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## Miss Lillibelle, Moonshine, and Midnight at the Crystal Café: Remembrances of a Southeast Arkansas Culture-Scape

*Susan Elizabeth Probasco, University of Arkansas*

Driving down Highway 65 South into the extreme southeast Arkansas Delta, eventually you would reach the town of Sweetwater where you might or might not notice a hollowed-out building, worn bricks resting next to a set of defunct railroad tracks. You might notice a deserted ladies' dress shop, an overgrown bottoms area south of town, or fallow fields that were formerly small family homesteads on the periphery of town nestled between curves of the Mississippi River. These are haunted spaces from a town that exists today only in memories. Four sets of narratives collected through the fieldwork process of "visiting" around the Delta transformed the building by the railroad tracks back into the Crystal Café, revisited Lil's Dress Shop where she recalled stories of her favorite days, uncovered the airstrip in the bottoms used by local farmers and merchants where on a hot summer day in 1967 one of the prettiest girls in town became the first woman to fly solo in Chicot County history, and located the family farm where a hapless moonshine runner named Hubert had an unlucky meeting with a couple of revenuers on a Saturday afternoon. Visiting these haunted spaces demonstrates the power of narrative to transform stories of places into remembered spaces and reconfigure an emptying landscape into an immortal topography.

Margaret Jones Bolsterli wrote, "Delta, in this case, means more than topography. It is also a landscape of the mind" (Bolsterli 2000, 1).

Although Bolsterli was speaking more in terms of environmental influence on the Delta psyche, the phrase informed the way I began to see the Delta and to experience that which I could see today, and that which could be reconstructed through stories. Kathleen Stewart's *A Space on the Side of the Road* provides the theoretical basis for recreating spaces on the landscape that today exist only as ruins, or only in memory. Stewart writes of Appalachia as a marginalized South. I would argue that the Delta is marginalized as well, conceived of in the national imagination only in terms of racial strife and demographic insufficiencies. Stewart also writes of Appalachia as a place that is doubly occupied: by the native inhabitants, as well as by the colonial powers of the big businesses that own the land and the mineral rights. Similarly, I would argue also that the Delta is doubly occupied. It is inhabited by its population, the large corporate super-farms that changed the entire social makeup of the region after farm mechanization; and I suggest that it is also occupied with memories of places that exist today only in a "landscape of the mind."

The four narratives that I am presenting are not just excellent examples of taking a moment, as Stewart urges us to do, and sitting to hear a story and re-create a space on the side of the road. The stories also offer poetics of southern womanhood and manhood and use narrative to create a "historic continuity" of place (Bruner 1991, 19-20).

#### MIDNIGHT AT THE CRYSTAL CAFÉ

Stoddard is an exceedingly handsome man, and he is a very courtly southern gentleman. Every morning at about 4:30 he walks the streets of Sweetwater for exercise. Accompanying him on his walks are two widowed ladies. On his feet are state-of-the-art running shoes sent to him every few months by his son Jay, who participates

in Iron Man competitions wherever he travels for business. Stoddard comes well armed, carrying a pistol in his pocket. No danger will befall the ladies while they are with Stoddard. There have been some muggings in town. Stoddard is not taking any chances, nor is he giving up his morning walk. He originally armed himself with an antique revolver, which may or may not have worked, but his sons recently got him a new pistol for Christmas.

Stoddard is from Forrest, Mississippi. In the late 1940s he got out of the Navy, and he went to Jackson, Mississippi, to attend business school. After business school, he got a job as a clerk on a barge in the Mississippi River. The society on the barge was much like the society in the military. There was a captain and other officers. Stoddard sat at the Captain's table and dined with the officers. Stoddard says he thought he was something.

Stoddard was eventually allotted a fine private cabin with his own shower. When he first came onto the barge, Stoddard had to share a cabin equipped with bunk beds with two other men, "and old men at that," he said. One of his roommates drank whiskey and prune juice; and, Stoddard confided in a wry tone, wore silk underwear. After he told me that, he just looked at me, still amused after all these years, and let me absorb the image of a grizzled old river-man swilling whiskey and prune juice, lounging on his bunk in silk underwear. Stoddard's wife Vivian broke the silence by commenting, "How about that!"

One night one of Stoddard's fellow workers asked him if he wanted to go to shore to Sweetwater. Stoddard said, "Sweetwater what?" "Sweetwater, Arkansas," his friend answered; he had a girlfriend there in town. They rode on a tugboat from the barge to a landing on the Arkansas side of the river, and they called a cab to come out to the landing and take them into town. This picture of Sweetwater fas-

minated me: there have been no taxicabs there in my lifetime, and the little store at the landing has been falling down since I was a child.

When Stoddard and his friend got into town, things were bustling. His friend was to meet his girl at a popular restaurant located next to the train depot. It was open twenty-four hours a day and always busy because of the train traffic. Stoddard remembered, “We walked into the Crystal Grill and Café...” “The Crystal Grill and Café,” echoed Vivian, with a smile. Stoddard said simply, “And there was Vivian.”

Stoddard was to stay in Sweetwater. Vivian’s family was from Sweetwater; in fact, her father owned the Crystal Grill and Café where they met.

I have chosen to present this narrative first because the Crystal Café has completely disappeared from the landscape of Sweetwater. My own mother, a native of Sweetwater, did not know that it had ever existed. Since I was a little girl there had been a hollowed-out building sitting next to the train tracks—no roof, no front, simply piles of bricks, with the ghost of a Dr. Pepper advertisement, advertisement on a wall that was shedding itself in diagonal layers like the sides of a pyramid. Sitting and telling stories with Stoddard and Vivian brought back the years when Sweetwater was a vital town, when the trains brought passengers through, and when young men swam from or took boats from the river barges to the banks of the levee to catch taxis and ride into town in search of pretty girls and fun. Stoddard and Vivian’s story re-created this space by the railroad tracks, as well as the cultural space on the edge of the levee where the taxis used to wait for young men who are long gone.

Stewart writes that creating these spaces “begins and ends with the eruption of the local and particular; it emerges in imagination when ‘things happen’ to interrupt the expected and naturalized, and

people find themselves surrounded by place and caught in a haunted doubled epistemology of being in the midst of things and impacted by them and yet making something of things” (1996, 4). I had only ever seen the space as a ruin; never had I imagined it as a magical café, the site of the beginning of a sixty-year romance between Stoddard and Vivian.

Stewart asserts that the spaces on the side of the road “mark the power of stories to re-member things and give them form” (ibid). This power to give the spaces form can be seen in the following narratives as well, whether it is Lil’s deserted dress shop, an abandoned air strip, or an abandoned family homestead with naughty secrets.

#### MISS LILLIBELLE

I have always known Lil as “Aunt Lil.” I think that most younger people in town call her Aunt Lil. Her store was open for over forty-five years, far longer than any other business in town except for the beauty shop. The beauty shop has never closed because the owner, Miss Betty Jo, says that no matter what the economy is doing, ladies always want to look pretty. Lil knew everyone in town, as well as everything that was going on. From her spot in the middle of Main Street, just up from City Hall, she could see everything. There was not as much to see as there once was, but she kept up just the same. My mother spent a lot of time at Lil’s when she was growing up. Lil’s had always been a gathering place, a social place, and that did not change over time. I might have seen any one of a dozen women I knew there any time I dropped by, just sitting on the stools at the back of the store, visiting. Lil used to sit on the counter at the front of the store. There is a spot where the paint is worn away, and the wood is grooved in the shape of a woman’s body. The counter tells how she sat in that spot for decades, watching the comings and goings of the

town. Several years ago Lil had to have both knees replaced, and she could no longer jump up on the counter. If she was standing next to it, though, her hand would rub back and forth over the spot where the wood is worn so soft, and remember.

One of the last times I went to see Lil I parked across the street from the store. She was sitting at the front, and she saw me before I crossed the street. She said, "Come on in Shug, where you been, watcha doin', where you goin'?" I told her I was coming right there to see her, and she told me to go get myself a "cold co-cola" from the back of the store and then come sit with her behind the counter. We visited for a while. In that time a couple of ladies came in and bought some undergarments, and a couple of other ladies came in and browsed around for a few minutes before leaving empty-handed. As the ladies left, Lil called, "Y'all have a good day and come back," and in the same breath she said, "They can't be from here, I've never seen them in my life."

Lil decided to close early so that she and I could go for a ride around town. I had about an hour until I needed to be back at Stoddard and Vivian's for supper. Riding around in Lil's Cadillac reminded me of when my grandmother still lived in town. Lil used to pick her and my Aunt Sister up at Christmastime and take them for rides to see all of the Christmas lights on the houses around Lake Providence just down across the Louisiana border.

Lil and I rode up and down all of the streets of town. She kept track of the living as well as the dead. She told me where everyone lived and where they used to live, and if there was an empty lot she told me whose house used to be there. We drove by my family's house and both agreed that it didn't look too bad. It did though, and it broke my heart to see it so forlorn and neglected. As we drove back downtown Lil said, "Town's dying, Sugar, I'm going to have to close the shop soon. I can't afford to stay open much longer." I reminded

her that she had said those same words to me almost five years earlier, and she laughed. After our ride Lil dropped me off in town to get my car and I got back to Stoddard and Vivian's house at five o'clock on the dot.

Lil was seventy-nine years old and she said, "It's obvious to anyone who looks that I'm no spring chicken." She kept her store because she loved it. Although it was no longer the moneymaker it once was, the store still served an important function downtown: it was the anchor. Lil's had always been a gathering place, centrally located in town as it was, but at that point in the life of the town I think it was more important that the ladies had somewhere to get together, in addition to somewhere to buy dresses. Once Lil's closed, the town lost its symbol of continuity and endurance and, with it, much of its vitality.

Lil opened her store on Saturday, August 10, 1957; and the town doctor, Dr. Anderson, came in to look around. Lil started the store on only \$10,000, which she used to buy such things as the display cases, shoes, and accessories and to advertise. This left precious little money to buy clothes. Can-can petticoats were the latest style, and Lil had bought plenty of them and little else. She had them all lined up around the front of the store, every color of the rainbow, swaying and bumping against each other like fat colored hens. Dr. Anderson finished his tour around the store and came up to tell her, "Lillibelle, you'll never make it." Dr. Anderson is long gone, but Lil's was still there.

Lil closed the store only on Sundays. In the last few years she and her husband had moved into town. They used to live outside town on a large piece of land that had to be mowed with a riding lawn mower because it was too large to cut with a walking mower. Lil loved to mow that lawn. She would get up on Sundays and go outside when it was just getting hot. She would put a Coke in the freezer when she



walked out the door, and when she finished with the yard, the Coke would be partially frozen, enough to be good and slushy. That was her special time, her ritual, and she still dearly missed it.

As she told me that story she ran her hand along the worn groove in the counter where she used to sit and watch all the goings-on in town. The story of the riding lawn mower and the half-frozen Coke, coupled with her unconscious caress of the worn counter, combined in a melancholic moment of loss. Over the course of my research, many women whom I admired and wanted to work with have slipped away, including my sweet grandmother; and now Lil, one of my main informants and the arbiter of all things social in the town, has slipped from her own memories because of Alzheimer's. Her store sits empty on Main Street, except for the bare counters and display cases. The ceiling still shows traces of the pink and gold glitter from the fifties, colors that grew less and less vivid as each year passed.

The story of Lil's shop creates more than a space on the side of the road—it re-creates a space that was the cultural center of town for almost fifty years. The story also offers stories within stories as I serve as the meta-narrator and interpreter, and as Lil “rode” me around town and recreated multiple spaces on the side of the road as she remembered each vacant lot or burned-out building for me. Lil's story also offers a glimpse into a particular southern womanhood of the Arkansas Delta.

Michael Herzfeld (1986) describes those actions which make the Cretan men of Glendi manlier. Herzfeld says that it is not as important to be a good man as to be good at being a man. The enactment of manhood is a form of cultural poetics, and the concept of poetics lends itself as easily to womanhood as it does to manhood. Stoddard embodied all of the aspects that would fulfill the poetics of a certain Delta southern manhood; the women of the Delta have their own poetic. In particular, it involves fulfilling roles traditionally enacted

by men and excelling at them while maintaining one's femininity. Both Lil and the pretty girl pilot in the next narrative were experts at this. Lil's husband was from an old farming family, but by the 1980's the viability of the small family farm in the Delta had waned, and Lil kept the family afloat with her business that she ran single-handedly in an efficient and consistent manner for half a century. She found joy in riding a lawn mower on hot Sunday afternoons and anticipating drinking a slushy "co-cola." As she did these things she remained the woman who gowned all the beauty queens and made sure all the ladies looked pretty.

Donna, the pilot, was the product of a man who rivaled the manliness of the tiny Glendiots and a tiny woman who remained fashionable and pretty as she ran the family cement business for forty years. Donna's father did the fieldwork, and her mother ran the business. Although less than five feet tall, Donna's mother ruled big burly men and kept an ivory-handled Colt .45 by her bedside; but she also maintained her 2:00 Friday appointment at the beauty shop for over forty years and collected a legion of size 4 shoes and matching handbags. Donna's parents each embodied a particular poetic of Delta southernness, which combined to form Donna's personal poetics.

#### THE PRETTY GIRL TAKES FLIGHT

There have been times in her life when Donna has excelled at things that most would consider activities reserved for men. For one thing, Donna can fly. The summer after her freshman year of college, a man was going to teach her older brother Charles to fly. Donna thought she should learn as well. Convincing her daddy was only slightly difficult. This was the man, who, after being questioned by his hunting buddies as to why he was bringing along his little girl to deer camp, for answer slid back the window separating the cab from the bed of the truck, gave Donna his gun where she was sitting with the other

men's sons in the back of the truck, and told her to shoot an armadillo that was rooting on the edge of the woods. Donna raised the rifle, took aim, and shot the armadillo clean through. As the armadillo was lifted into the air and flipped by the force of Donna's bullet, the men in the cab of the truck quit talking and said nothing more about her joining future hunting trips.

The fact that her daddy, Harl, would let Donna learn to fly probably didn't surprise many people. He'd been letting her drive around town since she was eleven. But Donna didn't just want to fly. She wanted to fly alone. The fact that Donna would be the first woman to fly a solo flight in Chicot County history did surprise some people. Maybe Harl was finally shaken by something Donna intended to do, for he would not go to the air strip to watch her landing. Instead he had his men at the concrete plant that the family owned lift him up high above the trees in the bucket of a front-end loader so that he could watch from the sky about a quarter mile away from the air strip.

A crowd of men had gathered at the air strip to watch Donna solo that day, including a reporter from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Her older brother, Charles, and their flight instructor, Billy, actually stood out in the middle of the runway. Donna said, "I don't know what they thought they were going to do there." Typically a flight student will land and take off three times in order to pass the solo test. Rather than stop each time, Donna did two touch-and-goes before landing after her third round. This level of skill greatly impressed Billy, and he'll still tell you that Donna was the only student he ever had that would wave at him from the plane as she was making her passes.

Donna so loved flying that her father and another man went in together and bought a plane of their own, a Piper Cub J-3. This is one of the most elementary flying machines, with an extra long

wingspan that allows it to act more like a glider than most planes. Donna and Billy had a good time in that plane, landing in unusual places, such as the levee or on a sandbar in the Mississippi River. They practiced stalls and tried to dip the wings into the Grand Lake. Had Harl known any of this, he would have lived in the bucket of the front-end loader.

Driving around town when she was only eleven years old, twirling and tossing flaming batons in high school, racing her Plymouth Barracuda against boys on the straights of Highway 65 South, and finally learning to fly, but then *playing* in the air by stalling and dipping her wings in the river and landing on sandbars—none of these things was quite rational, but the fact that she did them, looking like an angel, only added to Donna’s appeal. She continues to embody a particularly striking example of southern womanhood.

#### THE UNFORTUNATE HUBERT AND THE MOONSHINE

Despite the strong presence of evangelical Protestantism in the region, the Delta historically has been a hotbed of bootlegging activity. According to Willard Gatewood (1993), once the temperance forces in America succeeded in enacting prohibition early in the twentieth century, the answer to the legal ban on alcoholic beverages was a proliferation of bootleggers who supplied large numbers of unlicensed saloons with liquor. In the Delta, these saloons were known as “blind tigers.” Throughout Prohibition, the Delta remained a stronghold of opposition to temperance forces in Arkansas. Today, much of Arkansas, governed by staunch conservatives, is “dry,” meaning no liquor can be sold legally within the borders of the dry counties. Many of the “wet” counties in the state today are in the Delta.

Much of the liquor consumed in the Delta was homemade. One interesting facet of Delta whiskey production is that the underground

industry stayed in business long after Prohibition had been repealed (Hubbell 1993). According to Hubbell, whiskey-making in the Delta was at its peak in the 1930s. Prohibition was repealed in 1933 (Clark 2003), but according to Stoddard, making and selling whiskey in the Delta went on until the outbreak of World War II, when other types of jobs became available. Apparently, bootlegging provided employment in a region where money was tough to come by.

Only recently I learned that my family had a part in this history. Stoddard told me a story, which he said was told to him by my own granddaddy. It seems that Pa Barnes, who was my grandmother's father, was a whiskey producer with another townsman; and, along with some other men from the community, they employed Pa Barnes's sons-in-law to deliver whiskey for them. It was something of a family affair.

Apparently my own granddaddy had a model B Ford, customized for his bootlegging enterprise. In the trunk he kept a fifty-gallon drum and a siphon. He told Stoddard that he used to make whiskey deliveries for Pa Barnes all over the Delta. He would pull up and people would tell them how many gallons they wanted, and that's what he siphoned out. He and my grandmother married in 1935, so he would have started this enterprise well after the repeal of Prohibition.

According to Stoddard and Vivian, whiskey-making was a common occupation in the Delta, and the practice did not reflect badly on the practitioners. Lots of people did it, they told me. When Vivian was a child, her family lived out on the Boeff River (pronounced Beff). She said that she could remember seeing everybody's stills set up out in the slough. (A slough is formed when an oxbow lake becomes so choked up with cypress, lotus, and tupelo trees that there is very little open water left, and the lake is reduced to a narrow channel [Foti 1993]).

However, the fact that many people manufactured and sold whiskey did not make it legal, and occasionally there were consequences. Much of the Barnes family liquor was buried in drums in the potato patch. The men would take long steel rods and probe the ground until they found a drum and then dig it up. One day all the men were going into town except for Hubert, who was the brother of one of the sons-in-law. They all told Hubert, "Don't sell anything while we're gone." Later that afternoon two really "slick looking fellows" came to call. They were dressed up to go out on the town, including fancy straw hats. They said to Hubert, "We hear y'all make the finest whiskey around." Hubert said, "Yeah, I expect we do." They asked if he had any to sell, and he said, "No, not today." The men seemed disappointed and they said, "Well now, that's a real shame because we were looking to buy twenty gallons." Apparently this was a very good sale and Hubert could not bring himself to ignore such a boon. So he grabbed a rod and started probing the potato patch. When he dug a drum of whiskey out of the ground, he was promptly arrested by those two slick fellows. It was not a good day for Hubert.

#### REMEMBERING THE DELTA

Remembering is a process of creating. Sitting together, visiting, and storytelling facilitate the process of re-creating spaces lost in time. Stopping by seemingly empty spaces on the side of the road and telling stories about them ensures that the exploits of Stoddard and Vivian, Lil, Donna, and Hubert are remembered, and that the haunted and empty spaces of Sweetwater are repopulated and made into what I call an immortal topography. Bolsterli's landscape of the mind becomes immortal through narrative. Stewart described narrative as creating the possibility for alternative realities, creating spaces where things are remembered and given form, spaces where the Othered regions of America find a voice (1996, 4).

Jerome Bruner describes reality as “how we get a reliable fix on the world” (1991, 1). Bruner states that we organize our experiences and memories into narratives and that “narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although ironically we have no compunction about calling stories true or false” (1991, 5). All of the stories presented here are forms of the truth, the truth as my informants would have me know it, reality as they would have it remembered. Bruner suggests that the narrative form is the best mechanism for gleaning how reality is represented in the act of knowing. He states that “what creates a culture, surely, must be a ‘local’ capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure that permits a continuity into the present—in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy” (1991, 19-20). The Delta narratives not only create spaces on the side of the road in which forms of reality can be re-created and remembered, but also highlight the poetics of Delta southernness. As such, they exemplify Bruner’s local capacity of turning stories of the past into history through narrative.

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