes,” they mostly stayed away from any of the nonblack organizations and societies (198). These students might claim experiencing racism, but perhaps the fear of racism or the deep-seated distrust of the white presence is what really nurtures black separatism, even from activities and events that hold special interest for a black population. Evidently, this fear of whiteness does not arouse Williams’s sympathy, not to the point that it would obfuscate the ability of blacks themselves to break down social barriers and that “[t]o do so would be the only way that we would cease being what we always complained of being: outsiders” (199). Williams’s comment telegraphs his understanding of the advances African Americans have made in the workforce, education, and politics, but that African Americans had yet to trust, accept, or embrace these advances, at least not fully. Failing to accept these positive changes has put blacks in doubly dubious position of victim and hypocrite.
Like Thomas Williams, Juan Williams views authenticity as foreshortened possibility, a kind of internalized determinism that contributes to the criminal ethos in the inner-city. The privileging of a supposedly authentic identity to an articulated, or adaptive, one by a number of African Americans insures a narrowing of the definition of blackness as well as a tightening of the prospects and opportunities for the most susceptible of the black poor. The criminalization of the black poor from within the race merely reinforces defective notions of blackness, a problem Williams attributes, again, to shoddy, insufficient black leadership. He forcefully lays the blame for chronic outbreaks of deadly crime in Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, and elsewhere at the feet of civil rights leaders who, he claims, have remained shamefully silent or infrequently critical of the problem. Despite the sizeable dent made by the Black Caucus and other lawmakers during the 1980s and 90s against the inner-city drug trade, the problem remains, extending from one generation to another, fostering cycles of addiction, false recovery, poverty, and life-altering violence.

That men and women who stood at the front lines in the 1960s demonstrating for rights and justice have failed to modify their focus or inspire subsequent generations to stand guard over the present crisis baffles Williams, who incites leaders to brand illicit drug use as a “betrayal of all the black people who fought to be free, independent, and in control of their own lives since the day the first slave ship landed” (29). Williams drives his recommendations further, advocating a forthright attack: “black leaders should be in front of marches,” he writes, “pushing those crack dealers out of the black neighborhoods. And that effort should include a message that has yet to be heard with sincerity from black leaders: using crack, heroin, or any other addictive drug, including
excessive drinking of alcohol, is self-destructive, breaks up families, saps ambition, and is more dangerous than most white racists” (29). Williams’s call for a more stringent response from black leadership drives home his frustration with the status quo, even if it overlooks the grassroots efforts of the community organizers I mentioned earlier. While he continues to petition for new tactics and new rhetoric, a restructuring of black leadership at the top—high profile television pundits and elected officials—this strategic reversal may already be happening in the work of low-profile community organizers who effect change at the local level. Nevertheless, his argument lends insight to a major new energy in the political discourse, a refocusing of its goals and interests. With his criticism of those leaders “still fighting the battles of the 1960s,” Williams implies that actively chipping away at the vestiges of white supremacy can only attain a partial advancement of causes and concerns. The leadership must address, powerfully and specifically, the very problems Cosby mentions in his Constitution Hall speech, keeping black subjects, not white subjects, at the center of the discussion. Retreating from a rhetoric of victimhood and eternal oppression ultimately adds power and agency to black subjects, moving African American consciousness from an essentialist, authentic definition to one limitless and untold.

Williams is never more direct than when he attacks the “tired rant by civil rights leaders” who complain almost exclusively “about . . . what white people have done wrong, what white people didn’t do, and what white people should do. This rant,” Williams charges, “puts black people in the role of hapless victims waiting for only one thing—white guilt to bail them out” (32). Yet, his discussion lacks an ongoing penetration into the key reasons for this rant and why it has sustained such a long shelf
life and why even educated, successful African Americans are at times receptive to this so called “rant,” some steadfastly regarding it as gospel truth. To arrive at any usable analysis of this quandary, critics must consider first the disquieting effect of this discourse, particularly its capacity to unfix deeply held presuppositions about blacks and their lack of political efficacy. Often these presuppositions come from an appreciation of this nation’s history, one that provides a relentless and brutal precedent of victimization for African American subjects. However, in the discussion Williams proposes, whiteness, historically the victimizers, occupies an “outside” position, while black subjects must exchange their usual role as historical victim for one far less sympathetic. In doing so, African Americans face giving up their moral high ground, an abdication that threatens for some individuals their very definition of blackness. Holding on to this high ground, even at the cost of incurring a perpetual sense of victimhood, means that some African Americans become inured to less—to expecting less, achieving less, or aspiring to less.

Like Williams, bell hooks finds fault with post-1960s black leaders, especially male leaders, for identifying black people as victims. Digging deeper than Williams does, she detects in the men’s rhetoric a strategic appeal to white power. These black leaders, hooks claims, “deployed a rhetoric of victimization because it was less threatening to white males. To name white males as all-powerful victimizers was to pay homage to their power, to see them as possessing the cure for all that ails” (56). Here she suggests a counterintuitive understanding of white supremacy, that beyond preserving an economic and social dominance, it exerts a need to be at the center of every black thought and activity. Simultaneously, hooks implies that African American leaders, who place
whiteness at the center of a majority of black thought and feeling, no matter the
circumstance or even their sincerity in doing so, hazard an inculcation of inferiority and
helplessness, in which African Americans define themselves through expression of white
cultural dominance and economic power. In “Refusing to be Victim,” hooks writes,
“Despair and hopelessness are central to a psychology of victimization” (57);
consequently, such a psychology suspends the possibility of movement and change
against what is perceived as an implacable power.

Envisioning a new horizon for contemporary black subjects, hooks is able to
highlight the imperative of self-determination without deflecting the dangers of white
cultural dominance. No insights about ineffectual leadership and crumbling communities
can occur with a simple, singular focus. Leveling criticism at African American culture
should in no way compel black leaders to neglect or abandon their role as vigilant
protectors of civil rights. Dyson’s diametric approach, while reassuring to those who still
look outward at white racism as the greatest cause for this collapse, does little to address
problems and outcomes not so easily traceable to whiteness. Meanwhile, Williams’s
discussion traffics so weightily in self-determination that it runs the risk of
underestimating the presence of racial and cultural bias. Still, even with its shortcomings,
Williams’s analysis, I am convinced, will in time bear out as the more perceptive one.

But of the three writers, hooks offers the most persuasive discourse on black
victimization, first because she interrogates the impulse by black Americans to indulge in
such rhetoric and by showing its links to a continuance of white dominance. Some
whites support the narrative of black victimization, she argues, because it prolongs their
notions of supremacy. Some blacks approve the narrative because it diffuses their sense
of responsibility and because, beginning in the 1960s, victimization coincided with their feelings of hopelessness. The other reason pertains to blacks seeing whites as the only identity group needing to change in thought and action. As hooks explains, “If only white folks need to change then black folks are not required to undergo processes of radical politicization” (60). And, if African Americans must surrender their obstinacy, then whites must similarly give up their need to pity and patronize the black other.

Hooks puts it best: “White folks who want all black Americans to repudiate a victim-focused identity must be prepared to engage in a subject-to-subject encounter with black folks who are self-determining” (59). Taken in tandem, these two statements by hooks signal the possibility of greater social mobility for African Americans, engendered in part by the white gaze, but more importantly, by the black perspective.

If nowhere else, hooks, Williams, and Cosby uniformly agree that to attribute all or most of black failure to the deeds, attitudes, and institutions of white Americans is to deny a significant part of the problem, which, as a result, crushes or delays feasible, durable solutions. To move in the opposite direction, to disidentify with a defeatist, victimized mentality holds enormous prospects for African Americans in the twenty-first century. Any conscious effort of the black subject to disregard white guilt or to find it objectionable and detrimental as well as any attempt of the black subject to repudiate any identification as a permanent victim of white racism redirects the trajectory of African Americans as historically informed subjects. Envisioned here for the black subject is a release from the narrative of victimization, from the regime of expecting less, achieving less, having less, and from the often buried feeling of being less.
Never so much a sentient thought or emotion, this sense of being less lies at the heart of John McWhorter’s critique of black self-destruction. Similar to hooks and Williams, McWhorter locates the problem of failure as one born in black culture, though his argument goes much further than Williams’s (and light years ahead of Dyson’s) in declaring that such failure flouts the trappings of class, specifically poverty. In fact, McWhorter argues that all classes of African Americans, not just the poor, harbor self-sabotaging tendencies. Powered by an intransigent separatist ethos, what he calls a “Cultural Disconnect,” the impulse to self-destruct “is almost always evident . . . regardless of class lines, conditioning vastly different life trajectories” (146). In his book Losing the Race: Self Sabotage in Black America, McWhorter traces several defects in African American culture, including this prevailing sense of disconnection, back to the hulls of slave ships and theorizes that this fundamental wounding transcends time and the changeable constructions of class and manners, affecting the life of practically every descendent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. To this end, McWhorter writes, “Centuries of abasement and marginalization to internalize the way they were perceived by the larger society, resulting in a post-colonial inferiority complex” (27). Leaning on the work of Frantz Fanon and Kenneth Clark, McWhorter distinguishes his discussion with a focus on specific patterns of internal sabotage and destruction in contemporary African American culture.

Published in 2000, Losing the Race predates the Cosby controversy by four years, but since its publication the book has lost little relevance. McWhorter begins his discussion by debunking the myths and questioning the beliefs that in his estimation establish the primer of victim thinking. Topping his list is the widespread impression that
most black people are poor. Without diminishing the anguish and devastation that poverty can inflict on people’s lives, McWhorter points to a 1996 statistic that shows that 26 percent of black Americans live at or below the poverty line. My own, more recent findings show that as of 2010 the number, according to the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, has only slightly increased to 27.4 percent. Though distressingly high, this number shows that less than a third of the black population is actually poor. McWhorter also debunks the myth that African Americans are routinely paid less than whites for doing the same work. Explaining that most blacks live in the South, where salaries on average amount to less than those paid in the North or in the West, McWhorter shows that the income gap has much less to do with racism than with geography.

Next, McWhorter douses the incendiary claim that white racists regularly vent their racist fury on black churches. This claim arises from the spate of suspicious fires that engulfed hundreds of black churches during the 1990s. To be clear, McWhorter does not dispute the fact that white racists occasionally target black churches but contradicts the mass illusion that these bigots were waging an underground race war in which black churches served as the front lines. McWhorter spells out plainly that “From 1990 to 1996, about eighty black churches were burned. During the same period, however, over seven times that many white churches were burned every year . . . [I]n South Carolina, eighteen arsonists have been apprehended, and of these, eight are black” (11). This last statistic indicates that African Americans are also responsible for setting fires and that the situation is more complicated than racial paranoia would suggest. Anyone looking to cling to such conspiracy theories need only consider 1996, the year when the number of
torched black churches spiked. But according to the United States Fire Administration, the spike in arson did not affect black churches alone. And, in January 2001, just after the height of the arson trend, the Fire Administration reported that after 1996, when President Clinton formed the National Church Arson Task Force and Congress passed the Church Arson Prevention Act, which allowed state prosecutors to expand their base of charges against suspects, “the incidence of arson or bombing at houses of worship . . . declined steadily” (4). Significantly, this statement applies to all churches, black, brown, and white.

Conspiracy theories are in no way the only culprits in perpetuating this myth about a race war. Only one black church has to be bombed or set on fire to resurrect the traumatic memories of white terror in the 1960s, culminating for many African Americans in the 1963 bombing deaths of Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair, four black girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The martyrdom of these girls and others imparts the need for vigilance in routing acts of white terror. Ultimately, though, the blurring of terror and suspicion must prompt African Americans to parse between vigilance and needless feelings of victimization.

Much of McWhorter’s debunking strategy hinges on the perception that while vigilance can be productive and effective, hyper-vigilance can be detrimental and counterproductive. Next he repudiates the view that during the 1980s CIA agents funneled crack cocaine into South Central, Los Angeles. With no credible evidence to support this claim, the thought of the government purposely and maliciously corrupting innocent black bodies bypasses the realm of reason and logic to find sustenance in fear
and paranoia. On other hand, I would argue that this fear proves somewhat understandable, given the actions of the US government in past years, not least with the Tuskegee experiment, in which the federal government for no less than forty years played a crucial role in denying black male patients proper treatment for their bouts with syphilis, ostensibly to study the long-term effects of the disease. But as far as the CIA’s involvement in trafficking drugs, “all that has been found” McWhorter maintains, “is that a few . . . operatives looked the other way and allowed some drugs into South Central as part of the wider effort to aid the Nicaraguan contras. Altar boys they were not, but this hardly constituted a targeted effort to hook inner-city blacks across the nation on crack” (12). In addition to discounting the thought that African Americans are unfairly incarcerated and receive harsher penalties (which I address earlier in this chapter), McWhorter takes a complicated stance on racial profiling, specifically the police practice of “stop and frisk.” Although McWhorter agrees with the general sentiment that these stop and frisk procedures are racially based and that the phenomenon of DWB—driving while black—in which black drivers are stopped and detained for no other reason than skin color, produces only haphazard results in terms of arrests and convictions while needlessly aggravating the strain between many African Americans and police officers. That McWhorter does not condemn these practices more forcefully I find disturbing, especially since they support the paranoid fears that pervade both sides of the divide—black civilians and (white) police officers—turning the black (male) body into one of automatic suspicion and disdain.

For his final round of debunking, McWhorter explores the issue of police brutality, which, counter to his thesis, he views as proof of racism, but given the fact that
the number of incidents appear to be declining, and with notable breaks in the infamous wall of silence protecting police officers, he contends that this particular demonstration of racism denotes a mere vestige of past exploitation and white-on-black violence. McWhorter recalls among other cases that of Rodney King, a man beaten ruthlessly in 1991 by several white Los Angeles police officers, who, despite a video-tape clearly exposing the incident, were all acquitted by an out-of-town jury consisting of ten whites, one Asian American, and one Latino. “What happened to Rodney King,” McWhorter insists, “is not the state of the art—it is a remnant” (23). Interestingly, McWhorter ascribes this so-called remnant of the past to cliquish, ethnic strongholds, particularly those dotting the Great Northeast. He himself hails from Philadelphia and recalls his own instance of police harassment one evening while visiting his old neighborhood. These are, McWhorter admits, “the kinds of people who would make me uneasy walking through a working-class neighborhood . . . at night” (22). However, police are not the only ones to harass black men and boys in the street, as Trayvon Martin’s killing in 2012 by overzealous neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman proved. Carrying candy and bottled tea, Martin was walking toward his father’s home when Zimmerman spotted him and suspected him as a prowler. Their collision ended with Zimmerman shooting Martin two times in the heart. His eventual acquittal under claims of self-defense shocked the nation and spurred mainly peaceful demonstrations across the country. That these protests were overall peaceful and multiracial reflect a profound change in people’s perspectives about race and telegraphs a sharp difference between the present and the Jim Crow past. Nevertheless, I have grave doubts about the depth of the nation’s progress. While I am not willing to controvert McWhorter’s stance that such violence is a hold-
over of the past, I would stress that even a vestige of white racist violence can impose tremendous psychic devastation and open up old wounds that have not fully healed.

To the extent McWhorter’s readers challenge his claims that racism has become a dwindling reality for most Americans, he puts forward a potent argument for recalculating or fine-tuning the widespread perception of black subjects as eternally victimized. Even as I believe that white supremacy exerts a lesser force in black lives, I find some of McWhorter’s examples unsatisfactory. In one anecdote, McWhorter recalls a prank at Stanford University in the 1980s in which white students vandalized Ludwig van Beethoven posters by putting the composer’s image in blackface. The students were reacting to an upcoming lecture questioning Beethoven’s racial ancestry. McWhorter’s dismissal of the episode as “just one dopey little thing” (38) seems rather blasé given the history of minstrelsy in American theater and film and the gross misrepresentation of African Americans in various other media, including radio and television. His response here indicates his readiness to dilute the profound impact of past inequities on the psychology of the present generation. In all likelihood, the students and faculty who objected to the posters simply wanted to safeguard the significance of historical lessons while fending off future attacks. No less disconcerting, McWhorter discounts the subtle, “everyday” forms of racial bias blacks experience as the projection of an overexcited conditioning of the African American mindset. When on occasion he recounts his own clash with white racism—to show his sensitivity to the issue, I suppose—he runs the risk of contradiction, if not blatant hypocrisy. Of course, McWhorter has a right to disclose these events, and he is deserving of sympathy. However, in these moments, he risks hypocrisy only because of his overly rigid attitude about black victimization.
In his defense, McWhorter does acknowledge, without watery justification, the occasional eruption of white violence, pointing out, for example, the well-documented lynching death of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas in 1998: “These things must be identified, condemned, and stamped out,” McWhorter writes, going on to stress, “That is what we are doing” (26). Far rarer than they had been since the end of the Civil War, these horrible happenings, he contends, mark an anomaly in the current racial ethos. To use this anomaly as proof of infinite white racism and eternal black victimization places African Americans in more peril than an opposite attitude would accomplish.

McWhorter proposes three main causes of black self-sabotage and self-destruction—his own fashioning of the concepts of Separatism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Victimology, the last of which he describes as a running narrative for anyone, black or white, who sees African Americans almost exclusively through the prism of persecution. In this rather cartoonish perspective, African Americans figure stereoscopically as the casualties of heinous acts of racism, as underpaid and universally poor, as unfairly prosecuted and jailed, as maliciously besieged and battered by a mob government and by fuming white masses.

Pinpointing Victimology as the fundamental flaw of the black defeatist mindset, McWhorter maintains that it induces African Americans “to foster and nurture an unfocused brand of resentment and . . . alienation from the mainstream” (2).

Promulgated by essayists in the fields of Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Literary Theory, all of whom McWhorter generalizes as “professional pessimists” (26), Victimology places an exacting toll on affected black consciousness in that it encourages African Americans to exaggerate their victimization in any moment of interracial
conflict. Subsequently, it compels African Americans to seek refuge in victimhood as a naturalized otherness from whites and to jettison any sense of initiative or accountability for oneself or for other African Americans. According to McWhorter, the manifestations of Victimology are pervasive and mutable. He cites as one example the ritual of “dressing down whites” (28), supposedly to advance social justice or redress personal grievance, when in some cases this act of telling off whitey generates a much needed distraction from one’s own narrow vision. Finally, McWhorter discusses how Victimology condones personal failure, how it hampers ambition and professional performance, and just how seductive Victimology has become for so many African Americans in the post-1960s generation. Characterizing Victimology as a cultural contagion, McWhorter asserts that it “pulses through the very bloodstream of African-American identity,” adding, “In the name of the paradoxical high of underdoggism, we have replaced the shackles whites hobbled us with for centuries with new ones of our own” (49).

This “underdoggism” lays the groundwork for McWhorter’s reconceptualization of Separatism, moving it, as he does, from the reactionary militancy of Marcus Garvey and—a generation later—Malcolm X to a less concentrated, less nationalistic sensibility that still suffuses black thought and action. Unlike earlier expressions of separatism, McWhorter defines the current model as unconscious, reflexive, and steeped in victim logic. Hence, Separatism is responsible for “conditioning a restriction of cultural taste, a narrowing of intellectual inquiry, and most importantly, studied dilution of moral judgment. . . . Briefly stated, Separatism both concretely and metaphorically keeps black people in the ghetto” (51). A telling consequence of ghettoized thinking is its reliance on
authenticity, which I addressed earlier. On this point, McWhorter remembers a lunch date with a friend who casually tells him that she had no interest in reading white authored literature like *Anna Karenina* or *Jane Eyre*: “Oh, I’d never read something like that” (51). Here McWhorter essentially asks, Why should a black person not read *Jane Eyre*? Why should she fear it as a document of unknowable foreignness but, instead, regard it simply as one of cultural difference?

Possibly the most rampant element of Separatist thinking involves, in McWhorter’s words, “a bedrock assumption that because all black people are eternally victims, they are exempt from censure” (65). Marked by uncharacteristic restraint, his statement suggests that cultural confinement leads to a kind of moral absolutism and supremacy, which, in turn, mangles critical thinking, moral reasoning, and the ability to empathize. Reminiscent of hooks’s demand for equality from within the race as well as from without, McWhorter writes, “The most damning way in which Separatism forces black Americans into self-sabotage is in identifying cultural blackness with pardoning and even glorifying immoral behavior. This is for the simple reason that the person who cannot be taken to account is not an equal” (81). Here he specifically condemns defending anyone accused of immoral or criminal activity based simply on the individual’s status as African American. To illustrate, he mentions the overwhelming support by African Americans for O. J. Simpson during his murder trial in 1995 and for fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley, who in 1987 stood before television cameras and broadcast a painfully obvious lie about being gang raped by white New York City police officers. McWhorter rehashes in intricate detail all of the evidence brought forth in their cases, indicating the sheer improbability of Simpson’s innocence and Brawley’s
victimization. Ultimately, McWhorter expresses less interest in their guilt or innocence than he does in the near-monolithic response of the black public. The critical lack of polarization in the African American community, despite the presentation of proof, signifies for McWhorter a Separatist mentality, one that evades logic, calculation, and reasoned doubt.

These culture-sprung lapses in judgment also comprise McWhorter’s designation of the Cult of Anti-Intellectualism, perhaps the most controversial of the three factors of self-sabotage in that it threatens to lend sustenance to the racist projection of African Americans as mentally inferior. Separating ability from performance, McWhorter turns his sights on the achievement gap between blacks and non-blacks in US public schools. Examining statistics regarding high school graduation rates, college admissions, and SAT scores in which African Americans consistently lag behind their non-black peers, McWhorter refutes the assumption held by blacks and whites alike that African American students underperform primarily because of a racist education system. While recognizing the obvious barriers poor students face, McWhorter maintains that despite stereotypes and images in the media most black children do not grow up in poverty. Class, therefore, cannot be the central cause of failure. Re-invoking his analogy between cultural dysfunction and disease, McWhorter asserts that

blacks do so poorly in school decade after decade not because of racism, funding, class, parental education, etc., but because of a virus of Anti-intellectualism that infects the black community. This Anti-intellectual strain is inherited from whites having denied education to blacks for centuries, and has been concentrated by the Separatist trend, which in rejecting the “white” cannot help but cast school and books as suspicious and alien, not to be embraced by the authentically “black” person. [. . . ] In this vein, the African American “cultural disconnect,” as a black teacher friend of mine calls it, from the realm of books and
learning operates covertly as much as overtly. Yet its pervasive power in either guise renders it, like Victimology and Separatism, a defining feature of cultural blackness today. (83)

Although not denying occasional white-bias in US schools, McWhorter concludes that relying too much on this explanation has indelibly marred any functional analysis of black underperformance.

Rebutting one by one every rationalization put forward for this pattern of underperformance, McWhorter emphasizes the lack of credible evidence in supporting any of them. The charge of white teacher bias “falls down,” he writes, “when we consider that black students generally do not perform appreciably better” when taught by all or mostly black teachers. Only the most unusual cases, in which black (usually wealthier) teachers instructing black students, deliver slightly improved results. Against the charge that black-majority schools are grossly underfunded, McWhorter concedes that underfunding is a reality but an overblown one, especially in light of the fact that between 1965 and 1994 federal funding for schools rose 122 percent and that in 1992 even with 55 percent more funding allocated to students in the District of Columbia, with 96 percent black enrollment, these students still underperformed their mostly white counterparts in nearby Prince George’s County (119). Besides, underfunding does not account for the simple reality that a mere fraction of black students attend “bombed-out, violent schools” (120). Beyond the numbers, though, McWhorter understands the reluctance in turning against a racism-based reasoning, mainly for fear that such a pivot would be “feeding into the stereotype of black mental inferiority” (124). To substantiate his claims that underperformance stems from a cultural distrust of books and scholarship, McWhorter explores several strains of anti-intellectualism, not least the identification of
scholarship with whiteness or as inauthentic to blackness. Any student, who subscribes
to authenticity may also experience any number of the self-made traps that beset black
academic achievement. He may have parents and peers with exceedingly low
expectations of him, and he may begin to exhibit in the classroom what McWhorter, and
researchers like Lawrence Steinberg, view as “an almost alarming pride in disengagement
from learning” (130). These are the students who barely participate in class activities,
who come unprepared, or who don’t come at all. True, this problem hardly excludes
other races and identity groups, but these other groups, save Latinos, hardly present the
same lag in test scores or the same high school drop-out rates as African Americans have
done for decades.

McWhorter’s critique of black anti-intellectualism as a cultural (and not entirely
economic) problem is scarcely more convincing than when he points out how even a
community like Shaker Heights, a solidly middle-class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio,
presents the same problem of black underperformance. Clearly, this underperformance
emanates from an internalized sense of inferiority, from a cultural disconnect that plagues
far too many black Americans across class lines and social barriers. Ultimately, this
sense of being less permeates black culture, robbing individuals of the single greatest
hope for their future, an education. Saying so does not ‘blame the victim,’ as some may
suggest. As McWhorter states, “It is not the fault of black Americans that they inherited
Anti-Intellectualism from centuries of disenfranchisement” (150). To ignore or repress
these hard, inconvenient truths only amplifies their existence and serves to infantilize the
black race. Along these lines, McWhorter makes a direct exhortation: “We must neither
behave as children by resisting honesty, nor allow ourselves to be treated as children by
having honesty withheld” (151). Education by no means offers up a panacea for all that ails society, but without education, without embracing it wholeheartedly, people stand a greater risk of criminal involvement, incarceration, dependency, and despair. However simple or innocent the connection between education and success may appear, its reverse plays out in the most horrific, unrelenting ways day after day throughout America’s cities and suburbs.

Within an ever-widening spectrum of professions and careers, African Americans are more and more making their grievances with anti-intellectualism known. In a letter dated December 22, 1976, Ralph Ellison unleashed his pent-up frustration with black underperformance, writing to scholar Horace Porter that young blacks were forfeiting their future in the name of anger and unstructured protest. Ellison could see that for many counterculture agitators a formal education seemed antiquated and suspiciously like a tool of white oppression but in the end found their objection superficial. “The need to control and transcend mere anger,” he writes, “has been our lot throughout our history. . . [N]o matter the headiness of our slogans, an unthinking indulgence in anger can lead to a socially meaningless self-immolation and to intellectual suicide” (qtd. in The New Republic 4). In the letter, written in the wake of Civil Rights reforms, Ellison laments how blacks were “throwing away a much better opportunity for an education than that for which my mother and I had to make such great sacrifice” (qtd. in The New Republic 4). That narrative of indifference and waste, of “throwing away” education with both hands, would become pervasive in the years to come. Since the year Ellison drafted and posted his letter, the anger he wrote about has morphed into something less immediate, more
remote, the wariness that so many African Americans feel about formal education becoming more and more an undefined but fixed component of cultural significance. 

**Personal Reflections on Black Defeat: Trudier Harris and Ossie Davis**

How do we define this wariness? Had it already been ingrained in the black psyche, not solely by self-interested whites looking to disenfranchise blacks, but by other agents as well? Assessing black anti-intellectualism from a slightly different angle, literary critic Trudier Harris extends a wider net in capturing its formative meaning. In one section of her memoir *Summer Snow*, she investigates the alien presence of the black scholar living and working in African American communities. Phenomenologically, the figure of the scholar occupies a liminal space among those who doubt the usefulness, purpose, and practicality of academic excellence, especially when taken to the extent of attaining advanced degrees: “Folks could respect you for earning a doctoral degree . . . they just had little practical use for you and many times didn’t know what to do with you” (99). Calling on the wisdom of her friends and colleagues as well as her own experiences, Harris contends that the black scholar becomes a misunderstood stranger in one’s immediate and extended family, church, and neighborhood. In her own family, she came to understand that “there was a general belief . . . that too much education created problems” (98), meaning that educated persons are liable of not only losing “mother wit” but, more sinister than that, of incurring a kind of insanity: “There was an invisible wall of studying beyond which it was believed you shouldn’t go” (98, 99). Naming herself and other African Americans who earn advanced degrees “black nerds”—a phrase that captures the oddity and derisiveness of black erudition—Harris looks all the more closely at black women scholars who are particularly vulnerable to the foibles of the fragile male
ego. She recalls how in graduate school her ex-fiancé attempted to impregnate her so that “he could level the playing field” (101). Ultimately, Harris’s discussion calls for a redefinition of black culture, an expansiveness of the “playing field.” Poignantly, she writes, “I would venture to say that perhaps all of us would like black communities throughout the country to expand a bit more in their receptivity in who we are and what we do” (105).

The expansiveness Harris calls for would constitute nothing less than a cultural revolution, altering and transforming individuals and groups alike. Author, actor, and activist Ossie Davis speaks directly to this level of change in his essay “What I Found on this Campus,” a transcription of his lecture at Howard University in 2003. Like a page from Fredrick Douglass’s Narrative or from one of Maya Angelou’s life chronicles, Davis’s essay records his search for identity and freedom, which he says he found at Howard University. At Howard, Davis learned important life lessons from such dignitaries as Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and Howard’s first black president Mordecai Johnson, who all shaped his consciousness, giving him “things I needed to have to begin my life as a black man” (63). A son of the Deep South, Davis learned quickly as a child the precariousness of his position and later would come to appreciate more fully the affirmative power of his Howard mentors.

Davis begins his discussion by sketching out just how typical he believes his early education in Waycross, Georgia was compared to that of other black children his age: “reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, spelling, . . . annual doses of Negro History Week, . . . lynchings, the Klu, Klux, Klan, rape, and murder” (63). At age six or seven, he received a lesson that would haunt him for the rest of his days. His instructors, two
white police officers, casually picked him up one afternoon on the road home from
school, placed him in the backseat of their car, and then drove him to the precinct. Along
the way, the men made jokes, laughing at the child, and getting the child to laugh at
himself:

Later, . . . one of them reached for a bottle of cane syrup and poured the
contents over my head. This time they laughed even louder, as if it was
the funniest thing in the world, and I laughed too. Then the joke was over.
The ritual was complete. They gave me several chunks of peanut brittle,
which I ate with great relish, and then they let me go. I was never made to
feel afraid. My feelings weren’t hurt. It seemed perfectly alright. (65)

Davis marks this occurrence and the clear threat of random violence that could befall a
black person in Waycross, Georgia as “the niggerization of black folks” and as “the
building block of my education” (63, 64). Importantly, Davis’s “education” involves his
total acquiescence to these cops and their re-creation of his body. Objectified,
minstrelized, “niggerized,” as Davis puts it, his body bears the memory-mark of his
consensual laughing and gobbling of peanut brittle. If the cane syrup marks his body as a
laughable outrage in the gaze of the policemen (and of the child as well), the giving of
candy signs and seals an invisible, odious contract, binding the boy to the white men’s
rethinking and remaking of his black body. The fact that he is so young, perhaps too
young to don a mask, and that he is seduced into having no fear of the police officers or
any objection to their conduct furthers his participation in the men’s remaking of him.

The implications of this parable-like event capture much of the insidiousness of
white racism in the segregated South. In telling the story, Davis suggests how blacks
become infantilized through their absorption of the white gaze. Without an expanded
consciousness, without viable means to escape the received, narrow definition of their
existence, African Americans would inevitably accept the terms of the contract offered to the little boy in the police station. The process of “niggerization” demands—cannot exist without—the interior work of the black participant to match the external effort of the white racist. Davis eventually tells his readers how the effects of this process did not end with him in the precinct or during his term at Howard or at any time throughout his illustrious career on stage and in film. His feelings of complicity would surface as shame in the years to follow, and his relationship to that day at the precinct would become “central” to his psyche, “leaving scars, the marks of niggerization” that he would “carry . . . always” (64).

The cultural practice of “niggerization” has hardly ended for millions of black Americans who, along with racist whites, multiply its intent across generations and geographies. In his memoir, Davis discusses a letter he receives from a black congressman soliciting his participation at a conference devoted to uncovering the chaos of black men’s lives—the high unemployment, the criminal activity, their poor performance as fathers, and the steep drop-out rate in high schools and colleges—just some of the problems the congressman listed. Quoting the unnamed congressman, who asks, pointedly, “Why do so many black men die earlier of diseases that are treatable?” Davis responds:

I’m swept back to my own history, to a little boy in the basement of the police precinct with syrup being poured on his head to teach him a lesson about who he was and who he wasn’t, and the process of niggerization that went on at that time. And I ask myself, is the process still working? Has there not been sufficient change to liberate the black man? Is there something still in our history, in our culture and our psyches that still must be faced? . . . These problems which define the world in which you and I are living now will not remain static—they will increase in severity, or they will go away. (74)
The crucial connection Davis makes between the Jim Crow South and the current state of affairs hinges on the nonstop reproduction of self-doubt and self-hatred, “that something in our culture and our psyches that still must be faced.” His remarks reinforce the need to push past the fixed rehearsal of white racism. By way of resolution, Davis revisits his themes of education and expanded consciousness, positing his hopes for change in an increase in community outreach and in the realization that real change rests in the hands of those who actively oppose the insidious sense of being less.

The arguments put forward by Dyson, Williams, hooks, McWhorter, Harris, and Davis establish an epic debate concerning the destiny of African American culture in the twenty-first century. The epigraph to this chapter with remarks from Alain Locke attest to the length of this debate, resurrected from time to time by political and economic crisis. Stratified by ideological differences, this recent resurrection of the debate documents the writers’ diverse experiences and the passion of their perspectives. With Dyson and McWhorter occupying the extreme ends of the discursive spectrum, Williams and hooks sustain less radical points of view. This alignment may give some people a jolt, given the writers’ presumed political positioning, hooks perceived as liberal and Williams conservative. Despite this division, Williams and hooks agree that new black leadership is sorely needed, and both emphasize empowerment over victimization as a rhetorical strategy. Dyson and McWhorter’s political predispositions shine through in their arguments as well, with Dyson alleging a political and economic impasse for the black poor and McWhorter declaring a virtual end to racism for African Americans, regardless of class. Because their assertions reflect such extremist views, both Dyson and McWhorter tend to oversimplify the issues; nevertheless, I am inclined to favor
McWhorter’s argument, seeing as how it stresses the importance of locating agency and empowerment in the black subject, no matter the challenges African Americans face. In contrast, Dyson’s discussion operates from a faintly deterministic model that more and more proves out of date. Exposing cultural pathologies and toxic myths that prolong latent feelings of inferiority, McWhorter puts control back into the hands of a people who survived slavery and changed the world with political protests that demanded fuller recognition of their humanity. Even as I am compelled to point out McWhorter’s blind spots, particularly his reluctance to appreciate how hyper-vigilant reactions to even minor slights can be healthy and productive, I find that overall his discourse offers a first glimpse at black subjectivity in the new millennium. Empowered by an inward critical gaze, this new subject embraces self-reformation, irrespective of how white people think and feel or how much they are willing to change. In this sense, the direction of the discourse makes a vital pivot—looking inward as a way to look forward.

Davis’s memoir puts a painful handprint on this turn in the discourse. His courage in designating his child self as “niggerized” is momentous as well as patently risky, as his discussion clearly becomes vulnerable to the policing agents of political correctness. Unlike Cosby, Davis probably slipped the crook of controversy because his primary audience, the spring convocation at Howard University, was predominately black, and he could not be accused of airing dirty laundry to a racially mixed crowd. Also, Davis focuses his complaint on a memory of himself set in the earlier paradigm of the Jim Crow South. When he expands his definition of niggerization to include potentially all African Americans, his rhetorical strategy is far less ferocious than Cosby’s. These differences aside, Cosby and Davis similarly pinpoint the importance of
generational influences, calling attention to the indignities African Americans internalize and project as authentically black when the older folk fail to give healthier models with which to identify. In both addresses, the relationship between generations becomes a site of conflict and convolution. On one hand, the older folk, including those directly involved in and sympathetic to Civil Rights activism, stand as a beacon of mobilization, hope, and progress. On the other hand, not everyone in the older generation has been responsible in tending to the cares and needs of the younger folk. Ruby Dee and ZZ Packer, two writers I discuss in the next chapter, explore how much the older generation has been remiss in supporting and guiding their legatees and the extent to which the younger people have contributed to their own failure.
Chapter Five

Airing Dirty Laundry: Cross Currents on Black Self-Destruction in Rap, Poetry, and Fiction

Literary in style and tone, Trudier Harris’s memoir *Summer Snow* and Ossie Davis’s essay “What I Found on This Campus,” both of which I explore in the previous chapter, pave the way for discussions of black self-destruction in fiction, poetry, and song. Throughout *Quest for Blackness*, I have tried to illuminate the link between various modes of self-destructiveness in black culture and the earlier paradigm of white dominance, particularly in the South. In this chapter my analysis focuses on decidedly contemporary texts—rap lyrics, “spoken word” poems by Ruby Dee, and short stories by ZZ Packer—in which the shadow of the Southern lynch mob and white supremacy falls less directly (but still importantly) on the central events of the narrative. Although relieved of the role of historical victim, the characters and subjects presented here reveal their attachment to what John McWhorter calls victim logic. The ongoing arguments about the present state of African American culture provide new modalities of inquiry in the field of literary criticism and debate. These modalities propose far-reaching questions about contemporary black subjectivity, expanding not only the limits and depths of critical analysis but also the awareness of the kind of material in which self-destructive subjects appear. Unbound by traditional European forms like novels and short stories, their voices sound off in performance art, spoken word poetry, and rap lyrics. This
chapter investigates how some of these vernacular expressions have foreshadowed and added to the war of rhetoric and divisive political punditry. This interrogation of rap and literature focuses on how the self-destructive subject alters presuppositions about black victimization and oppression. Recognizing the American South as the site of origin for any narrative that involves issues of black victimization, stagnation, and recovery, this discussion also examines black self-destruction as it occurs beyond the territorial limits of the Mason Dixon line.

The transmutation of victim mentality into black-on-black or (more rarely) black-on-white violence signals the inability of black subjects to extricate themselves from their own devastating definitions of blackness. These subjects often integrate victim logic within a belligerent, disgruntled demeanor, a disposition occasionally critiqued in hip hop works, including the aptly titled 1989 rap anthem “Self Destruction.” This critique may come as a surprise to some readers, especially those unfamiliar with hip hop music. Discussion of a rap song as a socially conscious protest lyric may also seem ironic given the history of the hip hop genre, specifically its glorification of aggression and misogyny, to say nothing of the actual violence that has erupted at concerts, nightclubs, and even among several of the artists themselves. Rap music has always been at war with itself, provoking rivalries, inciting turf fights that span across regions, notoriously pitting west coast artists against their east coast counterparts. At the same time, part of the war has always involved confronting the slippages between tough talk and actual drive-by shootings, between narrating self-destructive behavior and exalting it. To varying degrees of artistic and commercial success, hip hop artists (Blackalicious, Jurassic Five, MC Lyte, and more recently Q-Tip) have mounted critiques of white privilege and power
as well as black self-defeat. Few hip hop compositions, though, have been as cogent as “Self Destruction” in linking black defeatism to the racial atrocities of the past. Admittedly agitprop, “Self Destruction” delves unabashedly into these fissures, calling on gangbangers and other culprits of self-defeat to account for their ravaging of black life and black identity.

Self-Destruction and the Rap on Rap Music

Like most critics, Bakari Kitwana locates the origins of hip hop culture in DJ performance, graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. Whether expressed in the inner-city or in the suburbs, these four elements encapsulate a way of thinking and feeling, a way of being as intense as that of blues connoisseurs at the start of the twentieth century. The popularization of rap performance derives from its commercialized expansion in the 1980s across racial and economic lines, and as Kitwana contends, this commercialization would codify the formation and subsequent re-formations of hip hop vernacular, body poses, attitude, and fashion (8). The reproduction of these elements in the media profoundly recreated the limits of public space, attracting devotees from around the country and from every facet of society, high and low. Kitwana writes, “That Black youth in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Champagne, Illinois, for example, share similar dress styles, colloquialisms, and body language with urban kids from Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York is not coincidental” (9). By Kitwana’s estimation, this hip hop generation, what he calls “Black America’s generation X,” stands in stark contrast to their forebears (7). Accordingly, the folk wisdom and church-born beliefs of the former generation diminished or disappeared altogether at the dawning of streetwise hustlers and hard-knock truth-tellers. Kitwana believes that the media has severed for many blacks a
critical sense of cultural lineage and connectedness, that an absorption of television, radio, and film has disrupted a flow of core values, perceptions, and cultural truths from one generation to another: “For the most part,” he states, “we have turned to ourselves, our peers, global images and products, and the new realities we face for guidance” (7).

Kitwana’s argument that national and global media productions have chipped away at local black traditions holds water but by no means proves watertight. While his observation that black youth in New Orleans walk, dress, and talk like those in Chicago or in Los Angeles is compelling, he elides the fact that these similarities extend a pattern that began with the advent of electronic mass media and that this so-called hip hop generation has simply followed in the footsteps of 1940s lindy-hoppers and countless other pop culture enthusiasts ever since. Not that Kitwana’s fear of cultural loss completely lacks credibility, but his portrayal of black elders as a wellspring of rejected wisdom rings false and fatally sentimental, seeing as how far too many cultural “truths” from this wellspring have damaged and demeaned black life. Serving the toxic model of white supremacy, an untold number of African Americans became all too willing after slavery to promote color caste hierarchies as well as notions of “good” and “bad” black hair within their own families and among their friends and neighbors. The circulation of these corrosive attitudes would continue throughout the twentieth century when finally writers and critics began to attack them as the noxious agents they had always been. To do so, these critics had to reassess the wisdom and influence of the elders, holding to what they believe valid while disavowing those beliefs, values, and customs they found corrupt, impractical, outmoded, or irrelevant. Seeing as how rap draws from musical and cultural precedents set by previous generations, I would appropriate a similar gauge in
assessing rap performance as a genuine expression of cultural values and beliefs. This analysis demands a mutable, multifold approach in which critics separate the sexist, self-annihilating strains of rap identity and performance from its more insightful iterations. Taking their place among other hip hop artists like Kanye West, Ludacris, Common, and Tupac Shakur—whose verses vacillate from socially conscious homilies to impenitent glorifications of violence, sexism, egomania, and, in the cases of Lauryn Hill, NWA, and Public Enemy, black separatism—the soloists of “Self Destruction” divide their voices between addressing the pervasiveness of black dereliction and the degree to which rap performance contributes to it.

More to the point, the rappers of “Self Destruction” combine their talents to defend the medium and divest it from an essentially aggressive perception. Addressing this need to separate rap performance from violence as a “bottom line” objective, MC Delight, one of the song’s performers, plainly asserts, “black-on-black crime was way before our time.” Presenting black-on-black violence as an historical reality, Delight’s lyric also highlights the immediacy of the calamity. His insistence on rethinking rap’s role in instances of intra-racial violence reverberates with that of the song’s thirteen other vocalists who, in unison, demand a change in perceptions from within the hip hop community as well as from those unsympathetic to rap. Heavy D’s directive for change reflects a Du Boisean double consciousness but one, by virtue of his lyric, he looks to overcome: “They call us animals mmm mmm I don’t agree with them/I’ll prove them wrong, but right is what you’re proving ‘em.” The urgency of this verse and all the others in the song refers directly to the impetus of its creation, the all too common killing of one black man by another. This particular slaying, involving two fans at a Public Enemy
concert in 1988, spurred rapper KRS-One to start the Stop the Violence Movement, which in 1989 released the single “Self-Destruction,” and as a show of solidarity, the performing artists donated their proceeds to the National Urban League. In addition to the song’s defense of rap music, the lyrics explore at least three facets of the violence: the senselessness of its waste, its enactment of self-loathing, and the connection between black-on-black violence and the earlier paradigm of white violence.

Significantly, the Stop the Violence campaign, which continued during the 1990s, forged an implicit comparison with the nonviolent philosophy that characterized the protests organized and led by John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, Martin Luther King, others throughout the 1960s. Within this comparison lurks the recognition of the reversal as to where violence against black bodies now originates. If King’s campaign publicly stressed nonviolent protest to discourage black radicalism and rioting, the ulterior motive intended to inhibit and suppress reprisals by violent whites. Despite subtle or singular differences in ideology and strategic implementation, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, and Angela Davis all chose to walk into the inherent danger of their work with their lives in their hands. These individuals and others had to depend on their demonstrations of dignity and restraint as a model response for their oppressors and detractors. Similarly, the Stop the Violence movement appealed to the better angels of those black folk who sought conflict resolution through aggression and mayhem.

Juxtaposing the turbulence of the 1960s with that of the 1980s, soloist Kool Moe Dee makes the irony of black-on-black aggression explicit and searing:
Took a brother’s life with a knife as his wife
Cried ’cause he died a trifling death
When he left his very last breath . . .
As I slept so watch your step
Back in the sixties our brothers and sisters were hanged
How could you gang-bang?
I never ever ran from the Ku Klux Klan
And I shouldn’t have to run from a black man

In the first three lines, Kool Moe Dee assumes the persona of a detached, thoughtless killer. Taking stout satisfaction in committing his crime, with the victim’s wife as his witness, the killer rehearses a familiar image of abject black masculinity rampant in rap performance. The killer claims masculine supremacy over his victim by way of violent action—the knife signifying phallic dominance—and through the recapitulation of his deeds via words. The victim’s “trifling death” foregrounds the killer’s *raison d’être*, his entire persona orbiting around his willingness to lay waste to other black bodies. With inanimate objects and human life accorded the same cold disregard, every element in the killer’s gaze conforms to his nihilistic control. Much like the weapon, the victim’s wife merely scaffolds the killer’s self-congratulation.

Even more incisive than the rapper’s critique of black machismo is the shift he signals in imagining the black body as a site of oppression and death-defiance during the Civil Rights era (and before) to one of self-inflicted devastation, the black body moving from historical victim to victimizer. Although possibly too reductive, this re-visioning of the body pinpoints a new and disturbing reification of blackness, developing within black consciousness instead of pressing in from any outside force of white supremacy.

Throughout the Civil Rights era, when African Americans waged a nonviolent war against their compromised position in the American body politic, black leaders fashioned such protests as feats of weighty purpose and sacrifice. Set against the historical
significance of the last four lines, the killing of one “brother” by another achieves meaning out of sheer meaninglessness. The gangbanger has little or no historical consciousness, has no appreciation for past struggles, and, subsequently, has no feeling for the preciousness of life, let alone black life. The slaughter and brutalization of black bodies occurring before the end of segregation actively alarmed the country, inciting further protest, while confirming the moral imperative of such organized agitation. The publication of Emmett Till’s disfigured corpse in Jet magazine in September 1955 sounded a piercing alarm of social unrest. News footage of peaceful demonstrators fending off white attackers, ferocious canines, and firemen’s hoses likewise gripped the nation and escalated the demand for change. Dismissing the moral charge of these events, the gangbanger occupies a parallel space to the successors of past struggles in which he overcomes the historic hardships of his forebears without fully acknowledging the price and reward of their sacrifice. Hence, the lyricist contends, “Back in the sixties our brothers and sisters were hanged / How could you gang-bang?” While the question bristles with the rapper’s uneasy perception of historical disjuncture, the gangbanger and the tragic, “trifling death” of his victim project a silencing effect on Civil Rights history. This act of killing not only mocks and spurns the life-affirming activism of the 1950s and 60s but, more shockingly, appropriates the role of the murderous white oppressor. In two images—that of lynching victims and of the speaker himself fleeing Klansmen—Kool Moe Dee aligns the efforts of white supremacists with those of the self-destructive black killer, showing how both epochs produce lifeless black bodies.

What these lyrics suggest (and what I should make clear) is that although the gangbanger squanders his historical legacy, he has in no way materially escaped the past;
his existence signifies as Civil Rights history as potently as it signifies on the history. If the hard won achievements of mid-century activism afforded black Americans the opportunity to tilt the trajectory of their future prospects, these achievements also highlighted the failure of some black Americans to realize and embrace these new prospects. None of the vocalists deny the continuing problem of social inequality but, at the same time, focus on the failure of black subjects (men specifically) to make sensible, life-sustaining choices that would consequently enable them to achieve a more vigorous black autonomy. Palpably vexed by the endless stream of intra-racial attacks and killings that spectacularly undermine the making of black autonomy, soloist Doug E. Fresh declares his exasperation with the crisis of intra-racial violence and the ineffectualness of Civil Rights discourse and inspiration in redressing it. He raps:

  Things been stated, re-educated, evaluated  
  Thoughts of the past have faded  
  The only thing left is the memories of our belated  
  And I hate it when  
  Someone dies and gets all hurt up  
  For a silly gold chain by a chump; Word up!

A popular neologism of the 1980s, the phrase “word up” summons attention and serves as a call of action. However, in the context of this lyric, “word up” stresses the rapper’s exhaustion with senseless violence and the worship of vapid materialism, the cut-rate cost of a young black person’s life. More broadly, Fresh’s rap announces the failure of cultural memory and historical legacy to install for future generations an accepted model of racial health and self-determination.

“Word Up”—From Rap to Spoken Word Poetry

  The rapper’s “word up”—as a fraught, unfulfilled call to action—echoes across a wide spectrum of literary and vernacular expressions, not least so in the emerging world
of spoken word poetry, also known as the slam poet, whose expressions fuse the
immediacy and colloquialism of rap performance with the more studied and formal
effects of conventional literatures. Critic Zoë Anglesey advises listeners and readers “to
think of this genre as the fulcrum between opposite points. . . . Hip hop, or rap, as a
predominantly African American . . . art form, stands between spoken word and the
performance arts. Both spoken word and hip-hop derive from the oral tradition, and both
forms appeal to overlapping demographics” (xvii). As a populist art form, spoken word
poetry forces its orators to climb down from the ivory tower (where many of these poets
are educated) and confront their listeners with a brash, streetwise honesty that
conventional poets rarely exhibit. The subjects of spoken word poetry span an enormous
province of contemporary urban life, melding the didactically political with the personal
and sensual. But as youthful and urgent as these performances seem, they also hold
aesthetic precedence in the works of Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange,
Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, and other artists of the black canon, as
well as from hip hop, the soundtrack of the performance poetry generation. Poet Jessica
Care Moore thus elaborates, “Nikki Giovanni was influenced by jazz. . . . It’s just that
hip-hop is the music of our day, and so, we’re influenced by it” (qtd. in Anglesey xxi).
Moreover, the relationship between spoken word poets and the influential 1950s Beats
cannot be underestimated.

Renown film actress Ruby Dee—who has crafted memorable performances
alongside Sidney Poitier in A Raisin in the Sun and Buck and the Preacher and husband
Ossie Davis in Do the Right Thing and who received an Academy Award nomination in
2008 for Best Supporting Actress for her work in American Gangster—has made her way
to the poet’s podium. Like lesser known artists, namely Carl Hancock Rux and Jessica Care Moore, Dee has translated her considerable talents in the dramatic arts to spoken word performance. Older by a generation or more than most of her colleagues, Dee infuses her readings with an authority and density of feeling that call to mind her experiences as a black woman living in a segregated America and as an active agitator during the Civil Rights movement. She turns from the subject of Civil Rights activism to the continuing problems of inner city poverty, criminality, and violent black masculinity. Touring the nation with poems, vignettes, and short fiction, Dee reintroduces herself to her audiences as a literary figure, mapping out her relationships with twentieth century artists and activists like Carolyn Rodgers and James Baldwin as well as her concern over issues that bedevil black life in the twenty-first century.

The poetic tributes scattered throughout her 1997 collection *My One Good Nerve* divulge her esteem for those black artists who dedicate their gifts to social protest, whether the artistic expressions are subtle or transparent. In Dee’s verse, the artist, her work, her very physical being all become uniformly blurred in unstinting service to social change, the artist’s body transformed from liminal and oppressed to rebellious and visibly autonomous. Dee’s celebratory rhetoric turns to scorn in her treatment of self-destructive black artists; here her verse becomes excitedly unhinged, running off the rails with outrage and vexation. The speakers of these poems probe an internalized inferiority in black male subjects who vacillate between outré displays of aggression and infantilism. Moving back and forth along a relatively brief historical continuum, Dee shows just how these men reject the life’s work of the Civil Rights generation and the positive future that their sacrifice provided.
In “Tupac” and “Owed to a Funny Man,” Dee’s bluster targets slain rapper Tupac Shakur and an unnamed comedian who she says she has “come to respect” but who initially startled her with his “raunchy . . . low down” remarks on a television program (53-4). In forwarding remarks to the poems, Dee directs her sense of responsibility as an elder to the process of recouping the lost lives of the younger generation and to making sense of the loss. Dividing the blame for this loss between the older folk and the young people themselves, she notes, “Some young men—I think of them as my sons—grew up when I wasn’t paying attention. I turned around too late, and they fell through my outstretched arms. Well, not all of them. Some got caught in other arms or on tree branches. Some are still falling” (53). Pinpointing a rapper and a comedian, Dee’s poems hardly stop at excoriating famous people and artistic leaders. They merely top the iceberg; they front a culture of self-negation that comes too effortlessly and too often.

Echoing Doug E. Fresh’s exasperated tone, Dee admits in her forwarding comment, “You can’t keep people from messing around with death,” adding, “They act like a species that won’t mind being wiped off the face of the earth” (53). Here she indicates the endpoint of black self-destruction. Unable in her life to undo or rewrite the ethical and material reality of these falling sons, Dee documents with uncompromising images and diction the symptoms of their decline. Throughout the poems, the speakers’ recollections of Civil Rights martyrs and radical activists fashion a continuous reproach of the performative postures of the poems’ subjects.

For “Tupac,” Dee works from thinly veiled allusions to the slain artist, pushing specifics off the page to make room for ordinary black men who follow a similar path as that of the rapper. To that end, the poem offers scant details about the entertainer’s
biography, referencing his mother’s association with the Black Panthers and the brevity of Shakur life: “Twenty-six was it?” (line 46). Without explicit reference to the drive-by shooting that ended Shakur’s life in Las Vegas in September 1996, the rapper’s life and death turn up from the title and from the speaker’s broad use of signifiers, representing his public persona as a playboy and a thug—his identification with gangs and “big bullets” that “make feet out of . . . knees” (35, 41). The poem’s opening lines unveil Dee’s dramatic use of spectacle-making and-time splicing, two conceits that project Shakur’s image across vast time spans, suggesting not merely his influence on future generations but also the cultural wellspring from which his talents come. The lines read, “Tupac. Womb walked with / The warriors. The nation / builders who believed / They could make a difference who / . . . Tried to feed some of the hungry / Take responsibility / Take charge of their lives / Their communities” (1-4, 9-12). This image of “nation builders” who “wore special hats,” “took special names,” and “made special rules” denote the Panthers, with “womb” alluding to Shakur’s mother, Afreni, who immersed herself deeply in the organization. The lines “Womb walked with / The warriors” also paint Dee’s expanded sense of space and time, imagining his life from a global perspective and relating his subjectivity to centuries of proletariat uprisings both in the United States and abroad. More specifically, these lines allude to the rapper’s namesake, Jose Gabriel Túpac Amaru, who in 1780 led a rebel army of indigenous people against the colonial powers of Spain in Peru. The rebellion failed to overthrow the Spanish, and Amaru was executed in 1781. Despite his death, or more likely for his martyrdom, Amaru’s legend would grow over the centuries and inspire insurgents worldwide, not
least of whom was Tupac Shakur’s mother, her womb made literal and historical in the poem’s opening image.

Like the rappers of “Self Destruction,” Dee positions Tupac’s wasteful death against the promise of his warrior predecessors. Dee lays the groundwork for her critique of such waste in the poem’s first stanza where she catalogues the self-assertive efforts of the Black Panthers and Black Liberationists to reform and revive inner-city neighborhoods and in the second stanza, where she marks out the sacrificial deaths of civil rights workers, community organizers, radical activists, and unremembered “everyday” folk, who raised their children and worked their jobs (when there were jobs) even in the face of great social upheaval and adversity. These activists and “everyday” folk comprise the rapper’s immediate forebears, their “Death lessons tattooed in the / Buildings and in the foreheads of . . . / Mamas and daddies” (18-20). But where Dee’s poem catches fire is in the curious spaces where she suggests a lapse in the transmission of life lessons from the civil rights generation to their hip hop successors. These successors are the sons and daughters who “came after / In the aftermath” who “[Grow] up loud / Sometimes wrong but searching” (13-14; 23-24). Their searches vacillate between “wrong” and worse in part because the posttraumatic silence that pervades the survivors of the protest generation discourages any active, generative discourse that might otherwise occur. While the young folk scatter toward a mirage of street hustling and drug trafficking, the mamas and daddies “swallowed some deep truths / Before brains got time to get in gear” (21-22).

Meanwhile, Dee assigns as much responsibility to the hustlers themselves, who in her imagining of them, consciously reject activism and political uplift in lieu of
narcissistic glamour and materialism. In the third stanza, she shifts from a more detached perspective to enter the psyche of the thug and the gangbanger, channeling their voices, satirically interspersing them with her indictment of their self-defeating ethos. Willing to dismiss “that revolution thing,” as an artifact of their parents’ generation, these hustlers, as Dee surmises, are quick to say, “We don’t / do that—no mo’.” (29-30). In the lines that follow, Dee evokes the hustlers’ embrace of anti-intellectualism and self-imposed alienation from the mainstream as their signal expression of empowerment: “F— revolution. F—thinking. / Get yourself some money. / Get with a gang. / Be a star. Actor, rapper, athlete / Or the new town clown” (33-37). As the poem ultimately suggests, any dismissal of the toils and achievements of one’s forebears portends a reductive and inevitably doomed future. This dismissal reverses and unmakes black potentiality as finitely as Dee’s dramatic reversal of Tupac’s name in the poem’s brief last stanza: “Tupac. Spelled backwards— / Caput. Meaning / Finished. Over. Ended. Done” (42-45). Tupac’s demise signals the death of civic rights protests, or at least their relevance. Unraveling the layered meaning of the rapper’s name, Dee’s word play elicits the piercing reverberations of his senseless death across the distant and recent past, the present moment, and, without the interruption of lasting cultural change, the future as well.

In “Owed to a Funny Man,” Dee continues her traversal of time but directs her focus on black self-destruction beyond the more obvious image of the gangbanger or street hustler to that of a contemporary black comedian and to African Americans who revel in his self-negating sensibility. As with the principle subject of “Tupac,” the unnamed “funny man” in this poem stands in the place of other black men and women
who inadvertently internalize demoralizing concepts of blackness and, in so doing, perpetuate new expressions of old pathologies. The poem’s triadic figuration of the speaker, the comic, and the comic’s audience foregrounds a developing discourse on stand-up comedy. A pioneering voice in this discourse, John Limon theorizes that the stand-up comedian collaborates with the audience in the making and performing of the joke. He writes, “Audiences turn [comedians’] jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it” (13). The collaboration between comedian and audience reaches a fever pitch when the comedian pushes at the accepted boundaries of taste and propriety, essentially springing the trapdoor of the forbidden or abject. Picking up where Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva leave off in defining the abject as the lurid yet unavoidable enemy of civilization—expressed specifically as defecation, urine, blood, and ferocious violence—Limon argues that the comedian is making fun of—is indeed making light of—not only what society considers sordid but the impulse to keep the sordid thing in its place, in the shadows. To do this, the comedian must stand above the offensiveness of the joke and allow the audience the same latitude, and the audience must consent in reassigning the boundaries. The constant presence of abjection becomes problematic during a breakdown of consent between comedian and audience. Limon writes, accordingly, “the failure of comedian and audience to separate into subject and object produces the emblem of abjection and confluence” (18). A joke’s failure, then, registered by an audience’s grumbling silence or lack of laughter, signals that the audience does not see itself apart from the joke, or more to the point, above it. Simultaneously, the funny man in Dee’s poem absorbs the racial abjection he imparts to his audience. As evident by Dee’s poem, not everyone is
laughing at the funny man; Dee’s objection to the comedy signifies her assessment of it as a confluence of subject and object, a nullifying blend of self and the abject other.

Dee’s misgivings are hardly hers alone. “Owed to a Funny Man” taps into a common fear among black comedians that audiences might misconstrue their work as embracing stereotype rather than undercutting or demolishing it. In the 1970s, Richard Pryor famously began to doubt his own commitment to certain aspects of his act, not least his attempt to appropriate the word “nigger” in interviews, stage performances, and everyday conversations. In his 1997 autobiography *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences*, the comedian recounts travelling to Kenya where he experienced in a hotel lobby in Nairobi a bona fide epiphany. Looking around the room, where “the only people you saw were black . . . gorgeous black people,” Pryor discovered for himself the toxicity of the word and vowed never to use it again: “It was a wretched word. Its connotations weren't funny, even when people laughed. . . . I felt its lameness. It was misunderstood by people. They didn't get what I was talking about. Neither did I.” In 2004, comedian Dave Chapelle faced a similar crisis and shocked his television audience and fans when he departed his popular cable show and lucrative contract. Explaining to Oprah Winfrey in a 2005 interview that he began to fear that the show’s material, much of which he authored, was becoming misunderstood, he recalled how unsettled he became with one particular skit that portrayed blackface as a pixie figure. Would audiences understand that the blackface figure condemned the racist white gaze and not the distorted human subject that the pixie represented? Like Pryor, Chapelle traveled to Africa, to South Africa, to reflect and regroup. In Pryor’s own estimate, his time in Africa would shatter and rearrange his racial outlook. Confronted with a black majority,
with black people “at the hotel, on television, in stores, on the street, in the newspapers, at restaurants, running the government, on advertisements,” Pryor told his wife, “You know what? There are no niggers here. . . . The people here, they still have their self-respect, their pride.” Clearly, Pryor and Chapelle had to contend with their own interactions with the white gaze and with their feelings of personal responsibility in exposing and extending the insidious capacities of white racism. Negotiating the slippage between satire and sheer buffoonery, between telling the joke and embodying the joke (again), both comedians had to set a new personal standard commensurate with their artistic vision and self-image.

Framed as a duet with James Weldon Johnson’s song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” “Owed to a Funny Man” interposes verses from this so-called Negro National Anthem with Dee’s own verses, pitting the song’s time and generation against the collective voice of the comedian and his audience. Dee’s invocation of Johnson’s song and of the comedian’s act centers on an argument she is tacitly making about self-representation in the wake of racist, exploitative portrayals of the black subject. In 1900 when Johnson wrote the lyrics to “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and his brother John Rosamond Johnson composed its musical accompaniment, black Americans were just beginning their epic journey for greater economic opportunity, leaving the cotton fields of the South to the mills, factories, and shipyards of the North, Midwest, and Pacific Coast. Known as the Great Migration, this tremendous population shift marked the formation of the New Negro and, with it, the effort by writers, artists, and intellectuals to wipe out the cartoonish recreation of black individuals in newspaper editorials, books, magazines, and eventually films as coons, Sambos, mammys, and other minstrel
creations invented the white racist gaze. The urge within African American culture to remove the mask of inferiority would emanate in part from artists and intellectuals calling on blacks to recognize and embrace their own humanity, even in the face of legalized inferiority and widespread social prohibitions. The exhortation in Johnson’s lyric for every black voice to soar with song “Til earth and heaven ring” affirms not only the humanity of black people but also their spirituality. Originally performed on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday in Jacksonville, Florida, the Johnsons’ hometown, the lyrics reflect the long-held black tradition of tethering political interests and spiritual awareness, an aesthetic that dates as far back as the making of the spirituals and slave songs. Commenting on the song’s iconic stature, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. suggests that its fixture in black consciousness confirms it as an “historically validated anthem,” a reliable touchstone in the record of racial uplift (441).

Cutting against the stately, idealized rhetoric of the song’s opening lines “Lift every voice and sing / ‘Till earth and heaven ring,” Dee’s own lines drill the ear with irregular rhymes, off-beat rhythms, and bleak images of racial terror—lynching, riots, bombings, rapes—all clothed in the poem’s remarkable conceit linking the speaker’s imagination of a black cultural ethos, the people’s collective heartbeat, with the political drumming and cadence of black singing. The funny man in this poem suffers profoundly from a lack of cultural and historical knowledge, or as the speaker puts it, he hears “the beat alright but / Never heard the song” (14-15). Such a smattering of knowledge puts the funny man in the vulnerable position of inadvertently rehearsing and recycling the civic and spiritual death of his ancestors, those depicted in “Movies, plays,” the “downright lies” of the “Amos ‘n’ Andy, crow, coon” type (27-28). The performer
knows the gestures, voices, and poses of the cartoon figure, and however much he revises or modernizes the concept and the act (not much, if at all, according to the poem’s speaker), he has added no significant satire or irony to his performance to suggest his liberation from such a racist gaze. The funny man knows what has pleased and delighted audiences in the past, but he has made no investment in understanding the cruel implications of the comedy, or the insidious ramifications in continuing the performance. Without this interrogation, the performer runs the risk of internalizing the shucking and the jiving while casting his toxic conceptualization of blackness onto other black people. Consequently, this “bright, bright, bright boy / . . . Becomes minstrel in paint, minus pain / Self-winding computer toy / Heart, soul hanging by a thread” (34, 38-9). Clearly, these images present a paradox—a minstrel detached from historical and aesthetical significance, autonomous, “self-winding,” and “minus pain,” but here the poet repeats her frustration with the dearth of discourse between the older generation and their descendants—the pain of the older folk dismissed, abstracted, and trivialized. This “self-winding” comedian turns himself into a feckless novelty that peddles the pain and loss of his ancestors in ways that crush the possibility of comedic critique, dissolving his intellect and inventiveness into a looming, ever-present caricature. Ultimately, his autonomy, power, and agency as a performer and a person derive from a negation and belittlement of his individuated and racialized self.

The added conflict in “Owed to a Funny Man” arises from the speaker’s public critique of the comedian, as opposed to a self-generated assessment that would allow the funny man to reach his own realizations. Dee’s speaker raises the stakes by connecting a lack of cultural awareness with political suicide, equating stereotype and death. Not
Unlike the gangbanger, the funny man becomes steeped in stereotype: “Stereotype personified, / Expert in black on black cancellation” (47-48). Compared to a zombie and a Jack o’ Lantern, “bloodless” with a “funny flicker” (42, 41), the shelled out comic reifies the racist projection of black subjects as reductively spectacular and aberrant bodies, as sheer, un-signified abjection, the signposts of an inherent mental defectiveness:

Cheers to the foul-mouthed champs
Dealing in crotch with diamonded hands as
Eyes, cheap beads, glisten from empty sockets—
And mouth minus lips curls around
Idiot four letter screams and
Mess up mind
Thinks it thinks. (55-61)

Here Dee cleverly combines images of Jack o’ Lanterns and zombies with depictions of a crotch grabbing, vulgar-tongued adolescent drawing cheers from his fans and other likeminded persons. These childish images suggest the funny man’s arrested development, and more generally, the arrested development of those African Americans who accept such entertainment with little or no resistance.

Imagining herself as the comic’s mother, the speaker exerts a salvific force on the life of the wayward artist. “One night I dreamed I was his mother” Dee writes:

Switched him with a triple-thick hickory all over
Snatched him off the poisoned pedestal
Flung him into the arms of the decontamination delegation
All the weeping mamas, teachers, daddies, divinities. . .
‘We will wash your mouth out
We will take you searching for
Your stolen misplaced parts.’ (66, 74-78, 82-84)

Certainly, these lines evoke their own humor. The image of a mother “switching” her adult son and that of a “decontamination delegation” “wash[ing]” his “mouth out” and forcing him to look for his “misplaced parts” all conjure up a familiar scene of parental
frustration and condescension, a staple in black comedy. Here Dee’s speaker makes her own jokes, shifting the poem’s rhetorical strategy from lecture to jive-talk. Wresting a humorous routine from the funny man himself and using it as a cudgel against him, the poem attains an unexpected irony, transforming the performances by Dee’s speaker and the funny man into a comedic duel played out over a serious underpinning of critique.

This passage also indicates the funny man’s slovenly use of “vacillating infantilism,” a technique John Limon considers essential to an ideal stand-up performance. To this end, Limon writes, “The comedian . . . looks down on [his audience] as upon children and lectures them. But they make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to . . . He wishes to humiliate them and they submit; they also think he is childish for craving their unchallengeable approval so desperately, and he knows this. There are . . . no child stand-ups; an actual child would block this vacillating infantilism” (26-27). Dee’s speaker could not be more emphatic in her judgment of the comic’s performance: “You are sick. Far from funny” (81). Is there something missing in Dee that makes her unresponsive to the funny man’s set? Has he failed in telling his jokes or has she failed in hearing them? I am asking questions I suspect no one can answer absolutely. Without the actual performance transcribed into the poem, or without mention of his name even, readers have to depend on Dee’s judgment. I can only point out Dee’s recognition of the comic’s re-mistralization and suggest that his sloppy negotiation between subject and object/abject has left her convinced that he hardly knows what all he is doing or is hardly aware of the implications embedded in his act. If Dee infantilizes the comedian, she does so by taking his lead, as way of mirroring back to him, his audience, and her readers the faultiness of his act.
The summa of power in Dee’s poem lies in its confrontational pairing of the funny man’s psychic destruction and the wasted sacrifice of his forebears. Here the poem’s humorous depiction of a disappointed, chastising mother gives way to a more profound reckoning of cultural decline. In the following lines, the juxtaposition of the esteemed deaths of Civil Rights workers and the lowly demise of the funny man’s mind recalls the “smack down” of the rap anthem “Self Destruction” and the time splitting imagery of “Tupac”:

All the black people who died, who died—
People who died—
So you could—go to school
People who died—
So you could—hold your head up again
Who died—
So you could—get a good job
Who died—
So you could—be able to vote
Who died—
So you could—not get wasted on a whim.
Who are your folks? Don’t you love nobody?
Letting yourself become rat-impaled on the nail of racism. (90-102)

The tension between the imaginary death of the funny man and the actual deaths of his ancestors telegraphs the speaker’s unresolved feeling that the older generation has failed the younger. When Dee asks, “Who are your folks? Don’t you love nobody?” she locates a lethal and broadly fixed lapse in cultural interrogation and uplift. Obviously, the deaths of one’s forbears are not sufficient in instilling for future generations a healthier, more informed consciousness and sensibility. These questions and the repetition of the phrase “people who died” reflect the speaker’s budding realization of this point; she also has lessons to learn.
Although these lines look sparse on the page, Dee’s reading infuses them with enormous drama and passion, teasing out their smoldering anger and frustration. On January 22, 2008, I attended a reading given by Dee, whose performance highlighted the 27th Birthday Celebration of Martin Luther King, a program hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That Dee would read “Owed to a Funny Man” at the MLK celebration marks a seismic shift in race discourse—from inter to intra, while suggesting an interconnectedness in the two sides to the discussion. For me, the reading was a profoundly riveting experience. Throughout her recitation of the repeated line “People who died,” Dee’s raspy voice, familiar to anyone who has seen her film work, turns incantatory, guttural, boldly conducting untold, untellable sorrow. The poem’s conclusion gives an injunction for cultural change that insists on a widespread internalization of historic struggle, valor, and sacrifice. When Dee says, “Move. Move over. Move out / While we tear down this stage / We got to build a new place” (126-8), she stresses the importance of taking action, implying that new cultural production requires a conscious repudiation of the black-effacing ethos that pervades so much of the funny man’s performance, a debt owed not only to forbears and martyrs, the “people who died,” but also to the funny man himself and to the generations who follow him.

Channeling the moral imperative of the 1960s can only address part of the problem; equally important is the forging of innovative voices in art, literature, music, theater, comedy, film, and politics, what Dee refers to collectively as “new beats” and “new songs.” Part of the last stanza reads:

Hear the old songs then
Write some new songs
“God of our silent tears—”
Where you can—feel the old beats then
Teach some new beats
"Thou who has brought us thus far on the way"
Where you can began to be about—
Caring about people who look up to you
"May we forever stand. Truer to our God."
Begin to be about
Our purpose on this earth
Begin to be about
Our dimensions so long hidden
Too long overlooked and trampled on (131-144)

Remarkably, these lines enact their own directive to the funny man, precisely doing what they instruct the comic to do, that is, to collaborate with a credible and affirmative precedent of black artistic expression. Here Dee’s slam poetic, juxtaposed with verses from “Lift Every Voice,” produces a stunning incongruity, a kind of Pirandello of histories, voices, and poetic styles, her newly fashioned critique of black culture couched in a religious, somewhat romantic salutation to the past. At the reading that commemorated Martin Luther King’s birthday, Dee’s quotations of “Lift Every Voice” evoked the protest songs of 1960s sit-ins and marches, reminding the audience not only of the protestors’ strength and determination but more specifically of the capacity of language to confront chaos—manifesting from within and outside of black culture—chaos that ultimately obstructs cultural change with internalized distortions and misrepresentations.

**Z Z Packer’s Intra-racial Critique**

Impressive as Dee’s performances are in these poems, some audiences will inevitably find them rather pushy—didactic, moralistic, even single-minded. Dee certainly places her writ large subjects at a distance, suppressing psychological nuance and complexity in favor of unfiltered political outrage. But by virtue of their allusions
and structural complexity, these poems are hardly pamphlets: any criticism of these poems for their political transparency does little to undermine their potency. On the other hand, if one can make the case that subtlety and ambiguity make for strong and provocative literature, these strengths undoubtedly unlock unseen dimensions of the self-destructive subject. ZZ Packer’s 2003 story collection Drinking Coffee Elsewhere resonates with the outrage of Dee’s poems but with a more subtle vibration. As resourceful as many of Packer’s characters are, others lurch toward self-destruction—or they sustain a slow-moving state of self-destructiveness—but without the elitism and celebrity evoked by Dee’s poems. Packer’s “everyday” black folk, settled in the South mostly—in Kentucky and Georgia—but also in Maryland, do not all dwell in the inner city, none of them fitting a gangsta’s profile or evoking thug psychology. Instead, Packer’s characters, young African American women mostly, present the excitement of self-discovery against the collective pressure of peers, parents, teachers, and other authority figures. But what distinguishes these coming-of-age stories from those by other black writers is Packer’s willingness to expose the impact of cultural dysfunction on her characters’ choices and actions, an impact that insidiously warps and perverts their path to self-discovery. With her older characters, Packer shows how this warping effect follows people into middle age and beyond, thwarting their insight and contributing to their defeatism and to the defeatism of their community.

Asked by an interviewer in 2003 about the supposed danger in airing such dirty laundry, Packer gave a sensitive but unequivocal response favoring honesty, transparency, and the fullness of a writer’s vision, stating, “I believe we can't deal with our problems unless they are first brought to light. While I don't want to contribute to
negative stereotypes, I also don't want to write stock characters. . . . I also want to show the ugly side—our self-hatred as slave descendants in a country that told us that we don't represent an ideal of beauty.” Although her protagonists often seem agential and assertive at the start of their stories, their suffering or their unraveling in the end unveils their susceptibility to generations of inured defeatism. These stories force readers to confront black self-defeat with a clarity few other writers have shown. In her statement, Packer aligns what she refers to as “the ugly side” of black life to the long trajectory of black history in America, from slave times to the present. Her comment cuts to the core dilemma challenging her and other black authors with similar writing interests: how does one explore the ugly side without reproducing or recycling the myopia of racist visioning? For Packer’s most reluctant readers, this question unearths deeply entrenched fears, one being that making public record of black failure will somehow chip away at black achievements in law, science, medicine, literature, music, art, and politics. Some fear the possibility of validating racism to the racist. But as Packer herself suggests, such fear and silence only work to stymy change while intensifying the very pathologies that go unaddressed.

In Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, Packer turns black fear of the white gaze into a major facet of the stories’ conflicts. Not surprisingly, the manner by which these black characters resist whiteness says far more about them than whiteness itself. In the collection’s bookend stories—“Brownies,” set at a camp outside Atlanta in the early 1980s and “Doris Is Coming,” also set in Georgia but twenty years prior at the start of the Civil Rights movement—Packer elicits a range of black resistance to the white gaze. Before the timid title character of “Doris Is Coming” can muster up the courage to do a
one-person sit in at a local white-only diner, she takes a stand against a white student using the term “flesh-colored” to describe a dress she intends to wear at a formal dance. Doris says to her, “You mean your flesh color. . . . Not mine” (254). Obviously, Doris objects to whiteness as the default position of aesthetics, what altogether the offender, Alice, sees as an insignificant point, one of “those little, itty-bitty things . . . your people concentrate on” (254). In “Brownies,” set twenty years or so later, an all-black scout group “decid[e] to kick the asses of each and every girl in Troop 909” who are all white (1). Even before the black girls come to believe that one of the girls in Troop 909 has hurled the word “nigger” at them, the black troop views the white girls with impersonal ire and automatic antagonism. “Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp,” Packer writes, “they were white girls. . . . They turtled out from their bus in pairs, their rolled up sleeping bags chromatized with Disney characters” (1). Where Doris’s complaint about the word “flesh-colored” makes sense, the acrimony of the black troop in “Brownies” seems less immediately understandable, and the twenty years separating the two stories mark a crucial shift in the black characters’ attitude.

Anyone looking to sympathize with the girls’ aggression might consider their early adolescence as a sign of their immaturity, while other readers might take into account the girls’ possible fear of being marginalized at their summer retreat. The Disney characters manifest not merely as signs of othering but also as cultural and economic difference between the two troops. In this reading, the black girls are resentful because their white counterparts identify with cultural representations they find objectionable: “Sleeping Beauty, Mickey Mouse . . . rainbows, unicorns, curly-eyelashed frogs” (1). However, these readings stem from a need to view black characters as
perpetual victims of whiteness and, as a result, bulldoze through the arc of social change that artfully binds these bookend stories. Part of the social change that Packer’s stories document concerns a transition from a paradigm of blatant racial discrimination to one that John L. Jackson terms as racial paranoia, in which African Americans make “distrustful conjecture about purposeful race-based maliciousness and . . . racial indifference” (3). What separates these two periods of race relations is the landmark enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which struck a blow against unfair voter registration and the segregation of schools and workplaces. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 attacked the unfair housing practices that kept entire neighborhoods segregated. So, legalized racism had more or less ended—by the stroke of a pen, by act of law, by blood of the martyrs. But how could the law erase what has existed for centuries, not just in deed but in the hearts of those who hate? How could the law stop the fear, prejudice, and hatred being taught in homes, passed down from parent to child, grandparent to grandchild? These questions lie at the bottom of racial distrust. Characterizing this distrust as “a hunch” that “inhabits the gut, not the mind,” Jackson rightly insists that it is “impervious to scientific appeals” or intellectual cogitation, an elusiveness that “explains its entrenched nature and long-term staying power” (18).

To be sure, racial paranoia is a slippery thing, an author without a text. It detects malice but draws uncertainty from witnesses, sometimes even from the detector. Flourishing in doubt, racial paranoia confounds the possibility of resolution. In ordinary circumstances, it lurks within the shadow of an act: an untoward glance, an edgy tone. In extraordinary cases, racial paranoia proves spectacularly ambiguous. Was Rodney King excessively beaten by a group of white police officers because he was a hostile,
dangerous motorist or because he was a bad motorist who was also black? Did neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman target Trayvon Martin because he was black or because Martin was acting suspiciously? How much did Martin’s race inform his suspiciousness in Zimmerman’s eyes? Mostly importantly, how does Zimmerman’s acquittal confirm black distrust of white authority? The answers to these questions may depend largely on who answers them. Just as racism spawned the nefarious color-line, racial paranoia puts people by means of racial designation on the opposite sides of a controversy. Despite these racial polarities and, in some cases, because of them, controversies de jour remain hazy, subject to speculation and inconclusiveness. Jackson puts the matter in sharp focus when he writes, “When racism was explicit, obvious, and legal, there was little need to be paranoid about it. For the most part, what blacks saw was what they got. However, after the changes of the 1960s, African Americans have become more secure in their legal citizenship but . . . less sure about other things, such as . . . silent and undeclared racisms” (9).

None of this is to declare racial bigotry dead and buried, that the absence of vitriolic speech, white-on-black violence, or apparent public bias should serve as some tacit announcement of the demise of racism or racial consciousness, for that matter. That banner may never be raised. One obvious example to this point, hate groups still abound, on occasion marching down Main Street or publicizing their thinking on the Internet. As of 2013, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that among all the states in the union California contains the greatest number of hate groups, 82, while Wyoming and Vermont contain two each. What is different from fifty years ago, in addition to the fact that such groups are now generally disparaged, is a shift in racial consciousness, not merely a
revolution in the material reality of race relations but a change in the thoughts and feelings that register, record, and make sense of that material reality. “The point isn’t that race is less important now than it was before” Jackson asserts, “It’s just more schizophrenic, more paradoxical. . . . Race is real, but it isn’t. It has value, but it doesn’t. It explains social difference, but it couldn’t possibly. This kind of racial doublethink drives us all crazy, makes us suspicious of one another, and fans the flames of racial paranoia” (11). To what extent racism, expressed in a roar or a whisper, still informs people’s lives, the fear of racism and the expectation of it undoubtedly strike a high pitch for African Americans, especially during interracial contact. Even if racial paranoia forms, in Jackson’s terms, the “flipside” of racism, “these two analytically discrete sides can sometimes effortlessly meet” (4). Hence, for white Americans, racism and racial paranoia coincide in a myriad of possibilities, not least white guilt, fear of the black Other, or fear of losing white privilege. For blacks and white Americans alike, paranoia keeps the color-line vital and relevant.

The kinds of anxieties and ambiguities that Jackson describes, Packer treats subtly in her fiction, the finest point of her focus defining the impact of racial distrust on her black characters. Packer’s fiction captures the aura and force of racial schizophrenia, in which race matters and does not matter. Her stories uncover the suspicion and ambiguity her characters experience and the effort, exerted by a precious few, to liberate themselves from such a tangled psychology. Not many of Packer’s people present a mindset as tangled and intractable as that of Dina, the protagonist of the collection’s title work. Dina sounds a campus alarm at Yale when she tells her peers during an orientation exercise, “If I had to be any object, I guess I’d be a revolver” (118). This comment, along with her
reluctance earlier in the day to participate in a game of Trust and fall into the arms of white boys “holding their arms out . . . sincerely, gallantly” wins her much unwanted attention as well as her own dormitory room (118). Nothing really nudges Dina from her antisocial disposition, and sessions with a psychiatric counselor and the fact that she self-isolates in her room only heightens the concern of those around her. She freely tells one insistent meddler that she is a misanthrope and upon invitation to dinner points in her room to a stack of ramen noodles, saying, “See that? That means I never have to go to Commons” (123). Further on, readers discover Dina’s childhood history of domestic violence and possible sexual abuse at the hands of her father, whom she calls “a dick” (123). We also learn how her mother’s untimely death initiates in the child Dina her lifelong pattern of retreating deeply into herself, what her psychiatrist casually calls her “survival mechanism” (144). Dina tells him, “I’d been given milk to settle my stomach; I’d pretended it was coffee. I pretended I was drinking coffee elsewhere” (144). But no single part of Dina’s trauma, nor her predilection for fantasy, crystallizes as the primary cause of her antipathy and alienation, pathology that also subtends race as the epicenter of her dissension.

Although not the cause of Dina’s distress, racial paranoia portends all the same as a key element of it. Significantly, her distress emanates from inside and outside of her affiliation with African American culture. Dina would hardly look forward to a game of Trust with anyone, regardless the race of the boys standing behind her waiting to catch her fall. The fact that they are white merely exaggerates her dissent. Meanwhile, her psychiatrist unpleasantly reminds her of a Civil War general, but one imagines, she would hardly have warm feelings for any figure sitting in his seat. Dina also dislikes the
black students she meets at Yale, mainly because she senses their difference from her in terms of class and education: “Most of them . . . tried hard to pretend they hadn’t gone to prep schools. And there was something pitiful in how cool they were” (121). Judging by these scenarios, readers might conclude that race does not matter much in Dina’s thoughts, and yet it does. Race does not seem to matter to other characters in the story, and yet it does. In the Commons, Dina notices the all too familiar *de facto* segregation of blacks, whites, and Asians, a situation only marginally complicated by the self-segregation of singing groups and athletes. Dina’s appearance there with the insistent meddler Heidi, a white woman who wants to be called Henrik, stresses Dina’s separateness even more. In a reverse of the black as spectacle paradigm in which the black body becomes a spectacular sight in the white gaze, Heidi becomes a spectacle of whiteness and otherness in the eyes of the black students who look suspiciously on Dina’s association with her. One of the black men sitting at the table asks her accusingly, “How you doing, sista?” and Dina instantly thinks herself a traitor, “clad in a Klansman’s sheet and hood” (125). The extremity of her guilt-ridden fantasy suggests how her personal insularity coincides with and, to a large degree, grows out of black separatism. In this instance, Dina imagines that she embodies this iconic symbol of hate simply because she crosses the color-line. When Heidi and Dina become increasingly intimate, their closeness bordering on the sexual, Dina’s misgivings intensify: “The record she’d given me was playing in my mind, and I kept trying to shut it off. I could also hear my mother saying that this is what happens when you’ve been around white people: things get weird” (139). Dina’s thoughts clearly signal a kind of mending wall between black
and white, consigning “weirdness,” same-sex desire, in this case, to an alien, unknowable whiteness.

This comment about weirdness, flashing back to an instance in Dina’s childhood, also shows just how ingrained with racial separateness she has become, and how this separateness works counter-intuitively not to protect her but to lessen her potential happiness and fulfillment. Notably, Packer shows Dina’s alienation as a child from neighbors as a result of her love of reading and learning. Dina tells her therapist that in the poor neighborhood of “Greenmount Avenue you could read schoolbooks—that was understandable. . . But anything else was antisocial” (131-132). Exploring this twin issue of cultural separatism and education, John McWhorter gives a troubling but convincing discussion. Despite the misgivings I outlined in the previous chapter with McWhorter’s overall dismissal of contemporary racist expressions as a little more than a string of “scattered inconveniences” (47), I find his overall diagnosis of black disillusionment perceptive, not least his recognition that a major component of separatism “has roots in segregation, . . . [that]was crystallized in the sixties as Separatism [and] expanded into a general coping strategy” (53). I would emphasize this point by recalling the impact made on black culture by Reconstruction in the South, by Jim Crow laws, and by the terroristic acts of white supremacists, culminating in the bombings, shootings, and various forms of violence visited upon blacks during the Civil Rights period. Throughout these times, blacks were forced to fear whites and to negotiate with them from the disadvantage of second class citizenship. Blacks had no choice but to build separate, sustainable communities with teachers, doctors, midwives, laborers, ministers, entrepreneurs, artists, and entertainers that kept interracial contact to a minimum. The
separatism of the 1960s, by way of Civil Rights activism and the Black Power movement, mobilized black consciousness with new measures of political ambition. But as McWhorter admits, “Separatism is so much more psychologically deep-seated than a mere political pose” (73). Over the years, separatism has evolved as both an offshoot and survival mechanism of racial paranoia. Ostensibly, separatism protects the black subject from an ever-present assumption of white malice, but at a time when race relations have improved by law, by a shift in mores, and by increased opportunities for African Americans, separatism becomes more and more an agent of self-negation. Because of separatism, because of a paranoid fear of the white other, opportunities are missed, and the black self is prosscriptively defined. On this point, McWhorter declares, “Separatism has taught generations of blacks to settle for less . . . less as human beings” (76).

The metric by which to read Dina’s self-negation must cut through her academic achievement to assess all that she has lost and the very little she ultimately possesses. From the outside, she personifies success, having earned a place at one of the country’s most prestigious universities. Yet, by story’s end, Dina leaves Yale, relocating to her aunt’s house in Baltimore, living almost completely in her fantasies of a life with Heidi. Fantasies are safe, malleable, and controllable. After Heidi makes a display of herself by participating in Coming Out Day at Yale, Dina resorts to her tried and true tactic of reclusion and fantasy-making. The death of Heidi’s mother and Heidi’s insistence that Dina return with her to Vancouver to attend the funeral prove too much for Dina as these events resurrect the anguish of her own mother’s demise. Dina desires, but she cannot act. Nothing in her lived experience has quite prepared her for Heidi’s openness and affection or for her expectation of reciprocity.
Just as her parents deprive her of a model of inquisitive interest in the world, the folks of Greenmount Avenue reinforce this attitude. Reading, regarded as intellectual exercise, meets with suspicion and ridicule. The cashiers at the supermarket remind her regularly of her oddness: “‘There she go reading,’ one of them once said, even though I was only carrying a book. ‘Don’t your eyes ever get tired?’” (131). Dina understands that “The government and your teachers forced you to read [books],” but to take up reading as a personal interest, to identify with the activity and possibly with the ideas, scenes, scenarios, and arguments put forth in any of these books means that a person is somehow tainted by the world outside Greenmount, and, as a result, strange and untrustworthy. As Dina says, “It meant you’d rather submit to the words of some white dude than shoot the breeze with your neighbors” (132). Clearly, Dina’s neighbors perceive governments and teachers as uniformly white and can never be anything but a mass of unknowable whiteness and books the products of an unknowable “white dude.” Books could never be the brainwork of a black mind, and like teachers and government agencies, they signify as outside authorities, demanding submission, defeat, the absence of autonomy. While racial paranoia permeates their lives to such an point that Dina’s books become a sign of provocation to them, a reminder of all they do not know or have or hope to have, separatism reinforces this reality, binding them to it, keeping them in their place. Without the cashiers and other Greenmount residents realizing the fixity of their situation, separatism becomes the cover, the justification, for their inaction, apathy, and anti-intellectualism. The people of Greenmount re-inscribe the very limits put on their lives by poverty by blocking pathways to change and economic uplift. Pathetically, Dina leaves this depressed space only to return, unchanged, to a space very much like the
former one. Try as she might, moving from the recesses of fantasy to the Ivy League, Dina ultimately lacks temerity and a vitalizing cultural template to free herself from Greenmount’s far-reaching vise.

“The Ant of the Self” sets the thorny subject of a debilitative black culture on the road between Louisville, Kentucky and the District of Columbia. In probing this debilitation, Packer begins small, specific, with a father-son conflict. The story recounts the disintegration of Spurgeon’s already tumultuous relationship with his ineffectual father Ray Bivens, Jr. After bailing Ray out of jail, Spurgeon tries to drive his father to his house and then return separately to his mother’s home; instead, Ray coerces his son into driving him all the way to D.C. so that Ray can execute his shoddy, dead-end scheme of selling exotic birds to gatherers at the Million Man March. After stopping at the house Ray shares with his girlfriend to collect the birds, father and son head out for the capitol. Like Dina, Spurgeon retreats from the unhappiness of his home life into books, delving into the intricacies of language. A student of forensics and debate, Spurgeon, like Dina, finds books more satisfying and fulfilling than most of the people in his life. The story derives remarkable tension and irony from its structure in that the car moves and moves but the two men inside stand guard over the impasse of their relationship, neither of them willing to show vulnerability or affection to the other, neither of them able to communicate their feelings to the other.

Threatened by his son’s burgeoning confidence and thoughtfulness, Ray tries to reestablish his dominance over him, working from an intensely toxic formula of masculinity. Ray figures less as a father to Spurgeon than as a familiarly insecure bully. When Spurgeon disagrees with him about taking the birds from his girlfriend, Ray tells
him, “You need to go to this March. When you go, check in at the pussy booth and tell ‘em you want to exchange yours for a johnson” (95). After the rally, Ray physically attacks Spurgeon for not handing over the car keys, thwarting Ray’s plans to speed off into some meaningless tryst with a woman he meets at a bar. Petulant and abusive, Ray’s desperate behavior announces his inability to communicate outside the narrow sanction of macho violence and control. And yet, Packer drops into this dysfunctional circus the subtlest epiphany for Spurgeon, who all along secretly pines for his father’s approval. During the fight, Spurgeon senses that perhaps only through the rhetoric of violence can Ray express affection, or Spurgeon subliminally understands that his best prospects for fatherly affection must come through fisticuffs. Spurgeon says more than he realizes when he recalls how Ray repeatedly rams, headfirst, into his body: “I try to pry him from where his head butts, into my stomach, right under my windpipe, but he stays that way, leaning into me, tucked as if fighting against a strong wind, both of us wobbling together like lovers” (112). Dangerous, destructive, the clash crescendos with father and son bonding in the only way their obstinacy will allow, beyond the precise limits of language, Spurgeon “so strangely mad that I’m happy” (112). In this moment, his oratory skills abandon him as he struggles to put his feelings into words, into meaning. His words become as remotely sensible as the rambling outbursts of Ray’s parrots. “Wind-o!” Spurgeon yells at him, “you don’t know shit about birds! Ariba! Ariba!” (112). Confused, Ray no longer hits him, but as Spurgeon tells it, “he’s holding me now like a rag doll” (112). Still unable to communicate or show vulnerability, Ray mixes affection with violence as his one accessible display of fatherly love.
The dysfunction of this father-son relationship reverberates with the story’s depiction of the March, the failed communication in the smaller drama magnified by the mass of civic leaders, celebrities, families, friends, and strangers, who gathered in October 1995 to promote the political and spiritual strengthening of the black men in their homes and communities. The historic basis to the story’s recreation lends weight and breadth to Packer’s critique of black male culture, a critique etched in empathy and nuance. Much of the controversy at the March surrounded the considerable absence of women and the presence of event organizer Louis Farrakhan, notorious for his anti-Jewish positions, which many felt distracted people’s attention from the event’s essential purpose of stimulating black male uplift. Sidelining the Farrakhan issue, the story concentrates, instead, on black male separatism and the defects of mob mentality. Farrakhan’s stint in the narrative amounts to a brief appearance on a projection screen with crowds cheering, applauding, and sporadically chanting. Attention then lands on an unknown preacher who reads from the infamous 1712 letter of slaver William Lynch, who advises fellow slaveholders to pit dark slaves against fairer ones, male against female, and one plantation slave population against another, all useful stratagems in ruling over black bodies. In the story, “The preacher ends by telling everyone that freedom is attained only when the ant of the self—that small, blind, crumb-seeking part of ourselves—casts off slavery and its legacy, becoming a huge brave ox” (101).

The men in the crowd are so enthusiastic, so ecstatically unified in their reception of the speech that no one bothers to question how their assembly re-invokes the letter’s instruction to separate the sexes. Indeed, no one in the crowd seems to connect the 1712 directive with the women standing across the street holding up placards that read: “Let Us
In” and “Remember Those You Left Home” (100). An historical flashpoint of white male dominance, Lynch’s letter clearly reminds the gathering that much of their bruised self-image traces back over the centuries to plantations in the South. By no means disparaging the men’s desire to redress and repair their manhood, Packer’s narration suggests the futility of trying to do so in isolation of women. However noble and potentially productive the preacher’s words are, thousands of women are not allowed to hear them in the company of their husbands, coworkers, lovers, sons, brothers, and friends. This one-sided focus of men among men—although a few women, very few, did speak at the actual march—denies the immediacy of a multilateral conversation between the sexes, a reality that reifies the intent of Lynch’s letter.

The showdown between Spurgeon and the other gatherers further demonstrates the dangers of an exclusive group-think mentality. The situation begins to deteriorate for Spurgeon when he does not echo everyone’s fervor for the preacher’s speech. Separated at this moment from Ray, Spurgeon explains to one eager listener that he has only come to help his father sell birds. Soon a subset of the crowd closes in on Spurgeon, pecking him with criticisms, condemnations, and insults, one man calling him “sorry” and another suggesting that Spurgeon is the irresponsible one in his treatment of his father. When one man tells him that he has violated the purpose of the March by failing to atone, Spurgeon retreats into his knowledge of words, his preferred method of self-protection, telling his accoster, “Atoning for one’s wrongs is different from apologizing. . . . One involves words, the other, actions” (103). Not really responding to the point of his inquisitor, Spurgeon seeks release from the phalanx of men who corner him, glaring at him as some kind of “villain” (103). Not that the men’s argument patently lacks merit—
one convincingly tells Spurgeon that he should not place all responsibility in his relationship with his father onto his father—but none of these men takes a breath to hear Spurgeon’s point-of-view; none of them seems interested in understanding his plight, only in imposing their group-think onto a stranger who dares deviate from their homogeneous formation. Just as women are denied their part in the conversation on racial health, Spurgeon is similarly silenced: power and language in this instance are borne out in a unilateral, top-down construction. Like Ray, these older men become bullies, belittling their own message of atonement and recuperation while undermining their self-made appointment as a guidepost for Spurgeon’s generation.

“Our Lady of Peace” also dramatizes the failure of an older generation in its responsibility to the problems incurred by the younger, but where “The Ant of the Self” interrogates the hazards of black male separatism and black machismo, “Our Lady of Peace” casts a critical glance at both sexes and calls into question the limits of responsibility placed on both the older and younger people of the story. Preoccupied by a midlife crisis and financial ruin, Lyneea Davis uproots her life, moving from Odair County, Kentucky to inner-city Baltimore where she hopes to elevate the poor students she encounters as a teacher. At first, Lyneea displaces her frustration at her own life decisions onto her neighbors—rural, white Southerners, who “oozed out their words” and sought her opinion “anytime Jesse Jackson farted” (55). Exhausted from living in a mostly white space, Lyneea romanticizes her future black students, even idealizing the mean streets of Baltimore, which in her imagination, “stretched black and row-house brown” where “slow-moving junkies strutted their way across the sidewalk as though rethinking decisions they’d already made” (55). She anticipates getting involved with
invigorating struggles, her life gaining new purpose. During her enrollment in an education program “that promised to cut the certification time from two years to a single summer” (57), Lyneea meets other people restarting their lives, one of whom is called Robert-the-Cop, so called because of his previous profession and his authoritarian tactics in the classroom. By story’s end, Lyneea learns that Robert-the-Cop has returned to the police force.

Robert’s eventual failure as a teacher presages Lyneea’s, both situations signaling their refusal to rethink their original vision of themselves as instructors and models in the classroom. Here Packer depicts the inner-city classroom with brutal honesty, noting how the two teachers become welded to authoritarianism, their rigidness replicating the paralysis of their students’ social existence. Frozen in place, neither party can see the perspective of the other. Robert, during the summer certification class, enacts a fascist demeanor, “goose-stepping to each pretend student, pounding his fist on their desks for quiet. He ended by telling them . . . they’d all amount to nothing, zero, zilch, nada, if they did not respect authority” (67). Outside of the schoolyard, Packer extends her critique of the older generations’ failure. In the scene, Lyneea rouses her neighbor Venus from a kind of stupor in which the older woman is “raking the same patch of leaves over and over” (70). Readers can never know what specifically depresses Venus or what started her mindless activity. Readers cannot know for certain what secret desires or aspirations lurk beneath her demoralized exterior, if any at all remain. Stunningly clear, though, is her sense of resignation, her disconnect from the youth, who, as she tells Lyneea, are “all crack babies. None of them’s got a bit of sense to them. Ought a skip schooling and send them all to the military” (70). Venus has most likely
seen Lynea’s forerunners—teachers who come, who see, and who surrender. The wheel of failure and self-defeat turns over and over, much like the pointless curving of Venus’s rake against the leaf pile in her yard.

After less than a year of teaching, Lynea comes to a similarly vicious outlook on her students and on Baltimore’s youth in general. Hitting the top of her rage, she purposely slams with her car (without seriously injuring) two boys at a busy intersection:

They were the sort of kids who thought they had all the time in the world; time to play around, time to disobey, time to do whatever they wanted. They were the types of kids who seemed to love watching faces, curse noiselessly on the other side of the windshield, their vengeance against the world. Lynea knew they weren’t going to make it across at the speed she was driving. . . . She had a chance to slow down, and she didn’t want to. She’d scare them for once. Make them run. (80)

Overwhelmed by the severity of their students’ disobedience and by the deprivation of their existence, Robert and Lynea cannot shake the pull of their egos. Abandoning their teaching posts, both repeat the pattern of what parents, teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and neighbors like Venus, have all done before them—give up. Rather than examine their own blunders and missteps, they center the liability of their failure on the students, viewing them as part and parcel of the subhuman deprivation that surrounds them, as nothing, nada, as that “sort of kid.”

At the same time, the narrative transcends such a tidy, all too simplistic, attribution of blame, by staging a constant interchange of economic determinacy and self-defeat cycling back and forth between the generations and by locating the axis of self-defeat in the defiant attitudes and actions of the young people themselves. Despite her sorry career in the classroom and her antipathy toward her students at the end of it, Lynea does exhibit signs of compassion, going out of her way in a particularly derelict
neighborhood to drive Sheba, a one-time promising student, to the orphanage she calls home. Sheba’s pregnancy leaves her feeling that any academic promise she may have is fleeting and impossible to fulfill. When Packer depicts Sheba standing away from the school gazing at two boys shooting hoops in a decrepit basketball court, absent now of “[t]he boys who smoked weed all through the fall” (76), the narrative places Sheba’s problems squarely in context with those of her classmates. The crumbling condition of the court, “the long faded free-throw line, the school mascot . . . weathered and chipped” and the absented bodies of the pot smokers, all familiar images of inner-city decay, presents an outward sign to the students’ psychology, specifically their sense of resignation. Evident by their behavior in the classroom, the students inevitably accept the decay around them as indicative of their individual worth. Before Sheba finds out that she is pregnant, she convinces her classmates to participate in the daily lesson, even encouraging Lyneea to try more engaging techniques that generate greater participation from her peers. Impolite, gruff, even overbearing, Sheba hardly represents the ideal class-leader for Lyneea, and some classmates fear Sheba and find her intimidating. Nevertheless, Lyneea comes to depend on her enforcer for her intelligence, talent, and inspiration, talent that may now be squandered away by the turn of events in the girl’s life. No stranger to trouble, Sheba transfers schools often and occasionally lashes out violently. The guidance counselor warns Lyneea, “She knifed a teacher at her old school” (68). Does Sheba sabotage her own success just as it begins to surface? Is her sexuality at the bottom of her discontent? Perhaps introduced to sex too soon, it has become too important to her self-esteem, and evidently now, with an unwanted
pregnancy and by her insistence on wearing miniskirts and fishnet stockings in winter, sex has become a perverted source of power for her.

Much like the boys at the intersection who without cause flash their middle fingers at Lyneea and like Ebony, a disgruntled student, who backhands her (also without cause), Sheba turns to fruitless acts of defiance as a way to redefine herself against the despair that encloses her. Her pregnancy quickly becoming grist for the school’s rumor mill, she begins to act out in class, joining its ever-growing brigade of rabble-rousers. To reiterate, this defiance merely leads to more defeat—for Sheba and her classmates. On this point, Packer could not be more direct, as when Lyneea drives Sheba home to the Catholic orphanage called Our Lady of Peace:

The statue of the Virgin Mary was larger than Lyneea thought statues should be, and was covered with pigeon droppings. A sign with a picture of a lightning bolt on it was attached to the high electric fence that ran around the building. . . . Next to it, another sign, wooden and hand-painted, read: TRY TO GET IN OR OUT WITHOUT PERMISSION AND DIE. (77)

Alongside the oversized statue that looms as an irrelevant exhibition of motherhood and female purity, the hand-painted sign announces a self-defeatism that rivals the spectacle of the statue.

Whatever transgression the graffitist intends with his vandalism, whatever mark of individual streetwise toughness these words convey, they impart an inward turn of personal defeat, an acceptance of unending poverty and underclass subsistence. To inscribe this sign with these words means on some level that the maker has absorbed its message. Driving up to the entrance, Lyneea tells Sheba, “Here you are” (77), a perfunctory statement that, without her realizing, punctuates the economic determinacy
Sheba must face every day of her life. Here one is poverty, the unwinding of entire generations through their quarantine in urban blight. Emotionally detached, Lyneea notices how the streets “got small and narrow” and how “Our Lady of Peace was its own planet: singular, immense, imposing” (77), but she cannot appreciate the psychology of the space, how blight enters the mind and body, demeaning both, inducing among the residents cycles of dereliction and despair. To tell this story—and tell it whole—Packer exposes the noxious balance of Sheba’s reality, the day-to-day tilting between economic determinacy and self-ruination, between open acts of rebellion and self-defeat.

If “Our Lady of Peace” expresses the stark psychological impact of economic determinacy across multiple generations, “Brownies,” quite possibly the most daring story in the collection, treats the imprint of racial prejudice on one generation by another, but here Packer reimagines this paradigm so that the prejudice in question arises not so much from her white characters but from her black characters. Just as the children and adults in “Our Lady of Peace” surrender to the oppressive forces of economic determinacy, the children of “Brownies,” particularly the African American ones, forcefully emulate the fears and racial paranoia of their parents. Told from young Laurel’s perspective, the story’s events, spanning four days, take place in the country outside Atlanta’s suburbs. The adults—camp counselors, organizers, and parents—become hazy figures while the black girls, on the cusp of adolescence, learn the ways of the world. Hearing that one of the counselors might be unwell, Laurel observes, “We had all been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealings with whites, sickness and death” (19). Who these brownies become remains uncertain by story’s end, but based on the girls’ varying personalities and their
relationships to their parents, the conclusion hints at vastly divergent paths for the girls, some paths more productive than others.

The attitudes of many of these Brownies reflect already their discomfort with whiteness, “rarely seen or thought about” in their African American communities (5). And yet, bombarded by media images that feature white females with “long, shampoo-commercial hair,” these girls have so internalized whiteness as the default standard of beauty that they both prize and envy their friend and fellow brownie Octavia, “the only black girl . . . with hair that long,” hair so long and flowing that the other black girls “listen to her reverentially, as though whatever she had to say would somehow activate their own follicles” (5). Seeing themselves as falling short of a standard only Octavia has achieved, the girls secretly admire white beauty, which seen from a distance, contains the glamor and romance of television ads. Watching the girls of Troop 909, Laurel comments on how “[w]e’d seen them from afar, never within their orbit enough to see whether their faces were the way all white girls appeared on TV—ponytailed and full of energy, bubbling over with love and money” (7). Made at a distance from false or unfair perceptions, their judgment about Troop 909 leads to a shocking recognition.

To complicate matters, Packer intersects the girls’ already mixed feelings with a stout case of racial distrust, one that evidently emanates from their parents. Arnetta’s claim that she overhears someone from Troop 909 call Daphne a nigger—Daphne neither confirms nor denies the claim—ignites a powder keg of resentment toward the white troop. Arnetta and Octavia devise a plan to ambush the white girls when they take their turn in the bathroom, but at the moment of truth, with the black girls closing in on their
target and the white girls huddled together at the bathroom sinks, Octavia makes a
discovery that quietly shatters their entire assessment of the conflict:

“I think,” Octavia said, whispering to Elsie, “they’re retarded.”
“We ARE NOT retarded!” the big girl said, though it was obvious that she
was. That they all were. The girls around her began to whimper. (23)

When the 909 leader declares that many of the girls are Echolalic, she all but dispels the
fury charging through the girls in Laurel’s troop. In the Journal of Child Language,
researchers Laura Sterponi and Jennifer Shankey confirm the American Psychiatric
Association’s definition of Echolalia as “the repetition of the speech of others . . . [as]
one of the defining features of autism spectrum disorders” (1). Offering a less formal
account than this scientific definition, the 909 leader explains how the girls are prone to
“say whatever they hear like an echo . . . I mean, not all of them have the most
progressive parents, so if they heard a bad word, they might have repeated it. But it
would not have been intentional” (26). Implicating their parents, the girls of 909 mime
bigoted language that they themselves are incapable of experiencing or truly expressing.

That not all of Laurel’s troop believe or accept this explanation discloses their
direct inculcation of their parents’ attitudes about race. Arnetta and Octavia refuse to
believe that the girls of Troop 909 are innocent, insisting that their whiteness
automatically makes them suspect, if not utterly culpable. Driven by sheer desperation to
be vindicated, Arnetta accuses in rapid succession one hapless Brownie then another.
Her first accusation falls flat when the troop leader says, “That’s impossible. She doesn’t
speak. She can, but she doesn’t” (26). The second girl Arnetta accuses, now more
frantically than the first, steps forward, seeming to Laurel “perpetually delighted” and
happily pointing at her sash, saying, “See . . . I’m a Brownie” (27). Laurel thinks, “I had
a hard time imagining this girl calling anyone a ‘nigger’” (27). But Arnetta’s insistence and her inability to admit her mistake indicate her own echolalia, a kind of mimicry of her parents’ voices.

More insidious than that, Arnetta’s insistence spawns from what John McWhorter terms Victimology, a need among some black persons to view themselves as perpetual victims of racism. According to McWhorter, since the progresses of the 1960s, logic has led to wild speculations and unfounded conspiracy theories. If the government could sanction and oversee horrific plots like the purposeful sterilization of black men infected with syphilis, a proven historical phenomenon, what might the government be doing presently? What might random white citizens be plotting? Still unwilling to concede her part in the misunderstanding, Arnetta persists with her campaign of crying victim. In one remarkable exchange between Arnetta and Octavia, Packer traces the line of Victimology from parent to child, while revealing the girls’ gross insensitivity to their own prejudices about immigrants and children with special needs:

“You know,” Octavia whispered, “why did we have to be stuck at a camp with retarded girls? You know?” “You know why,” Arnetta answered. She narrowed her eyes like a cat. “My mama and I were in the mall in Buckhead, and this white lady just kept looking at us, I mean, like we were foreign or something. Like were from China.” (28)

Must visitors from China expect gawking? Does their difference make them eligible for staring?

Evident from the fact that these girls are familiar with the politically conscious rap music of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Packer dates the story in the early 1980s, a time when the group was most popular. This dating proves significant as it situates the story several years after the heady crisis of the 1960s but still links the girls to
that time through the racial paranoia of their parents. McWhorter could be writing about Laurel’s troop when he asserts that the generation born in the 1970s and 80s “have never remotely known the world that spawned Victimology. Yet its clutches force them to conceive of themselves as victims regardless of their actual experiences” (37). Why must the white woman’s stare, however hurtful, matter so much to Arnetta? Why must it wield so much power that it affects the young girl’s vision of herself, putting her forever on the defensive, splintering her self-image with a relational tie to whiteness?

As the outspoken leaders of Laurel’s troop, Arnetta and Octavia instill a hierarchy among the girls, by giving orders and by singling out some girls as lesser members of the group. Janice figures as a constant target of ridicule because of her “laughable” country accent and “homely” appearance (9). Laurel gets stuck with the nickname “Snot” after an unfortunate incident in the first grade when she “sneezed in class and two long ropes of mucus had splattered a nearby girl” (10). For these high crimes and misdemeanors, Janice and Snot must occupy the group’s outer edge, both routinely told to “shut up.” The other girls Drema, Daphne, and Elsie tend to draw less attention, positive or negative, from Arnetta and Octavia, whose names, incidentally, emphasize their combative and controlling personalities. Taken from an Old German name Arnette, Arnetta means ‘eagle ruler’ while Octavia, the name of ancient royalty, recalls the sister of Roman Emperor Octavius. Signifying on her name and on the story’s theme of racial paranoia, Arnetta tries to crush Laurel’s doubts about fighting Troop 909, saying, “Snot, . . . Don’t think. Just fight” (14). By contrast, Daphne and Laurel’s names recall the Greek myth in which the nymph Daphne escapes Apollo’s unwanted advances by transforming into a laurel tree. True to the myth, Laurel is transforming in Packer’s
story, growing in confidence and finding her own voice apart from Arnetta and Octavia, who demand conformity and obedience. Against Arnetta’s wishes, Laurel begins to speak her thoughts, spurred on by Daphne’s gentle encouragement.

Laurel discovers her voice partly by repeatedly parroting the beautiful last lines of Daphne’s prize winning poem:

    You are my father, the veteran
    When you cry in the dark
    It rains and rains and rains in my heart (6)

Without understanding why, Laurel embraces these words, even whispering the lines to Daphne, to whom she clings during their time at Camp Crescendo. While the other girls flock to Octavia, drawn to her long hair, Laurel hopes to unlock the poem’s mysterious secret. Slowly, Laurel is opening up to the powerful empathy the poem evokes, to the metaphysics of love and compassion, to the possibility of expanding consciousness beyond the confinement of individual experience. On the bus ride home from camp, Laurel looks out the window, momentarily confusing her thoughts with the line of trees flashing by. The metaphysics of this moment pronounce her ability to think abstractly, to envision.

Creating a counter-narrative to the big fight, Daphne and Laurel turn a new page in Packer’s story, their introspection and resistance to blind aggression marking a more productive worldview. After Arnetta’s account of the incident in the mall, Laurel tells a story in which her father tricks a white man, a Mennonite, and his family into painting his porch for free. Laurel recalls her father’s words that now in the retelling pierce her innocence: “He said . . . it was the only time he’d have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free” (30). In the retelling, Laurel recognizes for the first
time that “when you’ve been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it
to others” and that “there was something mean in the world [she] could not stop” (31).
Nudging Laurel toward adolescence, this hard truth also pushes her toward accepting her
own budding empathy. Conversely, Arnetta asks, “why not make them paint the whole
house?” (30). Such a callous question shows young Laurel that cruelty can come from
everywhere, anywhere, or anyone (even from African Americans), but so can kindness,
and so can love. The counter-narrative of love and compassion that Daphne and Laurel
form opposes Arnetta’s vengeful-victim mindset, the dubious gift of the older generation,
in Laurel’s case, her father. Consequently, they constitute a new subjectivity, absent a
victim mentality and the blind, thoughtless opposition that Arnetta, Octavia, and Laurel’s
father present.

To be clear, none of these stories by Packer implies an end to white racism or that
economic determinacy no longer impacts black Americans’ lives. To the contrary, these
fictions advance the understanding of these issues by investigating the extent to which
African Americans contribute to their own diminishment or destruction. These stories
present an essential step toward a total view. Lyneea vacates her teaching post when she
realizes that her inner-city students would never sustain her romantic sense of them or her
self-aggrandizement. At the same time, these students, many of them capable and vitally
intelligent, affirm their feelings of worthlessness with actions that foreclose their futures.
Lyneea and Robert’s decision not to continue in the classroom signifies the mounting
failure of the older generation to scaffold the spiritual and political uplift of younger
black folk. Packer’s stories also confirm that this failure surfaces across economic
boundaries, inside the inner-city and out, in rural spaces and in suburbs, touching the
lives of so-called underachievers, such as Sheba’s classmates, and “go-getters” like Dina and Spurgeon. Arnetta’s vision of herself as a victim, though she would hardly call herself one, keeps her from appreciating kindness or expressing empathy for others; Victimology charts a prohibitive path forward for Arnetta, cribbing her potentiality and perpetuating the cycle of racial distrust.

Truth be told, Daphne and Laurel also face a difficult road ahead; their resistance to group-think and victimhood may continually alienate them from their friends, neighbors, and families. Unlike the heady, noisy pronouncements of the Million Man demonstrators, Daphne and Laurel stage a stealth reformation, in which they listen to people and encourage multiple viewpoints. Unlike some of the demonstrators at the march, Daphne and Laurel turn inward in search of truths accessible by introspection and empathy. But like everyone else, they must safeguard the conviction of their principles, just as the title character does at the end of “Doris Is Coming,” the collection’s bookend story, set in early 1960s Georgia. Walking out of a racially restricted diner, after her one-person sit-in, Doris gains a sense of the hard times ahead for her, announced by the weather, the “cold around her, moving toward dark” (265). Doris breaks curfew to take her stand at the diner, opposing her fear and her parents’ orders to shun Civil Rights demonstrations. Packer’s bookend positioning of these stories speaks to the importance of recognizing struggles, within the race and beyond, struggles among black youth, between generations, against segregationists and bigots, as well as against self-hating, self-defeating Victimologists. Ultimately, the positioning of these stories balances the widely celebrated Civil Rights struggle alongside this newly acknowledged, internal
strife, suggesting the equality of their significance in the lives of their characters and readers.

Something visceral, something denser than the purely intellectual or philosophical permeates Packer’s texts, a kind of urgency that also pierces through the rap song “Self Destruction” and through Dee’s poems. Common to all of these depictions of black self-destruction sounds a reveille for a new visioning of the black self. The last stanza of “Owed to a Funny Man” in which Ruby Dee’s speaker calls for “a new stage” compare powerfully with the final pages of Packer’s “Brownies.” Both the poem and the story imply that effective defiance against any mainstream forces (within and outside the race) requires daring and imagination. Dee’s speaker becomes so breathless with the expectation of uplift that she can hardly complete her thought. The last lines read: “People who died so you could people who died so you / Could people who died so you could. . .” (149-150). The anticipation of the future becomes the completion of an incomplete thought, the word “could” and the ellipses that follow containing a world of possibility and fulfillment denied to so many of the funny man’s predecessors. He can; he could—if only he embraces new opportunities of expression available to him and if only he recognizes the opening up of politics and economics and then work to make the opening greater and more permanent. At the end of “Brownies” Laurel has to gather her courage to speak, even as she fears her story will be unpopular, and even as she is “waiting for Octavia to tell [her] to shut up again” (29). Daphne’s quiet assurance and Laurel’s tentativeness all communicate the stalwartness of their opposition just as the funny man’s audience relishes his performance of self-diminishment and demand its continuance with their laughter and applause. In both poem and story, the flourishing of
a newly imagined black self originates from a sharp, decisive break with such diminishment and from an ever-expanding awareness of history and of the small and large ways history has and has not repeated itself in the present. Dee’s poem, an attempt to catch “the falling sons” of contemporary black culture, captures the trajectory of their fall while also signaling the need for their recovery. Like Dee’s poem, Packer’s fiction celebrates the imagination, that of Laurel and Daphne, even Dina’s. Although Dina’s imagination leads to self-isolation, it also shields her from the corrosive influences of her neighbors and family. Where Dina fails to live up to the promise of her imagination, Doris, Daphne, and Laurel stand a greater chance of doing so. Their openness and courage unlock their consciousness. In all of these cases, the imagination beckons the black subject away from internalizing victimhood toward experiencing self-discovery, expanded consciousness, and wholeness in all of its messiness and occasional magnificence.
Chapter Six
Strange Bedfellows: Randall Kenan Talks Back to the Southern Renaissance

In his book *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*, Gary Richards tackles the controversy surrounding the termination date of the Southern Renaissance. As Richards explains, authors and scholars debate various dates throughout the 1940s and 50s, most agreeing on 1945, 1950, and 1955. At this latest date, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate had stopped publishing poetry and Thomas Wolfe and James Agee had died. According to critic Richard King, William Faulkner had by 1955 exhausted his genius as a novelist, and Robert Penn Warren “never again regained the heights of *All the King’s Men*” which he published in 1946. By King’s estimation, “The apogee had been reached; the Renaissance had become a tradition” (3). Seeing as same sex desire became an increasingly central theme in fiction and plays published after 1955, the issue appears to be one of exclusion, whether to canonize, and, thus, officially acknowledge the art of known and suspected sexual transgressives or, as Gary Richards notes, to preserve the largely patriarchal, hetero-dominant tradition of Southern letters by “quarantining … same sex desire” (19). By hands unforeseen and mostly unwanted, a page in the story of the South had turned. “ Regardless of the specific date,” Richards writes, “the Renaissance is most usually figured to end just as Capote, Goyen, and Williams were establishing their significance and before McCullers was to represent gay desire most explicitly” (19). Among the Agrarian essayists contributing to
Notwithstanding this shift, real or perceived, the Agrarians would not recede into oblivion. While the post-Agrarian work of Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote would, indeed, come to eclipse in popularity the literature of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, if not that of Robert Penn Warren, the border between the Renaissance proper and the period that immediately followed remained a permeable one. For example, representations of a wasted Southern landscape and of a once invincible aristocratic family in swift and conspicuous decline, which recur throughout Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Unvanquished*, reappear in Williams’ most revered play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and to lavish effect in Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Depictions of same-sex desire as coded and closeted prior to 1955 retain much, if not all, of this onus in the post-Renaissance era. However much Agrarian conservatives feared a collapse of their Bible-based ideology, Williams relegates his sexual transgressives to offstage, denying them dialogue and face-to-face contact with the audience. Williams’s sensitive poet types Sebastian Venable from *Suddenly Last Summer* and Allan Grey from *Streetcar* only figure abstractly as topics of monologue and conversation. Most importantly, their sexual disruptiveness initiates their inevitably tragic deaths. In *Visitation*, Kenan centralizes Horace’s mad dance along multiple social margins, but at the height of the teenager’s anguish, he, like Allan and like Skipper from Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, commits suicide. When Horace shoots himself in the head, blighting his face, the portion of the anatomy that most identifies the self, Kenan plainly continues the convention of the outcast’s foreseeable demise, a
pattern by no means exclusive to Southern literature but nonetheless integral to much of its output at mid-century and beyond. Permeating all rifts—Renaissance and post-Renaissance, mid-century and contemporary—the braided themes of repression and tragic death hold an almost implacable sway in the fictional lives of the so-called perverse.

While the theme of repression is certainly not unique to the South, its authors hold distinction in the profound ways they delimit its political and social fixedness, documenting an ever-present desire in Southern culture to protect and preserve status or to conform to the dictates of social respectability. These writers are no less observant of the high psychological toll that the struggle for respectability can place on people. As literary forebears of Kenan’s work, Capote, McCullers, and Williams provide various precedents for Horace’s failure to meet the terms and expectations of his community. These writers also foreground Kenan’s treatment of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, as both tropes place Horace’s demonic possession within the larger, regional narrative of psychic distortion and as the inevitable outcome of a life framed by self-negation. Either way, we are able to read Horace alongside Randolph from Other Voices, Other Rooms or Sherman Pew, the tragic objet d’amour in McCullers’s Clock Without Hands. None of the men in the earlier fiction can claim demonic possession, but each character, including Horace, occupies intolerant spaces, their taboo desire redoubled through interracial contact, and all three characters develop self-destructive tendencies in coping with their repression. The tragedy of Sherman and Horace’s stories does not begin and end with the fatalism of the grave, but, like Randolph, with a foreclosure of their sexual independence and being, each figure contained and warped by the racial and sexual constraints of his
respective Southern setting.

While Gary Richards and Suzanne Jones mention Kenan’s revision of Faulkner’s intergenerational conflicts, critics generally overlook the wider scope of Kenan’s exchange with mid-century Southern literature. Without turning a blind eye to the hierarchical structures which have long informed race relations in the South, Kenan’s significations queer the binary of Southern white supremacy and black subjugation by examining how queer desire, communicated across the color line, undermines persistent modes of racial separateness still in operation long after formalized processes of the law to integrate a racially separatist society. To claim that *A Visitation of Spirits* reinvents the Southern Renaissance may be a slight overstatement. Yet, as Kenan’s novel forcefully engages many key themes and aesthetics prevalent at the mid-century mark, the author shows his willingness to delve headlong into the schism of the mid-century Southern canon, to coalesce as much as divide through parody and mimesis the interests of Agrarians and non-Agrarians alike. In the end, Kenan takes his stand in an array of poses for and against the Agrarians’ contempt for industry, urbanization, and the increase of scientific intervention in raising and harvesting crops. Much of Kenan’s prose vibrates with the Agrarian’s remembrance of rural customs as a curative of what ails modern, disillusioned sensibilities. The degree to which Kenan’s vibrations induce nostalgia, critique, or a hybrid formation of these two elements establishes the basis for my inquiry here.

The summer play, a musical performed at the Crosstown Theater, where Horace interns, comprises much of Kenan’s signification on Southern letters, his prose combining burlesque and serious commentary. Penned by Philip Cross, Horace’s distant
white cousin, the musical rehearses the literary glamour and romance of the Confederacy during the tumult of the Civil War. The poster heralding the play’s arrival trumpets a campy, gauzy vision of the Cross’ Scots-Irish lineage:

RIDE THE FREEDOM STAR
A Musical
The saga of an American Family …
through the trials and hardship through birth and death
through the tumults and tribulations of love …

(210)

Recalling the strategic absenting of black subjects in works like Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel Gone with the Wind, Philip’s play “tried to create a picture of domestic bliss for the house slaves and of jolly camaraderie for the field workers” (213). Kenan’s narrator all but clenches the connection between Ride the Freedom Star and Mitchell’s tome:

“Despite the interjection of a speech here or there that reflected the hard life of the slaves, the blacks were mainly there for buffoonery and hijinks that brought laughs and chuckles from the audience” (213-14). Even without the actual dialogue of the play copied and inserted into Kenan’s text, readers can easily transpose Philip’s characters the portrayals of Mammy, Prissy, and Big Sam in book and film. At the same time, white characters fare little better, their “clumsy and dull” dialogue separated by “long static passages of fathers patriotically extolling the virtues of riding off into battle; of mothers enumerating the travails of the Civil War-torn plantation system” (213).

Hence a sample of Kenan’s serious commentary. Despite the unspecified allusion to Mitchell, the prose reads straightforward, as dismissive as a would-be review in the Tims Creek Times. Clearly, in his indictment of the plantation myth, Kenan favors cogency over complexity. Compared to his more fanciful tableaux, not least Horace’s
doppelganger or the sudden appearance of a Masai warrior on a dark, empty North Carolina highway, the play’s description comes up short. But even if these descriptions reflect the banality of their subject—itself a compelling rhetorical strategy—they do not entirely lack the sting of irony. Contrary to the shared will of the playwright and the audience to affirm a romantic, hetero-dominant view of the plantation, Horace soon discovers that the cast consists mostly of gay men, many of whom are engaged in illicit affairs with each other. Similar to the antebellum house, the actors’ residence, “renovated to appear [as] an old Southern mansion with its gothic heights and columns and corners” (226) sets the stage for repeating the sexual subversion Horace and Antonio enact at their abandoned antebellum hideaway.

Like any formation of the closet, the Crosstown theater and the actors’ residence manifest two highly contested spaces. As othered bodies, the actors, many of them non-Southerners, present an alterity which offstage proves as destructive as it is cathartic. Onstage, their very presence, contrary to their scripted performance, defies the play’s rigid gender, racial, and sexual overtones, which long defined the South’s chivalric code and the Agrarian’s feudalist disposition. True, Philip’s musical preserves the myth of chivalry, replicating it with only a few alterations to its 1930s incarnations, and the actors give audiences what they long to see, but the effect is that of an ossified fairy tale, accessible through stage work only or by some other clunky contrivance. But while some of the actors express their disdain of the play—Antonio calls it “shit” (224)—their artistic grievance comes to little else besides, the promise of their talent further cut by a foreshadowing of the AIDS pandemic. Referring to the cast party as a “literal orgy,” Kenan employs Gothic rhetoric to parody the players’ forbidden and ferocious passion,
describing “[t]he strange inevitability of it, for, in a way—like witches in a coven under a
full moon, like wild wolves tearing hungrily at one another’s flesh …they were left to this
for expression, this for comfort, this for attention, this for love” (230). The narrator’s
modulation in tone from Gothic to mock-Biblical, when comparing the lovers to “hogs
wallowing in their own excrement and sin” (230), denotes the short-sightedness of two
diametrically opposed subjects—devout Christians and free-loving homosexuals. These
images also repurpose Kenan’s sex and violence slippage from encoding the erotic
subtext of lynching (which I discussed earlier) to foreshadowing sex as an unintentional
act of self-destruction. By the summer of 1983, the time of the Bacchanal, HIV infection
rates were already escalating, and the specter of what was initially called the gay man’s
cancer had already begun to cast its shadow over the world. While never mentioning
AIDS outright, Kenan’s narrator shrewdly intersects the image of the orgy with that of a
cemetery, onto which the party ominously spills.

While many critics focus on Horace’s individual despondency in the graveyard,
Robert McRuer, for one, pointing out Kenan’s signification on Ebenezer Scrooge’s
encounter with his own tombstone, I would emphasize the parallel Kenan builds between
the play and the players, if only to draw out the novel’s intimation at their shared
destructiveness. To suggest that the partiers turn to excess and “decadence” in response
to an absenting of their sexual selves on the stage would be too simple a claim; however,
to underestimate the impact of social invisibility on an already stigmatized minority may
be no less reductive. Either way, the scene cleverly supersedes the limits of victim logic,
solemnly overlapping the futility of the plantation myth with the reckless promiscuity of
the stage players, who in the wake of their revelries “were left only tired and stoned and
dirty and smelly and empty. This memory lodged itself in [Horace’s] soul like an unmelting, unmeltable sliver of ice” (231). Looming over in these presentiments of disaster is a sense of grief and foreclosure. Other than a path of dead ends, neither a glamorized past nor a lascivious present has much to offer Horace’s quest for self-acceptance, and bound by his inability to imagine an alternative social space beyond these, or that of his church, neighborhood, and school, he comes to the dark edge of suicidal thoughts. What, ultimately, the scene in the graveyard laments is a stasis of imagination, the stark symbolism of the stones interpolating this fatalistic lack in Horace’s troubled mind and the theater actors as well as the region’s worn out, clichéd caricature of itself.

In all the ways to read Kenan’s notice of Southern Renaissance themes, the novel’s pastiche disallows any singular analytical agenda. As quickly as the text evokes a sympathetic engagement with past writing, it gives way to satire, none more absurd than at the beginning of the theater episode, wherein Horace’s demon-guide appears as a buffalo with the voice and manner of a Southern belle named Veronica: “Picture a buffalo standing in the middle of the stage. Picture it wearing a white dress, simple, almost plain, not too many frills, but decidedly expensive. Picture it wearing gold spectacles and a yellow hat with green and white flowers” (209). If not for her beastly exterior, Veronica, daintily sipping tea and bemoaning an outbreak of bad manners, would resemble any number of belle-types who fill the pages of mid-century writing. Kenan’s dissolution of the Renaissance’s splinter in this instance ghoulishly magnifies far gentler parodies by Lillian Smith, Lillian Hellman, and Eudora Welty, whose subtle and probing portraits of white womanhood often debunk the simpering icon made so popular
by Mitchell’s novel and Selzick’s film. Where in the literature of Welty, Tennessee Williams, and Flannery O’Connor white women retain fine manners as a badge of their virtue—tragically so in Williams’s *Streetcar* and in much of O’Connor’s acerbic fiction—Kenan pushes his parody to its postmodern edge, transforming the belle into a wild beast, her literal placement onstage heightening the idea of her social performance.

Comparing the remarks of two Southern belles, Kenan’s Veronica and Williams’s Blanche from *Streetcar* will, I believe, reveal the sharpness of Kenan’s signification:

> But really, Horace, people can be so crass. … I’m afraid people have lost manners and politeness. They abide by no rules. *(Visitation 209)*

> I can’t stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action. *(Williams, qtd. in Norton 1817)*

Blanche’s delicateness, whether sincere or affected, relays the vestiges of her bygone pedestal as well as her displacement in a modern, hostile world. Fantastically *displaced* in the form of a wild animal, the belle in Kenan’s novel chatters and preens, less a creature of grace than a carnival entertainment, a sideshow freak. In lampooning the belle, Kenan is really attacking “the rules” Veronica venerates; he is really attacking the socially divisions put up between men and women, blacks and whites, gays and sexual others, their enforced separateness appearing as collapsible now as the antebellum house.

Apart from the theater episode, Kenan is far more ambivalent in his treatment of Southern Renaissance themes, in both the Agrarian and post-Agrarian periods. In *ADVENT* and *REQUIEM FOR TOBACCO*, two sections which serve as bookends to the novel, the narrator grieves the loss of rural norms. Robert McRuer convincingly argues that the hog killing ritual depicted in *ADVENT* avers Horace’s suicide as an inexorable sacrifice meant to protect a “sort of (heterosexual) pastoral wholeness” within
the black community “through disavowal or elimination of some of its members” (92).

What critics usually overlook, however, is the weight of the novel’s historical context or its textual interplay with Agrarian ideology. Recounting the planting, raising, harvesting, curing, and storing of North Carolina’s principal cash crop, REQUIEM FOR TOBACCO rehearses the presumptive rhetoric of the ADVENT section, but now with added urgency, even pointing to literary publications—possibly those of the Southern Renaissance—as a resource for or replacement of the reader’s cultural memory: “Didn’t you see it in a play, or read it in a book” (256). Echoing the complaints of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and other writers prominent during the 1930s, REQUIEM fingers an industrialized modernity as the chief culprit for the South’s cultural shift and expiration of memory. As part and parcel of this modernity, large, faceless corporations make a science of raising crops and reaping profits: “[t]he many who are concerned with yields and overheads and tax write-offs. The many who introduce the chemicals, the new super seeds, the superior fertilizer” (257). Figured as invaders of the bucolic South, these scientists/businessmen wrest workers from the land, “replac[ing] … brown hands and sweaty brows and aching backs with the clacking metal and durable rubber of a harvester that needs no men” (257). Referring, though obliquely, to the advent of transnational corporations and governmental lobbies, John Crowe Ranson’s Introduction to I’ll Take My Stand lays down a thematic blueprint for Kenan’s REQUIEM, the essay in retrospect reading like prophecy when compared to the industrial aftermath Kenan inscribes in REQUIEM. In the Introduction, Ranson worries that “labor as one of the happy functions of human life has in effect been abandoned, and is practiced solely for its rewards” (xlv). In the new, commercialized South, labor loses its purpose and communities forego a feeling of wholeness, so that
now no one in Tims Creek, for example, remembers “the day Hiram Crum was kicked in the head by that old mule they called Lightening” (*Visitation* 257).

Admitting the South’s indulgence in mythology, though only to fortify his determination in looking backward, Ransom writes, “The Southern tradition came to look rather pitiable in its persistence when the twentieth century had arrived. … In the country districts … great numbers of those broken-down Southerners are still to be seen, in patched blue jeans, sitting on ancestral fences, shotguns across their laps and hound-dogs at their feet” (“Reconstructed but Unregenerate” 16). Kenan’s narrator, I contend, also plays with myths, etching a legendary landscape, not unlike Philip Cross, though without the glamour, the romance, or the historical inaccuracy, which undermine the play’s potential to recollect the past. The difference lies in Kenan’s inclusiveness; coupled with his plea to remember is the understanding that some stories have never been told, that some stories have been stifled into forgetfulness. How ironic, still, given the political disparities between Kenan’s subjectivity and that of white Agrarians, to consider the similarities between the opening lines of Allen Tate’s most famous poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead” and Kenan’s *REQUIEM*. Tate’s poem begins:

Row after row with strict impunity  
The headstones yield their names to the element,  
The wind whirrs without recollection  

(1-3)

Where the soldiers in Tate’s ode die a second death, lost to time “without recollection,” so too are the labors of black farmers, fieldworkers, and domestics, their works bartered away by machinery and fleeting memory. As Susan Donaldson and others have noted, Tate’s “Ode” epitomizes the Agrarians’ commitment to preserving white patriarchy against a rising tide of national interest in Harlem Renaissance writers. For at least one
Agrarian, Donald Davidson, professional envy plainly coincided with racial prejudice, as when he complained to colleague John Gould Fletcher that publishers favored “the trivial verses of negroes like Langston Hughes because niggers are a metropolitan fashion” (xxviii). Importantly, by the late 1940s, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren had begun to rue “the logical line of continuity between Agrarian politics and Davidson’s espousal of segregation and white supremacy” (Donaldson xxxi).

The agrarian perspective Kenan offers breaks literary ground, embracing the life experiences of the queer black other, generally excluded by 1930s provincialism. People who can remember can speak “of the day [when] Henry Perry took Lena Wilson behind the cottonwood tree and stole pleasure there” (Visitation 257), but what stories abound of Henry and John, or of Angela and Alice, behind the cottonwood? Without the author’s written intervention, Horace’s story may, indeed, be lost. To counteract this absenting, Horace asserts in his Confessions the fullness of his life, including his vivid recollection of his grandparents killing fowl, how once he wrung a chicken’s neck and plucked another’s feathers. The similarity between his disposition and Agrarian ideals vis à vis his literary intellectualism and love of leisurely pursuits accentuates his predetermined break with these ideals, obviously because of his racial and sexual identity but also because of his ardent interest in Physics. Nevertheless, Horace maintains a fierce devotion to the Southern landscape, a core principle of Agrarian philosophy. His decision to shape-shift into a bird indigenous to the state complements his reluctance to see “himself as anything that would not fit the swampy woodlands of Southeastern North Carolina. He had to stay here” (11). Thrilled by the prospects of transfiguration, Horace foresees a change in his affiliation with the land, anticipating the hours he would “dip and
swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he had slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years. … No longer would he be bound by human law and human rules that he had constantly tripped over and frowned at” (12). By mimicking, defying, and fantastically deforming Agrarian concepts, Horace Signifies on longstanding notions of blackness, whiteness, and Southern identity.

Horace’s changes are immense, in part because of his willingness to look indiscriminately at all aspects of Tims Creek society—the Southern belle, the Northern interloper, the poor, the wealthy, old timers, and teenagers. Perhaps the riskiest adaptation of his gaze involves instances of queer, interracial attraction. When Horace stares with amorous affection at white men, which he does without disparagement of his own color or the color of other black men, he revises the rules about looking in the South and asserts a new paradigm where desire defies historical constraints and myopic cultural discourses. First, Horace’s wandering eye disrupts the historical binary of black as victim and white as oppressor. Secondly, Horace recontextualizes the otherness of race, in effect upsetting expectations of blackness as fixed objects of fetish and difference. Overall, Horace’s capacity to look across the color line challenges the hegemony of the gay white male gaze, reified in salient passages of Southern Renaissance literature.

Extrapolating on Florence King’s wry and wise argument that white adolescent boys in mid-century novels tend to come of age after witnessing random acts of sodomy, fellatio, and, in Randolph Skully’s case, seeing “a black named Raoul staring at a dead fish” (184), Gary Richards argues that white sexual otherness often receives its initiation through the other taboo of interracial attraction. These youths generally perceive black men as little more than a summation of their bodies, figuring as focal points of their
sexual imagination or as social protest. In reading Jester’s attraction to Sherman in McCullers’s 1961 novel *Clock Without Hands*, Richards draws several credible conclusions: that Jester eroticizes Sherman’s blackness, that his desire is partly borne out of his rebellion against the segregationist views of his virulently racist grandfather, and that his lust for Sherman conveys a “wish to exact revenge or punishment through social transgression” (197).

But apart from Richards’s interrogation of gay white male characters in mid-century Southern fiction, I want to highlight how non-white characters, whose sexual murkiness and indeterminacy rest on the more explicit desires of white protagonists, contrast with Kenan’s handling of the relationship between white and non-white queer subjects. In *Other Voices*, Capote (through Randolph) encases Keg, a one-time servant at Skully’s Landing, in a *black as body* stereotype, describing him as “a strapping young buck” and “feeble-minded” (77, 78). Keg definitely plays the role assigned him. After he is sentenced to a chain gang for attacking his wife, Keg’s absence from Skully Landing magnifies Randolph’s fantasy of him, creating for Randolph an abstracted body of an inexplicable mystery. To this effect, Randolph likens Keg to a Chinese chest, “the sort, you remember, that opens into a second box, another, still another, until at length you come upon the last … the latch is touched, the lid springs open to reveal … what unsuspected cache?” (78).

A similar mystique envelops Sherman’s character in McCullers’s *Clock Without Hands*, Jester’s view of him permeated by a haze of jazz music which, reverberating siren-like in the night air, lures Jester to Sherman’s doorstep for the first time. Running to the house behind his grandfather’s property line to “where Negroes lived,” Jester
“trembled, [t]he music still throb[ing] in his body” (40). Fixated on Sherman’s unusual beauty, his exotic blue eyes and his “dark and sullen face” (40), Jester finds Sherman’s aloofness an appropriately punitive response to his white privilege. Jester never truly breaks through this enchantment, or his own masochism, in part due to Sherman’s preoccupation with rage and protest, prohibiting any development of genuine affection between the men. Besides the eroticized mystery Jester makes of him, Sherman hardly seems flesh and blood, thought and feeling, his sexuality largely unresolved. More than anything else, he becomes a self-righteous symbol of black 1960s resistance, a martyr to the movement.

Kenan’s prospects in satirizing these mid-century figures are plentiful but possibly too easy pickings for his creative powers. Literary matters rarely read as linear or as one-sided as political correctness would otherwise prescribe. Similar, then, to Kenan’s multifaceted position in redressing the Agrarian’s view on agriculture, his homoerotic gaze articulates a contradictory range of tactics, from mimicry and complicity to critique and reversal. What compels this satire is its recognition of what is worthwhile or attractive in the original texts in addition to what rings false and unattractive. And so, while many scenes in mid-century fiction position the non-white body as an object and, thus, affirm the hegemonic view of queer white men, they also posit powerful subversions of heteronormativity, irrespective of race.

No tentative privileging of sexuality over race can begin to overcome the indeterminacy of critical analysis which surrounds this reallocation of priorities. Nor should it be any less vexed than Kobena Mercer’s viewing of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black male nudes. Mercer’s project *Welcome to the Jungle* offers an
effective model in analyzing Kenan’s conditional use of the homoerotic gaze. “I am now involved in a partial revision of arguments made in the earlier reading of Mapplethorpe’s work,” Mercer writes:

I should say I still cannot make up my mind about Mapplethorpe. … I am much more aware of how ambivalence cuts both ways. I therefore want to suggest an approach to ambivalence, not as something that occurs “inside” the text…but as a complex “structure of feeling” experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers—in relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific. (189)

Years ago, when race relations in the South inhered a stringent hierarchy of power, the imperial white eye could look with relative impunity, a reality well documented in the stories by James Baldwin and Richard Wright. When Mercer at last admits he has harbored some of the same kinds of fantasies depicted in Mapplethorpe’s glosses (Welcome to the Jungle 193), his comments expose a seismic shift in the intersection of racial and sexual politics wherein racial concerns are apt to displace issues of gender and sexuality. For any and all post-apartheid generations, striving to define, redefine, totalize, and dispute notions of blackness, a mosaic model would inevitably replace the monolithic one as a viable means to racial identification. Consequently, the presumptive role of victim falls sharply into question, while racial critique is subject to a confluence of contexts, each case separate and unique.

To acknowledge same-sex desire as a leveling power against the precedence of race is to challenge the “good intentions” of the liberal, humanist critic who might dismiss the representations by McCullers and Capote as purely reductive and exploitative. Where before the white boy generally gazes at the black boy, the black boy now looks back, or in some instances, the black boy looks—but without encouragement or reciprocation. Throughout the three specified instances in which Horace looks across
the racial divide—at Edward Gordon, Antonio Santangelo, and Rick Peters, “a huge blond” football player (161)—Zeke’s racialized fears threaten to eclipse his grandson’s desire. Like Rick, Edward is blond haired but with “English bone structure … so flawless he was almost boring” (216). Ironically, Horace develops an attraction to Rick while he is trying to follow Zeke’s manly example, but unlike a youthful Zeke who stands up in defiance of Jim Crow law, Horace turns in this instance toward whiteness, away from his black friends, particularly Gideon, his first crush, whose “very stance smelled of sex to Horace” (162). Unlike Zeke, Horace sees whiteness as safe, conventional, proper, that is until his feelings for Rick drive him to distraction: “Horace was pondering his feeling about Rick, telling himself that the sensation he felt in his stomach was camaraderie not attraction, admiration not lust” (161). Here Kenan topples the facile conception of whiteness as universally bland and banal, telegraphing onto Rick’s athletic build and blond hair the kind of mystique one finds in the objectification of black bodies in mid-century Southern literature. To further this turnaround, Rick, like black male objects of desire, shows no awareness of Horace’s affection, much less mutuality of feeling.

Not so with Antonio. When Antonio approaches Horace at the theater and declares his sexual interest, little time elapses before the two consummate their lust. Their reciprocated desire breaks the mid-century mold in which the would-be lover looks but never touches, a scenario epitomized by Randolph’s frustrated lust for prizefighter Pepe Alvarez on whom he dotes, buying him “cream colored hats and gold bracelets (which he adored and wore like a woman), [and] shoes in bright Negro colors” (Other Voices, Other Rooms 148). While nothing physical comes of Randolph’s lust, he exacts
his will all the same by turning Pepe into his dress-up doll, the material possessions accentuating his exotic difference, his face “brutal, yet boyish, foreign but familiar” (148). One night, Pepe’s inevitably animal nature outs itself: he attacks Randolph, strikes Delores, Randolph’s supposed girlfriend, and just to add insult to injury, “piss[es] on the rug and on [Randolph’s] paintings” (149). That Pepe’s behavior seems to predispose Antonio’s “bullish, unthinking way” (Visitation 222), Kenan does little to dispel the stereotype of the Latin love interest as brutish and crass, however muted the portrayal relative to Capote’s. To be sure, both Pepe and Antonio figure as essentialized objects in the amorous eyes of their admirers, only now the subject position of the lovers has shifted from white to African American: Horace is no unsuspecting player in the white man’s game, and while he does not immediately grasp the historical implications of his affair with Antonio (which I discussed in Chapter Three), he enters the relationship with the sole intention to have his share of “forbidden fruit” (224).

In his portrayal of Everett Church Harrington IV, Kenan quite possibly wields his finest, subtlest signification on mid-century black queer formation. Everett mirrors and reverses many of the tropes that dominate black (gay) subjects in earlier Southern writing: his most obvious difference lies in the absence of an Oriental mystique. Nor is his presence on the page tragic; nor does he stand in as a pathetic pawn for unsolicited white attention; nor does he make any attempt to conceal his sexuality (except onstage), and unlike Keg, Sherman, and Pepe, Everett’s orientation is hardly a point of conjecture. Such a revelation of openness might inspire Horace to expect a greater shift in the sexual mores of his town, but he realizes all too well that the actors play a transitory role in Tims Creek’s days. Possibly, this realization is what triggers Horace’s feelings of envy, hate,
and unfulfilled longing, which develop at first sight of Everett, long before Everett emphatically rebuffs Horace’s declaration of love for him. Horace both resents and admires Everett’s freedom, the kind of agency and entitlement he usually reserves for white boys such his high school friends. While defying mid-century stereotypes and Horace’s narrow definitions of blackness, Everett does fulfill at least two conventions of earlier writing, first his desirability, stemming not merely from his beauty but from a sense of his geographic displacement, in this case his Northern upbringing in a prominent and wealthy family. In this regard, Everett strikes Horace as exotic, as someone “foreign but familiar.” Finally, as an *objet d’amour*, Everett effects a proud—if not arrogant—disposition, fortifying his stature as unattainable, a trait richly inscribed by Kenan’s predecessors.

If Everett Harrington, in spite of his tropic links to the past, signals a new phase in queer black formation, unlimited by class or geography, then Kenan’s portrayal of Raymond Brown in the story “Run, Mourner, Run” furthers this index of cultural transformation, although not without significant concessions to the trenchant power of the closet. Also, Raymond’s refusal to sell his family’s land to a conniving textile owner, Percy Terrell, clearly places Raymond in partial sympathy with Agrarian ideals. In the story, Percy hires Dean Williams to seduce Raymond so that he can take snapshots of the encounter and thus gain leverage over his rival. Eventually, Raymond succumbs to the fear of public scandal, but more important than this showdown between black and white masculinity—a recurrent motif in *A Visitation of Spirits*—the short story relays a cross perspective of the changing South—a pastoral fairyland mowed over by an industrial nightmare. At the time “soybean fields,” “brittle-colored” trees, and a dusk-red sky (164)
nurture Dean’s dreamy disposition, Raymond turns his family’s inheritance of meadows and forests into a gay refuge, a world apart from the responsibilities of his young children and religious wife. The other South, a clattering blight of textiles and mills, reflects Percy Terrell’s Machiavellian quest for racial, economic, and sexual domination. When enlisting Dean’s help, Percy argues, “Niggers shouldn’t own anything as pretty as Chitaqua Pond,” but later when Dean demands his reward, Percy dismisses him as nothing more than “a pathetic white trash faggot whore” (166, 187).

Kenan’s repositioning of queer desire within Agrarian sensibilities radically reorients Southern subjectivity, making strange bedfellows of all parties involved. Despite their racial, social, and economic differences, Dean and Raymond (much like Horace) share an intense reverence for the land of their birth. Dean finds solace in the revolution of the seasons, observing the proper turn of events: “Dean sits in a tire. … Watching smoke rising off in the distance a ways. Someone burning a field maybe. But it’s the wrong time of year. People are still harvesting corn” (169). Likewise, Ray takes pride in his great-grandfather’s homestead skills, specifically his love of hunting. At the same time, however, both Ray and Dean are bound in by the religious and patriarchal restraints endemic to the bucolic South. Raymond claims to love his wife but thinks her “blinded” to the reality of his sexuality by her Holy Ghost religious fervor (174). Dean, a ninth grade drop-out, can only dream of careers in law and medicine. He spends most of his days reciting nursery rhymes and storybook tales. Dean accepts Percy’s offer of money and promotion to foreman at the textile out of a fierce desperation to escape his place on the mill line: “He hated the line. Hated the noise and the dust and the smell. But he hated the monotony and the din even more” (171). Dean’s failure to recoup his
reward signals his economic and social determinacy. Remarkably, Raymond’s mantra “Some things you just let happen” closely echoes the narrator’s comment in REQUIEM FOR TOBACCO: “Oh, but it was bound to happen. You realize this, don’t you?” (Visitation 257). These two voices, in the short story and in the novel, reverberate with a keen note of resignation, both recognizing their incapacity to prevent the certainty of change.

Change also happens with Kenan’s reassignment of power in the story’s representation of interracial queer desire and economic status. In Southern Renaissance literature, gay white men enjoy a perch of economic privilege, while non-white subjects must parlay their sensual wiles into material comforts. (Obviously, Randolph, Jester, and Sebastian Venable from Suddenly, Last Summer make up the list of the privileged ones). In “Run, Mourner, Run,” Kenan shines a harsh light on the crudeness of this power-sex dynamic with allusions to Ray’s wealth and with more than one reference to Dean as a “white-trash whore.” Dean himself internalizes the designation: “What else did he have to trade on but his looks?” After all, “[a] man once told him: Boy, you got eyes that could give a bull a hard-on. Why not use them?” (170). With this narrative logic locked in place, one might expect Dean to figure solely as the object of desire, but the intervention of race adds nuance to these matters in that Dean consciously retains some vestige of racial supremacy which surfaces at the bitter end of his affair with Ray. At this moment, Dean tries to “to dredge up every nigger, jungle bunny … sambo insult he could muster” (183).

That Dean cannot speak these words indicates at least one more complexity in this already destabilized arrangement of race, sex, and class. Narrating the story empathically
from Dean’s point-of-view, Kenan’s appropriation of the white gaze sketches the youth’s transformative perspective on gay black bodies, his newfound vision marking a decisive break from the short-sightedness of mid-century white characters. Upon accepting Percy’s proposition, Dean struggles to make sense of Raymond, who at first sight does not appear broken like other black men in town and whose image does not comply with his fleeting memory of the one other sexual experience he has had with a black man. Initially focused on Raymond’s striking appearance and proud demeanor, his “skin the color of something whipped, blended, and rich” and his stroll like that of “a minister’s majesty” (170), Dean in time develops genuine affection for Raymond, their affair amassing unexpected dimensions. When the conspiracy comes to light and Raymond orders Dean out of his house, Dean stumbles forward with guilt and regret: “he wanted to relearn hate, fiery, blunt, brutal” (183). To no avail. Not by sex alone but through intimate conversation does Ray become a whole human being to Dean, as Dean for Ray. In the broader context, Ray greatly differs from Sherman’s silent, brooding martyrdom, nor does he conform to the mysterious brute that Capote makes of Keg and Pepe. The trope of the objet d’amour, so long a staple in Southern literature since the Renaissance, is at last shattered.

Offering more than a compilation of homage and critique, however, Kenan’s imagination attracts attention in part because of its unruly, contradictory, often supernatural engagement with myth, history, and the brutal consequences of sexual repression. The narrative perspective moves forward, backward, forward again, overlapping past and present epochs, creating truths out of their contrasts. In the title story of the collection Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, also set in Tims Creek, the
presence of the resurrected, summoned from their graves by a maniacal preacher, presents a Gothic revision of the town’s historical record of a political uprising. Dates and events give way to an agitation of lore, memory, and repressed knowledge. Fractured, unfixed, in constant argument with itself, the story presents a mutable oral history, coming out piecemeal through a cluster of texts, one interrupting and intruding upon the other like a pile of tectonic plates.

So far, critics tend to draw connections between Kenan and other African American, usually contemporary, writers, and while this discourse offers piercing insights into Kenan’s contributions to the black literary canon, the results can be somewhat limiting. In my analysis of Kenan’s interpenetration of race, region, and same-sex desire, I have tried to uncover the cultural hybridity of his fiction, its rich resonances with a vast array of work by Southern writers—black, white, contemporary and mid-century. Within the crossfire of sexual absenting and traumatic memory, Kenan’s fiction makes for strange bedfellows with Southern literature spanning the twentieth century. In A Visitation of Spirits, the trauma of the older generation of African Americans is reborn in Horace’s body, literally in his capacity to draw whiteness back into their separatist lives, in his ability to excavate the bad old days, and to rearticulate them in what for him degenerates into a veritable funhouse of romance, horror, rage, and violent reprisal. Not unlike Horace’s fraught connection with his forebears, Kenan’s relationship, specifically with the Southern Renaissance, spins new connective threads, including a tentative seam along the Agrarian/post-Agrarian rift. Drawing antecedents from either side of the splinter, Kenan’s fiction avers the permeability of cultural philosophy and aesthetics
while forging one of the most unlikely—and combative—literary partnerships in Southern literary discourse.
Relative to the critical success of Alice Walker’s earlier novels, especially *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, the writer’s more recent efforts in the genre have met with far less enthusiasm, in some instances with derisive scorn and indifference. Finding fault with virtually every aspect of Walker’s 2004 novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review excoriates the book’s embrace of New Age spirituality and feminism. Compared to Celie’s clearly defined battles against a domineering father and tyrannical husband in *The Color Purple*, the search for psychic wholeness in Walker’s latest novel, Kakutani argues, offers nothing more than “a remarkably awful compendium of inanities” (x). While this review and other ones like it fail to grapple with the shifts in Walker’s distinctly black, womanist, and Southern voice, literary scholarship has fared only slightly better in capturing the praxis and tenor of Walker’s new focus. Agnieszka Lobodziec’s essay “Alice Walker’s *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* as a Womanist Novel,” for example, limits the text largely to the confines of Walker’s womanist principles, which certainly illuminate the portrayal of womanly bonding in the novel but only at the cost of ignoring its exploration of trans-American/trans-Pacific sensibilities. In mapping out these transcultural movements, Walker builds an
alternative fiction to the narrative contours of black female victimization, occurring above and below the Mason Dixon line. The would-be victims in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* are fairly minor characters, leaving the main account to Kate Nelson, whose story of adventure and introspection supersedes the racist and sexist forces that so often inhibit the lives of Walker’s heroines.

By not repeating a centralized narrative of black female subjugation, by daring to center her novel on a woman looking to honor the memory of her ancestors without bearing the burden of their suffering, Walker charts new and much needed territory in the narratives of Southern black women. Kate’s willingness to traverse the continent and brave the hot peril of an Amazonian rainforest imbues her character with vitality and agency rarely envisioned for black women in Southern literature. Global and regional in scope, Kate’s quest for psychic renewal provokes a confrontation between the American South and the Amazon, one that both intensifies and diminishes the significance of the cultural border. Theorist Robert Walter’s observation that “transculturization accounts for the local and global […] interplay of difference and sameness” stresses the dynamism generated at the border where histories and distinct systems of cultural production resist “being dissolved into each other” (238). Instead of conflating or dissolving the South’s past into that of Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Aborigines, Alice Walker’s book builds a crucial juxtaposition of histories, a forum on world culture. Presented in flashback and memory, Walker’s American South reveals a transmuted site of ancestral beginnings, cultural shift, and literary inspiration.
In no way does the novel’s preoccupation with world travel indicate an end to Walker’s appeal for greater gender equality and racial health, crucial hallmarks of her writing; on the contrary, the book represents a renewed emphasis on these issues but now with input from Native American cultures. In addition to Walker’s previous novels—the massive *The Temple of My Familiar* and more recently *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, which moves from the American Southwest into Mexico—*Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* reverses the motif of looking solely to Africa for ancestral guidance and inspiration, a pattern typified by Nettie’s absorption of Olinka culture in *The Color Purple* and by Wangero’s adoption of Afrocentric identity in “Everyday Use.” The directional shift in Walker’s literary travels also disrupts the transatlantic pattern established by other black Southern writers. Richard Wright’s essay “I Choose Exile,” for instance, details his frustrations with race relations in the United States and his decision to emigrate to France in the late 1940s. Published thirty years later, Maya Angelou’s memoir *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* records her misgivings about leaving Ghana to return to the Deep South of her childhood to participate in the ongoing Civil Rights movement. Walker’s new itinerary also contrasts the cross-Atlantic destinations of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin, who routinely transcribed their international experiences into stirring diatribes on race, class, and exile. Since the time of legalized segregation, Civil Rights, and the Black Arts Movement when a commitment to “black power” basically meant a negation of most things European, the motives for black exile have variously altered. Balancing the political critique of earlier expatriates with her present quest for indigenous spirituality, Walker’s journeys resonate with the previous tradition of
translating escape into literary protest; nevertheless, the directional shift in her travels also signifies her embrace of “Native America” as a geographic foundation of her identity, an important truth for Walker, whose letters, essays, and speeches constantly stress the African, Native American, and European facets of her lineage. Viewing the author’s travels as a colorful textile of newly formed “trans-cultures,” spanning regional and national borders, Roland Walter describes the development of international identity as a “fractal” process, one that continues to impact the “imaginaire of all peoples throughout the Americas” (233). As evident by her poems, essays, and novels, Alice Walker’s borderland imagination begins with her acknowledgment of her indigenous ancestry, which perhaps gives her the license and the incentive to cross over into the lives of indigenous civilizations populating the Western Hemisphere.

As part of New Southern Studies, established by Trudier Harris, Tara McPherson, Riché Richardson, Houston Baker and others, my discussion explores the crosscurrents of race, geography, and history, locating the American South as a seminal space for African Americans, a space of American cultural beginnings as well as unresolved fear and anguish. More specifically, my argument pushes at the edges of Thadious Davis’s acknowledgement of Walker’s Southern and Latin American juxtapositions. In her book Southscapes, Davis observes how Walker’s most recent poetry often “fuses politically, emotionally, and intellectually” the black subjects of the American South with those further south (373). While Davis’s reading of Walker’s poetry focuses on the “fusion” of these locations, my discussion interrogates the similarities and disparities of geography, culture, and history that
Walker evokes through Kate’s border-crossing. What emerges in the novel is Walker’s construction of counter-histories, narratives that move fluidly between recorded time and the writer’s recuperative imagination. Crucial to this imagination is the protagonist’s active engagement with history’s darkest days. Geographically, psychically, Kate’s travels unearth the arterial traumas and atrocities of Brazil and the American South, redefining the cultural significance of one location to the other. Even the novel’s title, “Ye es el tiempo para abrir tu Corazon,” a line from a shaman’s song of healing confirms the necessity of not only building empathic connections but, more fundamentally, the imperative of locating the possibility of change, healing, and growth in the self. That Kate understands this line of Spanish among others she does not and that a recording of this line resonates with her at the “beginning of the journey” (66) to South America corroborates world travel and personal accountability as Walker’s model of psychic wholeness.

Just as essential to the novel’s design of boundary crossing is its promotion of ecofeminism, a hybrid philosophy Gretchen T. Legler defines as “a posthumanist construction of human relationships with nature… a vision that is informed by ecological and feminist theories, and one that images human/nature relationships as ‘conversations’ between knowing subjects” (229). Legler’s explanation ably distinguishes ecofeminist thought from that of mainstream ecological literary theorists who regard the connection between people and ecosystems in far different (and less radical) political terms than their ecofeminist colleagues. Ecological literary theorists focus on how literature impacts people’s treatment of the natural world, while environmental feminists push the argument much further. At the heart of the
ecofeminist complaint is the parallel they make between misogynists’ devastating gaze on women’s bodies and a similarly patriarchal perspective on the natural environment. Taking a cue from French authors whose *écriture féminine* celebrates female sexuality apart from that relayed in masculinist discourse, Legler notes the tendency in male writing to posit women’s bodies and nature as interchangeably “passive, interceptive, docile, as mirror and complement” (233). By way of combating this sexist ethos, ecofeminists generally reconceive nature as a thinking, feeling force and repudiate the patriarchal conceptualizations of land, air, and water as mere objects, whose sole worth hinges on their serviceability to people.

To this end, Patrick Murphy stresses the “emancipatory strategies” ecofeminists employ in reconstructing the relationship between people and nature and between women and men (qtd. in Legler 230). First and foremost, environmental feminists strive to dismantle the masculine, inherently hierarchical, mindset with which people exert a sense of supremacy over the earth. Second, environmental feminists consistently blur the line between physical, emotional, and geographic spatiality, between human and nonhuman, between *you* and *me*. Third, as part of the process of *de-othering* nature, ecofeminists reject absolute dependence on empirical knowledge and rely greatly on a less conventional, academic way of knowing, a kind of intuition that arises from different parts of the body. In *A Natural History of the Senses* Diane Ackerman comments on the possible convergence of radical feminist nature theorists and mainstream neuroscientists, who grapple with how the mind moves beyond the seat of knowledge, the brain, and “travels the whole body on caravans of hormone and enzyme, busily making sense of the compound wonders we
catalogue as touch, smell, hearing and vision” (xix). Empirical observation and cerebral logic still hold sway for environmental feminists, though not to the exclusion of instinct, feeling, or what might be described as bodily insight. For example, in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Kate encounters a strange “sundried spike” during her sojourn along the Colorado, and not knowing the flower’s properties but hoping it might settle her nauseated stomach, she chews and swallows it. Lack of knowledge merely stalls Kate’s flower eating, her hesitancy quickly overcome as “[t]he voice of her body urged her to put it in her mouth” (31).

Gretchen Legler refers to the new relationship between ecofeminists and the earth as a “postmodern pastoral,” wherein nature operates as an unfixed power, as subject, not object, that demonstrates will and desire and vacillates with conscious energy along varying degrees of abundance and scarceness (229-230). However committed environmental feminists may be to the idea of a conscious, self-acting earth, the point is to reverse the image of a victimized planet, a world without power or agency or without the forethought to ensure its survival against the machinery of human ‘advancement.’ Here, then, Walker’s vision of a resilient black female heroine, both familiar with but presently emancipated from the role of historical casualty, merges with the author’s humanized image of the earth, an indestructible force of female consciousness Walker locates in the Mayan goddess called Grandmother or Grandmother Earth.

In the epigraph to *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, the author commemorates the life of her paternal grandmother, whose name Kate Nelson appears as that of the fiction’s main character. Instead of recreating the era or the
events of this woman’s life in a narration similar to *The Color Purple*, Walker imagines, as she puts it, “the psychic explorer” her father’s mother “might have become.” To whatever extent Walker’s grandmother inspires the narrative, Kate Nelson acts as the novelist’s alter ego, a post-millennium Southern transplant who holds residence in northern California while traveling the world in search of spiritual fulfillment and global awareness. Walker’s decision to reinvent—and reclaim—the life of her forebear signals her overall strategy in linking the consciousness of women spirit-seekers to that of Grandmother Earth. Speaking as the book’s chorus and as a disembodied character, Grandmother in one scene tells Kate:

> First of all, abandon any notion that anything you humans do will ultimately destroy me. That is because I am your mother. It is impossible to kill your mother. You may shoot her a hundred times, but alas, she has already given birth to you. She is yours forever. What you are destroying is your own happiness. ... Your joy. (77)

Twinning the survivability of the human race with the inexhaustible life-force of the planet, Grandmother’s announcement may be Walker’s most concentrated expression of ecofeminist philosophy in novel form.

Walker frames the pastoral as a postmodern retreat from the vestiges of colonial power and influence; Grandmother’s garden figures as a mutable presence that manifests around the world. In the title essay of her 1982 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker laments the lack of artistic outlets for black women artists during and after slavery as well as the tendency for some black women to internalize feelings of inferiority to their white and masculine counterparts. Where ever the garden of black womanly art has flourished, the struggle for its preservation has been immense with only exceptional moments of brief success. The author cites
a few cases, her own mother’s garden and blues singer Bessie Smith, to name two, suggesting that the garden is both a figurative and literal endeavor: “Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity … my mother’s art” (In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens 241).

The fact that Walker repeatedly synchronizes woman and earth raises a possible problem for so-called rational ecofeminists, who decry the woman/nature connection as remnants of patriarchal construction, specifically the nymph virgin and supreme mother archetypes. Invariably, these representations enforce a rigid sexual divide, typing men as the makers of civilization and women as embodiments of the earth. Despite the exploitative basis for the formation of the nymph/mother figure, Ellen Cronan Rose explains how radical ecofeminists “applaud the revival of mother earth rhetoric … [and] celebrate ancient traditions that honor women’s power and creativity, above all, the capacity they share with nature giving life” (152). Not surprisingly, the key to this act of revival entails tactical revisions of the virgin bride and the good mother.

Like other ecofeminist writers, Walker appropriates the historical representation of Mother Earth, acknowledging her ascendancy over humanity, her erstwhile observation of it, and most importantly, her disassociation from earlier, patriarchal representations of the Good Mother. Expunged from Walker’s goddess is any anthropomorphized image that might otherwise limit her representation. In presiding over a worldwide pastoral, Grandmother just is, her voice disembodied, her
form visible not as a woman but as any living tree, apart from any cultural specificity. If nothing more, Grandmother dismisses the sacrificial bride/mother model by not willingly subjecting her earthly body to the demands of industry—the digging, the mining, and the blasting. While *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* commonly portrays women as guardians of the maternal spirit, whose revelation of peace and permanency not only opposes but potentially overrules masculine paradigms of war, colonization, and terror, Walker obscures the inherent sexual binary with depictions of male spiritualists—shamans—who openly subscribe to the authority of Grandmother and act as abiding agents of her power. After completing spiritual sojourns along two rivers, the Colorado and the Amazon, and despite a catastrophic sense of the world’s state of being, Kate informs her lover Yolo of her newfound insight that she herself “is Grandmother,” adding, “the planet will be steered to safety by Grandmother/Grandmothers or it will not be steered to safety at all” (201). Apart from expressing a tentative hope in the world’s survival, Kate’s declaration aligns the lives of *little g* grandmothers, including Walker’s own, with the *great G* goddess, Grandmother Earth.

The recreation of her grandmother’s life in cosmic terms points up Walker’s strategy of enshrining the American South as an epicenter of black female creativity. Kate’s origins as a Southerner foreground her literary work, her thoughts on preserving the earth, and her realization of the need for marginalized people to take greater responsibility in their own survival and in increasing their political visibility on the world stage. Although the novel opens and closes in Northern California, Kate’s literary imagination repeatedly goes South, just as her quest for spiritual
knowledge echoes the work of her writing forebear and Florida native Zora Neale Hurston. At the moment, most of the criticism concerning Walker’s use of Signification pertains to her most celebrated title *The Color Purple*, read by Henry Louis Gates, for example, as homage to Hurston’s 1937 classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Walker herself has contributed immensely to this critical discourse, in part with her seminal essay “Looking for Zora” which records her personal discovery of Hurston’s work, which by the early 1970s had been relegated outside the African American, Southern, and American canons of literature.

The making of Kate Nelson, I argue, affords further evidence of Signification, revealing a rich and lengthy parity with Janie Crawford, Hurston’s heroine in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Since the 1970s, Walker has demonstrably patterned a great portion of her aesthetic and writing philosophy on the Hurston/Janie example of travel and self-interrogation. At the end of Janie’s story, she tells her confidant Pheoby, “Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go to God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (192). These words reverberate with Kate’s (and Walker’s) appetite for world adventure and intercultural knowledge, but the parallels hardly end there. Approaching middle age as a time of crisis, both Janie and Kate begin to see their existence as interminably flat and static. Kate compares herself to a “dry river” (Walker 14), while Janie’s narrator likens her to “a rut in the road” (Hurston 72). Prior to this point of reckoning, Janie and Kate endure multiple marriages to men who strive to domesticate and silence them. Marking the need for decisive action, both women transform their situations by embarking on journeys to
remote, tropical locations, and in the meantime, both build intimate bonds with other women, although Walker expands the limits of these attachments to represent same-sex desire.

In one parallel moment—arguably the core of their parity—Janie and Kate experience the loss of their individual voices as a devastating fracture between their minds and their bodies, and by way of recuperation, both women imagine wild, verdant spaces, seemingly untouched by the dictates of male control. One night after shooting a stretch of Colorado rapids, Kate remembers how “she had lain under [her husband], night after night, dreaming of getting away; of being high on a hillside in the sun” (Walker 28). Kate’s sense of being trapped by a soulless, bourgeois life “that no longer fit” (Walker 28) holds precedence in a similar scene in Their Eyes Were Watching God, where Janie, emotionally estranged from her imperious husband Jody, “watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes” (Hurston 73). Ironically, this coping mechanism replicates the women’s schismatic perceptions of their actual selves, but at least in their creative search for relief, they are able to manipulate the terms and scope of their psychic split. Furthermore, Janie’s adventure in the Everglades and Kate’s escapades along two rivers decidedly reconcile the breach between the women’s lived experiences and their jaunts into fantasy.

The most recurrent feature in these women’s fantasies involves images of trees. While meeting with a close friend and fellow disciple of Grandmother, Kate recalls her childhood belief “that trees had mouths and that she could find a mouth on
a tree if only she grew tall enough and looked for it very hard” (69). Kate’s search for self-awareness—like Janie’s—begins in childhood and intuitively implicates the patriarchal system of silencing in the dual subjugation of women and ecologies. Hurston’s depiction of trees as custodians of earthly, or primal, consciousness has long fired Walker’s creativity, and Now is the Time to Open Your Heart pushes Hurston’s inspiration to its greatest extent thus far. Throughout her story, Janie pursues a vision of gender equality and erotic passion that she first receives as a young woman lying under her grandmother’s pear tree: “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” (Hurston 11). The narrator then contrasts this image of vitality with that of Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, whose “head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered” (Hurston 12). Diverting Janie from her path of self-discovery, Nanny negates Janie’s vision not because she is older but because she has fully internalized slavery and a thankless motherhood as sure signs of her self-worth. For her “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston 14) and can entertain all but two choices in life—prostitution or drudgery, while a third choice, respectable, bourgeois marriage, happens only rarely. Her wisdom wasted, Nanny’s eyes no longer “bore and pierce,” and when she dies, she does so in an “infinity of conscious pain” (Hurston 12, 23).

Capturing the ethos, the pulse, and the sensuousness of Hurston’s ecological writing, Walker’s Signification extends Hurston’s dual theme of earth consciousness
and womanly individuation. Having written in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” and elsewhere of the historical ravaging of black women’s voices, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* attempts to rehabilitate these voices, projecting this “foundation of ancient power” into the life-force of the Great G, “The oldest Being who ever lived. Her essence that of Primordial Female Human Being As Tree” (Walker 52). In the essay “Everything is a Human Being,” Walker angrily vents her frustration at the devastating effects of pollution, deforestation, and waste dumping on eco-systems everywhere, her words re-envisioning Nanny’s defeatist self-portrait within the limits of ecofeminist outrage: “Earth itself has become the nigger of the world,” Walker writes, adding, “While the Earth is poisoned, everything it supports is poisoned. While the Earth is enslaved, none of us is free” (*Living by the Word* 147). As a woman of color and as a lover of the earth, Walker suggests here and throughout her latest novel that the same myopic mindset that would politically marginalize people would likewise spoil and demean the natural world.

Before taking part in a Buddhist retreat, Kate sets out to close the gap between vision and visionary, earth and woman, changing her last name from Nelson to Talkingtree, indicating a simpatico disposition with the goddess figure. With this new outlook, Kate feels restless with her Buddhist routine and suspicious of her guru’s comment that third-world revolutions tend to inflict more chaos than offer peace and stability. Sensitive to the plight of the world’s oppressed and insistent on actual transcultural contact—a global appropriation of Janie’s motto “you gotta go there to know there”—Kate partly agrees with the guru, a wealthy, well-fed, American academic, but mostly bristles at his smug dismissal of systems far removed
from his lofty post in the ivory tower. Like her literary predecessor, Kate recognizes
a need for action, for shift. Reliving Janie’s bliss under the pear tree, Kate divines
from a copse of redwoods the mandate to change her life, a scene that reverberates
with her recollection of a similar instance during her youth in the South:

She kept looking out of the window… just as she looked out of the
window of the Church of God and Christ, as a child, when she had
been unable to believe human beings, simply by being born, had
sinned. The redwood trees looked so restful, their long branches
hanging down to the earth. … [S]he slowly, slowly made her way to
the largest redwood tree and sat under it, becoming invisible to the
dozens of people who … walked all around her. (Walker 5-6)

The scene’s subtle melding of geographies—America’s South and Northwest—
signals Kate’s continued attachment to the region of her childhood, despite her
relocation across country or her journeys abroad. Her separation from the other
guests and her near eclipse by the redwoods further reflect her frustration with
organized religion—Buddhism and Christianity—as well as her desire for a more
sensuous, fulfilling involvement with nature.

If to go there is to know there, then Kate’s travels along the Colorado and the
Amazon ensure that her quests for recuperation, adventure, and enlightenment must
also involve her consideration of foreign histories and perspectives. In South
America, under Armando Juarez’s shamanic guidance, Kate and a circle of fellow
travelers ingest yagè, a drug that induces for her visions of a Southern ancestor, a
slave called Remus, who tells Kate about having his teeth pulled, “[o]ne by one, with
… pliers used for horses, without anesthesia” (92), all because his master, feeling
threatened, disdains the whiteness of the slave’s smile. Recounting yet another ordeal
in which he is shot in the heart by a party of Night Riders, Remus confides to Kate,
who at first resists her visions of him, that of all of the deaths he has died the greatest is to be forgotten by one’s descendants. Explaining that trees in a forest continue their work after their destruction by decaying and “becoming the soil in which other trees grow” (Walker 96), Remus furthers Walker’s linkage of earth and ancestry, forests and forebears. To prevent or interrupt this regenerative process, vis a vis clear-cuttings of landscapes and histories, is to deny the opportunity for spiritual legacy, the sharing of knowledge between generations, between the living and the dead, what Jana Heczková terms as a “reciprocal” process, whereby the past teaches the present and vice versa. Heczková argues, “Only by the reciprocal interaction of the two planes [past and present] can they form a continuum.”

To be sure, this continuum is hard won, to some extent deferred, put off, not by the dismissive disposition of the predominant white culture alone but perhaps more telling at the hands of black descendants. Kate’s initial resistance to her visions of Remus spring from the horror at seeing his visibly traumatized body, the bleeding wound of his gums—even his name deepens her anguish in recalling the past. Often used disparagingly, the name Remus, Kate discovers, was actually common among slaves. Remus tells her, “The masters liked it because it made us seem ridiculous” (97). The depiction of the slave here clearly and strategically contrasts the Joel Chandler Harris storyteller Uncle Remus, a figure Walker finds both familiar and alienating, his presence putting up a barrier, she finds, between black folklore and the culture it represents. Addressing the Atlanta Historical Society in 1981, Walker recalls the placement of an Uncle Remus statue in the window of a whites-only restaurant in Eatonton, Georgia, where a century apart she and Harris were raised. In
the essay “The Dummy in the Window,” which she converted from her speech, the author asserts her belief that “the worst part of being in an oppressed culture is that the oppressive culture—primarily because it controls the production and dispersal of images in the media—can so easily make us feel ashamed of ourselves, of our sayings, our doings, and our ways” (Living by the Word 32). In the essay and the novel, Walker emphasizes the necessity of overcoming the anger and the shame.

Remus’s shocking appearance in the novel, his intrusion into Kate’s restless thoughts, unearths her indignation about her family’s slave past, a stultifying emotion which at first thwarts her quest for spiritual wholeness. In the course of the visitation, Kate and Remus happen by:

> an enormous field of corn. Remus was barefoot and wearing ragged gray cotton trousers. Kate walked behind him looking at his footprints. Each time he lifted his foot one print would fill with water and the other with blood.

In the one that filled with water she saw her own face. …

> I used to have to plant, harvest, shuck, and shell a field of corn this size every year, said Remus. After shucking so much corn, it took the rest of winter for my palms to heal, to grow new skin. Consequently, I hate corn. No, you don’t, said Kate. You hate have been forced to deal with it. Corn is innocent. It had nothing to do with enslaving you. (97-98)

Walker literalizes Kate’s lineal tie to Remus by depicting her as following his lead and by telegraphing her reflection in his footprint; however, Kate’s compliance does not hinder her from countering Remus’s critique, especially where it concerns an element of the earth. Encouraged by Armando’s advice to “negotiate” with her ancestors, Kate makes a case for Remus in his memory of forced labor to separate the true culprit of his captivity from the earthly site of its occurrence.
By shearing the image of the cornfield away from the slave master’s dominion over it, Kate tries to redeem the earth from its misuse in history and to deny the slave master’s legacy even greater purchase in the continuum of then and now, ancestor and descendent. To be clear, Remus’s visitation does not re-envision or rewrite the histories of slavery and lynching in an effort to lessen the horror of these events, but in the instance of the cornfield, his ghostly presence effectively translates the sacrifices of previous generations into a productive present, and in so doing, restores a primal goodness to the greater (mythical) paradigm of laborer and harvest. When Kate urges Remus to eat an ear of corn—a request that might seem cruel given the state of his teeth and gums—the very act of biting down restores his grin, fantastically undoing the heinous deed of the slave master. Earlier, Remus tells Kate, “There is also the question of loyalty to the dead. We feel we need to avenge, to make right. To heal by settling a score. Healing cannot be done by settling a score” (97). The symbolic healing of Remus’s wound—the bleeding synecdoche of slavery—demonstrates Kate’s aim to redress the torments of her forebears, an impossible endeavor that, nonetheless, signals her release from the legacy of remembered pain, suffering, sorrow, anger, and shame. Like before in the outside world consciousness, the resolution to Kate’s quandary lies in taking action—rather than ignore or suppress her vision of Remus, she must engage it, not as a passive recipient but as an active collaborator. Remus’s visitation helps Kate fulfill her responsibility of remembering the dead without invoking desire in her to exact revenge, and despite her early reluctance in seeing the time traveler, the encounter culminates in her ability to merge her vision of the slave past with that of herself in the present. To confirm for Remus
the miraculous restoration of his smile, she calls out to him, “Here is the mirror. Look in my eyes” after which “He stumbled and began falling forward, into her. She felt the heveness of him, his hard head, his broad shoulders, even his scratchy hands, passing into her chest” (99). Realizing his potential as a figure of nourishment, the scene depicts Remus as man, spirit, and decaying tree, one that eventually “stumbles” and “falls” into Kate’s body, his hands “scratchy” like bark.

In addition to representing Walker’s interest in alternative, hypothetical histories in which ancestors travel beyond their allotted lifespan and chronicles of oppression give way to narratives of spiritual regeneration, Kate’s capacity to merge psychically with her ancestor stresses the author’s petition for cross-cultural contact. Curiously, Kate relives these frightful fragments of American history in Brazil, far from their original setting, a fact that stresses both her initial feelings of ancestral detachment and ultimately her inability to escape her history. The jungle setting also reifies Walker’s treatment of Hurston’s model of travel and introspection, the example somewhat redefined by Walker’s strategic conflation of histories that inform the vastly different landscapes of South America and the American South. This temporal/spatial warp avers the far-reaching splendor of Walker’s global garden, a revisionist pastoral that synthesizes in the drama of the cornfield the agrarian South and the Brazilian rainforest, a multivalent space marked by complex manipulations of an interior/exterior dynamic.

Imparting the history of corn as a cash crop, linking the enslavement of Africans in Brazil with those in the United States, the image of the cornfield signifies this ever turning axis of self and other, American South and South America. Remus
himself affirms the tie when Kate asks him, “Where have you been?” and he answers, “Only here…Only with you” (97). Remus’s metaphysical location in Brazil purposely contradicts his historical location in the South, signaling his expansiveness as both a figure of time and timelessness, conflating the agricultural economies of these two separate spaces and the capitalistic ambitions that drove European cultivators to acts of genocide and chattel slavery. Not long after settlers learned from natives the multiple functions of corn—treating it as source for food and fuel and drying it for rug weaving, mattress stuffing, and doll making—great numbers of indigenous peoples in eighteenth century United States met their demise, a point that historian Arturo Warman puts rather bluntly when he writes, “Once the settlers had fully grasped the secrets and potential of corn, they no longer needed the Native Americans. Indigenous peoples were wiped out, scattered, or relocated as settlers penetrated even further inland” (155). A similar fate awaited native peoples in South America where Spanish and Portuguese settlers, operating as missionaries, mercenaries, farmers, or industrialists, obtained the secrets of Indian maize while pushing natives—those who survived their gory clashes with Europeans—to the outer limits of the mainland. As this paradigm repeated itself across the Americas so did the importation of African slaves, not least in Brazil and in the United States.

Evoking the slave-descendent continuum in two separate cosmologies, Walker’s strategic conflation of Brazilian and U.S. histories presents an expansion of the imperative go there to know there. In this sense, the cornfield—in Walker’s novel and in history—suggests that knowledge of other places and other times gives one a cosmic connectedness, or rootedness, in a global garden of pain, restoration, and
renewal and a path at greater self-knowledge and introspection. Kate’s reconciliation with Remus far outside her native Georgia stresses Walker’s career long interest in documenting artistic vibrancy and resilience over systems of oppression. In “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker poses what becomes a foundational question in her work: “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time?” (233). Throughout the essay, Walker tries to re-evoke “[t]he agony of the women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them” (234). Echoing this voice of historical grief and recovery, Kate wonders, “How many shamans, perhaps even more gifted than Armando, had the Spanish slain?” (89). During Kate’s time in the Amazon, she notices the mixing of Native and Spanish features in the faces and physiques of the spiritualists, contemplating the incalculable loss of Mayan and Kechuan cultures to Spanish colonialism. The similarity of Walker’s voice in both the novel and the essay builds a nexus of artistry and spiritualism that supersedes national borders. But Kate’s observations in the novel identify an expansion on the cultural limits posited by the original question in the essay, confirming the global scope of Kate’s inquiries, her awareness of racialized oppression in the American South refocused now on the wasting of Native people’s lives in South America.

But Walker’s recognition of cultural loss and waste hardly rests with an accusatory concentration on the oppressor; instead, her vision moves toward a more comprehensive notice of the destructive pathologies that emanate from within marginalized populations in America and Brazil. What Armando teaches Kate is that
Spain’s atrocities—slicing natives in half with swords, raping women, “feeding […] babies to dogs” for mere amusement—continue to penetrate and impact the lives of native people: “We are left with the record and the consequences of this behavior in our own bodies and psyches, and we must work with it,” Armando tells her, “Not because it is Spanish behavior, no. Because it is human behavior. And we too are humans” (Walker 94). Armando’s remarks suggest that achieving psychic wholeness demands a negotiation with one’s ancestors, both natives and conquering peoples, if only to determine what to claim and disclaim in the making of identity, a thorny prospect for Native and African Americans alike. More pointedly, Armando suggests that the descendants of slaves and colonial projects now possess the responsibility and the incentive of repairing their lives and improving their futures for themselves, not by dwelling on the evils of the past but by “negotiating” with them as Kate does with Remus.

Kate’s synthesis with Remus marks an endpoint to Kate’s need for integrating the world and “l’otro lado” (the other world), chronological time and timelessness. In this summit of real time and vision-work, Kate attains psychic wholeness, in which her outside self, intent on physical exploration and intercultural experience, satisfies her quest for internal peace. After Kate’s encounter with Remus, the yage holds less impact on her psyche, indicating her graduation to the position of counselor. Assisting Armando in his shamanic duties, Kate gathers the other travelers into their ceremonial circle on the jungle floor; she leads discussions and probes painful memories in the attempt to stimulate healing. Alerting Kate to her new status, Armando explains that Grandmother “does not need to tell you anything more. She
has told you everything you need to know. What you need to do is listen. To accept” (144). Kate’s work as a counselor highlights her talent for listening, accepting, observing, and understanding. Again, as typified by the scene in the cornfield, her observations operate on an interior/exterior axis, this time with less focus on her own serenity of spirit than on an empathic embrace of the other participants in her group, a sharp reversal of her sour disposition at the Buddhist retreat in California.

A crucial aspect of Armando’s timeless perspective centers on his capacity to see beyond the constructed lines of race and national identity, his teachings of self-reinvention and personal responsibility affirming Kate’s burgeoning new outlook and shaping the entire ethos of the book. In the last circle meeting, Armando stresses the liability that each traveler bears in perpetuating her sickness, a lesson that resonates with Missy, an incest survivor and drug addict: “Armando and Cosmi had spent considerable time with her. Patiently encouraging her to get out of her own way” (153). Signified by this passage, the text suggests that any subject—African American, Native American, white, or Latin—possesses the opportunity to exorcise traumatic and historical inscriptions, even those that bore insidiously into one’s very sense of self. To recreate (not just rehabilitate) the self, the subject must separate out within her consciousness what is toxic from what is regenerative, what is treacherous from what is affirmative. This is deep, gut-wrenching work, calling for many of the travelers to un-think themselves as inveterate victims, as passive objects repeatedly violated (or simply acted against) with little or no recourse for positive change.

Taking their traumas to their core, these travelers become protective of their pain, regarding it as constitutive to their identities. To explain all this, Armando
compares spiritual sickness to a charming, unruly child, who lives “inside of you” and who “does not want you to heal”:

He is there having a good time at your expense and if you get well he worries there will be nothing left to do. No games to play with your sick body, no games to play with your mind. … He will have to be *negotiated*, just like you would talk to a lawyer. If I am well, you must tell him, there will actually be lots more for your to do. More games for you to play, because we will be stronger. If we are much stronger, we can go more places. … He is an odd little boy… And sometimes we are all charmed by him. That is why sometimes people who are not very sick will suddenly die. They have listened to the voice too long. It is very seductive. (153-4)

Tying trauma to the image of a “charming,” reckless child, Armando’s conceit pinpoints perpetual suffering as an arrestment in the psyche. As the sickness progresses, unchecked or unresolved, the sufferer learns to identify more through the trauma than through any other facet of her being so that any signs or symptoms of distress virtually disappear and the sufferer spirals quietly and insentiently into annihilation. These self-destructive ones “have listened … too long” to the child’s “seductive” voice. Interestingly, Armando looks not to eradicate the child but to “negotiate” with it, to recognize its intricate connectedness with the sufferer, the arrested and arresting part of her, and to guide that part away from its more insidious instincts. The conceit also reaffirms the novel’s celebration of travel, the instinct to “go more places,” as Armando puts it. Set apart from the travelers’ regions of cultural origin, the Edenic location of the jungle, essentially their new beginning, the shaman’s teachings give Missy and the others the necessary distance by which to reassess their relationship to their places of origin.

Drawing from Armando’s shamanic vision and Kate’s memories of the rural South, the novel projects a splintered view of Southern black female bodies,
interspersing male-driven sexual trauma and liberated Sapphic love—a perennial strategy in Walker’s work. For the scene of trauma, Walker revisits a familiar space of agony, Mississippi. In the jungle, Kate befriends Lalika, who after killing her rapist, is convicted and sent to a county jail in her native state of Mississippi, where she and a friend endure multiple rapes and beatings from the male guards and other inmates. Bolstered by delusions of impunity, two of the guards market an amateur video of the brutal attacks, their actions recalling the South’s notorious exploitation of black women’s bodies during and after the time of slavery. In stark contrast with this narrative of sexist male voyeurism and cruelty, Kate remembers her marriage to Lolly “off the coast of the Carolinas” where

beneath giant oak trees dripping moss they’d laughed to think they were expressing a freedom their forebears, who so desperately yearned for freedom from the lash, had not even imagined. And might well have been outraged by, though she doubted the more radical ones would have been anything but secretly amused. Kate was always willing to go far enough back in her ancestry to find the ones who resembled her; she knew they had to be there because look what they spawned. (81)

Although the relationship eventually fizzles, Kate holds fond memories of her and Lolly recreating the ancient rite of jumping the broom, “the only nuptials slave owners had permitted their African captives” (Walker 81). For the ceremony Lolly dons Kente cloth, and Kate wears suede cowboy boots. Presenting the whimsy of a postmodern pastiche, the image of these two women jumping the broom binds the idea of their sexual liberation to the geographic boundary of their oppression. Walker succinctly mixes timelines and cultural paradigms—African, African American, Southern, heterosexual, homosexual, the Middle Passage, and, finally, the dispersion of black bodies first along coastal territories then farther back into the main lands of
the Americas. Threaded through this massive historical collage is Kate’s consideration of the sexual barriers that her forebears faced, their prejudices predominantly the product of their own judgment as well as a reflection of their Christian masters. As a recuperative act of self-love, Kate imagines the sexual others who preceded her as well as the “radical ones,” those unorthodox thinkers, who “would have been … secretly amused.” Alongside Lalika’s narrative of trauma and pornographic violence, a new beginning unveils itself, appropriately enough on the shores of an original colony, a vital irony for Kate and Lolly's friends who “joked that they looked like Africa and Colonial America finally doing the right thing” (Walker 82).

Divided by various viewpoints and separate voyages, the remainder of the text dramatizes Armando’s call for native people around the world to assume greater responsibility for the condition of their individual lives and cultures. During Kate’s stint in the rainforest, Yolo engages in impromptu meetings in Hawaii with native elders, the most outspoken being Aunty Pear lua, who advises the younger generation to adapt and model for their children a stringent new lifestyle by rejecting the use of drugs, alcohol, recreational sex, even tobacco and coffee. Pear lua’s strict remedies reflect her frustration with the self-destructive habits and attitudes of her people, citing high rates of addiction—methamphetamine use being the latest in a long line of others—and the prevalence of obesity: “Now, I admit I’m big, like a lot of these other big Hawaiians you see around here. …Our diet is a disgrace. The beer. The smoke. All the pig and pasta salad” (174). Relating her perspective to that of native people on the mainland and to other native elders around the world, Pear lua embodies
Walker’s idealized vision of a powerful woman of color holding discourse with other minority women (and a few agreeable men) hailing from the world’s most beleaguered nations. In an open letter to President Clinton in 1996, decrying his increase in sanctions against Cuba, Walker writes, “I personally want compassionate female leadership in the world, at least for the next hundred years or so: … masculine leadership has pretty much destroyed us” (Anything We Love Can Be Saved 215).

The drug-induced death of a young Hawaiian man, the son of Yolo’s former lover Alma, provides the mainspring for Aunty Pearlua’s severe prescriptions. The senselessness of his demise and others like it dramatizes the routine destruction of indigenous bodies on the islands and throughout the world, destruction that in her view begins with the mass and thoughtless consumption of Western tastes, cultural and culinary. Pointedly, she says to her listeners, “If Lili’uokalani had made her people promise to eat poi and taro leaves forever and not get hooked on white bread and processed cheese. If only the buck didn’t stop here” (172). That Aunty Pearlua admits that indeed the “buck [stop[s]” with her and other native people affirms the relatedness of her thoughts to Armando’s teachings of self-actualization. Like the shaman, she asserts the significance of body-consciousness, saying, “Our bodies are all we have. … Over our bodies we have some control. We can make our bodies exactly what it is our young people need to see. Health and well-being. Freedom” (171). Seeing discipline as the ultimate act of autonomy and self-restraint as the body’s role in resisting the regime of Western influence, Aunty Pearlua rebuffs those in the circle who insist that smoking, drinking, and fry bread constitute essential elements of Hawaiian culture: “Health is our culture” she says, “anything that
interferes with it is our bondage” (172). Careful not to confine her comments to native Hawaiian people alone, Aunt Pearlua, widens her focus to include those “all over the world. In Africa, in Europe, in China. In Australia. In Indonesia. In Aotearoa and Fiji and Tahiti too. And in America . . . We will have no future eating the slops the masters have brought, and furthermore clinging to them for dear life” (173). Aunt Pearlua’s insistence that native people must divorce themselves from naturalized definitions of culture, adopting, instead, a more fluid but earthy sense of identity reveals her frustration with the malaise and self-defeatism that she perceives crushing her people’s resolve to seek healthy, holistic lives.

Aunty’s recognition of Africa, Europe, Australia, and Asia and her exhortation to the children attending the meeting to give up all the bad food “and the bad feelings that [come] with eating it[,] the easiest slippery slope to an early grave” (173) reinforce her link to Armando and his commitment to globalized, borderless compassion. Both Armando and Aunt Pearlua suggest that deeper, more informed sympathy with the plight of others living all over the planet can further empower the self. Walker lends the old woman the authority of a graceful appearance, one that implies wisdom wrought from keen awareness of the goodness of the earth itself: “She was small, plump, and brown, with large dark eyes. Her silver hair was thick and full and the breeze from the ocean lifted it gently as it blew. . . . She was dressed in a long green dress that made her seem part of the ocean that had walked up on the shore. Her hair seemed part of the moon” (173).

Yet, even as this syncretic image of earth and woman radiates beauty and spiritual truth, the grousing circle and Alma’s inconsolability cast doubts about
Aunty’s ultimate influence. After the circle, Yolo finds Alma “so saturated with smoke and beer,” he “move[s] upwind” of her (175). Seized by grief over her son’s death and by guilt for selling her family’s land, Alma tells Yolo, “If I’m drunk, none of it matters very much” (177). Alienated from her community because of the land sells, Alma personifies the ecofeminist principle of bearing responsibility to a sacred, living earth: “The land does not like being sold” she tells Yolo, “It haunts me” (176). Specifically, she bears the consequences of detaching herself from her lineage and from the land that supported it, her sorrow and self-destructive behavior reflecting the lack of familial ties that Remus warns Kate about in the cornfield. Though separated by time, geography, and cultural differences, Alma and Remus, representing opposite ends of the time-spectrum, represent shattered souls, their damage triggered by a break in the ancestral continuum. Despite Yolo’s attempt to comfort Alma and Aunty Pearlua’s declarations of hope for cultural healing, Alma has yet to internalize the possibility of change. To that point precisely, how likely will Aunty’s people accept her severe dictates? Without a plan of implementation, without a strategy for purging and expelling, Aunty’s words may have little impact on her people’s lifestyle, and her top-down, unilateral leadership may further highlight the gap between her ideals of renewal and the lived reality of the younger generations.

Even Armando’s more organic, inside-out approach to healing fails to reach all of his pupils—at least immediately. In the rainforest, Kate avails herself to the misery of two white men, Rick and Hugh, both struggling with the privileges that their families’ shady business deals and greedy land grabs have afforded them. Resisting the shamans’ work—the yagè and the visions—Rick makes a routine of
regressing, “pretending to be an orangutan, grunting, rutting around the floor” until Kate chooses to acknowledge him, to gaze at him directly and say repeatedly, “I see you” (Walker 148-9). This simple act of looking reverses Rick’s regression, forcing him to reexamine the loss of his family’s ethnicity in their attempt to assimilate into whiteness. Walker’s treatment of him as a cipher rearticulates a pattern established by many Southern black writers, to see and not see whites—a pattern well documented by Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and others as a survival mechanism during the Jim Crow days and as a matter of fact. Angelou recalls in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings how as a child living in Stamps, Arkansas she never “believe[d] that whites were really real” (25). As a youth, Angelou would refer to whites as “strange pale creatures” who existed obscurely across the railroad tracks in “their alien unlife” and who “weren’t considered folks. They were whitefolks” (26).

Walker pushes and repurposes Angelou’s characterizations, indicating the depths to which Rick has internalized his blankness. Whiteness, for him, had come to envelope many world cultures, reducing or erasing their differences, making them as invisible as their conquerors: “It’s curious now that everywhere you look there are white men, but in my view most of them are invisible” (161). Rick admits that throughout his life he has felt as numb and hollow as a mannequin or blow-up doll and that he had assigned the work of feeling to his wife, “the woman of color I dated in college” (163). Herself a woman of color, Kate rejects Rick’s pantomime, driving him at last to honor the shaman’s sacred work and the others’ suffering. By refuting Rick’s performance, by seeing him and acknowledging her sight, Kate foils the wasteful effects of a colonizing, mocking, world-conquering gaze while demonstrating her
capacity to stand in the fullness of her spiritual health. Free from any status as a victim or any sense of internalized marginalization, Kate channels her power as a little g Grandmother, who like the Great G Grandmother, projects the most encompassing, inclusive vision of all the world’s inhabitants.

Like the goddess, Kate’s visions and travels recontextualize South America and the American South, at once diminishing and intensifying the significance of the region’s cultural borders. Her narrative points up Robert Walter’s observation that “transculturation accounts for the local and global … interplay of difference and sameness” (238). At an outpost miles away from the jungle, Kate reveals her Southern roots when she tells Armando how Brazilian heat and humidity would be ideal for growing vegetables, the kind of foods that sustained her during her upbringing in Georgia: “collards, kale . . . tomatoes, beans, and squash” (167). A more telling hieroglyph of Kate’s Southernness appears in her writing and storytelling. On a plane departing the Amazon, Kate finds in her purse pieces of a story she began writing on the banks of the Colorado River. The inlaid narrative stems from a dream Kate has about her departed mother who in the dream regenerates a missing hand, originally lost in a car accident, and whose fantastical act of survival and recuperation generates in Kate enormous sympathy for the generations of black mothers who lived before her: “She thought of the half-European children hundreds of thousands of black women had delivered into the world, children forced on them through rape; children conceived in the bodies of black women so they could be sold” (181). Reminded of this painful, all too familiar detail in the lives of slave women, Kate quietly commends the women’s efforts to recover their lives in silent,
anonymous acts of resilience. Remarkably, Kate attributes the clarity by which she reaches her feelings of gratitude to her sojourn in the Amazon. Giving Kate *medicina* and affirming its ability to preserve her rehabilitation, Armando tells her, “It will make you see things in your life in a different way, Armando had promised. It will teach you to see through your own plots” (180). The “plots” of Kate’s life, as a woman and a writer, are thickly tangled, combining dreams, drug-induced visions, historical memory, and literary thought.

In so much as Walker’s novel deconstructs naturalized correlations of cultural identity and geographic space, the narrative prizes the stability and importance of cultural beginnings. Regardless of Kate’s travels or her more permanent relocation to northern California, she retains her identity as a woman of the South. Living away from the South does nothing to disaffiliate her from the region, nor does the South lose its cultural significance simply because of its contact with the global sphere. Indeed, Kate’s Amazonian adventure offers rather complex modalities of historical representation, presenting the region as a repository of horrific violence and as a space of reconciliation whereby subjects confront and come to terms with past atrocities. To this end, Kate must face whole paradigms of pain—the bleeding slave body, the lynched body, the raped, beaten body—historic wounding that without psychic redress and cultural witnessing threaten to hemorrhage indefinitely through the generations, numbing and deadening the descendants of history’s original sins. Assuredly, the novel does not suggest that the only way to become whole, to overcome victimization, or to make peace with historical atrocity is to ingest mind-altering drugs under a shaman’s supervision in the Amazonian rainforest. Kate
experiences all of these triumphs, but her path is as unique to her as Yolo’s is to him, but in both cases the principle of *go there to know there* applies in full as does the idea that distance can draw one closer to the self.

If not, therefore, a dehistoricized space, the South, reimagined from a global distance, figures as a space of regeneration, in point of fact as a regenerative body. From a great distance, Kate has close contact with Remus her slave-ancestor, envisioning his teeth restored to him. In real time, she watches Lalika take tentative steps toward healing, her sex and sexuality, brutalized in a Mississippi jail, finding possible relief. Kate holds close to her dream of her mother, whose regenerated hand acts as a metonym for the book’s ongoing acts of re-creation and resilience. That Kate transmits her dream into text only redoubles this pattern of transformation. Her writing captures her experience in the South and abroad, and as a solitary story, the imagined events refocus and rearticulate other stories and histories of the South—dreams, memories, narratives told, retold, fragmented and remembered, not unlike the broken bodies that the artist-shaman is always striving to save.
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BIOGRAPHY

Born in Greenville, South Carolina, Donnie McMahand studied literature and education at Francis Marion University before taking his Masters in English at Clemson University. Receiving his Ph.D. from Tulane University, he now teaches at the University of West Georgia. His current fields of study involve African American, Southern, as well as Twentieth Century American Literature. Synthesizing all three categories, his research investigates shifting representations of contemporary Southern black subjectivities, ranging from incidents of black rage and self-destruction to an ongoing struggle to affirm black identity against a precedence of internalized hatred. His publications include essays concerning the literary treatment of Emmett Till’s murder and representations of black violence and resistance in novels by Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison. Writing his first poem at age five, McMahand has preserved a love of creating poems throughout his life and looks forward to publishing more of these works. He is a recipient of the South Carolina Graduate Fellowship and is a member of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature.