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“THE QUEEN OF THE HOUSEHOLD”: MOTHERS, “OTHER” MOTHERS, AND FEMALE  
GENEALOGY ON THE PLANTATION IN POSTSLAVERY WOMEN’S FICTION

A Dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Department of English at The University of Mississippi

by CORRENA CATLETT MERRICKS

August 2012

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## ABSTRACT

In many ways, the plantation defined the U.S. South because it was the primary site of production, and therefore income, for prominent southerners. In addition to being a site of production, the plantation created a complex series of connected relationships that was imagined by the plantocracy to be a large family unit. It functioned according to a specific hierarchical model that was primarily based on a patriarchal understanding of genealogy. Yet Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde," Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, and Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order* are woman-centered; each text focuses on a mother-child relationship and privileges the voices of women over the voices of male characters. These texts focus on female genealogy rather than a traditional patriarchal understanding of genealogical history. Tracing female genealogy makes space to see alternate foci of power on the postslavery plantation and the ways women, particularly mothers, utilize this power. Looking at these texts through the lens of female genealogy illuminates moments when these authors explore the plantation's insidious nature and resist its traditional power structure. Each story places emphasis on exploring individual identity through an understanding of one's cultural and family history. This dissertation explores the ways black and white women, 1890-1950, express a shared identity. The six authors experience a shared historical memory;

each author reflects on the impact the plantation has had on the characters in her stories, and each author presents a new image of the changing plantation south. The authors explore their characters' anxieties about women's roles and places in a patriarchal society, and they explore the ways women gain and exchange power, both overtly and covertly. They also examine the ways mothers and children both love each other and manipulate each other. They look at relationships between black and white women, and they examine the ways these women are "family" and the ways they are not. Finally, they examine the ways a shared violent history shapes relationships between women in the present.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my sons, Isaiah and Ezra, and to my husband, D. You have enriched my life so much, and I am grateful to you for helping me keep perspective during this process. I hope that pursuing my dreams encourages you to pursue your own.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

### MAPPING NEW GENEALOGIES IN SOUTHERN WOMEN'S FICTION

In her book, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, one of Patricia Yaeger's themes is southern women writers and their relationships with their mothers. Referring to Virginia Woolf's assertion that "we write back through our mothers if we are women" (253), Yaeger traces a line of descent in which women's writing becomes historically significant, and she acknowledges that we have 150 years' worth of southern women writers to reflect upon. Yaeger asks a significant question: "If we write back through our mothers when we are women, the question we must ask in the South is—which mothers? Many white southerners were raised by black women, while many black southerners lost the constancy of their mothers to underpaid work in white homes" (253). In much southern fiction, genealogical history and reflections on the idea of family include women who were not actually part of the family. The role of mother and the cultural texts surrounding motherhood have a significant impact on how both black and white women understand themselves, their identities, and their bodies.

This dissertation is about motherhood in southern women's fiction, but it is not just about the connection between biological mothers and their children. Instead, it is about motherhood in some of its various shapes and forms it takes in southern fiction, including biological mothers but

also the “other” mothers who exist on the peripheries of southern texts. It is also about missing mothers: there are countless stories in southern fiction of women who have lost their children and children who have lost their mothers. It is about grieving mothers: story after story tells of black women who mothered white children while being forced to push their own biological children to the side. While reflecting on the place of genealogy in Southern Studies, I began to wonder if it would be possible to map a more extensive genealogy, genealogy that would include the “other” mothers in family history and that would expose the secret children of plantation owners who inherited their fathers’ features, but who would never inherit their possessions. In this dissertation, I focus on the plantation as a matriarchy and the significance of female genealogy in the works of women writers who engage the south: Kate Chopin, Pauline Hopkins, Zora Neale Hurston, Julia Peterkin, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter.

Examining the plantation as a matriarchy may seem problematic because the plantation was dominated by white males. In *Cotton’s Queer Relations*, Michael Bibler writes “no matter what the plantation setting in a text may look like, the defining characteristic for all of them is a hierarchical system of social relations in which every person is bound together through the blatantly heterosexualized rhetoric of paternalism” (5). Yet the texts I explore as part of this dissertation are woman-centered; each text focuses on a mother-daughter relationship and privileges the voices of women over the voices of male characters. Because of these characteristics, I argue that these texts focus on female genealogy rather than a traditional patriarchal understanding of genealogical history. Tracing female genealogy makes space to see other foci of power on the plantation and the ways women, particularly mothers, utilize this power. Kate Chopin explores a relationship between a mammy and her mistress in “La Belle

Zoraïde,” and she presents an image of a white mother who gives birth to a black child in “Désirée’s Baby.” Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* explores the genealogical history of a family by telling the story of an orphan. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores Janie’s genealogical history by telling the story of her grandmother’s past. Julia Peterkin’s *Scarlet Sister Mary* tells the story of Mary, a young woman who never knew her biological mother but gives birth to eight babies over the course of the novel. Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* emphasizes the mother-child relationship between Ellen Fairchild and her five biological children while telling the story through the eyes of Ellen’s niece, who has lost her own biological mother. Finally, Katherine Anne Porter’s collection of short stories, *The Old Order*, tells the story of a domineering grandmother who serves as matriarch over her children and their families since the death of her husband while also emphasizing the significance of her servant Nanny’s role in her life. Each of these texts takes place on or around a plantation; as the authors explore the importance of a family’s genealogical history, the plantation plays a central role in allowing the characters to understand themselves and their pasts. Each text is ambivalent: there are moments when women defy the patriarchal order, but each woman is also complicit in it. Looking at these texts through the lens of female genealogy opens up space to see when these authors explore the plantation’s insidious nature and resist its traditional power structure.

## 1. THE PLANTATION AS “FAMILY”

In many ways, the plantation defined the U.S. South because it was the primary site of production, and therefore income, for prominent southerners.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being a site of

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1. Several critics argue that the plantation defines the U.S. South, including James C. Cobb in *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, Richard King in *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South*,

production, the plantation created a complex series of connected relationships that was imagined by the plantocracy to be a large family unit. Understanding the residents of the plantation as a “family” was a positive way to view this community, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains in *Within the Plantation Household*:

For slaveholding women, and in some measure for slave women too, the most positive interpretation of the household lay in the metaphor ‘my family, white and black,’ which captured the important, if elusive, vision of an organic community. The white slaveholding women’s sense of community rested upon a psychological sense of belonging to a proper order—upon an obliteration or softening of the boundaries between egos, rather than an accentuation of them. (100)

As Fox-Genovese points out, the members of the plantation household formed a community, but their roles were not necessarily static. Sometimes roles shifted and individuals moved in and out of that community. She also points out that emphasizing the idea of “family” also stressed the idea of order. A patriarchal understanding of family indicates that its members do have varying degrees of importance and value, although they are all connected. The image of “my family, white and black” carries all of these connotations, and these help me to articulate the complicated relationships between women, servants, and children in the stories I discuss as part of this dissertation.

Undoubtedly, the family unit created by plantation culture was dysfunctional and oppressive to many of its members. In his book, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, Charles Aiken discusses several characteristics that define the plantation in the U.S. South:

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*1930-1955*, and Charles Aiken in *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*. King writes that “the plantation system was the key to understanding Southern economy and society” (20).

a plantation was often highly productive and highly profitable, one commercial crop was emphasized, the size of the landholding and the labor force were large enough to achieve economies of scale, and the labor force on a plantation was usually made up of entire families, although not families as traditionally conceived, since the imagined “family” included both the plantocracy and the slaves who labored on their behalf (4). Finally, Aiken mentions that “the managerial demand on large plantations is so intricate that it consists of a hierarchy that extends down from the owner to manager to foreman” (4-7). The hierarchy that existed on the plantation and the fact that the labor force was usually made up of entire families, sometimes reaching numbers over 100 people, served to create a unique culture (Aiken 6). My understanding of the plantation as paramount has been shaped by Elizabeth Christine Russ who writes: “I understand the plantation, in a literary context, to be not primarily a physical location but rather an insidious ideological and psychological trope through which intersecting histories of the New World are told and retold” (3). Russ’ characterization of the plantation as “insidious” is appropriate because of the way many members of the plantation “family” were violently exploited. The ideology of the plantation allowed a paternalistic relationship between whites and blacks, masters and slaves: it was possible to understand slaves as “family” members while abusing them. Understanding the members of a plantation household as a “family” allows me to use genealogy as my primary lens as I look closely at many of the complicated and troubling relationships between women in the texts I examine as part of this dissertation. The plantation was both a site of commodity production and a place where genealogical history played a significant role in the exchange of commodities; human bodies, both black and white, become commodities that contribute to the economic value of the plantation as a whole. It was also a machine that required numerous

workers, employees, owners and managers in order to successfully operate, creating the hierarchy that Aiken mentioned. The plantation functioned according to a specific hierarchical model that was primarily based on genealogy.<sup>2</sup>

Because the entire plantation was sometimes imagined as a “family” by the plantocracy, I discuss relationships between black and white characters as family relationships. On the cover of George Handley’s *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*, the subtitle, “Family Portraits in Black and White,” is juxtaposed over a black and white photo of a black woman and a small, white boy. The back of the book names the woman as “Wet nurse Mônica” and the boy as Artur Gomes Leal. The credit indicates that the photograph was taken by F. Villela in 1860. The image on the cover is captivating: both individuals in the photo are dressed in beautiful clothing and both are gazing at the camera; Mônica has a serious and somewhat sad look on her face, while the boy is leaning in toward her and hugging her closely. The picture subtly asks a number of provocative questions: How does Mônica herself reconcile her close relationship with this boy when her own biological child must be missing his or her mother’s milk? In what ways are Mônica and Artur “family”? How does Artur’s biological mother feel about the relationship between Artur and Mônica? How does a child who clearly loves his wet nurse learn to articulate

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2. In Russ’ introduction, she distinguishes between the American version of the plantation and the Spanish Caribbean version. She explains that the English word, “plantation” “is intimately tied to notions of rootedness, both literal and figurative. It can connote a variety of agriculturally oriented places and activities, including... ‘a cultivated bed or cluster of growing plants of any kind.’” Russ goes on to contrast the English word with the Spanish word for plantation, *ingenio*, which connotes a machine that “facilitates the exploitation of land and labor...In the first place, the plantation is imagined as an idyllic place. In the second, it is not a place at all but rather a system, a structure, or a machine” (7). I acknowledge the connections between the American version of the plantation and the Caribbean *ingenio*.

his feelings for her when she is treated as property? In what ways does Mônica's body, and the milk her body produces, function as a commodity and as a marker of class for Artur and his parents? Can a commodity be part of the family? The stories of wet nurses are not often told in great detail, especially in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but relationships that were similar to the one Mônica and Artur might have had are present in many of the texts I examine as part of this dissertation.

## 2. THE PLANTATION IN THE U.S. SOUTH

For this dissertation project, all of the books I focus on were written between 1890-1950, the period during which the post-Civil-War plantation thrived. The authors I study as part of this project represent a variety of backgrounds, and they provide differing images of the plantation in six states in the U.S. South. Some of them look back to a pre-Civil-War past, while others focus on the present-day for the authors, from the late nineteenth-century to the mid-twentieth century, but each of them emphasizes that the plantation continues to exist well into the twentieth century in the U.S. South.<sup>3</sup> The texts I examine as part of this dissertation articulate what Handley calls a “contemporary identity made possible by the past” (14).<sup>4</sup> Each story places a great deal of

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3. Charles Aiken argues that the idea that the plantation ceased to exist in the U.S. South after the civil war is a myth. He says “Plantations reached their numerical apex and greatest geographical extent in the American South early in the twentieth century. Ironically, at the very time the Southern plantation was at the height of its numerical and spatial importance, the idea prevailed that the great farms had vanished from the South” (8).

4. In *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*, Handley renames the U.S. South, and situates it in a society that he calls “Plantation America.” Plantation America is a group of nations or cultures that share the memory of slavery; common origins that include European colonizers, displaced indigenous populations, and imported African slave labor; and “new cultural syncretisms,” or new cultures and traditions that were birthed by a violent past (19).

emphasis on exploring individual identity through an understanding of one's cultural and family history. In each chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss how the texts I have chosen portray a unique image of the plantation. A strong influence in my study is Handley's *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*. He contributes three ideas that have shaped my project significantly: he compares texts that might not have been paired previously in order to help new conversations emerge between texts and authors, he connects these texts using the term "postslavery fiction," and he emphasizes the importance of genealogy in that fiction.

While Handley compares literature by men and women and by Spanish and English Language authors, my project narrows the variety of backgrounds; I explore the ways black and white women, 1890-1950, express a shared identity. The texts that I examine as part of this dissertation work in conversation with each other in order to articulate a female-centered vision of the plantation south. Chopin, Hopkins, Hurston, Peterkin, Welty, and Porter experience a shared historical memory; each author reflects on the impact the plantation has had on the characters in her stories, and each author presents a new image of the changing plantation south. Handley examines a variety of novels in his book, and about them he says "These novels...gravitate toward one another, begging for comparison, because of what I consider to be their uncannily similar postslavery cultural quandries. That is, they reveal parallel narrative anxieties about genealogy, narrative authority, and racial difference" (5). I find resonance

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Handley explains that "a common past brings various American nations together" and "the writers from this region emphasize a new, contemporary identity made possible by the past" (14). Handley's emphasis on the idea of a "common past" has shaped my project significantly. The texts I discuss as part of this project are all set in the U.S. South, so I use the term "plantation south" in order to describe them, but they share a historical connection to other Caribbean and South American authors.



between texts in a way that is similar to what Handley finds. The way conversations emerge between texts is a very exciting part of this project; each text sheds light on the others and brings similar questions to the surface. The authors explore their characters' anxieties about women's roles and places in a patriarchal society, and they explore the ways women gain and exchange power, both overtly and covertly. They also examine the ways mothers and children both love each other and manipulate each other. They look at relationships between black and white women, and they examine the ways these women are "family" and the ways they are not. Finally, they examine the ways a shared violent history shapes relationships between women in the present.

In this project, I utilize Handley's term "postslavery" in order to characterize the elements Chopin, Hopkins, Hurston, Peterkin, Welty and Porter have in common. Handley defines "postslavery" as "works of literature that, although written after the demise of slavery, return to slavery's past in a genealogical exploration of its deep, historical roots in order to understand its relationship to the present" (3). Handley goes on to say that postslavery literature "moves us away from a fixation on the more formal manifestations of slavery and into the more complex social relations before and after its legal abolition" (3). In the plantation south, relationships between women were complicated because of the hierarchical system. Women worked to wield power over each other, and they competed for the attention of the patriarch. In each of the texts I examine as part of this dissertation, the violent past haunts the present in a different way, but the authors often point to the past in order to illuminate the anxiety that their main characters experience. Because of this, I acknowledge the violent acts that exist within each family's genealogical past, whether the families in question were recipients of violence or the

perpetrators.<sup>5</sup>

Handley explains that an emphasis on genealogy is a defining characteristic of postslavery fiction: “As the central theme of postslavery novels, [genealogy] cuts both ways in that it can become a metaphorical privileging of patriarchy even if its intent is to dismantle the symbolic order of plantation society” (15). The authors I explore as part of my dissertation embody this idea of how genealogy “cuts both ways.” These texts are deeply ambivalent: by focusing on relationships between women, they work to “dismantle” plantation society, but they also demonstrate ways that black and white women uphold that order. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, Janie’s grandmother Nannie finally finds her own voice, but she uses that voice to dictate her granddaughter’s future and to enslave her to a man she doesn’t love; in *The Old Order*, Sophia Jane Gay escapes her husband’s dominance after his death, but she becomes a domineering voice instead of allowing others to experience freedom as well.

Exploring genealogical history as woman-centered exposes biological connections that cross race, gender, and generational expectations, and these connections make space for subverting the dominant narrative surrounding the plantocracy. In the plantation south, the “right” genealogical history became a source of power for an individual. The hegemonic structure of the plantation valued genealogy that emphasized white fathers and sons rather than white women and daughters; it also concealed the history of rape and violence that was

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5. Elizabeth Christine Russ writes that “the voices of those whose exploitation and loss were most intense under the plantation regime have, more often than not, been silenced or marginalized by the official archives of history. Consequently, our understanding of this history is far from complete” (3). The authors I discuss as part of this project examine the violent history of the plantation south, but it is important to acknowledge that the plantation was an insidious institution, and there are many stories of violence and exploitation that have never been told.

committed against black women and their families. Examining female genealogy shifts the audience's focus, privileges those who were previously excluded, and tells some of the stories of mothers and their children that the plantocracy desired to keep hidden. Many of the authors I examine as part of this project describe varying skin tones in great detail; sometimes their descriptions border on obsession, and this obsession is a symptom of their desire to subvert the patriarchy. Handley explains:

Genealogy is, on one hand, an ideological and metaphorical tool of exclusion, one that aided the plantocracy in publicly denying blacks a rightful place within the national family. On the other hand, it is a biological tool for the writers to identify the ellipses of the planter's scheme, the moments of contact with those who have been excluded. (15)

According to Handley, when postslavery authors write about family history, they are able to “revise the metaphorical meanings of genealogy that have been assumed by the plantocracy” (3). Handley mentions the “concealed evidence of sexual contact” in plantation genealogy; taking a close look at the women of color in southern fiction is one way to divulge the evidence (3). Indeed, genealogy is the key to power on the plantation because it allows the plantation owner's legitimate, white family to inherit his possessions and to continue the oppressive machine of production and consumption. Yet examining a family's genealogical history through a female lens opens up space for readers to see the “ellipses” Handley mentions (3).

### 3. THE PLANTATION SOUTH AS MATRIARCHY

Traditionally, a matriarchy is a society that is ruled by women or a society that records

genealogical history through the female line. The plantation was not a traditional matriarchy; it was a male-dominated society in which women were often considered to be objects or possessions. The plantation was an institution in which there were separate spheres for men, women, and for slaves. The exterior world of the plantation was a site of production where men worked in order to produce crops, but the domestic life that went on within the plantation household, what Aiken called “the storied big house” was primarily overseen by women (7). This big house is where the owner of the plantation and his family reside, and often the place “from which management disseminates” (Aiken 7), but it is also the place where another hierarchy is established and lived out. In her book, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South*, V. Lynn Kennedy reflects on the hierarchy that existed within the big house by quoting an 1839 article in the *Southern Literary Messenger* that called the mother “the queen of the household; her diadem is the social affections; her sceptre love; her robe chastity, pure as the driven snow, enveloping her form, so that the imagination can find naught to blush at, even in the impropriety of attitude” (10). According to Kennedy, there was an idealized image of white motherhood that set the U.S. South apart from its northern neighbor; the comparison to snow in the quotation is an example of the link between whiteness and purity, but this idealized image primarily applied only to members of the elite white class. Women were expected to live up to the ideals of piety and domesticity, and “*family* referred to more than private relationships; it was the primary unit of the southern social structure, forming the model for all other relationships of dominance and submission within society” (Kennedy 11). The exterior and interior worlds of the plantation merge and diverge, but it is this presumed world of separate spheres that allows me to focus on the female genealogy of the plantation. The interior spaces on

the plantation included their own version of hierarchy, and in many ways it mirrored the insidious focus on production and profit that was prevalent in the exterior spaces.

Rather than establishing the interior world as a completely separate space, I acknowledge the complicated relationship that existed between interior and exterior worlds; the plantation south was both a matriarchy and a patriarchy. According to Fox-Genovese,

Women contributed to the hegemony of the slaveholding class, even though men normally figured as its premier spokesmen, and no claim to understand them can ignore these contributions. Slaveholding women, who never figured as mere passive victims of male dominance, benefited from their membership in a ruling class. Slave, yeoman, and poor white women experienced their own subordination as, in some way, legitimated by women as well as by men. (44)

As Fox-Genovese explains, although all members of the plantation household were subject to the authority of the master, a female hierarchy also existed. Clearly defined boundaries stood between the world of the household and the world of the fields, but these lines were often crossed and re-crossed by various members of this large “family.”<sup>6</sup> About her book, *Delta Wedding*, Eudora Welty said “In the Delta it’s very much of a matriarchy, especially in those years in the twenties that I was writing about, and really ever since the Civil War when the men were all gone and the women began to take over everything” (*Conversations* 304). In southern

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6. It would have been easy to image the plantation as a “family” for a person in a position of privilege, but it is possible that some slave women and servants did feel some sort of connection with the family who cared for them. The complicated relationship between Nanny and Sophia Jane in *The Old Order* is a good example of how this image of “family” may have played out, and I explore this relationship in detail in my third chapter.

fiction, there truly is a power struggle; in some situations, white women “rule the roost” as Welty also says (189), but they are also subject to the expectations of a patriarchal society. About the plantation, Handley writes, “the region is defined by its indefinability; it is unified by its incapacity to be so. If the historical origins of this region are riddled with ruptures, its historical memory in fiction is both responsive to and liberated by them” (21). I take a cue from Handley as he voices the fact that the plantation south is difficult to define: rather than defining plantation culture as an “either/or,” I define it as a “both/and.”<sup>7</sup> By focusing on a woman-centered genealogy, I am able to understand the plantation south as both patriarchy and matriarchy.

Understanding the plantation south as both/and opens up space to ask important questions about the characters in the texts I examine and illuminates the tensions that existed in their worlds. In the plantation south, black servants were objects or possessions and also members of the “family”; white women were in a position of power over their black slaves or servants, but they were treated as commodities by their husbands; weddings were both celebrations of love and commodity exchanges; and power was disseminated in a straight line as a result of a strict hierarchy, but it was also exchanged among equals. Tensions such as these produced a great deal of anxiety among the individuals who worked to uphold the hierarchical structure of the plantation south. These women articulate the uncertainty that results from living in a both/and culture in different ways, but each of them explores this precarious position in her fiction, thus connecting these women and their stories. My examinations of these texts will illuminate some

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7. In their introduction to *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, Smith and Cohn discuss the U.S. South as a both/and space: “the U.S. South comes to occupy a space unique within modernity: a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated, empire and colony, essentialist and hybrid, northern and southern (both in the global sense)” (9).

of the tension that rises to the surface as a result of the complex relationships between “family” members on the plantation; the tension that results from living in a culture in which women are valued simultaneously as individuals, bodies, and commodities; and the tension that results from living in a culture that is obsessed with the past.

#### 4. THE PLANTATION AS META-NARRATIVE

Most historical scholars find the time of transition between 1880 and 1940 to be crucial to the development of the idea of the plantation (Aiken 5).<sup>8</sup> After the Civil War, plantation owners lost a great deal of capital when they lost the ability to own slave labor. Jessica Adams explains that “With the end of slavery, the plantation was (and is) still functioning as an agricultural entity. But new technologies and the rise of new economic forces and cultural forms caused it to evolve in terms of what it could do and what it meant” (5). In *Cotton’s Queer Relations*, Michael Bibler uses the term “meta-plantation” in order to signify the “vertical system of paternalistic and patriarchal hierarchies that constitutes the core structure of every individual plantation—whether it be slave or tenant, antebellum or modern” (6). The system of hierarchies Bibler refers to was the source of power for the plantocracy; without the power structure, they would not have been able to maintain production rates, and the plantation would have failed. During the post-war period of reconstruction, conditions became right for the re-creation of the plantation; the plantocracy no longer had the ability to own other human beings in the eyes of the law, but a narrative evolved that enabled them to continue to figuratively do that very thing.

I use Bibler’s understanding of the meta-plantation in order to inform my understanding

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8. Richard King discusses this time period in detail in *A Southern Renaissance*. He focuses on this time period in Chapter 2: “The Southern Family Romance and Its Context” (20-38).

of this narrative. The term “meta-plantation” refers to a set of hierarchies that form the “core structure” of every plantation (6). I argue that a narrative worked to uphold this system of hierarchies, so I call this story a “meta-narrative.” The meta-narrative is a story or myth about the plantation that became a set of cultural values: Richard King says “under attack from the outside, the region came to see itself as different from the rest of the United States” (20-21). This formation of an exceptional cultural identity informs the meta-narrative that I refer to. King explains that “in the Southern conception of itself, master and slave, rich and poor, male and female, knew their place before men and before God” (21). The meta-narrative is a set of constructed cultural values that dictate what one’s “place” is in the south, but it has real consequences and a significant impact on everyday life for southerners. There are six elements that are crucial to the meta-narrative as I define it: this narrative maintains a nostalgic picture of the “Old South”; the meta-narrative has the persistent ability to survive through popular culture; it emphasizes the importance of telling a glossy version of one’s family history, including a denial of racial mixture and violence in a family’s past; it insists on a binary understanding of race, dividing society into black and white; it divides labor strictly according to race, creating an underhanded method of controlling black life; and it upholds strict guidelines for expectations surrounding gender roles—women are understood as producers, white women of whiteness and black women of labor.

In many ways, the meta-narrative is similar to paternalism, which Brannon Costello defines in *Plantation Airs*: “Paternalism served as an insidious form of social control, a means by which the white upper class could control both the material circumstances of black life and even the desires and aspirations of the black community” (19). Costello discusses white social control



over blacks, but I extend Costello's discussion to consider other forms of social control and expectations of individuals. Costello explains that "despite transformations that seemed sure to unseat the planter elite, some version of the values of the nineteenth-century agrarian South adapted to technological and economic changes and managed not only to survive but to thrive well into the twentieth century" (9). Costello refers to these values as "the plantation myth" (9). He argues that this "myth" was a construction, emerging from the mind of the New South: "what we often consider the familiar values of the Old South emerged from the mind of the New" (9). Crafting a vision of the "Old South" as an idyllic place enabled the plantocracy to maintain their power: they were invested in perpetuating a way of life that mirrored the imagined "Old South" so they could hold onto their social and economic security. My term builds on Costello's image of "the plantation myth" by including an emphasis on family history and by exploring in detail how this myth impacted relationships between women and mother-child relationships in the plantation south.

In order to uphold the traditional patriarchal system, it was important that the pre-Civil War plantation be imagined as a simple and idyllic place; the myth that all residents of the plantation were part of a happy, loving "family" contributed to this picturesque image. A good example of the link between an idyllic image of the "Old South" and the myth that plantation residents were members of a happy "family" appears in early twentieth century travel advertisements. James Cobb cites a 1910 advertisement published by the Illinois Central Railroad inviting tourists to visit the Mississippi Delta as an example of nostalgia and racial paternalism. The advertisement attempts to attract tourists to the Mississippi Delta by implying that the past lives in the present in this unique place: "Nowhere in Mississippi have antebellum

conditions of landholding been so nearly preserved as in the Delta.” Tourists can visit large plantations “several hundred to several thousand acres in extent,” and the advertisement paints a picture of what Cobb calls “Tara-like contentment” when it describes the African-American laborers who are employed there: “The Negro is naturally gregarious in instinct, and is never so happy as when massed together in large numbers, as on the Delta plantations.” (98) The fact that Cobb cites an advertisement is a reminder that upholding this image of the “Old South” was a financial investment for members of the plantocracy; maintaining the “Old South” way of life, even if partly fictionalized, guaranteed that they could keep their position as members of the wealthy aristocracy, and it oppressed blacks who would continue to work on behalf of the plantocracy.

Cobb refers to the mood depicted in the advertisement as one of “Tara-like contentment”; this reference to Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 popular novel, *Gone With the Wind*, points out that Mitchell also painted a problematic picture of the “Old South” in her wildly popular novel. *Gone With the Wind* is an example of the meta-narrative’s ability to permeate popular culture. Tara McPherson says that “Tara becomes a symbol of the old ways of the antebellum South, and...what such a process erases is both the initial seizure of the land from its original inhabitants and the system of slave labor that allowed Tara to ‘miraculously’ produce cotton in the first place” (51). *Gone With the Wind* presents a nostalgic picture of the plantation “as home to a large and happy family” and a space “where childlike slaves are tended by kind masters” (51). The novel was a best-seller, and the recipient of the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Its popularity indicates the pervasiveness of the meta-narrative.<sup>9</sup>

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9. In her book, *Wounds of Returning*, Jessica Adams explores other examples of plantation ideology’s ability to persist in popular culture. She examines consumer culture, present-day plantation tours, and even a

The meta-narrative is a construction that enabled white males to maintain their position in the hierarchy, so it emphasizes genealogy and family history. A “pure” family history indicates that a family deserves to maintain its position as part of an imagined aristocracy, and it also guarantees that family members can hold onto their wealth. Handley argues that the plantocracy was invested in maintaining an image of itself as an elite aristocracy: “Plantation owners clung to their monopoly on property and to their claim of being the progenitors of New World nations by insisting on their own aristocratic family and blood lines, which divided their societies according to caste and color” (15). The divisions Handley mentions were rigid; crossing them could result in violent punishment or death for blacks. In *Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward discusses the post-Civil-War emergence of the “New South,” saying “genealogy became the avocation of thousands” (157).<sup>10</sup> Insisting on the purity of one’s blood lines and upholding a rosy image of one’s family history became important in order to maintain the idea that an aristocracy existed, and it also worked to uphold the nostalgic image of the “Old South” that I discussed earlier. Insisting on retelling a positive version of one’s family history indicates the deep anxiety the plantocracy felt about their position in the post-Civil-War-South: Woodward argues that “the South suffered from a prevailing sense of inferiority and a constant need for justifying a position.” This sense of inferiority is the reason behind the pervasiveness of the meta-narrative:

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Louisiana prison as she discusses the persistence of the plantation narrative.

10. James C. Cobb explains that the Mississippi Delta was a good example of the way the idea of an imagined aristocracy became pervasive in the “New South”: “Fancying themselves heirs to an aristocratic antebellum tradition, this cadre of white leaders sought to create through an ironic combination of economic modernization and racial resubjugation a prosperous and politically insulated cotton kingdom where the Delta planter’s longstanding obsession with unfettered wealth and power could be transformed from Old South fantasy to New South reality” (96-97).

“The fabled Southern aristocracy, long on its last legs, was refurbished, its fancied virtues and vices, airs and attitudes exhumed and admired” (Woodward 157).

The meta-narrative asserted that there were only two races: black and white were binary opposites, and any individual who was mixed-race was automatically classified as black. In order to uphold the position of the white aristocracy, it was necessary to exclude blacks from the family narrative. The idea that black and white are divergent has a significant impact on the ability to own property and be financially successful. Russ argues that “binary concepts of identity” were a significant component of plantation ideology (3). A binary understanding of race established a clear order for society, and it also had a significant impact on social roles and expectations. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha articulates the reason for the importance of defining race as a binary: “An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (66). Fixity was necessary for the plantation south to continue to function as it had in the past; this traditional society depended on signs of difference. Without clear differences and distinctions between individuals, the meta-narrative would not effectively uphold the patriarchal structure. Bhabha goes on to say that “Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (66). An obsession with fixity denotes disorder because it is a sign of deep-seated anxiety; the members of the plantocracy knew that their position of power was tenuous, and their insistence on retelling the meta-narrative indicated this.

The meta-narrative influenced social expectations, indicating how blacks and whites were

to interact, and what jobs were appropriate for black and white individuals. Woodward writes that “drippings from the plantation legend overflowed upon race and labor relations,” indicating the power of the meta-narrative to seep into all areas of life and to dictate prescribed social performance for both blacks and whites (157). Although the meta-narrative was a construction, it had very real consequences for African Americans; it determined which jobs were considered appropriate for African Americans: physical labor in an agricultural setting was most appropriate for black men, while black women were expected to work as maids or servants within the homes of the white elite. As Tara McPherson explains, “the plantation mythologies of the early twentieth century were almost always populated by the requisite ‘happy darkies,’ content to labor in the cotton fields and big houses of ‘dear ole’ Dixie”(45). The myth of the “happy darkie” combines a nostalgic representation of the “Old South” with social expectations regarding labor. The image of blacks who enjoyed physical labor controlled African Americans and separated them from the plantocracy: Costello argues that this was “an insidious form of social control, a means by which the white upper class could control both the material circumstances of black life and even the desires and aspirations of the black community” (19).

The meta-narrative also established guidelines for appropriate social performances for women. Because of this, it had an impact on how southern women understood their identities and their bodies. White women were valued for their purity, and were esteemed for their ability to reproduce whiteness itself; a nostalgic image of the plantation is closely associated with a particular vision of womanhood and femininity. An example of this appears in an 1891 article from *The Century Magazine* called “Southern Womanhood as Affected by the Civil War”:

In native womanly modesty, in boldness of manner, in refined and cultivated

minds, in gifts and qualities that shone brilliantly in the social circle, in spotless purity of thought and character, in laudable pride of family and devotion to home, kindred, and loved ones—these were the qualities for which Southern women were noted and in which they excelled. (140)

These flowery and superfluous adjectives are overwhelming, but the image of the white Southern woman was also overwhelming: the myth of the “ideal woman” was oppressive for both white and black women. Tara McPherson explains that “the myth of the southern lady (which is no less powerful for its status as a fiction) is central to southern culture” (19). Because black women were considered to be the opposite of white women, society also had expectations of them. Black women were understood as either hypersexual or asexual, and they were valued as bodies and objects. Jennifer Morgan explains in *Laboring Women*: “black women’s monstrous bodies symbolized their sole utility—the ability to produce both crops and other laborers” (14). Morgan’s description emphasizes the value of the black female body during slavery, but the understanding of black women as objects and sites of production continued into the twentieth century.

The meta-narrative understood women, both white and black, as sites of production. White women were valuable because of their ability to reproduce whiteness, while black women’s value was closely tied to labor, both physical and reproductive. The meta-narrative was a myth or a story, but it had a significant impact on women’s physical bodies. It was so powerful that it produced what Susan Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones call a “haunting,” especially surrounding female bodies. In their 1997 book, *Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the South through Gender*, they write:

Surely no bodies ever appeared more haunted by society. From the body of the white southern lady, praised for the absence of desire, to the body of the black lynching victim, accused of excessive desire, southern sexuality has long been haunted by stories designating hierarchical relationships among race, class, and gender. (1)

Donaldson's and Jones' use of the term "haunted" effectively characterizes the impact of the meta-narrative on women's bodies; this term links an ideological understanding of race and femininity to physical bodies themselves. Donaldson and Jones argue that the plantation's meta-narrative haunts the body's sexuality and has a significant impact on individual women's understandings of themselves and their roles in society. Each of the authors I discuss as part of this dissertation explores the link between an abstract idea and women's physical selves.

##### 5. Subverting the Meta-Narrative

The meta-narrative has the persistent ability to soak into everyday life and relationships, and it is difficult to escape. It has a physical impact on women's bodies, but it also impacts the surrounding world in other ways. Chopin, Hopkins, Hurston, Peterkin, Welty, and Porter have all internalized some of the meta-narrative's principles, but they also probe and question those same principles. The authors I explore in this dissertation challenge the power of the meta-narrative in four ways: they depict women's relationships to each other as more important than their relationships to the patriarch, they trouble rosy family histories by exposing stories of violence and sexual exploitation, they question rigid definitions of race, and they expose the plantation's insidious emphasis on production by highlighting commodity culture on the plantation.

In the plantation south, women's bodies are valued because of their ability to reproduce.

Black women produce labor and laborers while white women produce more members of the plantocracy, perpetuating the plantation order. Women are valuable as physical objects, and they are also valuable based on their proximity to the patriarch. Thus in order to uphold the plantation order, the patriarch should be the center of any story about the plantation south. The six authors I discuss in this dissertation craft woman-centered stories; each text focuses on the lives of women and relationships between women. The texts work to subvert the meta-narrative based on their subject matter; when Chopin, Hopkins, Hurston, Peterkin, Welty, and Porter elevate the voices of women in their fiction, they make space for readers to see the meta-narrative as a construction or an illusion rather than a fixed principle.

The meta-narrative divides the plantation south into black and white, but Chopin, Hopkins, Hurston, Peterkin, Welty, and Porter's stories question the meta-narrative's binary reasoning. The authors carefully describe mixed-race individuals in order to depict the varying skin tones of African American characters. Their presence disrupts the plantation order because mixed-race people wear the mark of a history of violence and rape in the color of their skin. The plantocracy insists on maintaining pure family lines, but the sexual exploitation of African Americans disrupts the purity they work so hard to uphold. Female bodies themselves are haunted by the history of sexual exploitation of black women; for example, in "Désirée's Baby," which I discuss in my first chapter, Désirée's husband questions her genealogical purity by comparing her to a slave named "La Blanche," or "the white one." La Blanche's physical body, and even her name serves as a reminder of the sexual violence in her family history, and when Chopin focuses on this character, she questions the notion that the plantocracy is a genealogically pure aristocracy.



The southern women writers I examine emphasize the significance of family history, but their versions of family history include stories of violence and exploitation along with descriptions of loving and affectionate relationships. These authors subvert the meta-narrative by crafting a complex vision of family history; for example, Chopin and Hopkins focus on secret histories, while Welty and Porter use violent language to discuss everyday family relationships. Each author paints family connections as being complicated rather than simple and rosy. Melanie Benson discusses how an emphasis on financial success and production can impact a family's history in *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912–2002*: “Haunted by the oppressive discourses and practices of antebellum slavery, patriarchy, and segregation, twentieth-century southerners enter a capitalist world ruled and contaminated by the politics of ascendance and the fetish of garnering surplus personal value at all costs” (4). Like Donaldson and Jones, Benson uses the term “haunted” to illustrate the way the past can impact the present; in this case, family history is polluted by an emphasis on capitalist production.

The authors I discuss as part of this project also probe the meta-narrative by depicting excess in great detail. By including detailed descriptions of physical objects throughout their works, these authors point out the plantation's emphasis on production and financial success. This also combats a nostalgic image of the “Old South” because it illuminates the tendency to exploit others in order to gain wealth. In her article, “Circum-Atlantic Superabundance: Milk as World-Making in Alice Randall and Kara Walker” Patricia Yaeger asks, “How much of this thematic or stylistic abundance reflects something long-standing about a hemispheric experience of surplus, superfetation, or superabundance that has become both myth and fact about the

southern stretches of Europe’s New World?” (771). Yaeger’s connection between thematic abundance and the United States’ history as colonizer illuminates commodities in southern literature in a new way—in many cases, commodities in southern fiction serve as reminders of family history, making them genealogical markers as well. Physical objects also serve as reminders of violence and exploitation in a family’s narrative.<sup>11</sup> Each of the authors I examine as part of this project explores the issue of excess; in doing so, they question the patriarchal structure of the plantation south.

## 6. COMMON QUESTIONS

Based on the ideas I have explored above, I have formulated several common questions that I will ask of each of the six authors I examine as part of this dissertation. How does this particular text explore the idea or the image of the plantation? Where does the author highlight hybridity and mixing in defiance of the meta-narrative’s assertion that race is a binary? In what other ways does each author subvert the plantation meta-narrative? How does each author uphold the meta-narrative? How does each text explore the idea of insidious commodification on the plantation? Finally, I want to explore the various ways each author demonstrates that anxiety is a very real part of living in the plantation south. How do racial and genealogical anxiety come to the surface in each text I examine, and how do the characters deal with that anxiety?

My first chapter explores texts that were written about the pivotal time of transition after the Civil War. Kate Chopin’s stories, “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*La Belle Zoraïde*,” both from

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11. Yaeger’s focus is mainly on the commodities that contributed to the success of the plantation’s exterior world—cotton, land, ships, and even the bodies of slaves, but this image of the importance of commodities as genealogical markers also extends to the domestic life in the plantation’s interior.

*Bayou Folk*, and Pauline Hopkins' sentimental novel *Contending Forces* look back at the pre-Civil-War plantation. The stories include problematic moments of nostalgia, but these authors also depict this time as dark and violent. Chopin and Hopkins illustrate the connectedness of female characters and the way the plantation served to aid those connections. By portraying links across time, gender, and race, Chopin and Hopkins trouble the meta-narrative's assertion that race is a binary. Each author takes time to focus on images of women, their bodies, and how their bodies are classified as commodities in their cultures. From a fair-skinned mother to a robust black mammy, women's understanding of their roles as mother or caregivers are shaped by their understanding of race and labor. Chopin and Hopkins obsessively reflect on genealogical history in these texts; Hopkins' frame narrative is the story of a slave-owning family who moved from Barbados to North Carolina only to have their mother discovered as being a mixed-race slave owner, while Chopin's stories focus on exposing secrets in two families' genealogical histories. The reflections on genealogy and the commodification of female bodies make these texts interesting for the purposes of my project. The fact that Chopin was a white woman who lived in Creole New Orleans while Hopkins was an African-American woman writing her own version of the sentimental novel means that comparing and contrasting these texts brings many issues to the surface. The authors' obsessions with genealogical history and their insistence on categorizing and describing various skin tones make this chapter an exploration of images of racial hybridity and how that hybridity shapes the role of mother. Both texts emphasize the history of rape and violence that has been a part of the history of the plantation South by highlighting the differences in skin color of various characters in the stories. These texts also explore the idea that the female body is a commodity—every woman's body has value, but dark-skinned bodies are valued for

different reasons than fair-skinned bodies.

My second chapter is a reading of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is set during the early twentieth century, but Nannie's memories of her life as a slave and her path to freedom provide a backdrop for Janie's discovery of her own identity. In *Scarlet Sister Mary*, Peterkin creates an imaginary plantation that is based on her privileged vision of plantation life; this novel is set during the time of transition between 1880 and 1940. Hurston and Peterkin reflect on the value of the female body and on women's ability to make choices regarding whether or not they would like to reproduce. These novels tell the stories of two women who come to accept and love themselves and their bodies through two different processes; Janie's ability to explore her identity and sexuality without having children gives her the chance to birth herself, while Mary's journey to becoming the mother of nine allows her to embrace her sexuality and feminine identity. The main characters in both novels are described as fully bodily and sexual—the female body is at the center of both stories. These novels are particularly interesting to explore through the lens of matrilineal genealogy because fathers and family history are often absent in the texts. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's ability to own herself and her sexuality makes her very different from her biological mother and grandmother. Peterkin's Mary does not know her biological parents—she was raised by members of her extended family. These novels are also explorations of class and racial identity; Hurston and Peterkin also take care to classify characters based on the color of their skin.

My final chapter is an examination of genealogical history in Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* and Katherine Anne Porter's collection of short stories, *The Old Order*. *Delta Wedding*

takes place in the year 1923, when the Delta aristocracy flourished. *The Old Order's* setting spans several generations, beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending around the 1920's, but the main character's reflections on her pre-Civil-War past and how her relationships have changed since the war make up an important part of the story. Welty and Porter also explore the value of the female body in these texts. *Delta Wedding* centers around an actual wedding, which is in many ways a commodity exchange between members of different classes. In *The Old Order*, the relationship between Sophia Jane, the plantation's matriarch, and her former slave, Nannie, is a way to explore the value of the female body and images of reproduction. This relationship also presents the idealized image of the plantation as a "family" as complicated and problematic; Sophia Jane sees Nannie as a member of the family, but Nannie asserts her own identity and separates herself from the Gay family after Sophia Jane's death. I also reflect on Welty and Porter's tendencies to include detailed descriptions of commodities within the interior spaces of the plantation because I believe that these descriptions are a way to expose the plantation's obsession with production. For Welty and Porter, each object in the home is connected in some way to family history. Some of the objects carry strong connotations of colonial history, like a chair made from trees that a Fairchild family member chopped down as he tore his way through the Natchez trace, and other objects serve as reminders of ancestors, like a tea set owned by a great aunt, but the way Welty and Porter attach family history to objects links the Fairchild and Gay families. I explore the issue of anxiety related to colonial history in this chapter by examining brief moments or mentions of violence that erupt in each text. If one read either Welty's novel or Porter's short stories through quickly, it might be easy to pass over the moments of violence that are included in the texts, but a careful reading notices that they rise to

the surface again and again—these moments point to deep anxiety about the families' places in their culture and society.

## CHAPTER 1:

### “I’M SO HAPPY; IT FRIGHTENS ME”: FEMALE GENEALOGY IN KATE CHOPIN’S AND PAULINE HOPKINS’S FICTION

Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* and Kate Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* were published only a few years apart—*Bayou Folk* in 1894 and *Contending Forces* in 1900. In this chapter I examine the short stories, “Désirée’s Baby” and “La Belle Zoraïde,” both from *Bayou Folk*, and Hopkins’ sentimental novel, *Contending Forces*. These texts center around motherhood and mother-child relationships. They tell stories of women and their children and the relationships between them, but they are also stories about the plantation in American culture and its far-reaching implications. On the plantation, the lives of black and white women were intricately intertwined in a complex hierarchical system; they often had sex with the same men, had children at the same time, and raised their children together. Chopin and Hopkins wrote at the turn into the twentieth century, and both authors’ writings demonstrate their desire to look to the future and to make changes to an oppressive system. However, these authors cannot look forward without also looking back, and their relationships with the plantation past in the United States has a marked impact on their views of femininity. Female bodies bear the weight of the past in which they were valued for their ability to reproduce and considered to be objects that could be bought and sold. The image of haunting works well in order to describe the way these

texts focus on genealogical history—the violence of the past seeps into the present and translates into pervasive anxiety; the three stories I examine here demonstrate the way this anxiety impacts relationships between women and mother-child relationships.

Chopin and Hopkins are obsessed with the past, so each text focuses on the genealogical history of its main characters; because of the nature of the lives of women in the stories, a traditional approach to genealogy is not appropriate. In his book *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas* George Handley discusses the differences between what he calls a diachronic and a synchronic reading of a postslavery<sup>12</sup> text: “Genealogy, though traditionally understood to reach back through time, becomes a means of unveiling the latent heritage of the present” (14). In the plantation south, genealogical history is both diachronic and synchronic; there is more than simply past and present at work in these stories, and biological connections are only one way to trace family history. “Synchronic” is one way to describe the organic nature of the large plantation family; genealogy is not simply a straight line, instead a web of connections is created between members of the family. In this chapter, I explore the synchronic connections between women and children in *Bayou Folk* and *Contending Forces* by examining mothers and their children and expanding the definition of the mother-child relationship. Exploring synchronic connections troubles the traditional understanding of the plantation as a patriarchal hierarchy and of race as a binary because it highlights moments of connection between the plantocracy and those they considered to be their “others.” These texts include elements that allow readers to see when a linear understanding of the plantation is troubled: female characters who are orphans or foundlings, gothic imagery, and monstrous depictions of the female body shift the audience’s gaze toward women, relationships between women, and the violence women experienced in the

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12. See my introduction for a definition of the term “postslavery” and justification for my use of it here.



U.S. South. Exploring these characteristics in more detail illuminates the multiple connections between characters in these texts; Chopin and Hopkins destabilize the traditional hierarchical image of the plantation when they connect black women and white children and when they point out biological connections between white and black characters.

Both *Contending Forces* and *Bayou Folk* were published at around the time that Charles Aiken calls a “time of transition” between the Old South and the New South (6). During the late nineteenth century, the plantation in the U.S. South transitioned from a place where the slave quarter was the prominent spatial feature to a site of production on which the dwellings of laborers were dispersed into tenant units. Aiken argues that the plantation reached its height around 1900 when “plantations reach their numerical apex and greatest geographical extent” (7, 8). Hopkins’ novel is set during the late nineteenth century—a time of transition for the plantation in the U.S. South—and Chopin’s texts are set either during or before the Civil War, but each text is a narrative in which the author looks back at the past. Because the stories are written in the form of frame narratives, they explore connections between past and present for the authors.<sup>13</sup> Chopin and Hopkins disrupt an understanding of time as linear; in the plantation south, the past reaches into the present to influence individuals. The plantation south that Chopin and Hopkins depict occupies both the past and the present. *Contending Forces* juxtaposes two stories and connects the stories through family genealogy: one is the story of the injustices endured by a plantation owner’s family while the other is the story of their descendants that occurred years after the “end” of slavery. Hopkins’ juxtaposition serves to connect these two generations.

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13. “*Désirée’s Baby*” is not a frame narrative, but as part of the short story collection, *Bayou Folk*, it reflects on the past. Some stories in the collection, including “*Désirée’s Baby*,” are set before the Civil War, and some are set after the war.

“Désirée’s Baby” is set before the Civil War and the ending of slavery, but its placement in a collection of postbellum stories is also a juxtaposition. “La Belle Zoraïde,” is a frame narrative that tells the story of two mother-child relationships: a mammy and her mistress who live in war-afflicted Louisiana reflect on the pre-war story of Zoraïde, a slave who is forced to give up her baby. The juxtaposition of antebellum and postbellum stories is one way the authors demonstrate the liminal nature of the plantation. In this chapter, I examine the role of the plantation in these texts, but it is important to acknowledge that both Chopin and Hopkins lived lives of relative privilege, and that pieces of the story of the plantation south are missing in these stories. I seek to find the holes in the texts where darkness and violence rise to the surface whether or not these two authors are able to articulate the deep loss of marginalized women clearly.

The plantation south is a physical place, but it is also a system that upholds a linear and hierarchical understanding of the world. This hierarchy translated into an understanding of race and gender as binaries; women were less valuable than men and blacks were less valuable than whites. In *A Southern Renaissance*, Richard H. King links this hierarchical structure to anxiety about the U.S. South's ability to withstand crises: “In all these ways, and others, the South was not born traditional, but became so. Its insistence upon cultural superiority masked anachronistic cultural values. The relative prosperity of the planter class hid the fact that the South was itself enslaved by the demands of a larger world economy” (21). The image of the south as culturally superior to the rest of the country was one way to deal with anxiety in the midst of change. The meta-narrative was necessary to uphold the lifestyle of the plantocracy, so many individuals were invested in continuing this story. Chopin and Hopkins both resist and uphold the image of the U.S. South as culturally superior, the binary logic of the meta-narrative, and traditional

expectations surrounding gender and femininity.

When Chopin and Hopkins depict hybridity in the texts, they remind the readers of sexual relationships between white men and black women that the patriarchs would have liked to keep hidden. Because it exposes what Handley calls “the ellipses of the planter’s scheme, the moments of contact with those who have been excluded,” the presence of women of color in these three texts disrupts a binary understanding of race and subverts the patriarchal order of the plantation south (15). Chopin and Hopkins expose the frequent sexual exploitation of black women that occurred in the plantation south by carefully describing women and children of various skin tones. The novels are explorations of traditional nineteenth-century expectations of white and black women, but they also explore cases when lines are blurred and boundaries are not clearly defined, bringing to light questions of hybridity and fixity. Chopin and Hopkins lived in a society that found comfort in clearly drawn lines that created distance between races in spite of the fact that those lines were a construction.<sup>14</sup> Early twentieth-century American culture maintained the illusion that black and white were binaries, but Chopin and Hopkins pay detailed attention to both fair and dark-skinned African-American characters.

These texts were published at the end of the nineteenth century, so they also come at a very important time for women in the United States. Another source of the tension for Chopin and Hopkins is the fact that they lived during what Elizabeth Ammons calls “a time of large-

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14. In “Edna Pontellier, Adèle Ratignolle, and the Unnamed Nurse: A Triptych of Maternity in *The Awakening*,” Katie Berry Frye explains that late nineteenth-century New Orleans had a reputation for “quadroon beauties and interracial intimacy,” but it also became “the setting of some of the harshest and earliest Jim Crow laws.” Jim Crow laws applied to blacks regardless of whether or not they had mixed ancestry because “miscegenation evinced a sincere and profound terror of the decline of the white population” (47).

scale, visible, fractious political movements among women” (*Contending Forces* 6). I examine these texts as Southern, but I also acknowledge that they have a place in American Literature as a whole. “*Désirée’s Baby*,” “*La Belle Zoraïde*,” and *Contending Forces* are reactions to the Cult of True Womanhood. Rather than continuing to uphold the ideal of the True Woman, which Ammons explains as “an ideal stressing domesticity, moral and sexual purity, submissiveness to authority, and removal from public affairs,” upper-class white women wanted to be redefined as “The New Woman” (7). These new women were involved in politics during the Civil War, and after the war their involvement grew. The turn of the century was a time when both black and white women desired to redefine themselves and make their voices heard, although the ideal of “true womanhood” did not apply to black women, who were valued as commodities or because of their labor or reproductive value.

In “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*La Belle Zoraïde*,” Chopin criticizes the image of the white female as sexually pure and as “the angel in the home” while Hopkins subverts and appropriates that image by casting a black woman in the role of “true woman” in *Contending Forces*. Chopin and Hopkins explore the issues of sexism, racism, and oppression by telling stories that center around mothers and their children; reproduction is important because it was necessary in order to continue the plantation owner’s genealogical line, but Chopin and Hopkins show us moments when reproduction subverts the plantocracy’s power. The texts work together to subvert the patriarchal order of the plantation south by connecting women, exposing the frequent sexual exploitation of black women, and by blurring binary understandings of gender, race, and class.

## 1. FRAME NARRATIVES: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

“*Désirée’s Baby*,” “*La Belle Zoraïde*,” and *Contending Forces* disrupt a binary understanding of the world by writing about a culture in which individuals reflected on their identities as related to both the past and the present. Connecting the past and present also connects female characters in the stories; the women of the present navigate their understanding of the world based on their connections with the women of the past. These texts were published in the late-nineteenth century, but each of them focuses on the time before the Civil War and the end of slavery. Bringing the past and present together in their stories is one way Chopin and Hopkins demonstrate the power of the past and its ability to shape their characters’ lives. These two authors indicate the power of the past and its ability to reach into present-day thinking, but they also demonstrate the insidious nature of the plantation’s history instead of understanding the past in a nostalgic way.

*Contending Forces* is an African-American novel that has been re-discovered and canonized as a result of the efforts of critics like Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate.<sup>15</sup> In it, Hopkins includes a preface in the first pages of *Contending Forces*, similar to the authenticating texts that introduce many earlier slave narratives, including *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*. She uses self-deprecating language that establishes her voice as one that is similar to other nineteenth-century women’s fiction in the opening sentence: “In giving this little romance expression in print, I am not actuated by a desire for notoriety or for profit, but to do all that I can in an humble way to raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (13). Hopkins goes on to

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15. Hazel Carby discusses the re-discovery of *Contending Forces* in her book *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Claudia Tate discusses the same in “Pauline Hopkins: Our Literary Foremother,” in *Conjuring Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

explain that she desires for her novel to motivate her readers to act politically in order to end lynching and mob violence. Mob violence escalated in the late nineteenth-century, and Hopkins desires that her “little romance” would enlighten her readers. But she also makes a connection that is integral to my argument in this chapter. She writes “Let us compare the happenings of one hundred—two hundred years ago, with those of today. The difference between then and now, if any there be, is so slight as to be scarcely worth mentioning” (15). By including this statement in her introduction, Hopkins connects the present to the past, and indicates that the two are more similar than many would like to admit. She indicates that the plantation of the American past continues to exist in her late-nineteenth-century present by constructing a frame story in which her characters are closely connected to their ancestors. Sometimes the characters don't know their genealogical history, but the novel explores the discovery of their pasts and their connections with ancestors who they may never have known. Hopkins centers her entire novel around the idea of genealogy,<sup>16</sup> but instead of emphasizing the importance of fathers and male characters as the origins of family history, Hopkins places women at the center of her novel. Connecting the past and present works together with Hopkins' overall purpose because her frame narrative indicates that the insidious nature of the plantation continues to exist in late-nineteenth-century Boston. She connects past and present, north and south, and in doing so she connects women who are victims of violence and racism.

Hopkins names her first chapter “A Retrospect of the Past,” indicating her plans for the chapter. She also includes an epigraph that serves several purposes. For an author like Hopkins, epigraphs serve as authenticating documents, indicating that she is well-read and literate. The

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16. Carol Allen discusses Hopkins' preoccupation with genealogical history in *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner*.

epigraph also serves as a brief summary of the first chapter. Hopkins includes the first verse of an abolitionist song written by John Greenleaf Whittier in 1862: “We wait beneath the furnace-blast / The pangs of transformation; / Not painlessly doth God recast / And mould anew the nation. / Hot burns the fire / Where wrongs expire; / Nor spares the hand / That from the land / uproots the ancient evil” (17). Her use of an abolitionist song in combination with her chapter title and the material in the introduction fit well with the novel’s beginning: Hopkins tells the story of a slave-owning family who moved from Bermuda to North Carolina in 1800. The Montfort family, including Charles Montfort, his wife and two sons, is the focus of Hopkins’ frame story; Montfort has decided to move to North Carolina and free his slaves at the dictates of his conscience, which will no longer allow him to own slaves. Hopkins’ epigraph foreshadows the difficult time Montfort will have; she portrays slavery as an insidious institution that is extremely difficult to eradicate. Hopkins connects Montfort’s story to the story of his descendants. Dora Grace Montfort Smith and William Jesse Montfort Smith are his great-grandchildren. The main narrative of the novel centers around their story and the story of the boarding house their mother keeps after the death of their father. The connections between characters become quite complicated, but they work together to support Hopkins’ goal of indicating that advocacy work on behalf of African Americans continued to be necessary long after the end of slavery. The most significant connections in the novel are between female characters; Hopkins tells the stories of two women who were victims of violence, Grace Montfort and Sappho Clark.

Chopin’s preoccupation with genealogy also emphasizes her characters’ connections to their pasts. Chopin connects black and white characters, but she does this covertly. Her focus on

genealogy is not as prevalent as Hopkins', but Chopin's characters are often linked to their pasts, demonstrating that genealogy was important in the plantation south. Discussion of genealogy and plantations normally brings the ideals of patriarchy to mind: plantations are passed down from father to son. In both "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde," looking at mothers and their children helps us to see the plantation world through the lens of female genealogy. "Désirée's Baby" is one of Kate Chopin's most anthologized stories. It was first published in Vogue magazine in January of 1893, and it has the feel of a mystery novel or a drama, perhaps in order to be more appealing to female readers. The story is set in Louisiana before the Civil War, and in it Chopin explores the relationships between several slave-owning families as well as the relationships between slaves and their masters. "Désirée's Baby" is set during antebellum times, but it functions as a flashback in its overall setting in *Bayou Folk*, a collection of postbellum stories. Désirée is a young woman whose history is unknown, and the fact that she is an orphan brings the question of genealogy and family history to the forefront of the story. Her husband, Armand Aubigny, whom Emily Toth describes as a "classic battering husband" (143) is a slave owner whose "rule was a strict one" (243). "La Belle Zoraïde" is a less well-known story that deals with similar themes. It was first published in Vogue a year after "Désirée's Baby." In "La Belle Zoraïde," we have two images of motherhood; the first is Manna Loulou, the "old negress" who is a mammy to Madame Delisle, the young mistress of the plantation in the story. Chopin describes Manna Loulou as "black as the night" (312). The second is Zoraïde, a slave who is separated from her child and loses her mind as a result. It is significant that Chopin chooses these two images to portray a picture of motherhood and maternity in the plantation south; these stories present motherhood as problematic and complicated.



Although both “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*La Belle Zoraïde*” depict life before the Civil War, their 1893 and 1894 publication dates connect them to anxiety about race in postbellum America. According to Katie Berry Frye, miscegenation was “a site of feverish anxiety in postbellum New Orleans” (47). Telling stories about the past is one way Chopin's characters navigate the anxiety they feel in the present; the past is the key to understanding the complicated nature of race and family relationships in the late-nineteenth century plantation south. In “*Désirée’s Baby*,” the plantation is presented by the narrator as an ominous, “sad-looking” place where women and children of various skin tones live and work together. The residents, both servants and masters, speak French, and it feels as if violence may erupt at any moment. Armand, the plantation master, has a history of violent outbreaks and frequently abuses his slaves. “*Désirée’s Baby*” illuminates the complexity of relationships between husbands and wives and servants and mistresses.

“*La Belle Zoraïde*” is a frame narrative that allows a servant to explore the complicated nature of her relationship with her mistress. Manna Loulou and Madame DeLisle appear to have a loving, close-knit relationship. They are more than servant and mistress; they have been together for a long time, and their relationship is more like mother and daughter. Madame DeLisle, who is described as having “pretty white feet” and hair the color of her wedding ring, cannot go to sleep without being fanned by a servant and being told a story by her servant (312). In a subversive, passive-aggressive move, Manna Loulou tells a story about motherhood to her mistress. Unlike Manna Loulou, Zoraïde, the heroine of the story, is “the color of *café-au-lait*,” what Catherine Lundie calls “an important distinction in Louisiana society” (154). Although Manna Loulou appears to have only the purest feelings of love for Madame DeLisle, the dark

nature of the story she chooses to tell demonstrates that her feelings for her mistress are complicated. The story also provides an alternate image of motherhood on the plantation. The predominant nineteenth-century images of motherhood include the true woman, who is the embodiment of the Victorian cult of domesticity; the mammy; and the black female slave, who is stigmatized as hypersexual. The story *Manna Loulou* tells includes the image of a black female slave who could be stigmatized as hypersexual, but instead she is portrayed with compassion. Zoraïde's story is heartbreaking; as mother, she is abused and treated terribly, and finally she goes insane as the result of the loss of her child.

## 2. SECRET HISTORIES: RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In addition to recognizing the ever-reaching influence of the past, both Chopin and Hopkins emphasize the importance of secrets and their relationship to genealogy in the plantation south. Secret histories indicate the importance of the past in present-day relationships; as much as some of the characters in these texts would like to believe that they can conceal their pasts, their secrets always come to the surface. The authors' insistence that women and motherhood are central in these stories brings the "concealed evidence of sexual contact"<sup>17</sup> Handley mentions to light, pulling secrets that have been pushed to the side to the center of the story (3). Orphans, or foundlings, are central characters in each text: in "*Désirée's Baby*," *Désirée*, *Zandrine*, and *Armand's* mother are each orphans or characters whose genealogical

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17. I quote this passage from Handley more fully in my introduction: "That is, by following biological links across races, sexes, and generations, family history exposes the genealogical ideologies that have concealed evidence of sexual contact across racial and class lines in order to protect a white elite patrimony and to evade the widely syncretic and contestatory nature of plantation cultures." (3)

history is kept secret; in *Contending Forces*, Grace Montfort's racial history is kept secret until she moves to North Carolina, and Sappho, another character who is central to the novel, has a secret history as well. The focus on orphans is also tied to an emphasis on secrets in the texts. Secrets tell the story of female genealogy—they tell the stories of women and the rape or violence they have experienced.

Grace Montfort's history is never articulated in the novel. By opening the novel with an emphasis on Grace's secret history, Hopkins casts an aura of secrecy and mystery over the rest of the story. Descriptions of Grace focus on her physical appearance and emphasize her beauty. Grace's son, Jesse Montfort, chooses to identify himself as a black man, but we as readers never clearly know his ethnicity; Brown describes Jesse's transition from South to North as "a gruesome immigrant narrative, one in which none of the traditional and uplifting hallmarks of transition, acculturation, and advancement apply" (221). Hopkins questions the traditional binary understanding of race by centering her story around characters whose ethnicity is unknown. The postbellum portion of *Contending Forces* takes place in the Boston home of Ma Smith, the widowed daughter of Jesse Montfort and his wife Elizabeth. Ma Smith runs a boarding house, and she takes in a mysterious boarder named Sappho Clark. Sappho's character is at the center of most of the novel; the Montfort family's frame story hangs in the background, lending significance to the present-day tale and indicating Hopkins' intentions. Sappho's history is mysterious; she keeps her past a secret. We learn later that Sappho has a child as a result of a violent incestuous relationship, so she is keeping her sexual history a secret, but throughout the novel the mystery surrounding Sappho connects her to Grace Montfort, making issues of family history and genealogy central. Hopkins' careful construction of the frame narrative emphasizes

the connections between characters, particularly between Grace Montfort and Sappho, indicating the synchronic nature of relationships in the novel, particularly relationships between women.

From the moment she is introduced, Sappho carries an aura of mystery and secrecy about her. She keeps to herself, and she doesn't volunteer any information about her past. In an early conversation with Dora, Ma Smith's daughter, she asks "Then you are not one of those who think that a woman should be condemned to eternal banishment for the sake of one misstep?" (100), indicating that she has a secret history. Sappho is gifted in caring for a home and establishing a comfortable domestic space, and she is also delicately beautiful and fair-skinned, making her a good representative of a sentimental heroine. The story of her family history is absent, as Hopkins narrates: "It was noticeable in these confidential chats that Sappho never spoke of her early life. Dora had confided to her friend every event of importance that had occurred in her young life...but all this had begot no like unburdening to eager ears of the early history of her friend" (127). Most of the novel is a social drama surrounding the question of whom Dora and Sappho will marry, taking place in social settings like dances, gatherings, church services, and activist rallies. Sappho's secret history is not brought to light until she is engaged to Dora's brother, Will Smith. Interestingly, it is John Pollock Langley, a mixed-race descendant of Anson Pollock,<sup>18</sup> the man who brought Grace Montfort's genealogy into question, who discovers Sappho's secret and accuses her of lying and infidelity. Although most of the novel takes place in Boston, Sappho's history brings us back to the U.S. South, notably New Orleans, in order to tell

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18. The story of John Pollock Langley adds an interesting dimension to the discussion of genealogy in the story, but I don't explore it in detail because I am focusing on motherhood and maternity in this chapter. The existence of Anson Pollock's mixed-race ancestors is an indictment of the double standard regarding male and female sexuality in the plantation south.

the full story.

While telling a story that fits within the form of a sentimental novel, Hopkins emphasizes the plight of mixed-race Americans, and points out that often mixed-race persons have a story of violence as part of their genealogical past. Hopkins does not shy from communicating that sexual violence against African-American women was pervasive. Sappho and Grace Montfort are family now; Sappho marries Grace's great-grandson, but the women are also connected because they are both victims of sexual violence. When Sappho's past is revealed, another orphan becomes central to the story; Sappho has a son who was conceived as a result of an abusive sexual relationship. Sappho's mixed-race father had a white half-brother who was attracted to her when she was a teenager. Her uncle raped her and kept her trapped in a brothel, and when confronted by his brother replied: "But your child is not better than her mother or her grandmother. What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue?" (261). Sappho's son was conceived as a result of rape, and by telling her story, Hopkins reminds readers that many fair-skinned African-Americans in her time have a history of rape in their genealogy. In her article, "Slavery Sexuality and Genre: Pauline Hopkins and the Representation of Female Desire," Kate McCullough writes

Hopkins counters the post-Reconstruction racist, white, supremacist appropriation of the mulatto figure....Using rape in place of "passing" as a figure for relations between the races, Hopkins self-consciously underscores the ways in which the white American imagination had linked sexuality to racial identity and had, moreover, figured a racial "threat" in sexual terms. (25)

By telling the story of Sappho's secret history, and by reuniting her with her son, Alphonse, who

was housed in a convent and had been told his mother had died, Hopkins highlights the story of the orphan. The injustice that is a result of stereotypes regarding African-American women's sexuality has forced many women to keep their stories secret and to become separated from their children.

“*Désirée’s Baby*” also emphasizes the significance of a secret history. *Désirée* is an orphan who is adopted by Madame Valmondé. Her status as an orphan demonstrates the double standard that existed in the plantation south regarding genealogical purity, and it also illustrates the way females and female bodies functioned as commodities in the plantation order. Interestingly, her status as an orphan also connects her to other orphaned women and children in the text. The short story focuses on *Désirée’s* relationship with her adoptive mother as well as her biological child, a son. Chopin upholds the mother-child relationship as primary throughout by focusing the story's surprising ending on the mother of Armand Aubigny, the plantation owner. *Désirée’s* mother discovers her as a baby sleeping in the shadow of one of the plantation's pillars; she is associated with the white pillars of the plantation home from the beginning of the story. Her association with the plantation emphasizes her role as an object. Because her history is unknown, she is passed from person to person and claimed as a possession. First her mother claims her and names her as her own, and later, a plantation owner's son and heir, Armand Aubigny, falls in love with her upon seeing her leaning on the same stone pillar:

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her...[T]he passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a

prairie fire. (242)

Désirée is transferred from her mother's ownership to her husband's, and the next step is to perpetuate the plantation system by becoming the mother of Armand's children. Armand takes a risk by marrying a woman with no history; he risks polluting his family's supposed genealogical purity, but as Chopin narrates, he "fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot." (242). Armand's position as a male in power gives him a sense of over-confidence: "He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" (242). Armand's over-confidence also characterizes his demeanor as head of the plantation where his "rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime" (243).

Désirée is not the only individual in the story who does not know her genealogical history. We are also introduced to other plantation mother figures, including the "yellow nurse woman" named Zandrine, who cares for Désirée and Armand's new baby boy (243). Désirée and Zandrine spend a lot of time together; they live together and work together like family members. Although their relationship is hierarchical, Chopin weaves multiple connections between these women, demonstrating that both of them are the victims of an insidious patriarchal system. Like Désirée, Zandrine's origins are unknown. Her yellow skin is never discussed; it is mostly taken for granted except for the fleeting moments when Désirée's mother carefully scrutinizes her grandson and then "looked as searchingly at Zandrine" (243). Zandrine serves as a double for Désirée, since neither woman has a genealogy or a past. Désirée was adopted by a white family and she lives within a position of power, but Zandrine lives her life as a slave, caring for her master's child instead of her own, who may also be her master's child. The fact that we do not

know Désirée's story causes us to wonder about Zandrine's story, illuminating the "ellipses of the planter's scheme" Handley mentions (3). By creating Zandrine as Désirée's foil, Chopin blurs the traditional dualistic understanding of race that the meta-narrative has perpetuated. Zandrine's hybridity illuminates the issues of genealogy Handley discusses and points out that Armand, whose racial purity is the source of his power in many ways, has had "moments of contact" with his "other."

"La Belle Zoraïde" also explores the stories of orphans and secret histories, continuing the theme of "black" servants waiting on black mistresses, showing how muddled the racial binary is and how much ancestry is concealed. Manna Loulou tells the story of a beautiful, fair-skinned maid, Zoraïde, who has led the life of a house-slave and has been pampered and doted upon: "from a toddling thing she had been brought up at her mistress's side; her fingers had never done rougher work than sewing a fine muslin seam; and she even had her own little black servant to wait upon her" (313). Chopin mentions that her owner, "was her godmother as well as her mistress" (313). Zoraïde's mistress would like to imagine that she is Zoraïde's mother and her family, but Zoraïde's biological mother is never mentioned. Her cafe-au-lait skin indicates that her genealogical history may include rape and violence. Zoraïde's genealogical history is kept secret or is forgotten, making her an orphan. When Zoraïde engages in a sexual relationship outside of her mistress' knowledge, she is not allowed to keep her baby, continuing the orphan narrative. Zoraïde was an orphan, and her baby becomes one as well: "For the baby was living and well and strong. It had at once been removed from its mother's side, to be sent away to Madame's plantation, far up the coast" (315). Madame's love for Zoraïde and the mother-child relationship that she acts out are simply charades that place Madame in a paternalistic position



over her slave.

By crafting the narrative in this way, Chopin troubles the plantation meta-narrative. She points out that the paternalistic, loving relationship between a mistress and her slave is a lie; the mistress's kindness ends when Zoraïde makes her own decision about her sexuality. Zoraïde is a commodity and a site of production. She is not allowed to maintain a relationship with her biological child, so she produces another orphan. Zoraïde's story can be representative of many women's stories, indicating that babies without mothers and mothers without babies are a result of the commodity exchange that happened on the plantation. Light-skinned slaves like Zoraïde are considered more valuable than dark-skinned slaves, but the topic of how they came to be light-skinned is taboo. As Mary Chestnut writes, "Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds" (quoted in Lundie 133). The loving relationship between Manna Loulou and her mistress could be seen as an image of the idyllic or rooted plantation, but the story Manna Loulou tells her mistress in order to help her go to sleep presents the image of the plantation as an insidious machine. Manna Loulou's story points back to herself; she is also connected to Zoraïde because she lives with and cares for a young woman who is not a member of her biological family. Manna Loulou and Madame DeLise have a complicated mother-child relationship that is similar to Zoraïde's relationship with her mistress.

### 3. HYBRIDITY AND GOTHIC IMAGERY

This image of the plantation as insidious also comes to life in the texts as the authors include elements of the Gothic genre. For Chopin and Hopkins, Gothic imagery is closely linked

to the concept of hybridity, but the version of hybridity that is most terrifying is the mixing of races, or miscegenation. Both authors resist a binary understanding of the plantation and a structured hierarchy by depicting characters of various skin tones and genealogical histories, but these authors also uphold the traditional plantation narrative when they depict mixing as terrifying. In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger describes what she calls “white panic”: “White panic is a moment of spectacular terror when racial boundaries that had seemed impermeable become unexpectedly porous; it is a contagious emotion that spreads too quickly, creating bodies whose fear begins to permeate other bodies” (89). In the texts I examine here, Gothic imagery indicates that hybridity is volatile; terrifying images surround the idea that the plantation meta-narrative might be subverted.

In *Contending Forces*, “Désirée’s Baby,” and “La Belle Zoraïde” images of the grotesque and the monstrous are prevalent, and they are connected to the ever-present fear of miscegenation. Because the fears surrounding miscegenation are connected to reproduction, childbirth becomes frightening and a plantation owner’s baby can be his “other.” Chopin’s works, particularly the two that I examine here, make use of melodrama and obsess over skin color. Chopin’s preoccupation with miscegenation is part of the melodrama in these stories; her detailed descriptions of skin tone and the mystery surrounding genealogical history is part of the uncertainty that is so terrifying. There is a sense of voyeurism or exoticism as Chopin focuses on females who are mixed-race. Reading “Désirée’s Baby” and “La Belle Zoraïde” with their Gothic tendencies in mind illuminates the plantation’s synchronicity—connections between characters are far more multi-faceted than the white patriarchy would desire to acknowledge. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* is also highly melodramatic. Hopkins utilizes many traditional

elements of gothic nineteenth-century sentimental texts, including fainting spells, secret histories, and violent male predators.

I link the Gothic to my discussion of genealogy, motherhood, and the female body. The Gothic is a vehicle for communicating the anxiety that centered around mixing and miscegenation in the New South. In her article, “Crossing Liminal Spaces: Teaching the Postcolonial Gothic” Gina Wisker explains that

postcolonial spaces, worldviews, writers, writings and reading are inevitably Gothic, since they, like the geographies of place and of history, are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past, and those who now still might occupy a parallel universe, unheard, unspoken, unwritten, were it not, perhaps, for the emergence of the postcolonial Gothic, among other events and changes. (402)

Wisker’s description of a haunted space could easily describe the U.S. South, although she is not referring to the south specifically. Ghosts and voices from the past rise to the surface in Chopin’s and Hopkins’ fiction, creating the kind of haunting and tension Wisker refers to. Understanding the U.S. South as a postcolonial space reshapes the conversation about the Gothic, as it links the U.S. South to its neighbors in the Caribbean, and also to its connections across the ocean.<sup>19</sup> These connections are fraught with anxiety for a late-nineteenth-century reading audience because they unhinge the South from essentialism and blur the binary logic of the meta-narrative. In Ellen

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19. I do not have the space to justify understanding the U.S. South as a postcolonial space as part of this project, but several recent texts have explored this possibility, including Melanie Benson’s *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912–2002* and Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn’s *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*.

Moers' seminal 1976 text, *Literary Women*, she discusses the Gothic. The Gothic has been important since the eighteenth century, and according to Moers, a definition "is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear" (90). Moers goes on to say that "In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite authorial intent: to scare" (90). For readers, somehow, experiencing fear also produces pleasure, and creates a sense of delight. Chopin and Hopkins' texts are not ghost stories; elements of the supernatural are muted, producing texts that are not traditionally read as Gothic. However, small details and descriptions bring the Gothic to mind, and these details connect closely to conversations about the anxiety that a late-nineteenth-century audience felt in postbellum America.

Montfort's story serves to make a hemispheric connection from the beginning of the novel: a slave-owning family lives in Bermuda, a British colony. Hopkins narrates the slave-owner's crisis of conscience by telling the story of slavery's ending in England, but the slave owner wants to free his slaves on his own terms, indicating his reason for moving his family to the U.S. South. Hopkins connects plantations in the U.S. South to plantations in Bermuda, while also indicating that the financial and economic success of Great Britain was a direct result of its connection to slavery in the Caribbean. The chapter opens with a discussion of Charles Montfort and his story. His wife's name is unknown until the second chapter, but in Chapter 2, the focus of the novel shifts from being Charles' story to being the story of his wife, Grace. The minute the Montfort family steps off the boat, two neighbors notice that Grace Montfort's genealogy may include African ancestors. In a conversation that indicates that they are prejudiced against the Montforts because of both race and nationality, they discuss her appearance, saying: "Thar's too

much cream color in her face and too little blud seen under the skin for a genooine white 'ooman. You can't tell nothin' 'bout these Britishers; they're allers squeamish 'bout thar nigger brats; yas, sah, very squeamish" (41). From this moment, the novel becomes the story of Grace Montfort and her descendants. In a sequence of events that Lois Brown describes as "a narrative of displacement and diaspora, victimization and self-preservation," the family is ostracized, Charles is killed, and Grace commits suicide, leaving her sons as orphans (Brown 221). The boys are enslaved by Charles' killer, and only one of them is rescued by a British friend. The novel becomes the story of Jesse Montfort, the orphaned son who escapes to the free North and raises a family of his own. Jesse claims his identity as a black man, and he marries the daughter of an Underground Railroad agent.

*Contending Forces* addresses the issues of rape and violence from the very beginning. Hopkins explains in the introduction that she has "presented both sides of the dark picture—lynching and concubinage—truthfully and without vituperation" (15). Lynching is an important theme in the novel, and ending it is one of Hopkins' political goals, but the rape of black women is also central to the novel. Rape is the horror that most Victorian Gothic novels focus on: when a young woman is raped, she loses her sexual purity, damning her for the rest of her life because she will not be able to be protected and cared for by a man. Hopkins' portrayal of race and genealogy is subversive; she does not shy away from addressing the violence that many African-American women experienced, but she writes the story in the traditional nineteenth-century form of a sentimental novel. Her use of this genre is also subversive. By choosing the sentimental novel, and by including the authenticating introduction that I discussed earlier, Hopkins aligns her main character with the ideal of the "True Woman," a woman who, according to Martha

Cutter's *Unruly Tongue*, was “domestic, pious, pure, submissive, and...silent” (ix). This image of the ideal woman excluded and alienated black women. When Hopkins places Sappho in the role of “True Woman” by making her the heroine of a sentimental novel, she appropriates an image that has been integral to plantation ideology.

Hopkins also carefully appropriates a particular audience for her own purposes; she writes a book that is aimed towards a reading audience of white, middle-class women, and her desire is to encourage these women to become politically active on behalf of the African-American community. Hopkins does this by encouraging her audience to make connections; she connects her late-nineteenth century characters to women in their past who have been abused and violated, so it is natural for her readers to make unlikely connections with the characters in her novel. Hopkins utilizes the Gothic genre, a genre that was very popular with her intended audience, in order to draw in that audience. She also includes detailed descriptions of lynching violence, feeding her readers’ voyeuristic desires. These detailed descriptions are acceptable for inclusion in a sentimental novel because they are included as newspaper accounts or as part of activist meetings; including them in this form separates the author and the reader from the grotesque details. One description, reproduced as a white “newspaper account” follows:

Jim Jones, a burly black Negro accused of the crime of rape against the person of a beautiful white woman, was taken from his home by a number of our leading citizens, and after being identified by his victim, was carried into the woods, where, before an immense concourse of people, he was bound to a tree, pieces of flesh were stripped from his body, his eyes were gouged out, his ears cut off, his nose split open, and his legs broken at the knees. After this the young woman

stepped forward and poured oil upon the wretch, and the wood being piled about him, she applied the torch to light the fire which was to consume the black monster. (223)

This grotesquely detailed but riveting description draws Hopkins' audience in so they can also participate in this violent act through voyeurism. It also separates readers from the male black body by using monstrous language to describe it. Ellen Moers discusses the use of the monster in Gothic fiction in *Literary Women* when she writes: "What are monsters? Creatures who scare because they look different, wrong, non-human. Distortion of scale was the first visual effect employed by Gothic novelists in creating monsters...But the classically Victorian device to create monsters was the crossing of species, animal with human" (101-102). Hopkins goes to an extreme here and in other places in *Contending Forces*, using language in order to create excess and to register the extremes of white panic.<sup>20</sup>

Hopkins' focus on genealogy points out that many family genealogies included a story of rape; the idea of motherhood was closely linked to rape for many black women. The narrative of Grace Montfort's story includes some Gothic imagery: an evil villain desires to violate and abuse her, and he uses the argument that she is "black" to justify this violence. Violently exploiting Grace gives her neighbor, Anson Pollock power and reinforces his position in the meta-plantation. It also alleviates the anxiety he experiences when he imagines that a black woman could be married to a white plantation owner. Regarding Grace's story, Hazel Carby writes:

Hopkins represented the brutal rape of Grace in the displaced form of a whipping by two of the vigilantes. Her clothes were ripped from her body, and she was

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20. This use of excess resonates with Patricia Yaeger's article, "Circum-Atlantic Abundance: Milk as World-Making in Alice Randall and Kara Walker." See page 774 for more discussion of excess.

“whipped” alternately “by the two strong, savage men.” Hopkins’s metaphorical replacement of the “snaky, leather thong” for the phallus was a crude but effective device, and “the blood [which] stood in a pool about her feet” was the final evidence that the “outrage” that had been committed was rape. (136)

By including a story of rape in the pre-war frame narrative, Hopkins associates the U.S. South and the experience of slavery with rape and violence. She makes a connection between the particular woman we read about in *Contending Forces* and the common experience of African-American women in the U.S. South. Hopkins wanted her readers to understand that the violence Grace Montfort and Sappho Clark experienced was common so her readers would be willing to act on behalf of women who continued to be victims.

Sappho, the mysterious heroine, is an interesting twist on the female Gothic heroine because she experienced rape and sexual abuse before her narrative even began. Sappho can be placed in the role of “True Woman” because her sexual history is unknown. The mystery surrounding her history is revealed only at the end of the novel, when the villainous descendant of Anson Pollock, Grace Montfort’s abuser, accuses her of impurity by saying “Ambitious men do not marry women with stories like yours!” (320). Hopkins’ most subversive act is the creation of a “True Woman” in Sappho. Sappho embodies the characteristics of the true woman, and her kind and gentle demeanor as well as her domestic gifts and capabilities draw the reader in, but Hopkins waits until the end of the novel to reveal that Sappho actually has a secret sexual history. Her history indicates that the stereotypes of a black woman as “a hot-blooded, exotic whore” or a “cringing, terrified victim” as described by Frances Smith Foster in *Witnessing Slavery*, could be applied to Sappho by members of the plantocracy, but Hopkins has already



drawn the reader into a relationship with her (131). Sappho's story also involves a dark villain, but in this case his abuse is doubly horrifying because he is a white man, and he is also her uncle.

By making the villain a member of Sappho's family, Hopkins subverts the image of the plantation as nostalgic. Hopkins describes the relationship by writing "Monsieur Beauban was an educated man, descended from a very wealthy family. His father had been his owner. When the father died he left to his son, born of a black mother, an equal share of the estate along with his legitimate heirs. They made no objections, so he got it" (258). Monsieur Beauban's older brother is a powerful man who shares his father's affection for mixed-race women, and he was "extremely fond" of Mabelle, Beauban's oldest daughter. When Mabelle turns fourteen, her uncle kidnaps her, keeps her in a brothel, and rapes her repeatedly. The result of this for Mabelle is pregnancy. Pregnancy is the terrifying result of rape for Mabelle, or Sappho as she is known later in her life.<sup>21</sup> For Sappho, or Mabelle, pregnancy and birth carry the elements of the Gothic: guilt, dread, and flight. Her child is born in a convent, and raised by someone who loves him, but Sappho believes that she can never know the joy of motherhood, thus creating another foundling, or a character without female history. By including Grace Montfort's story at the beginning of the novel, and by including characters throughout who do not know or do not claim their own family histories, Hopkins links Sappho's story to the stories of other African-American women, indicating the synchronic connections that exist between individuals. Sappho's uncle experiences

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21. In *Literary Women*, Moers uses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the seminal female gothic text because, she argues, it is centered around the experience of giving birth. Moers says "Here, I think, is where Mary Shelley's book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Most of the novel...can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care" (93).

no grief over what he has done to his own relative; instead he offers to pay his brother one thousand dollars and “call it square” (259). This connects Sappho’s uncle to the darkest Gothic predators, but in creating him, Hopkins also comments on race relations in late-nineteenth-century America.

In both “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*La Belle Zoraïde*,” Chopin explores the effects of miscegenation that were a result of slavery. These stories consider slavery’s impact on both white women and mixed-race women, and at times they implicitly criticize the upper-class women who were complicit in the abusive slavery system. This emphasis on miscegenation is indicative of Chopin’s preoccupation with genealogy, similar to Hopkins’ obsession with her characters’ origins and family history. These two stories are unique in the canon of Chopin’s work; she primarily focuses on the oppression white, upper-class women experienced. I agree with Catherine Lundie, who acknowledges that Chopin’s views on race were progressive for her time, but she argues that “it is important to recognize that [Chopin’s] writing is that of a privileged white Southern woman” (129). Chopin could not have effectively described the injustices black women endured because she did not experience them herself. As Russ writes, “the voices of those whose exploitation and loss were most intense under the plantation regime have, more often than not, been silenced or marginalized by the official archives of history. Consequently, our understanding of this history is far from complete” (3). Chopin tells an incomplete story; she cannot fully empathize with the African-American characters in these two texts. She creates sympathy more with white characters and equates beauty with being fair-skinned, like the “*café-au-lait*” complexion of Zoraïde, but it is important to explore her fascination with mixed-race women and genealogy in order to understand her writing more completely.

Chopin characterizes the plantation by including gothic imagery. After their marriage, Désirée moves with Armand to his own plantation, called L'Abri, which embodies the oppressive nature of plantation life. Désirée's mother always shudders when she arrives at L'Abri; "It was a sad looking place....The roof came down steep and black like a cowl....Big solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall" (243). It is the plantation's genealogical history that also make it a frightening place. The house is associated with death, funerals, and darkness. The violence that has taken place there has often been kept secret, but it is through gothic imagery that this secret come to the surface.

Désirée appears to be a happy young mother at first, despite the dark descriptions of the plantation, but she later says "I'm so happy; it frightens me" (244). Désirée's happiness is a result of her husband's change in personality since the birth of her son: "Marriage, and later the birth of his son, had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly" (244). Armand's personality becomes harsh again when he realizes that his son is mixed-race, and there is once again darkness surrounding the plantation. Désirée senses that something is wrong before she realizes that it is her son's color that is upsetting her husband: "When the baby was about three months old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp...Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner" (244). I mentioned earlier in my discussion of the story that Chopin carefully describes the skin tone of each character in the story. These detailed descriptions of skin color serve to contribute to the ominous feel in the story; it is when Désirée glances over at one of the other children on the plantation that she realizes the reason for her husband's anger: "She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. 'Ah!' It was a cry

that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face” (245). Looking at a mixed-race child helps Désirée realize the reason for her husband’s anger. Désirée’s recognition that her son is her “other” indicates that she lives in the liminal space of the postcolonial gothic; the dualistic world of the plantation south is blurred and becomes defined by hybridity. When Désirée realizes that her son is not white, she asks her husband “What does it mean? Tell me” (245). In an article entitled “Semiotic Subversion in ‘Désirée’s Baby’,” Ellen Peel writes,

The story takes place in an antebellum Creole community ruled by institutions based on apparently clear dualities: master over slave, white over black, and man over woman. Complacently deciphering the unruffled surface of this symbolic system, the characters feel confident that they know who belongs in which category and what signifies membership in each category. (224)

However, characters who appear to be white may not be, and this is frightening for the plantocracy that is heavily invested in the meta-narrative. The fact that appearance and reality may not be closely linked upsets the clear dualities Peel describes, also upsetting the entire plantation institution.

The dualistic world that Désirée and Armand have found so comfortable has suddenly become complicated. When Désirée claims that Armand’s speculation that she is not white is false by saying: “It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand. . . . Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand” he responds by comparing her to another mother: “As white as La Blanche’s” (245). Although she resists the connection, having a mixed-race son associates Désirée with the other women in her life. She becomes

closely linked to La Blanche and Zandrine in her husband's eyes. Désirée does not ask or wonder who La Blanche's father was, or who the father of her children is. She simply accepts that the mother is the one to blame when the children are black. When Armand points La Blanche out to Désirée, he disrupts signification because "La Blanche" literally means "the white one." Désirée's world is unsettled because what used to be clear and well defined is now complicated. These complications are a significant threat to the entire system upon which they depend.

In fact, Chopin carefully crafts language describing the varied skin tones of each character in the story. Désirée is described as "fair" and "pale," Zandrine's skin is "yellow," Armand has a "dark handsome face," and Armand's mistress is referred to as "La Blanche." It is the presence of one of La Blanche's sons, who is described as a "little quadroon boy" that startles Désirée into the realization that her son also has a mixed heritage (243-244). Armand is furious when he realizes this, and Désirée is banished. Because Chopin pays such attention to detail regarding her characters' skin tones, the story troubles the meta-narrative's assertion that race is a binary. The ending of the story reveals that it was Armand, after all who was not white. He realizes that his mother was mixed-race when he finds a letter she wrote that explains "I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (247). Female genealogy comes to define Armand and his family. The orphans and secret histories in the story serve to emphasize this importance: women have been pushed to the side far too often, and when their stories are told, a hybrid world emerges.

Because a hybrid world is too terrifying, Désirée accepts Armand's declaration that she is black. She cannot come up with any other way to answer the question, "What does it mean?"

(245). Her choice at the end of the story allows her to continue to uphold the meta-narrative. Chopin continues to use Gothic tropes in order to tell the story of Désirée's suicide: "Désirée had not changed the thin white garment....Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes....She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds" (246). Her banishment results in supposed suicide when "she disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again" (247). The ending of the story evokes sympathy for Désirée, but it demonstrates that the meta-narrative's dualistic vision of the plantation south cannot be disrupted. In her eyes, she is the carrier of hybridity, and race continues to be understood as a binary. This indicates the insidious nature of the meta-narrative: Désirée cannot imagine another way of understanding the world.

For Zoraïde, pregnancy and birth are marked with the understanding that she is not in control of her own fate. She makes the choice to have sex with Mézor, making it easy for both her Mistress and Manna Loulou to characterize her as a hypersexualized black woman, but her choices end there. When Zoraïde falls in love with a dark-skinned man, she commits a crime against the statutes of the plantation south because she chooses him rather than a mulatto man as her lover. She protests against the dualistic understanding of race when she tells her mistress about her love for Mézor: "'I am not white,' persisted Zoraïde, respectfully and gently. 'Doctor Langlé gives me his slave to marry, but he would not give me his son. Then, since I am not white, let me have from out of my own race the one whom my heart has chosen'" (314). Her mistress' response to Zoraïde's choice and to her pregnancy demonstrate Zoraïde's status as a commodity. The childbirth scene connects readers to a traumatic postpartum period rather than

depicting birth as a fulfilling and hopeful event: “La belle Zoraïde’s sorrows had now begun in earnest. Not only sorrows but sufferings, and with the anguish of maternity came the shadow of death” (315). As soon as Zoraïde gives birth to her baby, her mistress takes it away and tells Zoraïde that her baby is dead. Chopin includes the familiar Gothic trope of the mother who cannot let go of her dead baby’s body when Zoraïde becomes obsessed with a bundle of rags she believes to be her child: “Night nor day did she lose sight of the doll that lay in her bed or in her arms” (316). Her insanity can be seen as the result of her decision to make a choice for herself: this link would have been easy for Chopin’s contemporary audience, many of whom may have been involved in the suffrage movement, to see. Adrienne Rich explains in *Of Woman Born* that “If education was supposed to atrophy the female reproductive organs, women’s suffrage was seen as creating ‘insane asylums in every county’” (170). This image provides quite a contrast to the traditional nineteenth-century image of motherhood—what is normally seen as idyllic and peaceful has become horrifying and grotesque.

The image of motherhood in Zoraïde’s story contrasts with the complicated relationship between Manna Loulou and Madame DeLisle. Manna Loulou most likely breastfed Madame Delisle as an infant, and has cared for her throughout her life on the plantation, and after Madame’s marriage, she has moved with her to her new home. This relationship gives us a new understanding of family in a postslavery world—these two women are bonded very closely, but their connection is a slave/master relationship as well as a mother/child relationship. Patricia Yaeger writes about the slave/master breastfeeding relationship: “milk has the power to initiate new genealogies” (784). The relationship between Manna Loulou and Madame DeLise powerfully demonstrates this. She tells the story of Zoraïde to her mistress in order to put her to

sleep, but “she told it to her mistress in the soft Creole patois, whose music and charm no English words can convey” (312). According to Handley, “The term *creole* or *criollo* in Spanish, originally was used in the New World slave market to refer to black slaves born in the Americas...but it later came to refer to white-identified Europeans born in the New World and suckled by black wet nurses” (47). The term is complicated, and it demonstrates the complicated relationship between Manna Loulou and Madame DeLisle. Zoraïde’s story indicates the volatility of this relationship; Manna Loulou chooses to tell this “true” story to her mistress in order to help her fall asleep.

#### 4. MONSTROUS AND DISRUPTIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE BODIES

In *Contending Forces*, “Désirée’s Baby,” and “La Belle Zoraïde,” hybridity is presented through the lens of the Gothic because it is so destructive to the hierarchy that is necessary to maintain the plantation meta-narrative. A dark cloud of fear and anxiety hovers in the air during each of the stories I examine here. The Gothic genre is also closely associated with representations of the female body itself as monstrous or grotesque. For Chopin and Hopkins, female bodies themselves can function as dangerous because they work to disrupt a binary understanding of the world; when women can be owned or treated as commodities, it is a logical step to understand that their value lies in their physical bodies alone, but those physical bodies seem to have a way of slipping away from the individuals who desire to own or control them. The female body becomes a site on which terror can be focused, and mixed-race women’s bodies are particularly dangerous.

Negotiating the tension between the expectations of her audience and her desire to act in



order to effect social change was difficult for Pauline Hopkins because of the expectations and pressures she experienced as a black woman. In spite of this, Hopkins pays close attention to the female body in *Contending Forces*.<sup>22</sup> Hopkins engages in a careful balancing act in consideration of the sensibilities of her nineteenth-century audience; she includes detailed and sometimes horrifying descriptions of the violence black women experienced in the plantation south, but she also includes depictions of light-skinned women who sit politely in parlors and act out scenes that are very similar to the ones that would take place in the parlors and sitting rooms of middle and upper-class white homes. Hopkins upholds and emulates a classed society rather than subverts it, but the way she weaves these scenes together with scenes of violence and horrifying descriptions is subversive. Hopkins works to undermine the traditional hegemonic structure of nineteenth-century America, but her language and form employ many of the ideologies she works to challenge.

The most graphic bodily depictions in *Contending Forces* are often second-degree descriptions, but these descriptions are subversive. Grace Montfort's story is heart-rending and graphic, but readers also feel somewhat removed from it since it is the frame story surrounding the novel's primary narrative. Grace's role as a mother is always central to any depiction of her character, and it also contributes to the graphic nature of the descriptions of the violent abuse she endures. For example, when Grace discovers the body of her dead husband, her role as mother is primary: "With little Charles clinging to her skirts she stumbled blindly to the entrance and faced the crowd of angry men" (67). After passing out as a result of seeing her dead husband's body,

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22. In "Slavery Sexuality and Genre: Pauline Hopkins and the Representation of Female Desire," Kate McCullough writes about Hopkins's representations of the female body, including her utilization of the mulatta heroine, in more detail.

Grace's body becomes the focus of the text as we read the description of her beating: "As she lay upon the green sward, oblivious to thought and feeling, supported by her weeping maid, who had been ordered to care for her mistress by Mr. Pollock, Hank Davis came and stood for a moment, looking down upon the unconscious woman...He called to Bill Sampson to help lift her, and ...they bore the hapless lady to the whipping post." (67, 68). Grace's body is described as she lies unconscious, or as she is lifted and tied to the whipping post, but when the beating begins, the focus shifts to the abusers, or to the objects around her. The only description of Grace's body during the whipping describes "a long, raw gash across a tender, white back" (69). Hopkins' descriptions are certainly graphic enough to engage even a twenty-first century reader, but her efforts to separate the reader from the female body and the violence Grace experiences make the novel more accessible according to late-nineteenth-century standards of propriety.

In "Désirée's Baby," mixed-race bodies populate the margins of the plantation called L'Abri; the bodies themselves function in order to push back against a culture that desires to maintain the meta-narrative. A "yellow nurse woman" sits beside the window when Désirée's adopted mother comes to visit (243), and it is this woman who enables Désirée's mother to see that her grandson is also mixed. A "little quadroon boy," son of La Blanche, stands to the side and fans Désirée's baby on a hot day, and when Désirée takes a close look at this little boy, she sees the truth about her son's genealogical history. When characters like these two remain in the margins, the plantation's meta-narrative is able to continue, but when these mixed-race individuals come into focus, the narrative is disrupted. The characters disrupt the narrative simply by existing; they don't speak or act subversively. These individuals rarely speak in the story, instead they are present as objects or as bodies, acting as signs to the main characters about

the problems that exist in their family histories.

Kate Chopin's depiction of the mammy figure in "La Belle Zoraïde" is an example of a graphic and monstrous depiction of the female body. The mammy is an important figure in the plantation society; she is, in many ways, the matriarch. Catherine Lundie explains that "although the mammy held authority over white children, the figure was characterized almost solely in terms of maternal benignity, allowing it to be an acceptable symbol to whites of black power" (157). Madame DeLisle is pictured as dependent and passive while Manna Loulou is strong and beautiful in her blackness. Manna Loulou is pictured as a mother, but she is also a servant. She cares for her mistress because she loves her, but she is compelled to do so because of her position in society. Katie Berry-Frye writes about the mammy and child relationship: "where the slave woman is obese, unattractive, and maternal, the mistress is beautiful and childless, their dissimilarity merging in a portrait of domestic harmony as contrived and unnerving as the commodification of Aunt Jemima's benevolent smile" (53). Manna Loulou and Madame DeLisle created a closely-connected, physical relationship when Madame was a child, and when Madame becomes an adult, the tasks Manna Loulou performs for her mistress continue to be intimate and closely connected to the body: she washes her mistress' feet and kisses them after brushing her long, blonde hair. Madame DeLise and Manna Loulou have an intimate relationship that is similar to a mother-child relationship; these women are connected physically as well as emotionally.

Chopin includes little description of Manna Loulou's body; instead, she shifts the attention to the body of Zoraïde, who exists only in the story Manna Loulou tells her mistress. Zoraïde's body is young, attractive, and fair, but both black women are objectified. The story Manna

Loulou tells is about the body and bodily connections between individuals. Zoraïde's affection for Mézor has a lot to do with his physical body; she is attracted to his appearance and to his dance. Mézor's body is so beautiful that it has the ability to persuade Zoraïde to give up the pampered life she has led as the favorite servant. His dance is called the Bamboula; it was brought to the Americas, particularly the Virgin Islands and New Orleans, by African slaves. Mézor's dance and his skin color link him to his genealogical past, in Africa, and they also link him to the Caribbean, where the dance was also frequently performed. His demeanor is proud and Chopin's descriptions of his body are provocative: "His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil" (313). Describing the story, Emily Toth writes "'La Belle Zoraïde' was an extraordinary story for the daughter of slaveowners to produce, and it was not written in imitation of anyone else. Chopin was the first white American woman author to describe a dark black man as beautiful, and one of the first to show the thoughtless white world through the eyes of a woman of color" (139). Zoraïde's love for Mézor is scandalous because he has dark skin, and because loving him means that she goes against the plans her mistress has for her, but the story becomes even more scandalous. When her mistress will not allow her to marry Mézor, he and Zoraïde begin a sexual relationship, and Zoraïde becomes pregnant.

It is Zoraïde who is attracted to Mézor's bodily dance in Congo Square, and it is also Zoraïde who has Mézor's baby, the baby "that she would soon be able to clasp to her breast" (315). The experience of motherhood is a bodily event for Zoraïde; Chopin describes the event of birth by saying: "there is no agony that a mother will not forget when she holds her first-born to her heart, and presses her lips upon the baby flesh that is her own, yet far more precious than her own" (315). Mézor is sent away, so Zoraïde's close connection with her child is all she has to

remind her of him. When Zoraïde's mistress lies to her by telling her that her baby is dead, Zoraïde loses her mind, and becomes a rocking, mumbling madwoman who carries around a bundle of rags, thinking it is her baby. Manna Loulou ends the story by asking if her mistress is asleep. She and her mistress have a bodily and connected relationship, but we see that only through the details of the story Manna Loulou tells. This second-degree description of the female body and the bodily experience of motherhood is a manifestation of the tension I discussed earlier; Manna Loulou cannot articulate the complicated nature of her relationship with Madame DeLise, but the story she tells is a clue that their relationship is both loving and insidious.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Exploring the connections between motherhood and genealogy in "Désirée's Baby," "La Belle Zoraïde," and *Contending Forces* reveals connections between characters in these texts and undermines the patriarchal order of the plantation south. Comparing these three works helps the reader see the "persistence of slavery's legacies" (Handley 15) by demonstrating the ways women of different races and social statuses deal with the anxiety that surfaces when the meta-narrative is questioned. Kate Chopin and Pauline Hopkins have crafted stories that center around women and privilege the female experience. Women are connected to other women, white and black, past and present, and these connections promote a vision of the plantation south as a hybrid space, rather than a space that submits to the binary logic of the meta-narrative. Chopin and Hopkins also portray the deep anxiety that surfaces as a result of the transition from Old South to New South by depicting miscegenation as dangerous and volatile. They show violent responses to threats to the plantation order—a baby is stolen from her mother, a woman is

violently raped when she is suspected of having mixed ethnic heritage, and a husband abandons his wife because their son is not “white.” Chopin and Hopkins come from different racial and cultural backgrounds, but when their texts are paired, they work together to trace synchronic connections between women, and these connections contrast with the traditional linear and hierarchical understanding of relationships that upheld the plantation.

## CHAPTER 2:

### “ME AN’ MY CHILLEN DON’ NEED NO MAN”; BODILY MOTHERHOOD IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND *SCARLET SISTER MARY*

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Julia Peterkin’s *Scarlet Sister Mary* are explorations of female identity; therefore, the female body exists, often uncomfortably, in the forefront in both stories. The primary characters, Janie and Mary, grow into a new understanding of their bodies in a culture where black women were primarily understood as commodities; reproduction and motherhood are closely connected to this understanding of the female body. Both novels are “southern,” meaning that they were written by women who lived in the southern region of the United States, although they both expand the definition of southern literature, a term which, according to Yaeger, “has been whitened or shorn of its African-American connotations” (xii). I include both novels in my discussion of southern women’s literature purposefully in order to probe the boundaries and definitions of phrases such as “Southern Literature” or “Domestic Fiction.” Each novel is a complex representation of women in post-slavery America; each presents rich images of women who come to a more full understanding of their bodies and of their identities.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was published in 1937, takes place in Florida and

chronicles the life of Janie, the granddaughter of a former slave. The novel tells the story of Janie's self-discovery and self-birth. *Scarlet Sister Mary*, published in 1928, is set on a fictional South Carolina plantation called Blue Brook in the 1920's. Julia Peterkin is the white daughter of a plantation owner, but she writes the novel from the imagined perspective of African-American women who live on the plantation. Both novels received mixed reviews upon publication. Peterkin's novel was granted the Pulitzer Prize, but it was also regarded as obscene due to sexual content and banned in many libraries across the South. Hurston's novel received mixed reviews by African-American scholars; Richard Wright argued that Hurston's characters reflected minstrel stereotypes while Alain Locke claimed that Hurston should have addressed racial conflict more directly (West 2). Yet Hurston and Peterkin's main characters defy patriarchal culture, a culture that objectifies them, by learning to celebrate and enjoy their bodies; the women do so in opposite ways—Janie is childless, while Mary gives birth to nine children. For both women, the ability to be comfortable with their bodies is directly tied to motherhood: Janie is able to embrace herself and her identity because she does not have children, while Mary's experience of motherhood is what sets her free to accept her bodily self. Peterkin and Hurston defy the plantation order by writing novels that emphasize female genealogy, celebrate femininity, and honor the female body.

Both Janie and Mary understand themselves as rooted in a particular place; it is not only the physical place, but also the time—early twentieth-century America—that profoundly shapes the way these two characters understand themselves. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* are both set after the time of transition from the Old South to the New South. The Civil War and slavery are in the past, but the repercussions of these events continue to have a



profound impact on black women. In my introduction, I mention Elizabeth Christine Russ's discussion of the plantation as "not primarily a physical location but rather an insidious ideological and psychological trope" (3). The plantation functions as both a real, physical place and a psychological trope in these two novels. Practically, by the early twentieth century the plantation had shifted from a large compound that included slave quarters to a farm that primarily utilized tenant labor. In the plantation economy, black women were valued as objects and commodities; this ideology inflicted great violence upon them.

In a plantation economy, black women's bodies and their reproductive ability translated into economic gain for plantation owners. After slavery became illegal, black female bodies continued to be understood as objects that could be bought and sold. Hurston and Peterkin present powerful images of the female body in the two novels I explore as part of this chapter, and the body itself works in these texts in order to tell the story of black women. The commodification of black female bodies was part of the legacy of slavery. As Jennifer Morgan explains in *Laboring Women*, "Slaveowners spent years working through convoluted notions about reproduction and the women they enslaved. In so doing they enacted various degrees of intrusion and violence upon the bodies of women....Slaveowners' behaviors reflect their immersion in occasionally articulated notions of gender, race, and power" (107). Although white men and women could no longer physically own black women or their children, relationships between blacks and whites did not inherently change; black women continued to be nurses, mummies, servants, or wet-nurses, and their identities continued to be characterized by their function in society. In the New South, black men also continued to contribute physical labor to the plantation economy. As Janie and Mary journey toward self-confidence and self-discovery,

each woman also deals with great loss. As I explore their journeys toward independence, I also examine their family histories.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* are explorations of black female identity in defiance of the exploitation that was so common. Hurston and Peterkin fit Patricia Yaeger's description of what is singular about southern women writers: "These texts deploy a series of strategies—the explosion of monstrosity or violence, the flickery image of injustice...discomforting emblems of neglect, disregard, elision, the throwaway, gargantuan women, or hybrid bodies that try to move the reader toward unregistered precincts of knowledge" (*Dirt and Desire* 8).<sup>23</sup> Hurston and Peterkin both expose violence and present images of injustice in its many forms, but Yaeger's discussion of the way bodies themselves move readers toward new knowledge and realizations is particularly helpful in order to support my argument. The body itself works in these texts in order to push readers toward new understandings of femininity and of the violence inflicted upon black women in the plantation south.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* are complex stories of liberation and self-discovery. Telling the story of the plantation south through the eyes of women is one way to subvert the meta-narrative that upheld the traditional hierarchical model for the plantation. There are moments when the women in the stories stake claim to their identities in defiance of oppression from both whites and blacks, but there are also moments when both authors seem to be the mouthpieces of white or male supremacy; this ambivalence is what both

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23. Yaeger includes both black and white authors when she reconstructs southern women's writing in *Dirt and Desire*. Understanding the southern experience as inclusive of both black and white authors is pivotal to my overall argument in this dissertation.

Richard Wright and Alain Locke attempted to address when they criticized Hurston. Janie and Mary experience oppression at the hands of whites, but they also experience oppression from within their own African-American communities. At times, these women perpetuate violence or oppression against others; this is one of the reasons for the mixed receptions of both novels. In *Postslavery Literature and the Americas*, George Handley explores the way ambivalence appears in much southern fiction: “The presence of the black marginal subject...both subverts and upholds prevailing ideologies of white supremacy” (49). In these novels, the black subject is at the center of the story, but Hurston and Peterkin engage in a similar dance. Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* are subversive texts that challenge prevalent ideologies, but they are also stories about women who have internalized the same traditional ideologies and are attempting to work out their identities in light of that internalization. For example, Janie works to gain independence, but after she seems to have achieved it, she enters into a physically abusive relationship. In *Scarlet Sister Mary*, Mary chooses a life of physical labor for herself and celebrates labor, although this connection represents a troubling echo of the meta-narrative. In this chapter, I treat the novels as the complex works of fiction that they are and acknowledge the ambivalence that exists within the texts.

An understanding of creolization and black female bodies is an important part of the conversation regarding the shift to a postslavery economy. Because many mixed-race children were the result of the rapes of black women by their white masters, creolized bodies tell stories of female genealogy; white men were rarely held responsible for the violence they inflicted on black women, and they rarely lived into the role of father in their children’s lives. For example, Hurston represents her heroine as a fair-skinned African American with long, beautiful hair, and

her physical appearance makes her desirable and beautiful. Hurston also names some of Janie's male ancestors—her grandfather was a plantation owner, and her father was a schoolteacher. Both Janie and her mother were conceived as the result of rape. As Jennifer Morgan explains, “In the context of New World slavery, of course creolization was in fact rooted in loss” (108). Creolization continued to be rooted in loss after the Civil War as rapes of black women by white men continued to occur. Creolized bodies were considered to be more beautiful, often by both whites and blacks; therefore, they were more valuable<sup>24</sup> in the post-slavery economy, but the question of how this impacted mixed-race women emotionally is an important one. Creolization can refer to the biological mixing of races, but it also refers to the mixing of cultures. Morgan puts it this way:

New and syncretic cultural forms emerged as strangers developed linguistic, familial, educational, architectural, or performative practices while becoming members of communities. Children, as well as young adults, entering the Americas through the slave trade, made explicit the process of literal and symbolic reeducation that is at the heart of creolization. (108)

When cultures are mixed, the loss of a primary culture is inevitable. Both Hurston and Peterkin uncover the concept of creolization in the two novels I examine here. When I use the terms “creole” and “creolization” I am referring both to the mixing of races and the mixing of cultures that occurred in the United States during and after the end of slavery. The term should be

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24. Sometimes creolized bodies were more admired than darker bodies, but sometimes they literally had more economic value than dark-skinned bodies. One example of creolized bodies having high economic value is prostitution in early twentieth-century New Orleans. See Jessica Adams' discussion of this on page 23 of *Wounds of Returning*.

understood as indicative of a violent history of rape and exploitation.<sup>25</sup> Despite the fact that Janie is light-skinned, she eventually claims her identity as an African-American woman, and thus Hurston considers the politics of being a light-skinned black woman in the plantation south. Peterkin reflects on creolization throughout *Scarlet Sister Mary*, particularly through the mixing of cultural customs that fit into the lives of the characters in the novel.

Janie does not have any children in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but in spite of her childlessness, motherhood is a central theme in the novel. In *Scarlet Sister Mary*, it is through the births of her nine children that Mary comes into her own as a woman and claims her identity and sexual freedom. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and in *Scarlet Sister Mary*, the primary carriers of family life and family history are women. Because of this, it is appropriate to read these novels through the lens of female genealogy. Yaeger writes that “southern women writers are interested in...occluded knowledge—for white women, the gender and race practices that their characters know by heart and yet rarely acknowledge, for black women, a longing for lost epistemologies—the names, customs, revenants, and remnants of Africa” (*Dirt and Desire* 13). Indeed, both Hurston and Peterkin explore the concept of occluded knowledge in these two novels; the fact that women carry family life and history is one way these authors acknowledge the loss their characters and cultures experienced, but it is also a way forward. Because they both have strong female characters in their pasts, Janie and Mary are able to defy traditional expectations in order to claim their bodies as their own.

The primacy of female characters in these two novels gives new import to my discussion of female genealogy. Janie’s grandmother, whom she calls Nanny, is the matriarch of Janie’s

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25. Not all mixed identities were the result of rape and violence, but the sexual exploitation of black women was widespread and systematic, making much creolization the result of abuse.

family and the source of Janie's knowledge regarding her family's history. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is primarily the story of one woman's self-birth. Janie grows into herself and defies cultural norms in order to claim her identity. But the first few chapters tell the story of Janie's family history. Although it is not actively chosen and is shot through with violence, this history primarily tells the story of female genealogy—because Janie's grandmother and her mother were both raped, they do not continue relationships with the men who are part of their genealogical past. An interesting facet of the cultural life that emerges from the losses and abuses of slavery is the existence of matriarchal families in African-American culture, and Janie's family is impacted by this culture; in this case genealogy becomes the opposite of an “exclusionary line” between fathers and sons (Handley 3). Interestingly, it is this matriarchal culture that empowers Janie to embrace her identity as a woman and make decisions based on her own needs and desires rather than focusing on the happiness of the people around her. *Scarlet Sister Mary* tells the story of a young woman who is raised by a stand-in mother figure. Mary's genealogical history is unknown—Peterkin does not disclose who her biological parents are. Mary is raised by her Maum Hannah, a woman who may be Mary's aunt. Maum Hannah works to communicate the values of Gullah culture to Mary, and she cares for her throughout her life. Although Mary does have a strong mother figure to raise her, it is no mistake that she discovers her own identity and empowerment through raising and mothering her own biological children.

## 1. THE PLANTATION SOUTH AND COMMODITY CULTURE

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is rooted in plantation culture as it begins with the story

of Nanny, a former slave. Readers see the plantation through Nanny's eyes. Her experiences as a slave, and later as a servant, set the backdrop for Janie's childhood and tell the story of Janie's family history. Nanny tells her story with humor and a light-hearted spirit, but she does not gloss over the violent abuse she endured. Nanny was raped and abused on the plantation before the end of the Civil War, and after the war she lived on a plantation and became a nameless servant.

*Scarlet Sister Mary* provides a problematic image of an imaginary plantation called "Blue Brook." Peterkin's position of privilege allows her to imagine that the plantation was an idyllic, although primitive, place. Blue Brook Plantation is a place where former slaves choose to stay even after they are set free, and it is a place where these former slaves can choose to keep "faithful to the old life, contented with old ways and beliefs, holding fast to old traditions and superstitions" (12). The image of life on the former plantation is of a life that is primitive, where residents can be connected to a community of people and where ghosts of life on the former plantation live, but these ghosts simply "can be heard at sunset rattling the closed window-blinds up-stairs, as they strive for a glimpse of the shining river that shows between the tall cedars and magnolias" (13). Nanny and Mary are commodities, and this understanding of black women is directly tied to the plantation experience.

Naming is a significant theme in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the names Janie and her grandmother go by on the Washburn plantation point out their roles as commodities in the plantation economy. Janie's relationship with her grandmother provides an image of a complicated mother-child relationship. Janie was not raised by her biological mother; instead she was raised by her grandmother, a former slave who also served as mother or "Nanny" to a group of children on the plantation-like setting in which Janie grew up. As Janie begins telling her

story, she tells the story of her life in Florida with her Nanny. Janie mentions that she and her grandmother lived in a house “out in de back-yard” and that her grandmother worked for a family named Washburn. Janie says “She had four gran’ chillun on de place and all of us played together and dat’s how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin’ but Nanny, ‘cause dat’s what everybody on de place called her” (8). Janie’s grandmother is called “Nanny” throughout the novel; this name indicates a role or a status on the plantation. We never learn her true name.

Janie uses humor to describe the way growing up among four white children shaped her; she says she did not know she was not white until she had to pick herself out in a photograph at the age of six. Janie says “Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names.” Then she goes on to say “Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: ‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’” (9). Janie’s story of being named “Alphabet” presents a layered vision of life in the plantation south. The fact that she does not define herself by the color of her skin subverts the plantation hierarchy; Janie is able to imagine that she is just like the white children she plays with growing up. However, Janie’s namelessness categorizes her as an object; her namelessness indicates that she depends on others in order to define herself. When Janie sees herself as one of the white children on the plantation, she puts her biological grandmother into the role of servant, or “Nanny,” so Janie participates in the commodification of one of her family members. This short description of life on the plantation indicates the complicated nature of relationships between mother figures, their children and family members, and the children they cared for.

Nanny’s story of plantation life near the end of the Civil War portrays the plantation as violent and insidious. She is depicted as nameless and as asexual while she lives on the



Washburn family's plantation, but we do see her as a sexual being and a beautiful woman as she describes her life during slavery. When Nanny describes the birth of her daughter, Janie's mother, she indicates that Janie's grandfather was the master of the plantation, a man she calls "Marse Robert." Nanny mentions that she is the last one the master says goodbye to before he leaves the plantation. Before leaving to fight in the final battle of the Civil War, he went into Nanny's cabin, "and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin'." (17): it seems that Nanny's master has some kind of affection for her, and that she was as beautiful as Janie when she was a young woman, but Nanny does not articulate any kind of affection for her master or her home on the plantation. On the plantation, Nanny's name is "nigger," and this means that she has no rights and no voice. When Nanny's master hears the news about the fall of Atlanta, he leaves her without protection against his wife, who soon learns that her husband is the father of Nanny's new baby: "'Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?' ...But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look white...So Ah told her, 'Ah don't know nothing' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothing but uh nigger and uh slave'" (17). Nanny's mistress names her "nigger," and Nanny repeats that name for herself in order to placate her mistress.

Hurston's representation of the plantation is centered around African-American life and culture. Through much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston provides alternate visions of African-American life; she insists on telling a story that centers around the lives of African-Americans rather than privileging the plantocracy, thus subverting the plantocracy's understanding of African-Americans as commodities. Eatonville is a small, rural town that is primarily African-American, and Jacksonville presents an image of city life; the representations

of these two places focus on images of leisure rather than images of work. The story focuses around gatherings around Eatonville's central store, fishing trips, gambling sessions, and musical gatherings rather than describing labor. Some critics have criticized Hurston's portrayal of African-American life by calling it a nostalgic representation of rural life, including William Gleason, who asks "[Does] knowing that black towns like Eatonville were in large respect labor farms for neighboring white towns that catered to wealthy northerners wintering in Florida dissipate the haze of nostalgia enveloping Hurston's youthful recollections?" (341). Gleason is right to acknowledge that the characters in Hurston's novel were still part of a plantation economy; they depended on whites in order to provide jobs, and African-Americans continued to be exploited during this time. There are troubling moments in the novel when Hurston leans toward nostalgia, especially in her depiction of physical labor, but Hurston's representation of a primarily African-American community subverts the meta-narrative by telling a story in which the African-American voice is central.

The end of the novel, when Janie and Tea Cake go "on de muck" presents an image of the plantation in the New South: in order to be financially successful, the plantation is heavily dependent on itinerant laborers. The section of the novel that tells the story of life "on de muck" continues to center around the African-American experience. For Janie and Tea Cake, plantation life involves hard labor, but it also involves joyful celebration. Laborers from all over the country come to work on the muck. The image of the plantation at the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contrasts with earlier representations I have discussed as part of this project. According to Tea Cake, the muck is "down in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money

and fun and foolishness” (128). We are not provided with an image of a “big house,” and we never see the owners or the individuals who will profit from this agricultural site of production.

Hurston emphasizes the transient nature of labor on the plantation, and the experiences of laborers during their leisure time. In his article, “The (Extended) South of Black Folk: Intraregional and Transnational Migrant Labor in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Martyn Bone writes, “Hurston depicts the South—especially south Florida—not as a nostalgic site of rooted rural community but as an unstable, liminal locus increasingly defined by intraregional and transnational flows of capital and labor” (758). Bone articulates that Hurston’s representation of the plantation itself is not nostalgic because the plantation she depicts is not a “rooted rural community.” I agree, but I argue that Hurston’s representation of physical labor itself is nostalgic. The workers find joy and satisfaction in physical labor, but Hurston does not demonstrate the connection to slavery or the fact that physical labor in an agricultural setting was one of the only jobs that was socially acceptable for black males according to the meta-narrative. Hurston provides an image of the plantation where traveling is a significant component of labor for agricultural workers:

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. (131)

The portion of the novel that portrays life “on de muck” includes nostalgic representations of

physical labor, but it also portrays how dangerous and volatile the life of a laborer can be by depicting the impact a hurricane has on the characters in the novel. Hurston subverts the primary narrative surrounding plantation life when she centers a description of the plantation around the stories of itinerant African-American laborers.

Julia Peterkin's creation, "Blue Brook Planation" is both a nostalgic picture of plantation life, and a defiant subversion of the dominant narrative surrounding the plantation. By creating a story about the plantation that centers around the lives of African-American women, Peterkin subverts the narrative that centered around the patriarch; however, Peterkin also engages in racial paternalism when she casts African Americans in the role of content laborers. Peterkin's story is a veiled criticism of the plantocracy and an assertion that women's stories are important and valuable. Blue Brook is a place where there is no white patriarch, and African American life and culture are allowed to flourish. However, Peterkin's portrayal of the plantation includes a paternalistic idealization of African American culture. Her representation of the plantation as idyllic depends mainly upon the absence of whites in the world she has created, and this is also largely true for Hurston.

The novel's introduction uses a paternalistic tone and a traditional understanding of African Americans during the early twentieth century; its purpose was to draw in readers who had bought into a traditional understanding of race and hierarchy. Peterkin sets a trap for her white readers; she draws them into the story by espousing ideology that echoes the meta-narrative, but once readers are drawn in they can see African Americans as rich, multifaceted characters, subverting the meta-narrative. The introduction treats African Americans as commodities and credits the former plantation owners for cultivating the community, echoing the

ideology of the meta-narrative: the narrator refers to the slaves as being bred like animals in order to cultivate their best qualities: “The old owners of Blue Brook must have been careful to buy slaves that were perfect, for they built up a strain of intelligent, upstanding human beings, just as they bred race horses and hunting dogs that could not be excelled” (12). Among the qualities that are worth maintaining are slaves who are good field workers, fine mechanics and body servants, as well as a mystical connection to both the land and to the spiritual life. A connection to traditional African-American folk religion and wisdom is also valuable because it makes the community strong. As the narrator describes, “Their preachers and conjure doctors have always known many things besides how to save men’s lives and souls” (11). Jan Kreidler argues that “when viewed in the context of trickster literary theory, Peterkin’s fiction secures a legitimate and unique place in American literary history due to its revolutionary depiction of African Americans” (468). According to Kreidler, Peterkin’s portrayal of African-American culture allows her to covertly criticize her own white culture. Peterkin’s introduction draws in her white readers and makes them believe that she upholds traditional ideology, but it is through her rich portrayal of African-American characters that Peterkin subverts her target audience’s understanding of African-Americans.

*Scarlet Sister Mary* presents an image of the plantation as the center of African-American culture and life, and women are the primary conveyors of that culture. Peterkin’s representation of women is complicated; when women are closely associated with physical labor they are close to being understood as commodities, but when they are the leaders and creators of African-American community in the novel they move away from commodity status. Mary’s Maum Hannah is the decision-maker and caregiver for her family. The actual biological relationship

between Mary and Maum Hannah is never communicated, but Maum Hannah's title, "Maum" is a Gullah word for mother, communicating her role in Mary's life and also in the community. Like Nanny, her title associates her with the work she performs, but she also keeps the name "Hannah." As Peterkin narrates, "although [Mary] could remember her mother faintly, Maum Hannah and Budda Ben were the only parents she knew" (14). Maum Hannah serves as mother to Mary and as a second mother to many of the children on Blue Brook Plantation. She takes care of the children while their mothers work in the fields (42), and she also serves as a midwife in the Blue Brook community (264). Maum Hannah is a strong spiritual presence. She is a faithful member of the local church, and she is also wise in the ways of traditional African-American folk wisdom. Maum Hannah is Mary's spiritual guide and counselor. She is the one who sews Mary's "long white baptizing robe," and the one to whom Mary tells the story of her dreams and spiritual trials. It is Maum Hannah who is instrumental when Mary's name changes for the first time: "Her baptizing robe was put away in the bottom of the cupboard to be used for her shroud when she died, and her name was no longer Mary but Sister Mary" (17). This name change is positive, in opposition to the way naming works in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; it indicates that Mary is an important part of her church and community, and that she has grown in maturity.

Maum Hannah embodies the old traditions; it is her womanly nature that allows her to do this. According to Priscilla Leder, "On Blue Brook, women wield considerable power because they retain especially close connections to 'the old traditions' and embody the life cycle, presiding over the rituals of life and death" (70). *Scarlet Sister Mary* celebrates many aspects of traditional African-American life. Folk wisdom is important to many characters in the novel,

including Mary, who visits Daddy Cudjoe, the local charm peddler, when her husband won't stay home. Another woman advises her, saying: "Daddy is a wise man. E knows black magic as well as white. E could gi you a charm so strong July never could leave you no more" (114). Peterkin is energized by imagining a world in which women are the leaders and sustainers of society, but she is also fascinated by the primitivism of traditional African-American folk wisdom. Her fascination with African American culture echoes paternalism, making this a complicated text. On Blue Brook Plantation, folk wisdom thrives and African-Americans live together in community. As a white woman, Peterkin can idealize the primitive life that she imagines African-Americans live, and her status as an outsider and as a member of the upper class allows her to imagine this world as idealistic.

Peterkin does not connect Blue Brook Plantation to the outside world. She portrays the plantation as economically self-sustaining, and she presents a problematic image of physical labor on the plantation. Blue Brook is a place where people work hard, but their hard work will provide them with enough to live on; this is a romantic image of labor. According to Mary, labor is hard but also enjoyable and rewarding: "She did not mind work, for she was raised to work and she was never happier than when she was jerking a hoe, or cooking, or washing clothes. To sweat made her feel better; to swing an ax and cut wood limbered up her muscles; to spread black manure in the field cleared out her lungs" (107). Peterkin portrays physical labor as invigorating, uplifting, and unifying for blacks; working together unifies the members of Blue Brook Plantation and helps to cement their community life. Associating African Americans with a romanticized vision of physical labor is a form of commodification; Peterkin's paternalistic representation of blacks' relationship to physical labor echoes the meta-narrative. Near the end of

the novel, Mary is pregnant and close to delivering her eighth baby. While she is walking, she passes by the former “Big House” that used to be the center of Blue Brook Plantation (250). The passage in which Mary reflects on the history of the Big House is problematic as well. Mary considers the commodification of her ancestors with nostalgia rather than anger. Her reflections include the following thoughts: “They were valued according to their strength and sense. The weak and stupid were sold. Only the best were kept. A good thing. Mary could see it now” (250). Peterkin’s portrayal of the plantation is subversive in the moments when it centers around female characters, but her romantic image of physical labor is another version of insidious commodification.

## 2. COMMODIFICATION AND FAMILY HISTORY

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* explore the genealogical histories of their main characters. Both Janie and Mary’s recent ancestors were slaves; Janie and Mary work to understand their identities as they are part of a new plantation economy. Janie and Mary cannot be owned in the same way their mothers or grandmothers were, but they continue to deal with a culture that commodifies them. Nanny and Maum Hannah, the women who care for Janie and Mary, understand what it is like to be commodities; they want a different life for the young women they care for, but sometimes these older women continue the cycle of oppression; yet there are other moments when Nanny and Maum Hannah participate in liberating their descendants. Thus these novels present a complicated picture of genealogical history in Plantation America.

Nanny’s ideas about womanhood are grounded in her identity as a slave who has lived



most of her life as physical and sexual property, but the act of telling the story of her past subverts the narrative that identifies her as a commodity. Nanny gives Janie the gift of knowing her family history, even if the truth about her past is difficult to hear. Her status as a commodity and her experience as a victim of violence have a great deal of influence on her decisions regarding how to care for Janie. Nanny decides that young Janie must be married to a “good man” who will provide for her, so she can “marry off decent like” (13). When Janie protests, Nanny tells the story of her genealogical history. As Nanny tells her story, readers learn that both Janie’s mother and Janie herself were conceived by rape. The act of telling the story of her genealogical history is significant because Nanny names her rapist, Janie’s grandfather. As Laura Dubek explains, “The novel begins as many slave narratives do, with a story of family separation precipitated by white male violence” (115). Nanny links her love for Janie to birth pains, although she is not Janie’s biological mother: “Ah couldn’t love yuh no more if Ah had uh felt yo’ birth pains mahself. Fact uh de matter, Ah loves yuh a whole heap more’n Ah do yo’ mama, de one Ah did birth” (15). Nanny feels that she must take care of Janie, a child who has no father and no mother: “You ain’t got no papa, you might jus’ as well say no mama, for de good she do yuh. You ain’t got nobody but me” (15). Nanny’s ability to claim a child as her own is subversive in its own right, since for most of her life, she has not been able to claim even her own body as her property.

Because the novel begins with Nanny’s story, her past is integral to understanding Janie’s story as a whole; Janie’s genealogical history is key to her experience. Janie does not know her father or her mother, and as Nanny tells her story, we learn that Janie’s genealogy includes a great deal of violence. Nanny articulates her status as a commodity, and she acknowledges that

her reproductive capabilities were also commodified when she claims that she was “used for a work-ox and a brood-sow” although she didn’t want that for herself (16). Nanny’s plan for Janie may not be what Janie wants for herself, but it is Nanny’s attempt at telling a new story for her family: “Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her...But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world” (16). Interestingly, Nanny uses the metaphor of a sermon to illustrate the fact that she wanted to tell her own story, but as she says, “there wasn’t no pulpit for me” (16). Although Nanny’s story for Janie is not one that Janie desires to live into, the act of crafting of a text and forming an argument are a subversion of the dominant narrative of the plantation: that she is worth nothing but the labor she can produce—whether it is physical labor or the labor of childbearing.

Nanny’s desire to tell her own story, even if she only tells it to her granddaughter, defies the culturally dominant understanding of black women as objects or commodities. As Morgan mentions in *Laboring Women*, “While the transformation of human beings into chattel property began on the West African coast, the transaction at the point of sale simply initiated a long and drawn-out process of alienation and commodification” (68). Morgan goes on to explain, that “the violation at the heart of the Middle Passage is of course, the removal from home, and while one’s ability to imagine the lost home is increasingly compromised by the passage of time, the degree to which lives continued to be lived in the Americas was immeasurably shaped by what had been lost” (68). Slaves’ bodies functioned as commodities, but their histories were also lost. In a world where women who were slaves had no connection to their past, and had no control over deciding who would become the fathers of their children, the act of telling one’s genealogical history to a

descendant becomes subversive. Although Janie does not live the life her grandmother mapped out for her, her grandmother's willingness to subvert the dominant narrative by breaking her silence must have an impact on Janie's self-discovery. Janie's self-knowledge begins with her knowledge of her family history.

Nanny's family history also tells a story of creolization or hybridity. The most overt mixing we notice in the novel is through skin color, and the color of Nanny, Leafy, and Janie's skin all tells a story of mixing that was precipitated by great violence. Reeducation is also a part of the creolization we see in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; a new race and a new culture is formed. Jennifer Morgan explains that "New and syncretic cultural forms emerged as strangers developed linguistic, familial, educational, architectural, or performative practices while becoming members of communities" (108). Nanny forms a matriarchal family; Morgan argues that slavery meant the creation of a new family unit, a unit she called "the mother-child dyad" (109). Paternity was sometimes difficult or impossible to discuss or acknowledge for slave women and their children; biological fathers did not pass names or objects on to their children, instead children were named for their mothers' masters or the masters who bought them from their mothers' owners. This is what makes Nanny's story so subversive: Nanny names her rapist, "Marse Robert," and she tells the story of how angry his wife becomes when she sees baby Leafy's fair skin (16). By naming Janie's biological grandfather, Nanny disrupts the mother-child dyad that was imposed upon her as a result of slavery. During her interaction with her mistress, Nanny stays silent and refuses to name the father of her child, but as she tells Janie her family history, she names him.

Nanny worries that the violence and constant worry she experiences while she flees from

her owners will affect her baby daughter and come through her milk. As she says, “Ah hide in dere day and night and suckled de baby every time she start to cry, for fear somebody might hear her and Ah’d get found” (18). She goes on to explain, “Ah don’t see how come mah milk didn’t kill mah child, wid me so skeered and worried all the time.” (18). Nanny’s statement about her milk articulates her fear that the violence she experienced while pregnant and while her child was so small could somehow be passed on to her daughter and impact her spirit. Nanny’s concern here is insightful; it points out that the genealogical past matters, and demonstrates that this kind of violence can have an impact on a child. It also emphasizes the importance of the connection between mothers and their children, and acknowledges that small babies are connected physically to their mothers’ emotions. Unfortunately, this impact does continue as Janie’s mother, Leafy, also experiences rape at a very young age; now Nanny and Leafy are connected through their vulnerability as commodities. Nanny says that in order to protect her daughter from a man who was not her biological father, she refused to get married. Instead, after slavery ended, she “got with some good white people and come down here in West Florida to work and make de sun shine on both sides of the street for Leafy” (19). Despite Nanny’s best efforts, her fears regarding Leafy were well-founded. Nanny worked hard to put her daughter in school, but Leafy was raped by her teacher at the age of seventeen. After the rape, Leafy was never the same, and she ran off after Janie’s birth. Nanny is strong and willful in her decision to raise Janie on her own, but she does vaguely seem to blame Leafy for something. Leafy was not able to cope with the violent way her daughter was conceived; she crumbled under the pressure. Nanny’s expectation that Leafy should be able to cope with this is evidence that she has internalized a white cultural view of black women, but that internalization is what enabled

Nanny to survive a similar past.

This story is the genealogical history that Janie and Nanny have available to them. It is significant that this history is woman-centered, rather than patriarchal. Nanny continues her role as matriarch of the family when she finds a “good man” who wants to marry Janie (13). She feels that Logan Killicks can provide protection for Janie against the violent past that haunts their family. In a more traditional move, she also desires to pass off her role as matriarch and allow someone else to care for Janie and make decisions on her behalf. For Nanny, female bodies will always function as property and always be objectified, and she is doing her best to plot out a good future for Janie. Nanny has accepted the view that black women are in the lowest position in society as they are dominated by both white men and women and also black men; whether or not she has internalized this, she has accepted that it is reality. This is a case where Nanny simultaneously subverts and upholds tradition; she refused to get married herself, perhaps out of fear that a stepfather would mistreat her biological child, but she pressures her granddaughter to get married so a man can protect her and keep her safe.

Nanny wants Janie to know the story of her family history, and she does not gloss over the violent moments in that story. She defies tradition and subverts the meta-narrative when she names Janie’s grandfather and articulates how painful her daughter’s birth was for her. However, Nanny also internalizes the dominant narrative and repeats it. At the end of the second chapter, Nanny asks Janie to marry Logan Killicks, an older man to whom Janie isn’t attracted and thinks she can never love, but Nanny explains “And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe menfolks white or black is making a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate” (20). Nanny refers to herself as a “cracked plate,” which is very fragile,

and she refers to Janie as another piece of china, a spit cup. She uses domestic commodities in order to communicate her concerns. Nanny's request is directly linked to the violent history that she has lived. She cannot imagine a life where her granddaughter makes her own decisions based upon her own sexual desires and her own dreams; instead a protected, cared-for life is the only freedom Nanny can imagine.

Discussing the issue of genealogy in *Scarlet Sister Mary* is complicated because the story connects so closely to Julia Peterkin's own life. Peterkin's mother died giving birth to her, and she was raised by a Gullah woman from the low country. Because of these significant events in Peterkin's past, it is clear that she is exploring her own family history through her creation of the Blue Brook Plantation that lives in the novel. Peterkin felt a deep connection to the Gullah woman who raised her, and she was fascinated with Gullah culture and language. According to Susan Millar Williams, "By writing about black characters who were not subject to the same expectations of propriety and repressions that bound Southern ladies, Peterkin was able to confront her own ambivalence, her own sexuality, her own violence and love and hatred and envy and fear" ("Black Voices" 152). Peterkin uses her writing to explore her own past, and her relationship with the woman who raised her, as well as her relationship with the African-Americans on the plantation where she lived after marriage. Peterkin utilizes black characters as vehicles for her own self-exploration, so she engages in the commodification of black female bodies as she crafts her novel.

*Scarlet Sister Mary* is set on a post-civil-war plantation, but there are no white characters in the novel, making it an exploration of relationships between African Americans and of African-American and Gullah genealogy. The novel opens with an exploration of genealogy

based on descriptions of the physical bodies of the “black people who live in the Quarters” (11). But the descriptions of physical bodies are linked to a discussion of the genealogical history of the African-Americans who live on the plantation: “They are no Guinea negroes with thick lips and wide noses and low ways; or Dinkas with squatty skulls and gray-tinged skin betraying their mean blood; they are Gullahs with tall straight bodies, and high heads filled with sense” (11). Peterkin uses the term “Gullah” to refer to a group of people with distinguishing physical characteristics, but the term is more widely used to identify a particular language that is a creolization of African languages and English. According to Williams, Gullah is “a creole language created by slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the southeastern United States....linguists have determined that Gullah combines an English vocabulary with grammatical forms from various West African languages” (*Devil* xviii). This emphasis on the Gullah culture is one way Peterkin explores the concept of creolization in Plantation America. The mix of languages is rooted in loss; the Gullah people lost their original language and culture before creating their own. Peterkin’s description of the characteristics of the Gullah people objectifies their bodies; it was traditionally more acceptable to characterize African-Americans in this superficial way rather than deal with the complicated subject of Gullah culture.

In *Scarlet Sister Mary*, the family unit that is a result of creolization is also woman-centered. Morgan argues that this image of the family unit is distinctively different from images of white families, and that the image of the mother-child dyad “constitute[s] a linguistic model of cultural ideas that ...clearly separated black and white women's experience of reproduction” (110). Peterkin never explains the missing genealogical gaps in *Scarlet Sister Mary*; Mary had no father and her mother died long ago. Blue Brook Plantation is a culture in which shifting sexual

relationships are common, but Peterkin does not indict white slaveowners or plantation owners as responsible for this. Jan Kreidler argues that “during her career, [Peterkin] successfully presented American cultural diversity to white, middle-class Americans, sans the ‘moonlight and magnolia’ sentimentality or stereotypical racial caricatures previous Southern writers used to sugarcoat issues such as class, race, and gender” (468), but I disagree. Peterkin does take steps to portray her characters accurately, but the way she glosses over the violence in their genealogical past is, in fact, giving in to the sentimentality Kreidler mentions.

Some of the discussions of genealogical history in the text work to uphold the meta-narrative and continue the commodification of black bodies. For the narrator, a discussion of the genealogy of the African-American characters is a discussion about breeding that emphasizes the role of the master in shaping or forming a slave community that he deemed to be worthwhile. Because of this emphasis, the former slaves become bodies rather than human beings, and this continues as the former slaves are compared to horses and dogs. Mary reflects on the commodification of her ancestors when she walks past the ruins of the former “big house” at Blue Brook Plantation: “Black people used to make up a part of the plantation’s wealth the same as the carriage and saddle horses with their well-rubbed, shining hides” (250). She does not express anger about this, but she credits this breeding for her good qualities: “Her mother had been born here and her grandmother and all the other women before them right on back to the first ones who were brought long ago up the river from the town where a slave market gave them and other black people to the rice and cotton fields” (251). This reflection is paternalistic; putting these words into the mouth of a black character makes Peterkin the oppressor, although the fact that this description focuses on an image of the ruined plantation house asserts that the



patriarchal system is dead.

There are other moments in the text when Peterkin tells stories that subvert the dominant narrative; highlighting the violent history in Mary's past and exposing the mistreatment of her handicapped uncle is an example of the subversion. Peterkin demonstrates that Mary and her family experienced great loss; she portrays this loss in a heartfelt and compassionate voice. Looking closely at the story of *Scarlet Sister Mary* indicates that Mary is also the carrier of a genealogical history that includes a great deal of violence. Mary is described as fatherless; her mother died when she was very young. The emphasis on the fact that she "had no father" leaves readers to wonder if Mary, like Janie, was the product of a rape (14). Peterkin does not elaborate, only indicating that Mary "could remember her mother faintly" (14). Mary's family unit is made up of herself, her Maum Hannah, and her uncle Budda Ben. Readers can sense a strong connection between these characters, and it is easy to imagine them as a family unit. Budda Ben's story is also indicative of violence in their family's past. Budda Ben is crippled, and the story of how he came to be so is heartbreaking:

When Budda was a tiny baby Maum Hannah fell with him in her arms and broke his body badly. He had been a cripple ever since. His legs were hamstrung and could not stand straight. He had to walk half-squatting with a stick, and sleep with his knees doubled up close to his chin. He had to work sitting down and most of the time he sat on the wood-pile cutting wood and fat lightwood splinters, or mending shoes worn out by strong firm feet....His mother was to blame. She crippled him. She fell because she was afraid. Afraid her husband would see her going to meet another man, Budda Ben's own father. (18)

The fact that Budda Ben was injured as a result of his mother's infidelity and her decision to keep it a secret links his infirmity to his family history, but it also echoes the meta-narrative's stereotype that black women are hypersexual or sexually promiscuous. Budda Ben cannot hold onto his membership in the local church because he is angry at God. "He tried to pray, for God knows he needed help, but the children plagued him and called him names, until agony made him curse. Then he cursed everything: the children, his mother, and God himself" (18). Budda Ben's story, including his mother's infidelity, his own excommunication from the church, and the fact that his family could not find adequate medical treatment to help him recover from his terrible fall, tells a story of violence, loss, and grief. This story highlights the injustices that African Americans experienced in the plantation south, although it only brings intraracial injustice to light.

Peterkin also indicates an insidious genealogical history of the residents of Blue Brook Plantation through Mary's love-hate relationship with her local church. The church is a significant part of the community, and her Maum Hannah, Mary's primary care-giver and mother figure, is an upstanding member of the congregation. Because Mary does not know her biological family, her community stands in for family. The church on Blue Brook plantation is loving and accepting at times, but in other moments it serves as a mouthpiece for the oppressor. Sadly, it is through the church that Mary first experiences sorrow and grief: "She had hardly known sorrow until lately. Three years ago, when she was twelve, Maum Hannah had made her seek God's pardon for her sins, and she had to go off by herself and pray for days without laughing or talking" (16). After receiving a vision in which she was told that all her sins were forgiven, Mary decided to become a member of her community's church and to be baptized. She

told them her dreams and “After they had asked her a few questions about it, and she gave her promise always to try to live as right as she could, never to dance again or sing reel songs, not to lie or steal or be mean or do anything low, they said she might be a candidate for baptism” (17). At the age of fifteen, Mary became “Sister Mary,” but her life in the church is short-lived. When she falls in love with July, whom her uncle calls “a wicked sinner, a crap-shooter, a poker-player, a gambler, a dancer who sang reels” (19), Mary cannot maintain her position as a sister. She becomes pregnant before her marriage to July, and when Maum Hannah notices her swelling breasts and belly on her wedding day, she hypocritically says “Some sin is black, an’ some ain’ so black, but dis sin you had is pure scarlet” (37). It is through this sin, that Sister Mary becomes Scarlet Sister Mary, but it is Peterkin’s use of both words in the title that indicates the tension under which Mary lives. She longs to keep true to her heritage and her family who love her by being a member of the church, but she also longs to live a life of freedom and joy. Rather than allowing Mary to discover her identity on her own, the church contributes to the oppression in her life. This relationship recalls Janie’s relationship with her grandmother; the older figures in the story are the carriers of oppression that is often associated with the past and with slavery.

### 3. LIBERATED FEMALE SEXUALITY

Hurston and Peterkin explore connections between the female body and liberation from commodity status for the main characters in their novels. Both authors represent the body itself as a means for liberation; as Janie and Mary become familiar with and comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality, they are free to accept themselves. Janie is able to embrace her bodily and sexual self because she does not have children, while the repeated process of pregnancy,

childbirth, and motherhood helps Mary to embrace her sexuality. The body itself works to subvert the meta-narrative in both texts. Hurston and Peterkin place the female body in the forefront of their stories, pushing their readers toward a new understanding of sexuality and femininity by forcing them to look at something they would normally turn away from.

The logic of the plantation argues that female bodies are valuable because of their ability to produce, and black female bodies are linked to production that comes from physical labor and childbirth. Janie understands that female bodies can have commodity status from the story of her grandmother's experiences, but she is still able to understand herself as bodily and to celebrate and be comfortable with her body. The novel's opening scene is a picture of Janie returning to Eatonville late in her life after she has left her grandmother and been married three times. About this scene, Patricia Yaeger writes "Why is Janie so dangerous? ...Her breasts move and change, they seem interactive, while her body is mixed with earth, her clothing muddy, covered with the world's own bodiliness" (268). Janie's experiences after leaving Eatonville have transformed her; she is comfortable with her body, and she is strangely more womanly when she is wearing overalls and covered in dirt. During this scene, when Janie returns to Eatonville, she reunites with her friend Pheoby who says "Gal you sho looks *good*. You looks like youse yo' own daughter...Even wid dem overalls on, you shows yo' womanhood" (4). Janie is her own daughter; her repeated decisions to defy the meta-narrative and assert her own will enable her to metaphorically give birth to herself.

From a young age, Janie desires sexual freedom and liberation. At the age of sixteen, she has an epiphany when she makes a connection between the natural world and sexual liberation. Janie's epiphany is sexual, emotional, and intellectual. As she watches a bee pollinate a flower,

she understands reproduction and its connection to sexual pleasure. Watching the bee pollinate the pear tree helps her to understand reproduction, but it also enables her to seek physical pleasure and sexual liberation:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. 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. So this was a marriage! (11)

When Janie understands fertilization, she decides that she wants the freedom to experience herself as a sexual being solely for the purpose of enjoyment. She does not focus on the fact that the connection between the bee and the flower would eventually produce a product; the honey that would come as a result of the union is less important than the joy of sexual connection. This is an important part of her growth and her understanding of herself and her sexuality. According to Thomas McGlamery “Surrounded as it is by the lush, naturalistic imagery of blooms and bees, sixteen-year-old Janie’s sexual desire is here depicted as an unmediated product of nature, a kind of sympathetic response in harmony with the surrounding creation” (104).

For most women the social implications of sex are inevitable; before the widespread use of birth control, sexual experiences reinforced commodity status because they resulted in pregnancy. This is what Nanny expects will happen to Janie. Nanny cannot understand sexuality outside of its connection with reproduction; she wants Janie to be protected against the life she led as a single mother, and she believes that a marriage to Logan Killicks, the owner of sixty

acres, will protect Janie from that life. Soon after Janie marries Logan, Nanny asks her “Don’t tell me you done got knocked up already, less see—dis Saturday it’s two month and two weeks” (23). Surprisingly, Janie never gets “knocked up” in spite of the fact that she has sexual relationships with three different men in the novel. The fact that Janie does not conceive throughout the novel is puzzling, but it is her freedom from motherhood that allows her to birth herself. Herbal and traditional contraceptives were available to women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as documented by V. Lynn Kennedy in *Born Southern*. She explains “the recollections of former slaves indicate that some of them tried to control their fertility. Traditional African societies made efforts to lengthen birth intervals through breastfeeding, ritual abstinence, and abortion. At least some of these cultural traditions may have been transported to the New World by enslaved women” (40). This type of traditional wisdom would have been available to Janie, but Hurston never mentions whether or not Janie’s childless life was the result of a conscious decision. Conscious or not, it is Janie’s childlessness that enables her to become her own daughter.

Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is valued as an object, first by her grandmother, then her three husbands. Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks is very much like an exchange of commodities; Nanny is able to die knowing that her granddaughter is safe under Logan’s protection, and Logan has another pair of hands to labor and to help him maintain “his often-mentioned sixty acres” (21). Janie and Logan’s relationship is hierarchical, and Janie does not connect sexually with Logan; Hurston illustrates this by using the image of the pear tree: “The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn’t know how to tell Nanny that” (14). Nanny does not want Janie to have the same commodity status she did as a

slave and as a postslavery “mammy,” but she cannot step outside of a world in which women are treated as commodities. Janie takes on Logan’s name, and as time passes, their conversations focus more and more on the value of an important commodity: labor. Logan wants Janie to help him keep up his land, but she is not satisfied in their relationship. She tells Nanny “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lake when you sit under a pear tree and think” (24). Janie’s reference to the pear tree indicates that she wants to experience freedom and sexual connection with a man; she is not satisfied with the life her Nanny wanted for her.

When Janie sees Joe Starks’ fancy clothes and hears his pleas to join him, she cannot resist, but she knows their relationship will not measure up to her epiphany under the pear tree. Her decision to marry Joe is also a financial decision and a commodity exchange: “So they were married there before sundown, just like Joe had said. With new clothes of silk and wool” (33). Janie’s marriage to Joe does continue her commodity status, but it also helps her step outside of it in some ways because she makes the choice to leave Logan and to marry Joe. She exerts her right to make a decision about her own value, but she also continues identifying herself as a commodity. She does not choose Joe because she thinks she will be sexually fulfilled in their relationship: “Janie pulled back a long time because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon” (29). When Janie Killicks becomes Janie Starks, Joe has her work in his store. This type of labor is a move up in class since in her last marriage she did menial physical tasks. For Joe, Janie herself is also a commodity, and the fact that she works in a store, a landscape literally filled with commodities, reinforces her commodity status. She is beautiful and fair-skinned, and her beauty gives Joe status in Eatonville.

Janie’s hair is a symbol of her sexuality. When she is married to Joe, she keeps her sexual

self hidden. Joe forces Janie to keep her hair covered while working in his store: “Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store” (55). Janie’s hair is long and beautiful, just like her Nanny’s was, and her hair is a symbol of her beauty throughout the novel. Her hair is also a sign that she was fair-skinned, and her mixed-race body makes her even more valuable to Joe. The fact that Joe wants Janie’s hair covered indicates that he believes he owns her body and wants to selfishly guard what he understands as his. Deborah Clarke writes that Joe

wants to put Janie on display in order to reap the benefit of reflected glory as her owner, this is precisely the position which is threatened by the eyes of other men. He wants her to be both present and absent, both visible and invisible, a task he attempts to accomplish by insisting that she keep her hair tied up in a head rag....Once she is fixed by gazes other than his own, he loses his exclusive ownership of her body. (605)

Joe owns Janie for most of their twenty-year relationship; she submits to him through her actions, but in her heart she never truly belongs to him. Late in their marriage, as Janie reflects on her relationship with Joe, she thinks: “She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over” (72). Soon after Janie realizes that Jody is not who she thought he was, he dies, leaving her the owner of the Eatonville store.

After Joe’s funeral, Janie’s first act is to change the way she wears her hair. This demonstrates that she is ready to experience complete sexual liberation: “Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her



hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist. That was the only change people saw in her” (89). When Janie is almost forty years old she meets Tea Cake, the man who helps her discover her own identity and come into herself more than any of her other relationships. Janie’s decision to marry Tea Cake in spite of what other people think is one more step towards owning herself. She is attracted to Tea Cake—both his appearance and his personality—and it is with Tea Cake that Janie first experiences sexual pleasure. Hurston tells us that Janie experienced sexual pleasure for the first time by using the language of the pear tree to describe their relationship: “He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took” (106). Janie defies her community and the meta-narrative by entering into an unconventional relationship with a man who is fifteen years younger. This act is a reply to plantation ideology because Janie is claiming complete ownership over her own body, sexuality, and identity.

Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship is another example of ambivalence in the novel. Tea Cake is the realization of Janie’s sexual desires. Since she had her feminine awakening as a young girl, Janie has never been in a relationship in which she experienced true sexual pleasure. Janie and Tea Cake truly enjoy each other sexually, but their relationship is still based on commodity exchange and ownership. Janie is complicit because she objectifies Tea Cake when she describes his attractive physical features. They have their most passionate sexual encounter only after Tea Cake engages in a flirting relationship with a young girl on the muck. Their argument becomes physical, and then turns into sex: “Janie seethed. But Tea Cake never let go. They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with

the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible” (137). This kind of violent sexual experience is pleasurable for Janie, but it also stands as a reminder that both Janie and her mother were conceived as a result of sexual violence. Experiencing sexual pleasure is an important milestone for Janie, but her relationship with Tea Cake is still mixed up with exchanges of power and the concept of ownership.

The scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which Tea Cake beats Janie is representative of the deep ambivalence in the novel. Their neighbor on the muck, Mrs. Turner, admires Janie’s “coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair” and thinks it is a shame that Janie has married a dark-skinned man (140). Mrs. Turner decides she should try to set Janie up with her brother who has “dead straight hair” (142). Even though Janie tells Mrs. Turner that she is already married and doesn’t want to meet her brother, Tea Cake beats Janie while the brother is visiting:

When Mrs. Turner’s brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. (147)

Tea Cake beats Janie in order to mark her as his own. His ability to beat her reassures him that he possesses her, but the marks that remain on her skin also served as reassurance. Deborah Clarke writes: “She suffers physically for her interracial body when Tea Cake beats her to display his ownership in the face of Mrs. Turner’s theories of Janie’s superiority due to her light skin. The bruises, of course, are clearly evident precisely because of that light skin” (610). In the

relationship between Janie and Tea Cake, Hurston portrays a freeing sexual relationship in which Janie is able to discover who she is in some ways, but the relationship also serves as a reminder of Janie's violent family history. Like her grandmother and her mother before her, Janie is abused by a man. It is Tea Cake's desire to possess Janie that makes it necessary for him to die. Janie cannot become her "own daughter" while still in a relationship with a man who possesses her (4).

As the novel comes to an end, Tea Cake has died at Janie's hands. She shoots him herself because he has contracted rabies, a terrible virus that leaves him crazy and foaming at the mouth. As we return to the frame narrative, we are reminded that Janie has been telling this story herself, in her own voice. I discussed earlier how Nanny's ability to tell her life story and their family history to Janie was a subversive act. Janie's story is the way that she births herself. She tells her own genealogical history, and her family history to Pheoby, and it is through the telling that she becomes her "own daughter" (4). Janie stands in direct contrast to women like her mother and her grandmother who were slaves (both literally and figuratively) to a culture where they were valued only as bodies. In the moment in which Janie tells her story to Pheoby, Janie is able to be in touch with her body and her bodily self. She is able to come into her own sexually and bodily on her own terms—her body is not claimed by another (man or child).

Peterkin also explores connections between pregnancy, childbirth, and liberation. Unlike Janie Crawford, who is able to discover herself through experiencing sexual relationships and sexual freedom without having children, Scarlet Sister Mary is able to craft her identity as she becomes a mother to nine children. Similar to Hurston's description of Janie when "the men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair

swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (2), Mary’s body stands in the forefront of the novel, curvy and fertile when she is pregnant, yet slender and appealing when she is not. There is no time when Mary is more attractive than when she is pregnant; even from the earliest days of her pregnancy her body tells Maum Hannah that a child is growing within her when Mary doesn’t even realize it herself:

Looka you bosom, a-struttin, a-tellin de bad news an’ you body a-swellin an’ a braggin. Why couldn’ you wait for de preacher to read out de book over you an’ make you July’s lawful wife? Lawd, gal, I’m dat sorry, I could pure cry like a baby. I could, fo-true. Some sin is black, an’ some ain’ so black, but dis sin you had is pure scarlet. (36)

Mary’s body is always associated with fertility and it is in her fertility that she is beautiful. Even the title “Scarlet” that is placed in front of her name can represent femininity and fertility in addition to representing sin like *The Scarlet Letter*. As Leder mentions, “Rather than draining her energy, bearing and rearing the children makes her stronger and more attractive—it seems as natural as inhaling and exhaling” (73). In the church, Mary is shunned for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, and she is no longer allowed to be a member, but her fertility continues to be celebrated in her traditional culture. In fact, late in her first pregnancy, she is asked to spread seed and brew medicine: “A woman who is about to bear a child has a strangely good hand for planting seed; something magic in her touch makes the seed sprout quickly and grow fast and mature in half the regular time...Medicines brewed by a woman at such a time have more strength to cure ailments, and her hearth was kept full of pots holding herbs and roots for remedies” (64). Mary celebrates and embraces her fertility and her role as a mother, and after her

first husband, July, leaves her, she does not worry too much about what other people think of her sexual freedom.

Mary in *Scarlet Sister Mary* makes a choice about her sexuality that is similar Janie's choice. She decides that her sexual freedom is important to her, and that she can make the choice to own herself and care for her children through choosing sexual freedom. Mary's results are very different from Janie's: at the end of the novel she has nine children from different fathers, but she is confident in herself and her identity in a way she never was when she was "owned" by just one man. Mary's sexual awakening involves a sexual relationship with July, her first husband. When Mary is accused of having sex, her aunt asks her "An' you went an' let July make you have sin?" (35). Mary keeps the truth that she also enjoyed her sexual encounters to herself: "Mary wanted to say that July was not all to blame, but her breath fluttered and spilled the words" (35). As a young girl, Mary is different from many of the other women on Blue Brook Plantation. She does not feel shame about seeking and achieving sexual pleasure even though her Maum Hannah tries to make her feel that way.

Peterkin's depiction of the birth of Mary's first child continues her portrayal of African-Americans as somehow more closely connected to the earth and to fertility than whites. The fact that Peterkin is able to explore images of sexuality, fertility, and reproduction only through the image of a black woman is problematic; Peterkin echoes the meta-narrative's assertion that black women are hypersexual and more suited to labor than white women. The birth of Peterkin's first child was a horrifying experience that ended in her sterilization and was followed by months of illness and postpartum depression, but Mary simply "dropped" her child in the middle of the road (75). Peterkin longs for a world in which she can be more closely connected to her body and

celebrate her fertility, but she can only explore that world through the eyes of a black female character. The depiction of Unex's birth is another example of Peterkin's ability to simultaneously subvert and uphold traditional ideology. She describes the birth scene:

One morning while she was hurrying home from Grab-All, where she had been to buy a few more lengths of cloth to finish some of her baby's clothes, a terrible spasm of pain seized her body. It scarcely passed before it came back and seized her again, tearing her bones and sinews apart, fairly cutting at her very heart-strings. Lord, how scared she was. She cried for help as loud as she could, but nobody was in hearing distance, and her child was born right there in the middle of the road. (75)

After the sudden and surprisingly quick birth of her baby, Mary simply gathers him up and walks to her Maum Hannah's house, where she and the baby are cared for, scolded and celebrated.

Mary is depicted as so strong and so fertile that birth is natural for her. Her body is celebrated and her ability to grow and birth a beautiful baby with or without the approval of her community is admirable. This depiction of such a strong woman and this celebration of the female body subverts the tradition that says any detail or description of a woman's body must be kept quiet, but Peterkin's choice to write about a black woman's body in this way continues a tradition of depicting black women as bodily, and as being more closely related to animals than they are to white women. The description of Mary continues, "A woman with plenty of experience could have done no better. God must have blessed her with the same wisdom he gave to the beasts, who know well when the time comes to birth their young, and instead of complaining of God's ways, as people do, go off alone without a word, and struggle with their

labor as best they can” (76). Perhaps Peterkin’s comparison of African-American characters to animals pacifies her primarily white audience who might protest Peterkin’s subject matter, but it also dehumanizes the very people she is trying to celebrate.

Mary’s body, and other black bodies, are understood as commodities in many moments in the text. For Peterkin, black people were more bodily than white people; therefore, it was more acceptable to explore her fascination with the bodily and images of bodies themselves through black characters and on an all-black plantation. The slave’s body as personal property is integral to the idea of the plantation, and the female body as personal property is integral as well. If black women’s bodies symbolized their utility during slavery, it is significant that their bodies continue to be valued as commodities even after slavery. Janie and Mary are often treated as commodities, and sometimes even understand themselves to be commodities in these two novels.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Julia Peterkin and Zora Neale Hurston explore the significance of genealogical history and its impact on African-American women in their novels *Scarlet Sister Mary* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both novels connect motherhood to sexual identity while telling the stories of women who defied convention in order to give birth to themselves. Hurston’s Janie births herself by understanding her genealogical history and stepping outside of the life “on high” that her grandmother longed for her to have. Peterkin’s Mary chooses to engage in sexual relationships with men without commitment and to provide for herself and her nine children on her own. Mary and Janie both make the decision to leave relationships in which they are valued as commodities in order to discover their own identities and selves. However, there are troubling

moments in each story when the authors uphold traditional ideology. I argue that it is possible to simultaneously subvert and uphold plantation ideology; it is the complicated nature of these novels that makes them so rich. Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* together highlights the insidious nature of the meta-narrative; the plantation myth had a way of saturating the minds of individuals who lived in the U.S. South. Both authors demonstrate this by echoing the meta-narrative at several points in their novels. *Scarlet Sister Mary* is the most troubling of the texts I focus on in this dissertation; telling the story of a strong, independent, sexually liberated, black woman is a challenge to a culture that elevates white men over all other individuals, but troubling echoes of paternalism permeate the novel, undermining the moments when Peterkin subverts the plantation order. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* includes nostalgic representations of labor and a troubling representation of an abusive sexual relationship, but it tells the story of a woman who is able to birth herself by choosing to celebrate and embrace her sexual desires. Both Mary and Janie defy the meta-narrative by owning their decisions to embrace their sexuality.



CHAPTER 3:  
CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION ON THE PLANTATION: COMMODIFICATION AND  
ANXIETY IN *DELTA WEDDING* AND *THE OLD ORDER*

Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding*, and Katherine Anne Porter's collection of short stories, *The Old Order*, both explore the significance of the plantation in the U.S. South; while these texts focus on the plantation as a site of production, they primarily explore family relationships and the domestic life. The external geography of the plantation in the U.S. South, most often controlled by men, includes expansive flat lands, cotton fields, and rivers on which the commodities produced on the plantation can be transported to their buyers. In the exterior world of the plantation, the commodities that are exchanged give the plantation owners power and control over their workforces and family members. However, kitchens, living rooms, parlors, and back porches make up an equally important interior geography. Each space, exterior and interior, contains commodities that are tied to a power structure. In the exterior world of the plantations, the commodities that are produced give the plantation owners power over their workforces and family members. The commodities exchanged in interior spaces, most often controlled by women, are important markers of class and family ties, and individuals wield and exchange power in ways that make the interior spaces similar to the exterior. Because women

dominate the plantation's interior spaces, the exchange of commodities that happens inside the home often tells the story of female genealogy.

Welty and Porter present an ambivalent picture of the plantation south in *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order*: these texts celebrate family connections, but they also illuminate the ways commodity culture and an emphasis on production seep into images of family life. The exchanges of power that exist in the plantation's exterior sometimes move into the interior, domestic spaces. The centrality of family in these stories emphasizes the importance of genealogical history and its value in plantation culture, but the stories center around female characters rather than around the men who traditionally would have owned and ruled plantations. Welty and Porter critique plantation culture by emphasizing its obsession with commodity culture and its emphasis on production. Female genealogy opens up space to see when these authors explore the plantation's insidious nature and resist its traditional power structure, but there are also moments when female characters internalize ideas about their own worth as women and uphold the patriarchal order. The Fairchild and Gay families work to maintain pure family lines and narratives through commodity culture and reproduction, but the young female characters in the stories probe the silences in their family narratives.

Both *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* depict the importance of ownership for the families portrayed in the stories; the ownership of property created a hierarchy in which certain individuals were owners while others were objects who could be owned. Owning land, homes, or objects became a source of power and a marker of class, and that right of possession relieved plantation owners' anxiety about their place in the plantation south. For the Fairchild and Gay families, ownership is linked to their violent family histories. In *Delta Wedding*, the life of the

Fairchild family centers around their home, a large white house at the center of the plantation called “Shellmound.” *The Old Order* tells the story of the Gay family, a large family, and its powerful matriarch, Sophia Jane Gay. The Gays own acres upon acres of land in the city and the country. Land ownership is closely tied to genealogical history. George Handley writes “Ownership inherently contradicts the facts of New World history because it is fundamentally tied to the anxiety about genealogical legitimacy, an anxiety initiated by the violence of New World history” (“Poetics of Oblivion” 37). I argue that they experience an anxiety similar to what Handley discusses; in the midst of the shift from “Old South” to “New South” the Fairchild and Gay families sense that the meta-plantation<sup>26</sup> is at risk, and they are doing all they can to maintain power in a culture where their position is tenuous.

For the Fairchild and Gay families, ownership is about power and control as much as it is about possession. In her book *Wounds of Returning*, Jessica Adams also explores the concept of ownership and its connection to the plantation. She writes, “I use these texts to consider property in the United States as a locus of possession—by which I mean an admixture of ownership and what we might call spirit possession. For possession is so much more than ownership” (11). This idea of what Adams calls “spirit possession” works well in order to describe the Fairchild and Gay families’ struggle to hold onto their land, possessions, and servants; their possessions work as more than objects for these families. Land and objects give them identity as part of a family and part of a culture. An obsession with ownership translates into an expression of anxiety about

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26. In *Cotton’s Queer Relations*, Michael P. Bibler defines the “meta-plantation” as “an abbreviation signifying this vertical system of paternalistic and patriarchal hierarchies that constitutes the core social structure of every individual plantation” (6). I discuss this term in more detail in my introduction, but I use it here in the same way Bibler uses it.

relationships with family members and outsiders as well. These texts are set after emancipation, but plantations in the U.S. South continued to be dependent on black workers to continue to produce capital (Aiken 17). Because of this, intimidation and manipulation were used to maintain the illusion of control; the patriarchy knew intuitively that they were losing control: they told and retold to themselves and their descendants a narrative about a plantation culture in which they were the aristocracy in a hierarchical society.<sup>27</sup> Commodity culture is prevalent in these two texts, but it surfaces prominently through descriptions of the physical objects within the home. The detailed descriptions of physical objects also illuminate moments when female bodies are objectified, servants and former slaves are treated as commodities, and marriages function as commodity exchanges. The plantation is defined by commodity exchanges in exterior spaces, but commodity exchanges also define what happens in domestic spaces and often illuminate troubling moments in the plantocracy's genealogical lines.

In *Delta Wedding*, a focus on objects and commodities translates into anxiety about race, class, and mixing. Katherine Anne Porter's collection of short stories, *The Old Order*, also explores an obsession with both physical objects and people who are objectified. Both authors describe the characters' possessions with great detail, indicating the families' obsessions with ownership. The characters recite to themselves lists of objects and land they own to themselves over and over again, indicating their anxiety. The Fairchild family has a dining room filled with chairs, portraits, and fine china that remind them of their ancestors, and Sophia Jane Gay, the

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27. George Handley discusses this idea in his book, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas*: "Plantation owners clung to their monopoly on property and to their claim of being the progenitors of New World nations by insisting on their own aristocratic family and blood lines, which divided their societies according to caste and color" (15).

Gay family matriarch, recites descriptions of the property she owns to herself again and again. Melanie Benson's book, *Disturbing Calculations* connects the concept of counting and an obsession with ownership to the issue of deep-seated anxiety among the plantocracy. Her term "calculation-obsessed discourse" is helpful in communicating the link between the emphasis on physical objects and on the commodity status of female bodies I see in the texts I am exploring here. This discourse permeated the family narratives because the obsession was not just about commodities and ownership; it was also about control and power:

While the origins of [calculation-obsessed discourse] plainly include slavery and its principles of human quantification and commodification, it is not just former slaves but white women, elite men, Native Americans, and immigrants who have precise economic value in this system and betray anxious fiscal attachments and desires lasting long beyond emancipation. (2)

"Calculation-obsessed discourse" indicates that an emphasis on descriptions of physical objects is linked to anxiety about a family's place in society; even human bodies themselves have value in this culture. Through close attention to the physical objects in the Fairchild and Gay homes, Welty and Porter likewise connect family possessions with family anxieties about their roles in society. In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger writes about Southern women's fiction: "This literature stirs up new ways of thinking about labor and object relations, and about the ways commodities become magnets for labor, points of crossover, exchange, blockage, or leakage between black and white cultures" (254). Welty and Porter bring attention to labor and object relations in a way that is similar to what Yaeger discusses here; the detailed descriptions of the objects in the home are not insignificant. Objects are reminders of family history, and like Yaeger

mentions, they are “magnets for labor.” Each little object the Fairchild and Gay families own tells a story of labor, exchange, and family history, and each little object is linked to the family’s story.

Descriptions of objects and their value also leads me to consider what else is valuable in the Gay and Fairchild homes and families. Porter and Welty often use “calculation-obsessed discourse” to describe individuals, giving language to the anxieties these families feel about their role as members of the plantocracy. Benson mentions that individuals also have “precise economic value” in the system of slavery and in post-slavery society (2). In this chapter, I explore the commodity status of female bodies in *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order*. *Delta Wedding*’s central focus is on the wedding of Dabney Fairchild to Shellmound’s overseer, so the value of women in the plantation south is a central theme in the novel. Troy’s labor and labor management contribute to the value of the Fairchild family plantation, so Battle is forced to consider the possibility of handing his daughter to a member of another class. Because Dabney chooses to marry outside of her class, the family’s anxiety about her status as a Southern lady, and about their own status and importance comes to the surface. *The Old Order* explores similar themes by telling the stories of various generations of women who are part of the Gay family. Sophia Jane, the matriarch, places value on individuals based on their ability to serve as part of a site of production, but her granddaughter, Miranda, is troubled by the commodification she sees in the world around her. *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* reflect on the myth of the white Southern lady by reflecting on motherhood and on relationships between women, but they reflect on ways the myth is troubled, as well as on ways the myth is upheld. These stories demonstrate how these families fit within the traditionally hierarchical system, but they also illuminate ways

they step outside of that system. The value of white female bodies is significant in both texts, but these stories also explore the value and significance of women who exist on the margins in this culture. *The Old Order* spends time focusing on the story of Nannie, a former slave and life-long servant of the Gay family. Nannie is treated as an object and a commodity, even though the Gay family would like to imagine that she is well-loved and valued. *Delta Wedding* includes images of African-Americans whom the Fairchilds consider to be part of their family while they list them among their possessions.

Violent moments erupt throughout Welty's *Delta Wedding*; these moments haunt the narrative of the Fairchild family history, showing us ways the hierarchy of the plantation south is penetrable. In a 1944 essay entitled "Some Notes on River Country" Welty describes what she calls the "sense of place" that exists in a string of Mississippi river towns: "I have never seen, in this small section of Old Mississippi River country...anything so mundane as ghosts, but I have felt many times a sense of place as powerful as if it were visible and walking and could touch me." As she continues, she describes the sounds of history that still live in this place: "Much beauty has gone...Just as, when there were mansions and celebrations, there were no more festivals of an Indian tribe there; before the music, there were drums" (286, 287). Welty's statement that "before the music, there were drums" is a description of her understanding of history; for Welty, Mississippi's past is still alive.<sup>28</sup> Native Americans inhabited the land, then early settlers made Mississippi their home, taking possession of land that was not rightfully theirs. The settlers' later financial success depended on the exchange of human bodies.

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28. In a 1984 interview, Welty contradicted herself when she said "I don't write historically or anything...I've never gone into such things as guilt over the Indians or—it hasn't been my subject." Patricia Yaeger calls this a lie, and I agree (*Dirt and Desire*, 155-6).

Mississippi's violent past resurfaces to impact its physical spaces, and the layered history of violence comes to life in supernatural form. In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger writes, "place is never simply 'place' in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape" (13). This statement is true of Welty's fiction; her descriptions of physical places always include hauntings. The geography of the plantation's exterior includes this powerful sense of place layered with the history of violence and commodity exchange, producing a haunting of the natural spaces in the plantation world; I argue that these hauntings extend to interior spaces and to family relationships.

Welty's description of place brings up images of a violent past, but Porter uses a description of her family history in order to articulate the way violence haunts the present. In her essay, "Portrait: Old South," Porter writes "I am the grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation" (160). She goes on to reflect on her family's history. She learned this history through stories that family members told about the good times and the hard times they endured as a result of the Civil War. The concept of "blood-knowledge" is significant because it connotes that Porter has inherited an understanding of deprivation as part of her genealogy. There is a sense that this knowledge passes from generation to generation through stories, but the phrase "blood-knowledge" also connotes the importance of biological connections through family history. In her article "Accessing Blood Knowledge in Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order*," Sarah Robertson writes "blood-knowledge carries with it the lingering presence of the unspoken as well as the spoken" (247). The family passes stories on from generation to generation, but they also pass anxieties about the importance and significance of their family, along with an obsession with



whiteness. Like Welty's emphasis on the land, Porter's description of "blood-knowledge" indicates that the past continues to impact the present and haunts the characters in her stories.

## 1. LAURA AND MIRANDA'S LENSES

Eudora Welty's novel, *Delta Wedding*, was published in 1946. It focuses on the wedding of Dabney Fairchild, the family's second-oldest daughter, but the novel is not driven by action. Welty invites us to know the Fairchild family and their history by letting readers overhear conversations and enter into scenes that show what everyday life is like on Shellmound, the Fairchild plantation. Laura McRaven's trip to the Mississippi Delta is a retreat from her life in the city of Jackson, but she "could not be in [Dabney's] wedding for the reason that her mother was dead" (1). Welty's fiction is often ambivalent, and Patricia Yaeger discusses this ambivalence when she asks the following question in *Dirt and Desire*: "Why is it that a writer as freak-obsessed and fiercely disturbing as Eudora Welty can consistently be described as 'one of our purest, finest, gentlest voices'?" (62). Laura McRaven's narration gives us the lenses to see Welty as "freak-obsessed and fiercely disturbing" while also seeing her gentle affection for a large, hilarious, and sprawling extended family. She sees the Fairchild family's obsession with violence and power, but she also sees a deeply loving and connected family; Laura questions the lifestyle of her extended family while loving them.

Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order* focuses on the role of the matriarch in a Texas family; it includes stories that were published from 1934-1944, but the settings of the stories span a period of about fifty years, telling the story of the Gay family across generations. The collection's focus on generational history indicates the importance of family genealogy. Sophia

Jane is the source of the family; she is endlessly ambitious, industrious and orderly. She has been a spoiled daughter, a wife, a mother, a widow, and a matriarch, and she spent a great deal of her life living in bondage to a set of expectations regarding femininity and womanhood. The present day in these stories is the time of Sophia Jane's old age; now she has the opportunity to look back on her past and to exert control over others. Sophia Jane's relationship with Nannie is located on the periphery of these stories; Nannie is a former slave who served as Sophia Jane's childhood servant and companion who acted as nurse to four of Sophia Jane's children, and who still lives with her in her old age. This collection of stories catalogs an obsession with objects and with the idea of ownership that is similar to what we see in *Delta Wedding*. Because Sophia Jane's husband died early in their marriage, she has been the one to maintain a preoccupation with the idea of ownership and to pass that obsession on to her children. A few of the stories focus on her granddaughter Miranda, and it is because of Miranda's vision that we are able to see Sophia Jane's obsession with ownership as troubling and violent.

*The Old Order* and *Delta Wedding* both tell the story of the plantation through outsiders' eyes. In *The Old Order*, Miranda's young mind scrutinizes the realities of her life and explores the concept of ownership. In *Delta Wedding*, Laura McRaven, the Fairchild family's niece, travels from Jackson to visit her extended family in the Mississippi Delta. These young characters have an ability to see the actions of their family members with a remarkable clarity; their observations probe and trouble dominant family narratives. In his book, *Cotton's Queer Relations*, Michael Bibler writes that "From as early as the 1820s and 1830s...literary narratives about the plantation have typically revolved around issues of marriage and reproduction, whereby the continuity of the entire plantation system depends on the continuity of the white,

slaveholding family” (2). *The Old Order* and *Delta Wedding* both fit this description; both texts focus on marriages and family narratives surrounding reproduction and genealogy, but Laura and Miranda see moments when the family narratives are troubled. Patricia Yaeger writes, “The landscape of *The Old Order* is filled with real and hypothetical bodies—with buried children, buried chickens, and the bodies of tortured slaves. In the secret world of the child, these voices come to life again. Their weeping marks not only the child’s individual loss, but her culture’s predations” (19). Miranda is the character who notices these bodies that Yaeger mentions, and she cannot ignore them. Miranda has an ability to see; this may be because she still lives in “the secret world of the child,” but Laura has a similar gift. Laura notices the violent language members of the Fairchild family use in everyday conversation. Although these girls do not always know what they are looking at, their vision helps us to hear voices that have been silent.

Laura’s journey to Fairchild is a trip that will continue her mother’s family narrative and pass down the narrative of her matrilineal genealogy. Laura associates Shellmound with domestic spaces, and this is fitting because Shellmound is a place where Laura, the “poor little motherless girl” goes to understand her mother’s family history (1). As Laura rides the train from Jackson, images of the expansive Mississippi Delta flash by: “In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky. The clouds were large—larger than horses or houses, larger than boats or churches or gins, larger than anything except the fields the Fairchilds planted” (3). Images that associate the plantation with commodity production flash by: cotton fields, a cotton gin and compress, and a railroad track. The description indicates that the fields belonging to the Fairchilds stretch out into the distance and appear to be larger than the sky, critiquing the family’s obsession with ownership. After passing sites of production, Laura and the cousins also

pass a cemetery. As Laura rides by in the Fairchild car with all of her cousins, she lists what she sees, but the objects she sees associate the commodity exchange that happens on the plantation with the objectification of bodies: “They went up and down the street three times, backing into cotton fields, to turn around, before they went across the bridge again... On this side of the river were the gin and compress, the railroad track, the forest-filled cemetery where her mother was buried in the Fairchild lot” (5). There are moments in the novel when bodies emerge as objects, and the scene when Laura and the Fairchilds pass the grave yard is one of those. Laura’s mother is buried in the family plot, a signal connecting Laura’s genealogical history with the concept of ownership or possession. Her mother’s burial site is closely associated with other places that are associated with production and productivity. When Laura’s mother married, she became a member of another family and moved away to Jackson, but after her death, her body is returned to be buried on her biological family’s land, indicating that the Fairchild family’s desire for ownership has an extensive reach.

The fact that Laura’s father has sent her on a train to spend time with her mother’s family is an acknowledgement of the significance of genealogical history to this Mississippi family. During these opening scenes we learn that Laura is nine years old, she is traveling to visit her mother’s family because her mother has died, her father has gone with her only part of the way, and Laura will not be able to be in her cousin’s wedding. After this list of facts, the narrator points out which of these is most memorable to Laura: “Of these facts the one most persistent in Laura’s mind was the most intimate one: that her age was nine” (1). Silence fills the space in the novel where we should sense Laura’s deep grief at the loss of her mother. This silence works as a signal; the novel is filled with similar silences. There are moments throughout when family

members speak lightly of moments or events that should be filled with grief or emotion. Laura notices these moments, although she does not always have the ability to articulate the loss she feels. She longs to hear words that would speak of her loss and of her connection to her mother's family: "They looked with shining eyes upon their kin, and all their abundance of love; as if it were a devilment, was made reckless and inspired or was belittled in fun, though never, so far, was it said out. They had never told Laura they loved her" (19). The Fairchilds want to maintain an intact family narrative that comfortably focuses on the trivial, but we are allowed into the silences through Laura's understanding of this family.

Laura also notices exchanges of power that take place between members of the Fairchild family. The narrator notes that "it was the boys and the men that defined the family always. All the girls knew it" (16). Laura is able to recognize the hierarchy that exists in the plantation south and name it, although she does not speak this thought out loud. She is a Fairchild, but she also is not; she senses the belonging and togetherness that this family experience and she longs to be a part of it. In some moments, she fits in, but in other moments she is an outsider looking in:

But boys and men, girls and ladies all, the old and the young of the Delta kin—even the dead and the living, for Aunt Shannon—were alike—no gap opened between them. Laura sat among them with her eyes wide. At any moment she might expose her ignorance—at any moment she might learn everything. (16)

As she sits with her eyes wide, she takes in everything, letting the reader see beautiful moments of love and companionship among the Fairchilds, but she also sees moments when the family narrative is troubled.

One of the most unsettling qualities about *Delta Wedding* is the way violence surfaces

throughout the novel, but Laura's response to violent language and events is to acknowledge that she is not a true member of the family. Even the youngest members of the Fairchild family talk about violence and use violent language in everyday conversation, making it seem commonplace. The same evening Laura arrives, Ranny, Orrin, India, and Shelley tell Laura the story of how "The whole family but Papa and Mama, and ten or twenty Negroes with us, went fishing in Drowning Lake" (23). Shelley says "It was almost a tragedy" when Maureen's foot was caught in a railroad trestle. Maureen is another cousin who lives with the Fairchilds because her father is dead and her mother is insane. Uncle George leans down to help her out and stays with her even when the train comes, and "the Dog stopped just before it hit them and ground them all to pieces" (23). The children join in to tell this story to Laura, each one taking a different moment in order to explain how this almost-tragedy took place. The story is riveting, but it is also unsettling; the family lists "ten or twenty" Negroes among their entourage, indicating the abundance with which they live. The description of what might have happened—George and Maureen might have been ground "all to pieces" if not for a moment's difference in events—is extremely violent. Laura's response is simple, but her words seem weighty: "Laura looked at her gravely. 'I'm glad I wasn't there,' she told her" (24). Indeed, Laura is lucky she wasn't there because it feels as if something terrible could just as easily happen to her. Soon after the conversation about the close call on the railroad tracks, Battle's sisters complain that his wife Ellen does not rest enough: "'Your mother is killing herself,' Battle's sisters told the children. 'But you can't do a thing in the world with her,' they answered. 'We're going to have to whip her or kill her before she'll lie down in the afternoons, even'" (24, 25). The children talk about killing or whipping their mother in order to get her to conform to expectations of what is

appropriate for a woman of her class. The children don't mean what they say literally, but their language is troubling. Welty adds that "They spoke of killing and whipping in the exasperation and helplessness of much love," making this moment even more unsettling (24, 25). Laura's response to this conversation is to understand that she does not belong: "Laura could see as far as that she was the opposite of a Fairchild, and that was a stopping point" (25). When we see the Fairchild family through Laura's eyes, we see complicated exchanges of power and problematic relationships between family members.

Burial sites work as markers in both *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order*; bodies also function as objects in Porter's short story "The Grave." The story starts out with a reflection on Sophia Jane's need to stay close to the body of her husband: "The Grandfather, dead for more than thirty years, had been twice disturbed in his long repose by the constancy and possessiveness of his widow. She removed his bones first to Louisiana and then to Texas as if she had set out to find her own burial place" (48). The description of him as "the grandfather" objectifies him; he does not have a name, instead he is remembered only according to his role in the family. The fact that Sophia Jane feels a need to carry his body with her continues the objectification. After the grandfather's body is moved for the third time, young Miranda and her brother explore the empty grave sites together. After standing in an empty grave and discovering two objects, a gold ring and a screw head for a coffin, Miranda and her brother hunt for rabbits. The story weaves these events into one large narrative, indicating that the visit to the gravesite at the beginning of the story is closely connected to the rabbit hunt. Since Paul is skinning rabbits so their skins can become clothing for her dolls, the rabbits also become objects, and Miranda begins to understand reproduction as it is related to objectification. When Paul kills a rabbit, the

children look at the dead body carefully:

Miranda watched admiringly while her brother stripped the skin away as if he were taking off a glove. The flayed flesh emerged dark scarlet, sleek, firm; Miranda with thumb and finger felt the long fine muscles with the silvery flat strips binding them to the joints. Brother lifted the oddly bloated belly. "Look," he said, in a low amazed voice. "It was going to have young ones." (54)

When Miranda gazes at the rabbit's body and at the tiny rabbits that her brother has cut out of their mother's womb, she says "Oh, I want to *see*" (54). This is an intense moment of understanding and knowing for Miranda, who "began to tremble without knowing why" (54). In this moment, her family's tendency to keep silent surrounding their "blood-knowledge" comes to a head. Miranda's trembling indicates that she feels a great deal of grief when she realizes that her family is inclined to use others as objects and that she is complicit in that objectification.

The construction of the story is a sign to readers that Miranda's moment of realization surrounds her place in her family's structure, her gender identity, and also her genealogical history. Porter reflects on the Gay family's values regarding land ownership, gender, and commodity exchange in the story, and the scene with the rabbits serves as the moment when all of these issues come together. The narrator tells us that Miranda "wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along" (54). Miranda's epiphany moment comes at a scene of violence, when she observes: "Ah, there's blood running over them" (54).

Yaeger writes

The suspicion that Miranda participates in a world where living things can be



buried alive drives her story toward the borders of the fantastic, mingling ghost story with realist melodrama. This is an ambiguous tale about a little girl who is too sensitive and overreacts to everything, but it is also a fantasmatic tale about a world filled with factual ghosts, with disobedient slaves staked out in the swamps, black babies malnourished when their mothers suckle white children: a material foundation for a culture that contains too many uncounted bodies. (19)

Miranda comes into contact with her family's ghosts in this moment: "She understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and so steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she had to know" (55). Quickly, Miranda and Paul suppress these thoughts and push these realizations back down inside. She tells Paul that she "will not have" the skin of the dead rabbit to dress her dolls in, and Paul instructs her to keep quiet about their shared experience: "Don't you ever tell a living soul that you saw this" (55).

Laura and Miranda are both part of families who maintain false family narratives by keeping silent. There are moments in their families' genealogical histories that are kept secret, but both young girls can see the places where the hidden truths about their families bubble to the surface. Laura's and Miranda's vision subverts the plantation's power structure because these young women see the spaces where their families are silent. Because they can see, readers of *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* can also see the problematic commodification of bodies that takes place in the Fairchild and Gay families. At the same time that they allow us to see into the silences, Laura and Miranda also give readers hope for the futures of the Fairchild and Gay families. Because they question their families' troubled pasts, they make space for a more

harmonious future.

## 2. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE “BIG HOUSE”

Welty’s descriptions of Shellmound communicate nostalgic feelings about plantation life and culture, but her depiction also illuminates the commodity-obsessed nature of this world that allowed plantation owners to steal from their Native American predecessors as well as their African-American slaves and servants. The action of *Delta Wedding* is set within fluid and detailed descriptions of natural spaces; this setting and the primary subject matter of the story—images of family life and family traditions—mean that the novel can be read as a nostalgic take on plantation life in the U.S. South, but if readers pay attention, we see moments in the story in which Welty points out problems; she lets us see the plantation south as both lovely and problematic. In her article, “Outlaws and Indians,” Mae Miller Claxton says “Early reviewers of *Delta Wedding* did not see the complex cultural and historical context of the novel, characterizing it as a rosy portrait of the old South” (123). Although it is possible to gloss over the violence in the novel, Welty has carefully crafted her story in such a way that readers who look closely will feel unsettled by a recognition of the plantation’s insidious history of violence and exclusion. In her book *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination*, Elizabeth Christine Russ writes about the nostalgic image of the plantation: “By minimizing or erasing the presence of the slave and turning its main house into a domesticated container of romance and nostalgia, [tour guides] transform the plantation into ‘an uncomplicated site of white achievement’” (9). Russ mentions that a nostalgic image of the plantation erases the presence of the slave, but Welty also highlights the way it erases the memory of the Native Americans to whom the land

originally belonged. Shellmound, the Fairchild plantation, is quite complicated, however. At one point in the novel, Laura reflects upon her Uncle George's actions after she sees him, “the sweetest man in the Delta,” wordlessly express his anger by clenching his fist (53). Laura thinks to herself “It is because people are mostly layers of violence and tenderness—wrapped like bulbs, she thought soberly; I don't know what makes them onions or hyacinths” (53). This image of layers of violence and tenderness can also describe Welty’s depiction of the plantation.

Both *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* present images of plantations that center around one large dwelling, the house at the center of the plantation that Charles Aiken called “the storied big house” (7). Welty and Porter represent the plantation as an exterior space before moving to focus on interior spaces and the domestic life. The big house is a prominent home at the center of the owner’s land; action and production center around this home. Jessica Adams writes that the big house continues to be significant in contemporary culture: “Plantations have become popular tourist destinations among whites because ‘historic house’ or ‘unique architecture’ or ‘romantic’ comes to mind before the image of slavery does. And when it does, it will have been filtered through architecture and romance and perhaps not seem so disturbing any more” (55). The first image of the Fairchild family’s big house in *Delta Wedding* is romantic: “the tall, white, wide frame house with a porch all around, its bayed tower on one side, its tinted windows open and its curtains stirring, and even from here plainly to be heard a song coming out of the music room” (6). It is easy to picture this large, stately home standing tall against the flat landscape of the Mississippi Delta, against the space of Shellmound’s land, which sprawls over an expansive space covering cotton fields, one of which is called “the Mound Field,” orchards, and creekbeds.

The name and description of Shellmound links it to the Fairchild family’s history of

violence and exploitation. African-Americans and Native Americans were exploited in order to produce this financially successful plantation. Welty's decision to name the Fairchild plantation Shellmound is a nod to the land's previous Native American owners, making *Delta Wedding* an exploration of the effects of colonization. The term "mound" refers to the mound-building Choctaw Indians who lived in the Mississippi Delta prior to 1820. They "dwelt primarily on the sedimented high ground along the banks of rivers and streams" (Cobb 5). By choosing this name and acknowledging that the family grows cotton on top of a former Indian mound, Welty acknowledges the land's former Native American residents. In her book, *Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction*, Annette Trefzer writes about the layers of history that are present when southern writers consider their land's history: "When southern writers dug through the 'rich surface deposits' of their landscape they encountered the traces of previous cultural inscriptions by Native Americans that had been 'overwritten' by the dominant white settler culture" (15). The glorious, white plantation home that sits on top of a former Indian mound is an example of the overwriting that Trefzer discusses.

*The Old Order's* representation of the exterior world of the plantation emphasizes the land, the outbuildings, and the orchard that the Gay family owns. The concept of land ownership is central to the texts; owning land gives the Gay family power and significance. The family owns a house in the city, which they call a "town house," and a house in the country, which they refer to as "the farm" (2). The first short story in *The Old Order* is called "The Source"; it is very short—it is more of a sketch than a story, but it is filled with examples of calculation-obsessed discourse. The story narrates the way each year, with the changing of the seasons, Sophia Jane begins to long for the country: "With an air of tenderness, as if she inquired after a favorite child,

she would ask questions about the crops, wonder what kind of gardens the Negroes were making, how the animals were faring. She would remark now and then, ‘I begin to feel the need of a little change and relaxation, too’” (1). As Sophia Jane reflects on the lands she owns and the commodities that have been produced on those lands over the years, she feels a sense of satisfaction. She counts her possessions again and again as a sort of mantra that comforts her and gives her peace.

In her article “Circum-Atlantic Superabundance,” Patricia Yaeger writes about Welty’s “jeweled adjectives,” asking: “How much of this thematic or stylistic abundance reflects something long-standing about a hemispheric experience of surplus, superfetation, or superabundance that has become both myth and fact about the southern stretches of Europe’s New World? Welty’s prose overdoes it beautifully; her world is filled with too much” (771). Porter explores similar superabundance in *The Old Order*. Excess and scarcity go hand and hand throughout the texts, including the descriptions of the family’s connection to the land. Before Sophia Jane’s husband dies, he invests in sugar refineries in Louisiana, where he says “there was going to be a fortune in sugar” (25). Fortunately, Sophia Jane realizes soon after her husband’s death that he was wrong. She is able to sell out and move her family to Texas “where her husband had bought cheaply, some years before, a large tract of fertile black land in an almost unsettled part of the country” (25). The family suffers several lean years in Texas, but eventually the “fertile black land” returns on her investment and provides for her large family. The land’s fertility itself is an image of superabundance, and Sophia Jane’s ability to rule over her family seems to be linked to her connection to the land. Sophia Jane and her family take up an extravagant amount of space as well as an extravagant amount of land. She has planted five

orchards in three states, including the one in Texas. As her family travels, they make up a caravan: “She had with her nine children, the youngest about two, the eldest about seventeen years old; Nannie and her three sons, Uncle Jimbilly, and two other Negroes, all in good health, full of hope and greatly desiring to live” (25). The Gay family’s sheer size and the list of individuals, including slaves, objects, and possessions is another example of calculation-obsessed discourse. Even Sophia Jane’s expansive family is extravagant; it is difficult to imagine how many resources such a large family would consume.

Sophia Jane is associated with both exterior and interior spaces; she seems to believe that she has the ability to exercise some kind of control over both. She counts the fertile land as her own, so it is only logical that she would also count the numerous servants who help her maintain that land as her own possessions as well. Porter narrates Sophia Jane's arrival at her family’s orchard in the country:

Without removing her long veiled widow’s bonnet, she would walk straight through the house, observing instantly that everything was out of order; pass out into the yards and gardens, silently glancing, making instant plans for changes; down the narrow path past the barns, with a glance into and around them as she went, a glance of firm and purposeful censure; and on past the canebrake to the left, the hayfields to the right, until she arrived at the row of Negro huts that ran along the bois d’arc hedge. (3)

One of Sophia Jane’s sons lives on and runs this orchard with his three children, as his wife died when the children were young. Rather than focusing on the relationships with family members, Sophia Jane’s visit is all about counting, cataloging and inspecting the lands that she owns. After

this description comes another catalog of interior possessions, and a description of the way the “Negroes” who live at Sophia Jane’s country home clean the place from top to bottom as she arrives. Sophia Jane is described as “a tireless, just and efficient slave driver of every creature on the place” (5). Porter’s tone is ambivalent, but the obsession with counting and ownership is the primary focus of the story. The way Porter pairs these descriptions indicates that Sophia Jane’s rule was not necessarily just; Porter points out the insidious tendency to focus on production and profit rather than on valuing individuals.

### 3. COMMODIFICATION IN INTERIOR AND DOMESTIC SPACES

The plantation’s commodity status comes primarily from the amount of land a family owns—a plantation is an institution for the production of a commodity. The Fairchild family closely links commodities to genealogy; the objects in the domestic spaces in the novel tell the story of the family’s female genealogy. These physical objects are a part of the family narrative; looking back on their possessions reminds the family of the story they uphold about their purity and superiority. The family associates the objects in domestic spaces with the women of the family; some examples include paintings, furniture, and tools for the domestic life, while objects that are associated with the males in the novel include mechanized tools for farming and production as well as technological advances like automobiles. Focusing on the exterior spaces of the plantation fits within the traditional understanding of the plantation as an agricultural site of production. In this understanding, the plantation owner exercises power over individuals and over the land in order to produce agricultural commodities that he can then sell in order to provide for his family. Since exterior spaces are generally associated with masculinity and

interior spaces with femininity, I want to take a close look at the interior spaces on the plantation in order to see the world of the plantation south through the lens of female genealogy. This lens illuminates the ways the plantation's interior spaces are also defined by commodification and an obsession with ownership.

Yaeger links Welty's ornate descriptions of the natural world to the South's history of "surplus, superfetation, or superabundance," but she argues that the superabundance also serves to highlight the lack experienced by another part of the population of the U.S. South: "Landscape is never simply landscape; it suggests a history of ongoing plenitude for white people coupled with scarcity for blacks" (771). It is difficult to read ornate descriptions of interior spaces in *Delta Wedding* without thinking of a similar disparity. *Delta Wedding* is filled with detailed descriptions of physical objects, beginning with the description of the exterior of the Fairchild home, but these descriptions also indirectly serve to highlight the lack the African-American servants in the story experience. The Fairchild family's possessions are ornate, beautiful and plentiful, but they also tell the story of the family's violent history of exploitation. Welty's description of the Fairchild family's dining room also "overdoes it beautifully":

Besides the old walnut-and-cane chairs (Great-Grandfather made them) there were easy chairs covered with cotton in a faded peony pattern, and rockers for the two great-aunts, sewing stands and fire shields beside them, all near the watery-green tile hearth....At the other end of the room the Victrola stood like a big morning-glory and there, laid with somebody's game, was the card table Great-Grandfather also made out of his walnut trees when he cut his way into the Yazoo wilderness. A large ornate rattan settee, upslanting at the ends, with a steep scrolled back, was



in the bay alcove. In the half-moon of space behind it were marble pedestals and wicker stands each holding a fern of advanced size or a little rooted cutting, sometimes in bloom. (21)

Many of the possessions the Fairchild family owns and takes great pride in were made of the walnut trees their Great-Grandfather chopped down “when he cut his way into the Yazoo wilderness.” This brings the exploitation and violence from the plantation’s exterior world into the interior, domestic, and maternal spaces. The exterior world is also growing inside; large ferns and root cuttings cover the space, blurring the lines between exterior and interior, although these are not commodity crops.

The material objects in domestic spaces at Shellmound are signals of the status and importance of the Fairchild family. *Delta Wedding* is filled with lists of objects, and with servants who work on behalf of the family, but do not have strong voices or personalities of their own. As Laura McRaven arrives at Shellmound, she remembers the spaces within the home before she walks through the house again, and she catalogs the rooms in her memory by the objects that are placed there: “She remembered (as one remembers first the eyes of a loved person) the old blue water cooler on the back porch—how thirsty she always was here!—among the round and square wooden tables always piled with snap beans, turnip greens, and onions from the day’s trip to Greenwood” (7). As Laura looks from object to object, she isn’t only thinking about the objects themselves. Each object brings up a memory; therefore, it is connected to a memory of a relationship. It is the physical objects that help her situate herself in this space and understand herself and her relationship to her mother’s family more fully. Laura continues to catalog the items in the home as she lists the paintings in the dining room, painted by a long-dead great

Aunt, the ornamental plates hanging there. She remembers playing cards, paper dolls, and then she lists the family's servants as part of the catalog: "She remembered the Negroes, Bitsy, Roxie, Little Uncle, and Vi'let" (8). Even this memory only mentioned in passing highlights the disparity between black and white. As Yaeger explains, "Southern whites may encounter African-Americans as landscape, background, atmosphere—as part of the furniture" (*Dirt and Desire* 22). The way Laura, who is an outsider on Shellmound, remembers the black characters in the novel as items in a list indicates that the Fairchild family sees these individuals as objects or as commodities they own. The Fairchild family owns innumerable material objects, and they are also able to consider human beings in the catalog of their possessions.

The portraits in the Fairchild family's dining room are an important part of their family narrative; these objects function as possessions, but they also tell the story of the family's genealogical history. Like the cemetery, humans function as possessions here, although this type of possession is different from owning slaves or servants. Starting with the portrait of Great-Great-Uncle George that hangs in the parlor, the Fairchild family history looks down from the walls and surrounds the family as it is embodied in physical objects: "in his portrait ...the one who had been murdered by robbers on the Natchez Trace and buried, horse, bridle, himself, and all, on his way to the wilderness to be near Great-Great-Grandfather—even he, she had learned by looking up at him, had the family trait of quick, upturning smiles" (16). This phrase juxtaposes an acknowledgment of physical features the Fairchild family members share with an admission of the family's violent history. Laura's internal narration highlights both a troubling moment in the Fairchild narrative and a deep affection for her mother's family. Again, the family history is layered with violence, love, and violence again like a hyacinth bulb. Their story cannot

be told without acknowledging the violence in their past; their Great-Great-Uncle was killed as he participated in the colonization of Mississippi. Conversely, the thought of the upturned smile also connotes the great affection these family members feel for each other. In the same way that “place is never simply ‘place’ in southern writing,” physical objects are never simply objects. Violence is layered underneath each detail of the Fairchild family history, troubling the narrative of the meta-plantation.

Ellen Fairchild is a complicated picture of femininity and motherhood; she plays an important role in upholding the Fairchild family narrative. There are specific objects in the home that seem to belong to her, and these objects tell something about who she is. Ellen is associated with tea cups, fine china, and elegant clocks that chime the wrong hours. She is a kind and loving mother, but she is also absent-minded. Ellen seems to be in constant motion doing work around the house even though she has servants to do the work for her. Ellen appears to be in power within the interior spaces of Shellmound when she orders around the servants or makes a declaration, but moments like the following indicate that the exchanges of power that happen in both interior and exterior spaces are a delicate dance. Ellen is associated with fine, rich foods. The cakes and baked goods serve as a marker of class in the same way that fine china and white dresses do. Soon after Laura McRaven arrives at Shellmound, Ellen asks her, “Come, help me make a cake before bedtime, Laura” (29). Ellen plans to make a coconut cake, her brother-in-law George’s favorite. In her article, “Reading the Cakes: *Delta Wedding* and the Texts of Southern Women's Culture,” Ann Romines writes, “As Ellen stirs up a Fairchild ancestor’s recipe, Great-aunt Mashula’s coconut cake, Welty shows how much of tradition, innovation and consciousness are expressed in the baking of a cake” (610). Somehow, Ellen (and Welty) is able to take this

small act and give it a great deal of significance: baking this cake together with her motherless niece is a way to initiate Laura into the world of women, but it is also a way to ensure happiness for her daughter who is marrying a member of another class.

Battle's younger brother, George, is well-loved by all the family members in spite of the fact that he too has married a member of the lower class. Robbie, his wife, was the daughter of the local shop owner instead of being a member of the plantocracy, but George is the embodiment of that Uncle whose portrait hangs in the dining room. Somehow, Ellen feels that if George is happy, her daughter Dabney will be as well: "For Ellen's hope for Dabney, that had to lie in something, some secret nest, lay in George's happiness. He had married 'beneath' him too....When he got home from the war he married...little Robbie Reid, Old Man Swanson's granddaughter, who had grown up in the town of Fairchilds to work in Fairchild's store" (30). Baking the cake for George is one way that Ellen desires to make him happy, and in turn she thinks his happiness will insure Dabney's happiness. When Ellen prepares to bake the cake, she asks Roxie, the servant to "Get out of the kitchen," but Roxie responds by reminding Ellen that she can't really bake the cake on her own: "You're fixin' to ask me to grate you a coconut, not get out" (29). In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger writes about the "'secret' of unacknowledged labor in *Delta Wedding*" (98). Yaeger says that the objects in the Fairchild home all belong to servants as well as the Fairchilds. She argues that "pastoral always happens at someone else's expense" (98). Ellen's relationship with Roxie demonstrates that she is highly dependent on the labor of the servants in her home; they live and work together in an intricate dance, although the labor of the African-American servants is often unacknowledged: "'Well, you get the oven hot.' Ellen tied her apron back on. 'You can grate me the coconut, and a lemon while you're at it, and blanch me

the almonds. I'm going to let Laura pound me the almonds in the mortar and pestle'" (29). Ellen clearly depends on Roxie's labor, but she claims the final product as her own: "'Smell my cake?' she challenged, as Dabney appeared radiant at the pantry door" (33). For Ellen, the cake is her own, and baking it is an act that symbolizes all of her dreams and desires for Dabney's happiness. What Ellen does not see is the unacknowledged labor that Roxie contributes.

Weddings traditionally include the receiving of gifts; in *Delta Wedding*, the gifts that are given to Dabney and Troy carry great significance. The objects in the Fairchild dining room tell the family's history, but the objects that sit in the aunts' parlor also contribute to the story. Aunts Primrose and Jim Allen never married, and they live together in a house that belongs to Uncle George. In their parlor, "Grandmother's and Great-Grandmother's cherished things were so carefully kept here, and the Irish lace curtains were still good" (51). Two portraits of a great-Grandmother named Mary Shannon hang in the parlor and stare down at the aunts and all their guests: "Mary seemed to look down at her and at the dear parlor, with the foolish, breakable little things in it" (52). Dabney visits the aunts so they can give her a wedding gift, but rather than giving her something new, they allow her to choose from the objects in their home. These objects are markers of class because they have been passed down from generation to generation and because they are "foolish" or "breakable." Aunt Primrose tells her, "Dabney will have to have some kind of little old wedding present from us to take home...Jump up and pick you out something, honey. You take whatever you like" (54). Dabney carefully and politely chooses something small and insignificant, only to have her aunts tell her that it isn't good enough. She chooses a small glass bowl, but her aunts insist that she take a night light. The night light might initially be seen as less valuable than the glass bowl, but the aunts want Dabney to have

something with history, that tells part of the family story: “She must have the night light, Jim Allen....Dabney shall have it. It’s company. That’s what it is. That little light, it was company as early as I remember—when Papa and Mama died” (57). With this gift comes the gift of family history and connection, but it also carries instruction because it serves as a reminder that Dabney should continue to participate in telling the Fairchild family narrative.

Troy and his family are members of the working class, but Troy’s mother also contributes gifts to Dabney and Troy’s household. Troy’s mother participates in the simple act of gift-giving as part of a wedding celebration, but Welty’s detailed description brings this act into focus as an example of commodity exchange and class delineation. Many women in the novel know how to sew, but the Fairchild women’s sewing focuses mainly on beautiful details rather than utility. As Aunt Primrose sits in another room sewing a lace bridesmaid’s mit, Troy and Ellen discuss the gifts his mother will be sending and the items his mother sews: “My little old mama made the prettiest quilts you ever laid your eyes on....One called ‘Trip around the World,’ and one called ‘Four Doves at the Window.’ ‘Bouquet of Beauty,’ that was one...” (123). The utility of the quilts his mother sews and the blankets she crochets, for “[s]he can crochet just as well as she can piece tops—hard to believe,” stand in contrast to the fine silver Troy is helping Ellen polish and the linen napkin she hands him (123). Troy’s mother’s quilts indicate the family’s thriftiness and ability to reuse scraps of fabric and items of clothing, demonstrating a difference in class between the Fairchilds and Troy’s family. When the gifts arrive, Troy asks everyone to take a look at them as he steps back in time as a result of the memories the quilts bring to the surface: “‘Look,’ he said, ‘everybody look. Did you ever think your *mother* could do something like this? My mammy made these, I’ve seen her do it. A thousand stitches! Look—these are for us,

Dabney” (147). The gift from Troy’s mother is different from the gifts the aunts give because she has labored over making these quilts. The image of her sitting and piecing together small scraps of fabric paints a portrait of her hard at work. The gift of the quilts highlights the deep love Troy’s mother has for her son, but it also contrasts his family with Dabney’s. Her aunts have countless fine objects sitting in their living room, so the gifts they give are given out of excess rather than scarcity, although they are also given out of love and a shared family past.

A shift from exterior to interior space in Porter’s collection of short stories, *The Old Order*, highlights the relationship between Sophia Jane and Nannie, her lifelong slave and servant. In the short story called “The Old Order,” which has also been called “The Journey,” Sophia Jane and Nannie live together in their “later years” (8). The women sit together and sew, counting and caring for their treasures. These moments are also moments in which readers can see the “profligate expenditure” Yaeger discusses in “Circum-Atlantic Superabundance.” In “The Old Order,” Porter uses the metaphor of a quilt made up of patches of “scraps of the family finery, hoarded for fifty years, into strips and triangles” to continue to illustrate Sophia Jane’s obsession with ownership (8). Sophia Jane and Nannie’s love for quilting is directly tied to their affection for physical objects: “They had contrived enough bed and couch covers, table spreads, dressing table scarfs, to have furnished forth several households. Each piece as it was finished was lined with yellow silk, folded, and laid away in a chest, never again to see the light of day” (8). Quilting is mainly associated with utility and thriftiness, like the quilts in *Delta Wedding*, but Sophia Jane and Nannie transform this form of sewing into artistic work. The emphasis on hoarding old fabrics and hiding the quilts away once they have been completed is another way that Sophia Jane’s obsession with owning and with counting objects surfaces.

Sophia Jane's need to collect and adorn objects is closely related to her family's genealogical history. The objects she chooses to adorn with finery are often objects that belonged to her ancestors, but holding onto them allows her to have a selective memory regarding her family's history of exploitation and violence. For example, Sophia Jane has a particular affection for a rolling pin that belonged to her great grandfather who was "Kentucky's most famous pioneer" (8). Sophia Jane's great-grandfather "hewed out" this rolling pin for his wife "while he was surveying Kentucky" (8). The image of the grandfather hewing out the rolling pin associates his surveying with violence and the desire for ownership. The rolling pin is related to the family history of exploitation; this is similar to the significance of the Fairchild family's dining room furniture. The description of this object also overdoes it, indicating how very significant it must be to Sophia Jane: "The rolling pin was the Grandmother's irreplaceable treasure. She covered it with an extraordinarily complicated bit of patchwork, added golden tassels to the handles, and hung it in a conspicuous place in her room" (8). She puts her energy into preserving the history she would like to remember and have her grandchildren remember. Sophia Jane attaches a similar value to the razors that belonged to her father, "a notably heroic captain in the War of 1812" (8). She and Nannie created a patchwork cover for the razor case and a frame for a photo of her father. Sarah Robertson writes that "For Porter's fictional Gay family the tension between verbalized accounts of the past and the things too terrible to utter is particularly apparent throughout *The Old Order* and *Old Mortality*" (247). Sophia Jane's need to hold onto one version of her family's history is also apparent in the relationship between Sophia Jane and Nannie.

The focus on interior spaces in *The Old Order* normally presents a picture of Sophia Jane



together with Nannie, her former slave, but the objects the women focus on and sew decorations for belong entirely to Sophia Jane. In the short story, "The Old Order" Nannie is an object herself, and Sophia Jane reflects on her relationship with Nannie as if Nannie were also one of the possessions that she must count, care for, and value. This shift in the story indicates that detailed descriptions of physical objects lead to an exploration of what else functions as a commodity for the Gay family. The concept of ownership adds a complicated feature to the relationship between Nannie and Sophia Jane. Nannie was owned by Sophia Jane's family for most of her life, but the women see themselves as companions and as friends at some moments in the story. The women's memories of their past are images of scarcity in contrast to abundance. Nannie remembers being bought by Sophia Jane's father: "Nannie remembered well being on a shallow platform out in front of a great building in a large busy place, the first town she had ever seen....Nannie had been sold for twenty dollars: a gift, you might say, hardly sold at all. She learned that a really choice slave sometimes cost more than a thousand dollars" (15, 16). Porter's description of the beginning of their so-called friendship is unsettling: "The friendship between the two old women had begun in early childhood, and was based on what seemed even to them almost mythical events" (14). As a five-year-old, Sophia Jane, spoiled and dressed in fine clothing, sits with her father. She sees his recent purchases parade onto their plantation when she notices Nannie for the first time:

On the floor of the first wagon sat two blacks, male and female, holding between them a scrawny, half-naked black child, with a round nubby head and fixed bright monkey eyes. The baby Negro had a potbelly and her arms were like sticks from wrist to shoulder....'I want the little monkey,' said Sophia Jane to her father. (14)

Nannie is a commodity here—she is simply a body. The story has been told and re-told for many members of the Gay family, but they choose to hear the story as if it were a funny anecdote rather than a heartbreaking image of exploitation; this is another example of the family’s desire to hold onto their meta-narrative. The fact that Sophia Jane could describe any one this way at such a young age is troubling; as a young child, Sophia Jane has internalized a hierarchical worldview.

Porter’s 1944 story, “The Last Leaf” explores life and relationships from Nannie’s point of view. When readers see through Nannie’s eyes, the Gay family narrative is troubled. Nannie’s story opens up space to see inside silences in the story as well; we learn that Nannie was not happy to be a member of the Gay family. Her actions after Sophia Jane’s death indicate that she has always longed for a degree of independence and solitude, and that she did not love the husband who was forced upon her at a young age. Nannie, who had thirteen biological children and who lost ten of those children, was an object or possession for most of her life. Even after she was a freed slave, she stayed with Sophia Jane and lived with her. Staying with Sophia Jane is an indication that Nannie had internalized a patriarchal worldview, but after Sophia Jane’s death, Nannie is able to claim her own identity and express her individuality. When Sophia Jane’s children gather around Nannie and say “Never you mind! We love you!” the narrator explains that “She paid no attention; she did not care whether they loved her or not” (42). When Nannie asks to move out of the big house and into a small cabin across the creek, the Gay children discover how much she contributed to their home and family life:

They missed Nannie every day. As their fortunes went down, and they had very few servants, they needed her terribly. They realized how much the old woman

had done for them, simply by seeing how, almost immediately after she went everything slackened, lost tone, went off edge. Work did not accomplish itself as it once had. (44)

As a free woman, Nannie develops an identity that surprises the Gay children. She no longer wears black wool dresses or black and white calico with an apron and a cap; she begins wearing a blue bandana wrapped around her head and she starts smoking a corncob pipe. Nannie becomes “an aged Bantu woman of independent means” rather than “the faithful old servant Nannie, a freed slave” (43). Sophia Jane’s children are surprised when Nannie asserts herself: “It was astonishing to discover that Nannie had always liked and hoped to own certain things, she had seemed so contented and wantless” (43). Sophia Jane’s death frees Nannie. Indeed, one of the oldest daughters, Maria, reflects on their relationship with Nannie later in her life by thinking “they had not really been so very nice to Nannie” (42). One of the oldest children is surprised to discover that Nannie was married to Uncle Jimbilly, another elderly former slave who still lives on the Gay family's plantation. After years of a “marriage of convenience, in which they had been mated with truly royal policy,” Nannie and Jimbilly take no notice of each other and each talks about “my children” rather than “our children” (45). Maria can see Sophia Jane and the Gay family’s relationship with Nannie through a new lens; she carries guilt over her family’s history of exploitation of their servants.

#### 4. OBSESSIVE REPRODUCTION

The Fairchild and Gay families are obsessed with reproduction, and this is closely tied to their obsessions with genealogical history. The obsession with reproduction is about whiteness—

producing more children means producing more white people. Fertility is taken for granted in these stories; both Sophia Jane Gay and Ellen Fairchild have numerous children, and they do not give credit to their servants who help make this possible. An obsession with reproduction is another manifestation of “calculation-obsessed discourse.” It feels as if these two families can reproduce at a ridiculous rate, and they have the material means to care for their own biological children, other family members’ children, and numerous servants, but there are also moments in the stories when the idea of reproduction becomes troubling for the family narratives. George and Dabney Fairchild both choose to marry outside of their class, causing their family members to worry about them, and Sophia Jane Gay notices that the young men of her family have sexual relationships with the servants, producing babies who are not black enough.

The children who encircle Ellen and Battle Fairchild are so numerous that they also read like items in a list. Ellen and Battle have eight biological children, and even more children of other family members live under their roof. Welty describes the Fairchild family characteristic through the eyes of Laura McRaven: “All the Fairchilds in the Delta looked alike....Without a primary beauty, with only a fairness of color (a thin-skinnedness, really) and an ease in the body, they had a demurring, gray-eyed way about them that turned out to be halfway mocking—for these cousins were the sensations of life and they knew it” (16,17). Welty makes sure to emphasize fair skin; there are so many children running around that it is almost as if the reader is surrounded by whiteness. The children function as little reflections of their parents’ whiteness, and it is their family name that serves as most valuable in the town that is named after them. The Fairchild name is an important signal in the book that genealogical history is primary on Shellmound. The family’s name combines the word “fair,” which emphasizes skin color, and the

world “child,” which emphasizes the importance of reproduction and youth. Their fair skin makes the Fairchild mirror images of each other, but the skin color also emphasizes the source of the family’s power in plantation culture. From Battle Fairchild’s anxiety about his daughter marrying an overseer from the Mississippi hill country, to Uncle George’s controversial decision to marry a lower-class woman from Memphis, the Fairchild family’s anxiety about purity surfaces and resurfaces throughout the novel. Welty describes the way the parents look at their children by saying “They looked with shining eyes upon their kin, and all their abundance of love, as if it were a devilment, was made reckless and inspired or was belittled in fun, though never, so far, was it said out” (19). Somehow, Welty conveys a deep sense of the love and affection that exists within the Fairchild family while also communicating the problematic nature of both their whiteness and their exclusivity.

The Fairchild family’s obsession with reproduction is another example of calculation-obsessed discourse. In having so many children, Ellen and Battle Fairchild have essentially produced and reproduced mirror images of themselves. The children all look alike, and they also look like their parents:

How Ellen loved their wide and towering foreheads, their hairlines on the fresh skin silver as the edge of a peach, clean as a pencil line, dipping to a perfect widow's peak in every child she had. Their cheeks were wide and their chins narrow but pressed a little forward—lips caught, then parted, as if in constant expectation—so that their faces looked sturdy and resolute, unrevealing, from the side, but tender and heart-shaped from the front. Their coloring—their fair hair and their soot-dark, high eyebrows and shadowy lashes, the long eyes, of gray that

seemed more luminous, more observant and more passionate than blue—moved her deeply and freshly in each child. (26)

There are so many Fairchild children, they all look alike, and they are often dressed in white; the descriptions sometimes feel like another list of possessions rather than a description of relationships between parents and children, although Ellen is moved by them as individuals, she is partly moved by the elements of sameness. Welty also emphasizes the bulk of the body in her descriptions of Fairchild men: “In the men grown, in Battle and George, it was a paradoxical thing, the fineness and tenderness with the bulk and weight of their big bodies. All the Fairchild men...were six feet tall by the time they were sixteen and weighed two hundred pounds by the time they were forty” (27). These descriptions are almost like mantras the family repeats to themselves over and over again to remind themselves of who they are and to reflect on their family’s genealogical purity. The obsession with reproduction continues as Dabney repeats “I hope I have a baby right away” again and again, partly in order to shock her old aunts, but partly to reflect on her own ability to reproduce (62). Dabney’s statement is a mirror of her parents’ obsession, but it also disrupts the Fairchild family narrative because her children will carry some of their lower-class father’s genes.

Troy, Dabney’s fiancée, is from a working-class family, and this match causes Battle Fairchild a great deal of anxiety: “And she would not take anything for the relentless way he was acting, not wanting to let her go. The caprices of his restraining power over his daughters filled her with delight now that she had declared what she could do” (41). Part of this is the hesitancy of a father to marry off his daughter at all, but the language used here to describe Battle’s hesitancy about the marriage also understands Dabney as a commodity. The exchange of gifts

that takes place before her wedding serves as a reminder that the wedding itself is a similar exchange. In her article, “Seeing Things as they Really are in Mississippi,” Reine Dugas Bouton writes “Welty’s loving depiction in *Delta Wedding* of the Fairchild clan and its chaotic preparations for Dabney’s marriage to the overseer of the family’s cotton plantation is, in fact, deeply critical of the plantation aristocracy, white privilege, and the position of women within these institutions” (137). Bouton’s statement is insightful; the criticism of commodity culture that takes place through the description of the exchange of gifts and the depiction of the wedding as a commodity exchange itself is one place where this story is critical of the plantocracy. Dabney, at seventeen years old, is in love with Troy, Shellmound’s overseer, who is thirty-four years old. Her relationships with Troy is one way Dabney embodies ambivalence: she defies her father by choosing to marry a man of a different class, but in doing so she submits to a man who cannot control his own violent impulses. Dabney wants to have a baby with Troy as soon as she can, so she will continue to perpetuate the plantation order. The class differences in the relationship, and Troy’s role as the family’s overseer impact their relationship significantly:

Troy treated her like a Fairchild—he still did; he wouldn’t stop work when she rode by even today. Sometimes he was so standoffish, gentle like, other times he laughed and mocked her and shook her, and played like fighting—once he had really hurt her. How sorry it made him! She took a deep breath. Sometimes Troy was really ever so much like a Fairchild. Nobody guessed that, just seeing him go by on Isabelle! He had not revealed very much to her yet. (41)

This image presents another moment when the Fairchild family narrative is troubled, and this passage indicates that the tensions of the plantation—*anxiety about upholding the plantation*

order—are the same tensions undergirding the impending marriage. Troy is like a Fairchild when he is working and won't say hello to her, and Troy is “ever so much like a Fairchild” when he hurts Dabney. Dabney bravely defies her father, but turns around and recreates a relationship that is similar to her mother and father's, including her desire to have many children as soon as she can.

*The Old Order's* emphasis on reproduction highlights the relationship between Sophia Jane and Nannie. Even as an adult, Nannie remembers standing on the auction block, but as her seller promised, her value increases: ““A pretty worthless article right now, sir, I agree with you,” said the auctioneer, ‘but it'll grow out of it’” (16). Nannie and Sophia Jane have grown up together; they shared a bed and played together as children. In a moment that seems ridiculously extravagant, Sophia Jane's father gives her Nannie and “a boy [Nannie] had known ever since she came to the family” as a wedding present. After both of them are married, the extravagant imagery continues when Nannie and Sophia Jane begin “their grim and terrible race of procreation, a child every sixteen months or so, with Nannie nursing both” (19). The rapid rate at which they reproduce is another image of both profligate expenditure and calculation-obsessed discourse. The family multiplies at a ridiculous rate at the expense of their servants. Both Nannie and Sophia Jane become valuable because of their fertility and plentiful breast milk: Sophia Jane gives birth to eleven children, nine of whom survive, and Nannie gives birth to thirteen children, only three of whom survive. At first, Nannie nurses both babies, but after she becomes ill, the women share breastfeeding duties, and it seems that between the two of them, they have an extensive supply of milk, although Nannie's children suffer from deprivation and scarcity alongside Sophia Jane's healthy children.



The passages that explore the relationship between Sophia Jane and Nannie are marked by silences—Porter does not overtly criticize Sophia Jane or her family, but she indirectly highlights the problematic nature of Sophia Jane and Nannie’s relationship. At one moment Nannie questions why God has been so hard on an entire race just because of the color of their skin. Sophia Jane responds reassuringly, but her response also serves to silence Nannie: “Miss Sophia Jane was always brisk and opinionated about it: ‘Nonsense! I tell you, God does not know whether skin is black or white. He sees only souls. Don’t be getting notions, Nannie—of course you’re going to Heaven’” (23). Sophia Jane’s “brisk and opinionated” response does not create space for conversation, and Nannie’s theological questions are silenced. Sarah Robertson says that these silences surface throughout the stories: “silences shadow the Gays’ interactions with one another, suggesting that that which they seek to deny is never far from the surface” (248). The Gays tell a story about their family, their relationships, and themselves that they desire to be true while glossing over the violence in their family history.

Motherhood is a significant theme in the story, and at certain moments it feels as if Nannie and Sophia Jane shared the duties and life of motherhood like they shared many other things—they slept in the same bed as children, and as adults they fed and cared for their babies together. However, the passage on breastfeeding is about the growth and development of Sophia Jane rather than a passage about both women. This is another example of the silence in the stories; Porter can tell the story of Sophia Jane’s growth into motherhood, but she cannot tell Nannie’s story because it would be far too painful and because it is inaccessible to her. It is clear that Sophia Jane and her biological children are more valuable than Nannie and her babies. Each woman had three children, and Nannie breastfed her own babies and Sophia Jane’s. After each

woman had her fourth child, Nannie became sick with puerperal fever and almost died. Sophia Jane had been “in dreadful discomfort, suppressing her milk with bandages and spirits of wine” after the births of her first three children, so she decided to nurse her own child, and Nannie’s fourth baby. When Sophia Jane’s mother and husband resisted this, she stubbornly refused to listen to them. Porter narrates, “She had already begun to develop her implicit character, which was altogether just, humane, proud, and simple” (19, 20). The passage is about Sophia Jane’s strong-willed character and personality, and she appears to be a hero in this section of the story because she fed both babies “justly turn about, not favoring the white over the black, as Nannie felt obliged to do” (19). Nursing her fourth and subsequent babies becomes a point of pride for Sophia Jane, who discovers her identity and her womanhood through the experience of motherhood:

She had learned now that she was badly cheated in giving her children over to another woman to feed; she resolved never again to be cheated in just that way. She sat nursing her child and her foster child, with a sensual warm pleasure she had not dreamed of, translating her natural physical relief into something holy, God-sent, amends from heaven for what she had suffered in childbed. (20)

Breastfeeding is an empowering experience for Sophia Jane; being able to feed and care for her own baby as well as someone else’s indicates that she is strong, fruitful, and capable. This experience impacts her significantly and shapes her into the woman who is a strong, powerful matriarch; this matriarch ends up with enough land and possessions to give each of her nine children “a good strip of land and a little money, she was able to help them buy more land in places they preferred by selling her own, tract by tract, and she saw them all begin well, though

not all of them ended so” (27). “The Old Order” narrates Sophia Jane’s transformation from spoiled daughter, to southern belle, to wife, mother, widow, and matriarch. The story portrays a complicated and ambivalent relationship between Sophia Jane and Nannie.

Whiteness is a particularly important commodity in *Delta Wedding*, and *The Old Order* also demonstrates its value. One indication of this is Sophia Jane’s need to check on the skin color of the newborn babies in the slave quarters:

There were so many young men about the place, always, young brothers-in-law, first cousins, second cousins, nephews. They came visiting and they stayed, and there was no accounting for them nor any way of controlling their quietly headstrong habits. She learned early to keep silent and give no sign of uneasiness, but whenever a child was born in the Negro quarters, pink, worm-like, she held her breath for three days, she told her eldest granddaughter, years later, to see whether the newly born would turn black after the proper interval.... It was a strain that told on her, and ended by giving her a deeply grounded contempt for men. (24)

Sophia Jane’s contempt for men makes her into a strong matriarch, but she bears a life-long grudge against her husband and sons for the money she loses as a result of their poor financial decisions. Sophia Jane’s anger towards men makes her a powerful female figure, and her strong personality and ability to rule a plantation and receive a return on her investment is one way she subverts the familiar meta-narrative of plantation culture. She is deeply angry at the young men who rape women in the servant’s quarters. Porter writes that “She could not help it, she despised men. She despised them and was ruled by them” (24). But after her husband’s death, Sophia Jane

does break free from the rule of the men in her life. Instead of completely subverting a hierarchical system, Sophia Jane buys into it and creates a new version of hierarchy that works to her own advantage. She both subverts and upholds the meta-narrative; she upholds it when she passes on an obsession with whiteness to Maria, her oldest granddaughter, but she subverts the narrative by being a strong female presence who makes financial decisions for herself and her family.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order*, Welty and Porter paint a picture of the plantation south as woman-centered; they emphasize relationships between women and mother-child relationships, focusing on the importance of female genealogy rather than a traditional understanding of genealogy as male-centered. Ellen Fairchild and Sophia Jane Gay are portrayed as the most important individuals in their respective families. Welty's and Porter's decision to tell the story of the plantation primarily through the eyes of women subverts the plantation's dominant power structure; however, these texts are also deeply ambivalent. While telling woman-centered stories is subversive, Porter and Welty also demonstrate that the obsession with production and profit that characterizes the exterior world of the plantation exists in interior spaces. The women in their stories are strong and independent, but they are also complicit in the system that oppresses them; the insidious nature of the meta-narrative means that it seeps into one's understanding of one's self and one's family. Focusing on female genealogy makes space to see moments when women subvert the patriarchy, but it also makes space to see the ways Porter and Welty explore the troubling nature of "family" or genealogical history in the

plantation south. *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* exemplify the joy of family connections and the ways these women shape their children and grandchildren positively, but they also highlight moments when family relationships result in the commodification of individuals. They probe the myth of the plantation as a space where black and white individuals can be a “family” by illustrating the way servants and former slaves continue to be treated as objects and contribute invisible labor in order to help the plantation function. Thus, in *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order*, Welty and Porter interrogate the culture of the plantation south by illuminating the ways commodity culture and an obsession with ownership permeate domestic life on the plantation.

## CONCLUSION:

### *THE HELP'S* REPRESENTATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY PLANTATION SOUTH

In the afterword to her 2009 bestseller, *The Help*, Kathryn Stockett writes, “Mississippi is like my mother. I am allowed to complain about her all I want, but God help the person who raises an ill word about her around me, unless she is their mother too” (450). Stockett’s problematic book reflects on mother-child relationships between black women and white children in 1960’s Jackson, Mississippi, and it suggests that a place—here, Mississippi—can be figured as a mother. The novel also reflects on the act of storytelling as subversive. Its wild popularity demonstrates that women continue to “write back through our mothers” and to ask the “which mothers?” question Patricia Yaeger discusses in *Dirt and Desire* that I mentioned in my introduction. Stockett’s novel explores the complicated relationship between care-giver and child in 1960’s Jackson, and it has generated widely divergent responses.

In my introduction, I discussed a concept that I call the meta-narrative. After the end of the Civil War, members of the plantocracy could no longer own other human beings in the eyes of the law. Owning other individuals was a marker of class and position in the plantation south, so ownership continued to delineate the plantocracy; according to Jessica Adams, ownership was one of the ways whiteness was defined in postslavery America: “after Emancipation, the

ownership of other bodies persistently remained a way in which white identity was organized and recognized” (36). The persistent need to be separated from other residents of the plantation south defined the aristocracy. The meta-narrative asserted that the hierarchy that was established in order to uphold the plantation continued; the most important figure on the plantation was the white patriarch, and everyone else’s worth depended on his or her relationship with him.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes that “The white slaveholding women’s sense of community rested upon a psychological sense of belonging to a proper order” (100). After the end of slavery, the meta-narrative continued to uphold the “proper order.” Sexual and genealogical relationships with the patriarch gave individuals the most value on the plantation; his wife and children were most important, the female slave with whom he had a sexual relationship was also valuable, and others’ value depended on their ability to help make the plantation economically successful. The meta-narrative imagined that the patriarch continued to be the “father” of all the residents of the plantation, and it promoted a paternalistic understanding of relationships between whites and blacks—the image of a large, loving, connected family is insidious and dangerous; it hides the violent exploitation that was a result of the need for constant consumption and economic success.

In this dissertation, I explore the ways six women authors both subvert and uphold the meta-narrative. Each of the texts I have explored privileges the voices of women over the voices of men; each is subversive because of this quality. By focusing a story on female characters, each author signals that the patriarch is not the most important or the most valuable figure in the plantation south. Rather than focusing on genealogical history through the lens of patriarchy, Kate Chopin, Pauline Hopkins, Zora Neale Hurston, Julia Peterkin, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter explore genealogical history by telling women’s stories. Tracing female genealogy

gives readers new lenses through which to view the plantation south: readers see power disseminated in a straight line, but we also see women wield power over each other through manipulation and trickery, and we learn that not every individual on the plantation considered herself to be part of the “family.” These authors also question the meta-narrative’s assertions regarding gender and race: they represent complex relationships between women, and they demonstrate that mixing and miscegenation were widespread across the plantation south.

The authors I explore as part of this project reflected their discomfort with the meta-narrative by creating characters who disrupted the function of the plantation south. They pointed out the problems with a narrative that centered around men in a variety of ways in their fiction, but they had also internalized this hierarchical worldview. The message of the meta-narrative was powerful and pervasive, and it was difficult to escape. There are moments in each of the texts I explore here when the authors contradict themselves and work to uphold the meta-narrative. This both/and quality is common in postslavery fiction; many texts written during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century embody the tension I explore in this project. In the first chapter, I explore the synchronic connections between women and children in Kate Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* and Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*. The connections between women and children across time, race, and socioeconomic class trouble the traditional understanding of race and hierarchy on the plantation. These texts encourage the reader to expand the definition of the mother-child relationship by including African-American women who cared for white children and who often developed significant but complicated connections with those children. The second chapter is a discussion of female genealogy in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Julia Peterkin’s *Scarlet Sister Mary*. Both novels



celebrate African-American culture and focus on relationships between African Americans. Focusing on African Americans as primary characters subverts the meta-narrative, but these authors are also subversive because their stories focus on female characters. Hurston and Peterkin explore the ways black women's commodity status shifted as the United States became a postslavery society. The main characters in these two novels defy a culture that objectifies them by learning to celebrate and enjoy their bodies; however, both Hurston and Peterkin include problematic representations of labor in their novels and rely on moments of objectification and violence that link them to gendered representations of race and power. The final chapter is an exploration of commodity culture in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order*. Welty and Porter work to carefully describe physical objects in each text; these descriptions point out the problematic obsession with ownership that her characters experienced. This obsession with ownership translated into family relationships when it was time for a wedding or in the adults' obsession with reproduction. Examining the plantations in *Delta Wedding* and *The Old Order* through the lens of matrilineal genealogy illuminates moments in the stories that trouble the meta-narrative. Readers see power being passed down in a traditionally hierarchical fashion, but we also see the plantation's structure making space for both black and white women to subvert the meta-narrative.

The framework I use to read these texts is also applicable to contemporary literature and culture. Kathryn Stockett's bestselling novel, *The Help*, is the coming-of-age story of a young woman from Jackson, Mississippi, and it includes the stories of two women who work as maids for her friends. The novel presents an image of the plantation south and explores its impact well into the twentieth century. Agricultural production is no longer the primary source of income for

many of the families in the novel, but many of the principles of the meta-narrative continue to apply to the lifestyle of the characters in the novel: they still desire to uphold a nostalgic image of the Old South, they continue to emphasize the importance of upholding a positive vision of their family histories, they continue to emphasize a binary understanding of race, they enforce a division of labor according to race, and they uphold a romantic image of white femininity. Like the other texts I explore as part of this dissertation, the novel also focuses on the stories of women and emphasizes the importance of female genealogy. Stockett's decision to privilege the female voice and to tell part of the story using the voices of female African-American characters subverts the meta-narrative. *The Help* explores relationships between black women and white children, and her novel exposes the idea that black women were considered part of the family to be a lie. This troubles the narrative that African Americans were part of the plantation "family." Like many of the works I have discussed in the body of my dissertation, *The Help* reflects that its author has internalized the meta-narrative. In Stockett's efforts to expose the lie that African Americans are part of the "family," there are moments when Stockett demonstrates that she also believes it. This is primarily demonstrated through her focus in the novel: the novel centers around a young white woman; the black women in the story are aids to her maturation.

As the plantation was re-created and restructured, the meta-narrative continued to shape the way southerners understood race. In *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, Grace Elizabeth Hale explains that after the Civil War, the United States needed to "narrate new foundations" (6). The U.S. South became more closely incorporated into the national economy, "yet it was racial identity that became the paramount spatial mediation of modernity within the newly reunited nation. Not self-evidently more meaningful, not more real

or natural than other markings, race nevertheless became the crucial means of ordering the newly enlarged meaning of America” (7). According to Hale’s description, ordering the world through the lens of race was done by carefully crafting a narrative that defined whiteness, and it benefited the American middle and upper classes in both the U.S. South and the North.<sup>29</sup> In *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens*, Rebecca Sharpless explores the ways this narrative shifted to maintain a hierarchy:

Stereotypes were among the means that white southerners developed and expanded in the hope of controlling African Americans. Powerful white people created images of African American women as subservient and jolly, images designed to persuade both whites and African Americans of the truth of such a description. (xiv)

The image of African-American women as “subservient and jolly” is a powerful element of the meta-narrative; it shaped relationships between black and white women in the U.S. South for many years. *The Help* buys into this stereotype in some moments in the novel, especially through the depiction of the loving relationship between Skeeter and her maid, Constantine. In other moments, the stories of Abileen, Minny, and Skeeter expose this stereotype as a flat representation of African-American women: Abileen narrates a variety of relationships with white children and expresses the complicated nature of her love for them because it is woven together with grief over the loss of time with her own son.

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29. Hale explores the ways media contributed to the crafting of the meta-narrative when she argues that “these mass racial meanings were made and marked at a time when technological change made the cheap production of visual imagery possible and the development of a mass market provided financial incentive—selling through advertising—to circulate the imagery” (7).

In crafting her novel, Stockett made the choice to write in the voice of two African-American maids and cooks. Readers see white families in 1960's Jackson, Mississippi through the eyes of Abileen and Minny, women who work in white homes as maids and caregivers. Reading about these families in the voices of their maids is startling: the women see moments when mothers fail, when husbands abuse their power, and when children are abused by their parents. Most importantly, these women talk about their frustrations with the white families for whom they work, upending the myth that they are loving members of the "family." In the afterword to her novel, Stockett reflects on her decision to create African-American voices in her novel: "I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature" (450). Stockett had the right to be afraid: her decision was presumptuous and problematic. Several critics have released statements about the representations of black women in the novel. The Association of Black Women Historians argues that Stockett's representation of the African-American community is "irreverent." This group argues that she did not do justice to the many African-Americans who fought hard for civil rights in the 1960's. According to Ida B. Jones and a group of colleagues,

In the end, *The Help* is not a story about the millions of hardworking and dignified black women who labored in white homes to support their families and communities. Rather, it is the coming-of-age story of a white protagonist, who uses myths about the lives of black women to make sense of her own. The Association of Black Women Historians finds it unacceptable for either this book

or this film to strip black women's lives of historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment. (Jones)

Jones and her colleagues point out the troubling nature of Stockett's narrow focus in writing *The Help*.

Although Stockett has worked to represent the voices of African-Americans in her novel, it is primarily a story about a young, white woman's growth and development. The black women in the novel serve a supporting role; this reflects a troubling nostalgia for the past. Like several of the other authors I have explored as part of this dissertation, Stockett participates in upholding and recreating the meta-narrative. Stockett focuses on the importance of storytelling and its connection to liberation—telling their stories should be a significant act for Aibileen and Minny, but Stockett recreates the meta-narrative when she makes it necessary for Aibileen, Minny, and the other maids in the novel to tell their stories through Skeeter. Historically, many slave narratives were crafted by whites with good intentions, and *The Help*'s recreation of African-American voices is too close to that tradition.<sup>30</sup> When Skeeter asks Aibileen, an African-American maid, “Do you ever wish you could...change things?” a shift happens for Aibileen. The grief she feels over losing her son, and the frustration she experiences while working as a maid translates into her desire to tell her story so Skeeter can have it published. Rather than having her own voice, Aibileen depends on Skeeter in order to tell her story.

*The Help* presents an image of the plantation in mid-twentieth-century America: it explores relationships between women on the plantation and in a nearby city. The novel also explores the way plantation ideology permeates the thought processes of the individuals who live

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30. One example of this is Sojourner Truth's famous speech, “Arn't I a Woman?” which Deborah Gray White explains was actually written by a white abolitionist (5).

in the city: race continues to be understood as binary, and a hierarchical understanding of gender also continues. The book is set during the 1960's, an important time for Civil Rights in the United States. Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan and her family live on a cotton plantation called "Longleaf." This plantation is close to Jackson, Mississippi: "Even though it is only five minutes outside of town, most people consider this the country out here" (55). Longleaf is sustained by "ten thousand acres of Daddy's cotton fields, the plants green and strong, tall as my waist" (55). The picture of the plantation is similar to the idealized vision that we have seen in several of the texts I have explored as part of this project: acres of cotton surround a "big house" where the plantation owner and his family live. The members of the family are well-provided for by the plantation's yield. The model in the book follows Charles Aiken's timeline: African-Americans provide labor for Longleaf when cotton is ready to be picked, but they live in a small primarily African-American community about a mile away. This community is called Hotsack. Skeeter claims that she was raised by an African-American woman named Constantine who lived in Hotsack and walked to the big house on Longleaf Plantation every day to care for her. Skeeter has a genuine affection for this woman, and she misses her deeply when she returns home from college to find that Constantine no longer works for her parents. The novel explores Skeeter's complicated feelings for Constantine, the woman who raised her, and for her biological mother. Although it is unconventional, this makes the story an exploration of female genealogy: Skeeter values her relationship with Constantine so much that she considers Constantine as important as her biological mother. As she comes to terms with losing Constantine, Skeeter begins to understand more about herself and her culture.

Stockett portrays a loving relationship between Skeeter and Constantine, but she

demonstrates its hierarchical nature when she emphasizes that it is inequitable. Skeeter narrates: “I was pretty sure I knew everything about Constantine—she had one sister and grew up on a sharecropping farm in Corinth, Mississippi. Both her parents were dead. She didn’t eat pork as a rule and wore a size sixteen dress and a size ten ladies’ shoe” (62). When we see Constantine through the eyes of young Skeeter, we see the one-sided relationship Kimberly Wallace Sanders describes in her book, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. She calls the mammy “an ultimate representation of maternal devotion” (14). This description captures the way a child could forget even to ask what his mammy’s history or life story was—why should the child ask when the relationship is completely child-focused? Skeeter imagines that she knows everything there is to know about Constantine, in the way only a child could, but when she asks Constantine about her biological father, she says “I can’t tell you ever single thing, Skeeter...Some things I just got to keep for myself” (67). Stockett does portray this tension, and she acknowledges that Skeeter did not know everything (or anything) about Constantine because she did not know that Constantine had a biological daughter.

The plantation is not very far from Jackson geographically, and it is also close figuratively. Skeeter is a recent, unmarried college graduate, but many of her peers returned from college early in order to get married. They live in homes within the city limits, and they spend their time living out conventional family relationships. Some of the families in the novel have moved away from the plantation economy, but they have not moved away from plantation ideology. They continue to uphold the meta-narrative and repeat it by teaching it to their children. The characters who live in Jackson understand race as a binary, and they work hard to maintain a separation between the races. Stockett uses humor in order to point out the ridiculous

nature of socially constructed racial boundaries by creating a story that centers around using the bathroom. A young mother who is president of the Junior League of Jackson has drafted a plan that dictates that every home in the city with a maid should also be required to provide a separate bathroom for that woman. The plan is absurd, but it points out the absurdity of many of the Jim Crow laws that were written and passed as part of Mississippi's constitution. Focusing on this topic is also serious in some moments in the text, like when Aibileen hears the story of a young man who was beaten with a tire iron for using the wrong bathroom: "Oh no. Not *Robert*. 'He... is he...?' / Franny shake her head. 'They don't know. He up at the hospital. I heard he blind'" (101). Stockett does not shy away from describing the deep fear her characters feel at the thought of being beaten or abused for transgressing the boundaries established by white society, but she makes these reflections accessible by writing a novel that appeals to a wide reading audience. The novel's popularity demonstrates Stockett's success: by August 2011 it had sold over 100 million copies, and it had spent more than 100 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

*The Help* intersects with the other texts I discuss as part of this project because it scrutinizes the meta-narrative that works to maintain a strict hierarchical structure in the plantation south. It examines the ways the meta-narrative became institutionalized in the U.S. South: the main character, Skeeter, spends time reading through a booklet she finds in the library entitled "Compilation of Jim Crow Laws of the South" (172). In addition to legal structures, the novel reflects on the hierarchical relationships between maids and the women they work for. By telling part of the story in the fictional voices of black women, Stockett bridges the silence that aided in upholding the meta-narrative. Her character, Minny, spends time reflecting on why it is important for her to keep silent in certain situations: "Standing on that white lady's back porch, I



tell myself, *Tuck it in, Minny*. Tuck in whatever might fly out my mouth and tuck in my behind too. Look like a maid who does what she's told. Truth is, I'm so nervous right now, I'd never backtalk again if it meant I'd get this job" (30). Minny's reflection indicates that her voice and the voices of many African-American women were silenced so they could keep their jobs in order to care for their families.

*The Help's* reflections on relationships between African-American women and the children they cared for also connects it to other works I examine as part of this project. The emphasis on using the bathroom brings up the fact that black women often had intimate relationships with the children they cared for. Aibileen's reflections about how many children she taught how to use the toilet indicate her important but invisible role in their lives:

The next few weeks is real important for Mae Mobley. You think on it, you probably don't remember the first time you went to the bathroom in the toilet bowl stead of a diaper. Probably don't give no credit to who taught you, neither. Never had a single baby I raise come up to me and say, *Aibileen, why I sure do thank you for showing me how to go in the pot*. (93)

Aibileen's relationship with the children she raises creates a significant connection between them, but the novel also exposes the truth that whites are willing to quickly sever that relationship if the maids upset the hierarchy or question the women they work for. Stockett indicates that writing the novel is an exploration of her own female genealogy. She has strong feelings of affection for the African-American woman who raised her, but she also has a deep sense of guilt over the hierarchical nature of their relationship.

Exploring southern women's fiction through the lens of matrilineal genealogy probes the

meta-narrative that indicated that the U.S. South was a patriarchal culture. When female authors center their stories around the voices of women, they question their culture's hierarchical order. Each of the authors I have examined as part of this dissertation works to undermine the meta-narrative that upholds plantation ideology. Each of these women also upholds the meta-narrative in various ways in her fiction, and this demonstrates the pervasive and insidious nature of this narrative.

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