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MATERIAL MELANCHOLY: STRANDED OBJECTS IN MODERN SOUTHERN  
WOMEN'S WRITING

A Dissertation  
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
For the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy  
In the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

JAMES TRAVIS ROZIER

MAY 2015

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces the origins and uses of a specifically southern obsession with the past. Examining how southern women writers represent the compulsion to remember, I demonstrate how, in their narratives, efforts to retain intimate relationships with an idealized past obstruct characters' ability to live in the present. Their fiction aligns neatly with the dynamic described in psychoanalysis as 'melancholia'—not least because, in each case, these relationships with the past are typically ambivalent or even destructive, and the melancholic subjects must 'work through' their damaging attachments. Typical psychoanalytic approaches, however, have neglected how such troubled remembering might be influenced by historical efforts to memorialize an imagined antebellum community by infusing objects with narratives of the past. I hope to add a cultural materialist lens to the discourse on southern melancholy by suggesting that this melancholic production is primarily accomplished by infusing objects with narratives of the past, thereby making an imagined premodern community a concrete fact of the social world. Turning to the early twentieth-century women's memorial movement as a historical example, I argue that elite white women acted as cultural custodians of the South and were integral to the production of patriarchy. This dissertation examines the object world of the works of Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Zora Neale Hurston, looking for moments when objects either represent an idealized past or reveal its constructed nature. This approach demonstrates that opposed to producing ahistorical texts focused on solely domestic issues, these writers interrogate the historical process, illustrating how material culture produces a persistent yet fragile nostalgia.

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## INTRODUCTION

The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes.

--Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*

In 2000, Patricia Yaeger attempted to “dynamite the rails” of scholarship on southern women’s writing by dismantling the categories that organized our thinking about southern literature, suggesting that these categories served to mystify the material conditions that structured the lives of southern women (34). Turning away from conventional topics such as family, community, or relationship with the land, Yaeger focused on representations of detritus, bodies, and objects to see how they worked to subvert the dominant discourse. Yaeger’s work has been incredibly influential on the scholars associated with the new southern studies who have revitalized the study of southern literature by destabilizing the concept of the South as a fixed region bound by distinct cultural practices, viewing it instead as an ideological construct whose content depends on its uses. Much of this work has centered on dislodging formulations of the South from the region it describes, investigating how the concept has been deployed outside the geographic region of the American southeast.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Rae Greesson argues that in the 19th century, the idea of the South’s depravation and backwardness served to cement nationalization by providing justification for claims to exceptionalism through the “spatialization of



Despite this work divesting the concept of the South of a stable referent, the term returns again and again as a troubling and often painful site of ideological reference. It continues to act as a marker of a region dominated by a conservative politics that looks to a lost past, whether that past is an antebellum agrarian society or the 1950s pre-Civil Rights era, as a model for an ideal society. And although scholarship on the contemporary South suggests we live in an era of the “postsouth,” the idea of the conservative, backward gazing region still functions both for those who would condemn it and those who would champion it.<sup>2</sup> Disturbingly, Jon Smith has recently argued that this longing for a past South persists not only in popular culture, but also in academia. In *Finding Purple America* (2013), Smith contends that a melancholic relationship to the South as lost object has been the driving force behind the old southern studies and, perhaps more troubling, the latest trend in American studies. Smith sees the fascination of the ‘90s generation of hipsters with southern culture—as seen in the rise of Alt-country music, a phenomenon Smith describes as “a fantasy of truck driver-bohemian alliance” (40)—as another iteration of the longing for a premodern white-dominated southern past exhibited by the baby boomers responsible for the old southern studies. The longing of those Gen-Xers, who are just coming of professional age and publishing, is perhaps more dangerous than that of the older generation because their conservatism is handily disguised as a rebellion against the artificiality of postmodernity. Smith attributes the failure of academia to dynamite the rails of this type of thinking completely to the idea that “the fantasy train of white southern melancholy does not run

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national morality” (4). In a similar move, Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino suggest that the idea of the South as a deviant region has allowed the nation to disavow its participation in racial prejudice by labeling it a southern problem (3-24). Leigh Anne Duck has provided perhaps the most nuanced view of the South’s relationship with American nationalism, claiming that the South, viewed as temporally dislocated from the rest of the nation, has at times served as the nation’s Other, yet at other times it has represented the nation’s ego ideal.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have used the term postsouthern to critique the possibility of an identifiable South in the era of late capitalism. This move, however, does not mean the term elides what Martyn Bone describes as “the sociospatial inequality” still at work in the region. Bone notes, “If I generally want ‘postsouthern’ to signify a radical *break* with our familiar ideas of ‘the South,’ the etymological retention of ‘southern’ can also point up historical-geographical continuities” (51).

on the rails of logic” and suggests that “the critic’s task today must be, less glamorously, to show what it does run on” (34).

This melancholic relationship to the South within academia is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in Alan Shelton’s moody memoir, *Dreamworlds of Alabama* (2007). In *Dreamworlds*, Shelton describes how the act of remembering becomes an act of melancholy: “This book is about how I lost this world. In each essay I wrote, I lost a little more of what I had already lost” (xvii). In the work, remembering is not an act of reclamation but an experience of loss that appears both painful and pleasurable, the creation of a nostalgia in which Shelton feels compelled to indulge. Shelton’s work, however, offers more than just nostalgic remembrance of better times past, instead delving into an investigation of the origin of this nostalgia under full recognition of its influence. Importantly, he identifies himself with Walter Benjamin, whose work on his childhood, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1950), exhibits a nostalgia missing from his unfinished *Arcades Project* (1972), his chronicle of the rise of the commodity and its influence on 19<sup>th</sup> century society; by focusing on the earlier work, Shelton also engages this affect, locating it within but also embedded in the material world of the South. In *Berlin*, Benjamin describes his memories of the public monuments, shops, and city streets that made up the world of his childhood. Shelton similarly turns to the material world to reconstruct his South, looking to Confederate monuments, wisteria vines, antique furniture, and his family’s garden tools as a means of accessing his memories. He recognizes the porous relationship between subjects and objects, suggesting that “[p]lants, objects, and bodies are not separate but are wrapped systems with stories originating as much out of the actant as the actor” (25).

Significantly, Benjamin and Shelton also attribute their orientation to the past to the matriarchs who watched over them. Benjamin recalls the stories his mother told him of his

ancestors when he was sick with fever,<sup>3</sup> and Shelton similarly refers to his grandmother as “the family historian, chronicling the individual trajectories past lives left behind, though ‘paleontologist’ might be more accurate, since the traces were usually left in paper or etched into a gravestone like a fossil” (34). Shelton’s metaphor reveals the relationship between maternal authority and the material world and their influence on his perception of the past. The stories passed down to him from his grandmother congeal in the material objects that make up his South, and these go beyond written tales and tombstones to the everyday, mundane materials of life, from an old refrigerator to the rust-covered objects stored in the family’s shed. Shelton refers to his dreamworld, the South infused with melancholy remembrance, as “an architectural virus that my mother and grandmother imparted to me” (xx).

Taking Shelton’s emphasis on maternal influence into consideration, I return to Yaeger’s subject matter, modern southern women’s fiction, as a means of investigating the production of melancholy in the South. While Yaeger’s work was generative, new methodologies have appeared that offer opportunities for better understanding the construction of the rails she attempted to explode. Just one year after the publication of *Dirt and Desire* (2000), Bill Brown published “Thing Theory” (2001) in *Critical Inquiry*, launching a critical theory centered on representations of the relationship between subjects and material objects. Brown’s work examines how subjects constitute objects and how objects construct subjectivities, or, in his words, “the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems,” and how they in turn “constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects” (5). This dissertation examines the complex

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin notes, “Such stories brought to light what little I knew of my forebears. The career of an ancestor, a grandfather’s rules of conduct, were conjured up before me as though to make me understand that it was premature for me to give away, by an early death, the splendid trump cards which I held in my hand, thanks to my origins” (74).

relationship between southern women and material objects that memorialize the past, a relationship crucial to understanding southern melancholia.

The authors whose work I examine were acutely aware that women, particularly elite, white women, not only act as the symbol around which southern patriarchy is organized, but also serve as the means by which that patriarchy is ideologically reproduced through generations. This reproduction is accomplished through the production of a melancholic sense of loss of a specifically premodern, Old South society that they pass down to future generations through narratives of family history. Southern matriarchs act as the storytellers who represent the family's past to future generations, but, importantly, they also act as the custodians of the family's cherished possessions, those objects that memorialize the past conveyed in narrative. They construct this memorialization of a bygone southern era through an engagement with domestic material culture, allowing objects to naturalize privilege by making it a concrete fact of the social world. Benjamin's description of the carousel as a nostalgic object par excellence symbolizes the working of the material object in the melancholic longing for a return to omnipotence and continuity:

The eternal return of all things has long since become childhood wisdom, and life an ancient intoxication of sovereignty, with the booming orchestrion as crown jewel at the center. Now the music is slowly winding down; space begins to stutter, and the trees start coming to their senses. The carousel becomes uncertain ground. And his mother rises up before him—the firmly fixed mooring post around which the landing child wraps the line of his glances. (123)

The carousel represents the repetitious return of the child back the maternal figure, the symbol for the imaginary wholeness that anchors the child's sense of itself as omnipotent sovereign of all it surveys.

Though material objects can work to support dominant ideology, the use and mutability of these objects also reveal the constructed nature of a southern history that naturalizes aristocratic privilege, and the materiality of objects may also demystify the obfuscations of ideology by offering evidence of what a version of an ideal society seeks to disavow. Thus while the object may be used in service of the dominant ideology, acting as a relic of a glorified past, other objects may act as remnants of those facets of society that ideology seeks to forget. Also, while these women act as the central disseminators of this system, their role is never static, but is contingent on a number of factors including age, geography, class, and race. Thus while some women contribute to southern mythology, constructing an ideal past and building memorials to it, others resist this memorialization. Perhaps the most important factor in the relationship between women and memorialization is the historical moment from which they view the past. This dissertation explores how this relationship changes from the immediate postbellum period into the mid-twentieth century, examining the various responses to a sense of a lost past depicted by the chosen authors. Overall, the relationship between women, the past, and materiality is problematic and deeply ambivalent, and the authors examined here offer a searching portrayal of this ambiguity.

### **Southern Women and Memorialism**

Shelton's emphasis on the matriarchs of his family as the purveyors of family history foregrounds the importance of the concept of the southern white woman, a figure who has always held a central place in southern culture. White southern womanhood, however, despite its longstanding centrality to ideas of southern identity, has not been a static notion, its characteristics and uses changing over time. Critics and historians have come to different conclusions as to how the white southern woman initially ascended the pedestal. W. J. Cash suggests that in a slaveholding society, the southern woman, "as perpetuator of white superiority in legitimate line . . . inevitably became the focal center of the fundamental pattern of Proto-Dorian pride" (84). Cash adds, however, that the custom of slaveholders taking sexual liberties with female slaves demanded that white women "must be compensated," leading to "downright gyneolatry" (86). Anne Firor Scott also sees the vaunting of southern womanhood as tied to slavery, arguing that submission, the defining quality of southern women, supported slavery by affirming "the patriarchal family structure" in which slavery was based (16). Anne Goodwyn Jones, on the other hand, sees the importance of the concept of white southern womanhood as developing out of a Western patriarchal ideology predating southern slave society, though she does recognize that its importation into a culture based in slavery accounts for its importance to southern identity; "it is the peculiar relation of patriarchal attitudes toward women with the development of a slave society that produced, in the early nineteenth century, both the South's most intense period of self-definition and the refinement of the image of the lady as the slaveholder's ideal" (12). Despite disagreements on whether or not the antebellum South's stance toward women originated in the South or is linked to antecedent European tradition, each of these authors sees the South's worship of southern white women taking a unique shape due to its basis in a culture of slavery and becoming intimately linked to southern identity.

Though white southern womanhood remained central to southern culture in the postbellum era, the advent of the Civil War altered the way in which women carried out their essential function of embodying the social order. The loss of the war also marks a moment when women took a more proactive role in the production of southern identity. From the first articulation of the “Lost Cause,” the figure of the southern woman constituted not just a central symbol, but also the purveyor of nostalgic ideals to future generations. In Edward A. Pollard’s *The Lost Cause* (1876), that ideology’s seminal text, Pollard writes, “The war has left the South its own memories, its own heroes, its own tears, its own dead. Under these traditions, sons will grow to manhood, and lessons sink deep that are learned from the lips of widowed mothers” (751). Pollard registered instilling values in future generations as women’s work—part of the domestic work of reproduction—and women would indeed prove vital in the dissemination of southern values to the community. One way in which these women filled the role Pollard prescribed to them was by mourning for the Confederate dead. “So great were the region’s losses during the Civil War,” W. Fitzhugh Brundage suggests, “that white women revised the restrictive customs they had maintained. United in mourning, white women redirected their networks of voluntary associations to perform tasks that government either could not or chose not to perform” (27). These women formed Ladies Memorial Associations (LMAs) whose first task was the formation of Confederate cemeteries for all the Confederate soldiers who had been buried in unmarked, battlefield graves. Their work, however, soon turned to the creation of “rituals of remembrance” such as Confederate Memorial Day, which began as an imperative “to decorate the humble graves of the Confederate dead at least once a year” (26). Thus women took responsibility in the postbellum era for the public project of collective mourning for Confederate South’s losses.

Despite the emphasis on tradition and remembering the past, Gaines M. Foster stresses “how little political content it had” (46). The early memorial project focused on mourning for the South’s losses rather than making political statements about the war. Most southerners were not interested in reigniting the sectional arguments over which they had fought. Though the memorial movement expressed grief, it also manifested an orientation toward the future, as apparent in the decision to hold Memorial Day in the Spring with its association with rebirth and renewal; in that way, it supported the region’s desire to become reconciled with the Union. Furthermore, Foster suggests the physical placement of the ceremonies “helped the South begin to reduce, or at least alter, its commitment to the Confederacy. . . . By placing memorials to the wartime heroes outside the normal living and working areas of the community, southerners symbolically placed distance between their daily lives and their lost cause” (45). The memorial movement assigned the work of mourning to its proper place, the cemetery, in the interests of allowing southerners to move past these losses and rejoin the nation.

The last decade of the nineteenth century, however, saw a resurgence of memorial activity headed by a new generation of southern women. The daughters of the LMAs began forming groups called Daughters of the Confederacy (DOC) to continue their work. In 1894, so many chapters of the DOC had formed that they came together to form the UDC and shifted their focus in a way that reveals a growing emphasis on disseminating Lost Cause ideology. As Karen L. Cox notes, “These groups saw the need to extend their work and influence beyond memorializing the past and sought ways to preserve Confederate culture for future generations” (2). Statistics reveal that this new generation of women was more prolific than the last: “93 percent of the monuments erected on the urban landscape were built after 1895. One-half of them were unveiled between 1903 and 1912. Concurrently, the UDC grew from a membership of



approximately 35,000 in 1903 to nearly 80,000 in 1912” (Cox 50). Furthermore, they managed to bring the memorial project out of the cemetery and into the center of public life. “Statues of soldiers,” Cox writes, “now appeared in civic spaces, such as town squares and on the grounds surrounding courthouses....the monuments became part of the political landscape” (66). The women of the UDC redefined the memorial project started by the LMAs by adjusting its aims, multiplying its numbers, and transferring its work out of the cemetery and into the most political of public spaces.

Changes that occurred in southern society between the years of the LMA’s decline and the rise of the UDC help explain both the resurgence of the memorial movement and the change in its aims. Industrialization picked up speed in the 1880s, and, though the South’s economy remained primarily agricultural, “[t]he postbellum economics of cotton production forced changes in the selling of cotton that left farmers more directly involved in the market than ever before and also spurred the development of small crossroads market towns” (Foster 80). These towns required “shopkeepers, lawyers, physicians, small businessmen, and other professional people” who “became increasing influential.... [c]onstituting a new middle class” (80). Not all southerners were happy about these changes in the region, and some dramatic events gave even New South proponents cause to worry about social upheaval. Populism began to spread among farming communities who “advocated a cooperative, agricultural social order based on producer values as an alternative to the emerging commercial, industrial South,” and, like the rest of the nation in this period, the South experienced labor agitation in the industrial sector leading to the formation of unions by the Knights of Labor and numerous strikes (86). Foster suggests that “[l]abor rebellion, perhaps even more than the farmers’ revolt, threatened the sense of order in the South” because it “exacerbated lingering fears of the dangers inherent in industrial society as

well as persisting racial anxieties, since workers were black as well as white” (86-87). During this period of accelerated change the new generation of the memorial project responded to anxieties about social upheaval by bringing their work into the public to construct social order.

The anxiety over disruption in the social order is manifest in the memorial work done by the UDC. This era saw the construction of the Confederate private monuments, still ubiquitous throughout the region, and though these statues seem to engender respect for the South’s white lower classes, memorialists accentuated qualities in the Confederate private by which they hoped the lower classes would abide: “their submission to discipline, their respect for private property, and their contribution to rebuilding the South” (Foster 122). The figure of the Confederate private “offered a model of the way the world should work and how the lower classes should behave” (142). They also attempted to represent the proper place of African Americans in their memorial work. “In 1923,” Grace Elizabeth Hale notes, “the UDC even asked Congress to authorize the construction of a ‘mammy’ memorial in the nation’s capital,” and monuments to the faithful ex-slave who remained at his master’s side after Emancipation were also suggested (60). These public representations of racial hierarchy were meant to serve as concrete examples of the region’s lasting paternalistic social order—even while the South was modernizing to fit the industrial model set by the north.

Though southern memorialists disguised their rhetoric in a specifically anti-modern stance, envisioning an agrarian South, their efforts were key in building a New South that could play a role in the north’s industrial economy. Rather than impeding economic modernization, memorialists supported these changes by concealing them in Old South nostalgia, a move that insured the cultural dominance of middle- and upper-class whites in the New South’s growing economy. “Old South nostalgia,” Grace Elizabeth Hale writes, “the funhouse mirror of New

South progress, culturally anchored the authority of a rising white southern middle class while paradoxically transforming the region into the northeastern-centered economy's developing market of choice" (53). By producing Old South nostalgia and a regional commitment to Lost Cause ideology, the memorial movement allowed southern whites to naturalize their place in the social hierarchy as aristocratic privilege passed down from previous generations rather than the result of coercive exploitation of lower-class and African American laborers in the new industrialized economy.

The memorialists' tactics responded to an epistemological shift at the turn of the century in the concepts of both culture and, importantly, region. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of museal anthropology when anthropologists began displaying artifacts in order to convey how culture is produced over time. As Brown notes, "The object-lesson—a belief that objects (as opposed to words) would speak to more people (young and old, immigrants and natives) in a universal language—was beginning to become part of daily life" (*Sense* 109). In the 1880s, anthropologist Franz Boas sought to reformulate the way anthropologists thought about material objects' relationship to culture by spatializing what was to that point a purely temporal understanding of human cultural development.<sup>4</sup> He noticed that cultures developed differently in different places and that they could not be placed together on an overarching timeline of evolutionary development. Brown characterizes Boas's critique as "an attack on the absence of the geographical specificity with which to make sense of the ethnological collections, typologically arranged there according to basic form (the kind of object) rather than to specific function within a historically, geographically, and tribally specific milieu" (89). Thus the memorial societies came to prominence in a time when culture was known through the study of objects, and Boas facilitated a specifically regionalist perception of this knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of the work of Franz Boas see Brown, *Sense*, 81-135.

The object-lesson soon became common practice not just in anthropology, but also in the study of history, leading to a new fascination with how the nation understood itself in respect to its history: “The work of Americanizing memory—which meant both discovering a past to remember and inventing traditions to keep—was performed most assiduously by the scores of historical societies and associations that emerged in the closing three decades of the century, home to innumerable genealogists and antiquarians” (Brown 109). The UDC employed the object-lesson by collecting Confederate objects and even opening a Confederate museum in Richmond (Cox 93-100). Brown suggests that this type of collecting and imbuing objects with historical significance amounts to “a kind of historicist fetishism where possessing a thing comes to feel like possessing history itself” (118). These objects created a physical presence that naturalized a history of white privilege. Boas’s addition of a geographical element to this understanding of culture allowed memorialists to construct a sense of the cultural distinctiveness of the region, thereby naturalizing hegemonic social order as a characteristic of the region even as it reconciled with the Union. The consequences of maintaining such a distinction are evident in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court decision that established federal support for segregation in the South on the grounds that the South was a distinctive region with a distinctive social order.<sup>5</sup> The memorialists used objects imbued with Confederate culture to define the history of the South, thereby defining the South’s present.

## **Gender and Southern Modernism**

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<sup>5</sup> The ruling cited “the established usages, customs and traditions of the people” of the South as trumping federal law. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

The centrality of the white southern woman to southern culture has made this figure central to southern literature. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, antebellum southern literature, preoccupied with legitimating slaveholding society, used the submissive southern woman to “represent the values of legitimate authority, hierarchy, and particularism, which most proslavery southern intellectuals saw as the substance of their distinct culture” (75). She turns to Augusta Jane Evans’ *Beulah* as an example of this narrative at work. *Beulah*’s relinquishment of her intellectual pursuits to submit to God “represent[s] the southern triumph over the seductions of modernity through an acceptance of faith, limits, and ordained social roles” (75). Jones suggests that in the postbellum era, southern women were often used to define the author’s attitude toward the New South. Literature that supported the idea of the New South utilized reconciliation narratives in which the southern lady “marries the northern charmer, then persuades him to agree with her political ideas,” while New South opponents depicted the southern woman as rejecting her Northern suitors (14). In each case, the white southern woman represents the integrity and future of southern culture.

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century culture of memorialization feeds directly into the literature of southern modernism. Southern modernism is usually defined as the literature arising out of tension between southern tradition and modernization. In deriving from a perceived loss of traditional modes of living at the hands of increasing industrialization, of course, southern modernism does not look much different from other versions of literary modernism, but due to the uneven development of modernity between the rest of the nation and the South—its provincial, rural character—this tension has been seen as more keenly felt in the region. “[E]vents were so much more accelerated and traumatic in the South,” writes Richard Grey, “that they seemed to be without parallel” (38). As the anxiety surrounding modernity was

more prominent in the South than in other previously industrialized areas, the reactionary look back to the past also reached a higher intensity in the region. That the South had already been invested in memorializing the antebellum past for fifty years before World War I only strengthened the nostalgic impulse. Southern modernist figures, such as the Fugitive Poets, could reject the progressivism that underlay the work of the second iteration of the women's memorial movement while making use of the culture of memorialization they constructed to imagine a premodern past built on feudal agrarian principles.

Allan Tate, often considered the most modernist of the Fugitives, offers a convincing example of the power memorialization had over his generation of southern writers. His "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1930), as formally modernist as Eliot's *Wasteland*, seeks to capture the alienation from the past inherent in modernity. This experience, however, rather than taking place in an industrial, urban environment, stems from a site common to the South, the Confederate graveyard. The poem foregrounds the experience of living in the constant presence of the absence of the "immoderate past" as monumentalized in the cemetery, where "[t]he wind whirrs without recollection" (44, 3). The narrator's attempts to engage the past through the tombs ends in his complete alienation, and he is turned "like them to stone" (20). The memorials remind the narrator of the absence of a tradition that is sealed off in the past, but they offer no access to it. That Tate, at the time he wrote the poem, had largely disassociated himself from the South, even agreeing with the criticisms leveled against the region in H. L. Menken's essay "The Sahara of the Bozart" (1920), speaks to how deeply he had internalized the lessons of memorialization. Concerning the writing of "Ode," Tate wrote, "after it was on paper it served to bring up a whole stream of associations and memories, suppressed, at least on the emotional plane, since my childhood" (qtd. in *Idea*, O'Brien 139). Importantly, Tate's repressed feelings

about the southern past had likely been instilled in him by his mother. As Micheal O'Brien notes, "His mother, a Virginian nostalgic for the old days, let him believe that he was a Virginian. In fact, he came from Kentucky" (139). Tate's mother valued connection to the Old South aristocracy, an attachment she passed on to her son.

The centrality of white women to the tradition of the South is not absent from canonical southern male modernist literature, or, perhaps more accurately, it is a center that is conspicuously absent. William Faulkner's preeminent work of southern modernism, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), provides a good case study. The earliest point in the novel—the primal scene in which Caddy climbs the tree—is the day of the funeral of the children's grandmother. Thus the conflict begins with the death of the southern matriarch, the figure who lived through the Civil War. Caroline Compson, the children's mother, stands as the next generation of southern women. Obsessed with class and injured by her family's downfall, she makes the Compson home her tomb, only leaving once in the novel to go to the cemetery. Caddy, however, escapes such a fate. As many critics have noted, the novel is centered on the narrative and physical absence of Caddy.<sup>6</sup> The loss of tradition and the breaking down of the social order all become conflated in the absent female. Nor is she the only missing woman in Faulkner's work. Both *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Sanctuary* (1931) center on white southern women who refuse to play their roles in upholding tradition. The southern white woman is the center that no longer holds tradition together. The importance of this absence for southern modernism is evident in the description of Addie's Bundren's coffin as "a cubist bug" (219). The world void of tradition, synonymous with the women who construct it, necessitates formal intervention.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Caddy as the absent center of *The Sound and the Fury*, see John T. Matthews, "The Discovery of Loss in *The Sound and the Fury*" in *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982), 63-114; André Bleikasten, "The Quest for Eurydice" in *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 41-55; Doreen Fowler, "'The Beautiful One' in *The Sound and the Fury*" in *Faulkner: The Return of the Repressed* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997), 32-47.

Despite the centrality of the southern woman to southern modernism, scholars have continually failed to recognize modern southern women's writing as making a significant contribution to understanding the construction of southern subjectivity in modernity. Richard King has argued that "they were not concerned primarily with the larger cultural, racial, and political themes" and that "they did not place the region at the center of their imaginative visions" (9). More recently, Fred Hobson claimed that the works of southern women writers fail to address the "sweep of history," largely "because the male, particularly in southern society, was usually conditioned to think more ambitiously, that is, to ponder history and politics in which *he*, after all, could more easily participate" (78). Interestingly, Hobson offers an alternative reason for the male writer's attention to history: his tendency to be "more abstract, less attentive to the everyday truths and concrete details than that of most women writers" (78). Hobson's claim, perhaps more revealing than he realized, suggests that the male mind of the South, in its confrontation with history, necessarily separates the material from the abstraction of the historical, thus neglecting the vital relationship between the two.

It is the modern southern women writers' attention to the material world, their investigation of the objects that fill southern spaces, that I argue makes their works particularly important for understanding the construction of southern subjectivity in modernity. It was the southern woman who was charged with the task of creating a culture that allowed for a view of history that elided the material. Paradoxically, they accomplished this through the building of a material environment that supported the abstract narrative of a solid South, a community founded on a natural social order based in patriarchy. Modern southern women writers, having come of age in the early twentieth-century South, understood the onus of filling this role even as it confined them within its ideological structure. They felt the imperative, in Tate's words, to "set



up the grave / In the house,” but they also knew that the grave could be “ravenous” (84-5). Their work, rather than neglecting history as King and Hobson claim, examines the construction of historical narrative as revealed in the South’s relationship to its material environment.

### **The Southern Object**

In order to highlight the role of melancholia in constructing southern subjectivity, this dissertation examines representations of southern culture in literature through the lens of psychoanalytic object relations, the analysis of the subject’s libidinal investments. The potential of this discourse for analyzing collectivities is exemplified in Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s groundbreaking text on melancholia in postwar Germany *The Inability to Mourn* (1967). The Mitscherlichs suggest that many Germans, having suffered the loss of the ego-ideal as represented in Nazism, were incapable of accepting the guilt for the deaths of the millions of victims of Nazi ideology, instead identifying with the victims through feelings of persecution. They propose that “[i]dentification with the innocent victim is very frequently substituted for mourning; this is above all a logical defense against guilt” (45). Historical parallels between postwar Germany and the postbellum South—including military loss and acute social change—make the Mitscherlichs’ analysis a potentially useful model for analyzing narratives of southern identity.

W. J. Cash’s analysis of the South in *The Mind of the South* (1941) aligns neatly with the Mitscherlichs’ examination of post-war German society, which claims that German denial of guilt and feelings of persecution evidenced a lapse into “acting out infantile fantasies of omnipotence” (25). A similar sense of denial is apparent in Cash’s description of postbellum

paternalism, an appeal to a naturalized community and social order based in the myth of the Old South that disavows the coercive nature of labor in the South and blames postbellum social disorder on the incursion of northern industrial interests. Cash posits a southern psyche in which paternalism and the idea of an aristocracy arose out of the need for a defense mechanism to deny white southerners' misgivings about their participation in slavery. Cash sees the Civil War as the event "which really created the concept of the South as something more than a matter of geography, as an object of patriotism, in the minds of Southerners," and, importantly, claims that "this solidification of feeling and interest in the South involved the final development of the paternalistic pattern" (65-7). He suggests the Old South was "a society beset by the specters of defeat, of shame, of guilt" regarding slavery and that it defended itself primarily through the "the legend of the Old South—the legend of which the backbone is, of course, precisely the assumption that every planter was in the most rigid sense of the word a gentleman" (61).

*The Mind of the South*, though it identifies the notion of southern aristocracy as a construction, also exemplifies the efficacy of the myth of the Old South. Despite its bitter criticisms of the South, Cash's book also conforms to the standard declension narrative. While he suggests that the South has always suffered from a "tendency toward unreality, toward romanticism," he attributes the origin of this tendency to a number of factors including the influence of the natural environment, the lack of labor necessary to run the plantation, a lack of class consciousness, and, perhaps most dubious, the influence of living closely with the black slave, who Cash characterizes as "a creature of grandiloquent imagination, of facile emotion, and, above everything else under heaven, of enjoyment" (44-50). His narrative moves from a sense of a simple society populated by child-like hedonists, to a society disrupted by a New South industrialism that introduced class consciousness to the South. As Michael O'Brien

suggests, “while he grasped how ideas had formed others, he did not grasp how they had formed him,” nor did he “grasp that his own analysis embodied a Romantic image” (*Rethinking* 183).

While Cash may be right that southern ambivalence finds its origin in antebellum slave culture, the loss of the Civil War, the events of Reconstruction, and the changes to southern society associated with New South industrialism provided conditions that allowed white southerners to construct a fantasy of an organic, paternalist society that could be reproduced over generations, including the generation of modernist writers of which Cash was a part.<sup>7</sup> This situation is articulated by Scott Romine’s work on cultural reproduction in the South. The reproduction of a southern culture based in white supremacy depends upon the acceptance of an “authentic” past, a past in which the social order was unbroken by the imposition of modernity, yet, as Romine argues, “authenticity articulates a structure of desire and hence of absence” (4). Thus southern culture is produced, and thereby reproduced, in its disavowal of the real in favor of a fantasy of traditional society. What is disavowed here is not merely the South’s participation in modernity—the fact that racial domination in the South is part and parcel of capitalism and not the expression of an organic society—but that the turn to tradition is the very condition of possibility for this participation in modernity. Romine suggests that this disavowal is facilitated by the imposition of narrative, which “conceals modernity’s actual status as tradition’s constitutive underside” (6). Thus cultural reproduction in the South depends on what Romine calls a “machine of desiring-production,” a means of organizing desire toward that which is always already absent (30).

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Johnson enumerates several strategies used by southerners to disavow guilt for their participation in the slave trade including displacing guilt onto the figure of the slave trader, blaming the sale of slaves on economic hardship, and appealing to a sense of paternalism that colored the purchase of slaves as a humanitarian act (25-29, 109-111). Each of these tactics exemplifies ways in which the South sought to “maintain an artificial and ideological separation of ‘slavery’ from ‘the market’” (25). Thus the South’s problematic relationship with modernity and its need to displace guilt has always been at the heart of southern ambivalence.

Richard King's analysis of postbellum southern culture corresponds well with Romine's conception of cultural reproduction, and, significantly for my project, he reintroduces the importance of gendered cultural work to the process. King sees the southern turn to the past as a playing out of the Oedipal family romance that "pitted father against son and often joined grandson and grandfather" (35). Conforming to a narrative of declension, sons rejected their fathers who had foregone southern tradition in favor of New South progress, instead identifying with their grandfathers who had fought gallantly to preserve the Old South. He sees this identification arising from the "reification of the tradition" that acts as "a sign itself of the distance between self and tradition. . . . The very act of trying to re-present the tradition pointed to its absence" (15). This present absence produces a sense of fractured being and a desire to recreate wholeness through identification.

King's assessment of the portrayal of this process in the literature of the southern Renaissance offers cogent insight into the role of women and material objects in this process of cultural reproduction. He notes that "[i]n fiction and poetry the tradition was often symbolized in the portraits of the heroic generation, the presiding presences of the tradition. . . . The portraits of these men—stern, untroubled, and resolute—hung in the entrance halls or the parlors of homes; and from there they judged the actions of their successors" (15). Thus the veneration of the older generation was fomented in the home, made manifest in the material domestic environment. But importantly, King's analysis of the Southern family romance centers on the dynamics of the male family relations. The mother, he suggests, plays the role of mother to all, "caring for the wants and needs of her family, both white and black," yet she "remain[s] a shadowy figure, always there and ever necessary, but rarely emerging in full force" (35). King's assessment, while correct in its outlines, overlooks the importance of this "shadowy" aspect of the southern woman.

She remains “shadowy” because the work she does must never become apparent. Her work—the hanging of portraits, the building of cemeteries, the construction of monuments—must always appear banal and never be recognized for what it is: the construction of the tradition, an ideological force.

This (re)production of melancholia across generations in the form of ideology figures as the process Eric Santner defines as the “cultural transmission of psychopathology” (37). Santner’s analysis of film in postwar Germany, *Stranded Objects* (1990), extends the Mitscherlich’s work in three ways useful for thinking about cultural reproduction in the South: he attends to the generational transmission of melancholia, he identifies the function of material objects in this transmission, and he theorizes how these factors work together to produce a sense of regional identity. For Santner, this is a process that starts within the home:

[T]he family became the primary site where a damaged self could be refurbished, could be respecularized under the mirroring gaze of spouse and offspring. That is, the family was used as a sort of looking glass that would magically make one whole again, give oneself back to oneself, if only as an image. In this way the second generation was blackmailed into complicity with the parents’ inability to mourn (37).

Here the home acts as the site of the Lacanian mirror stage in which the subject reconstitutes its ideal ego through the gaze of the other. As the parents lapse into fantasies of victimization as a means of disavowing guilt, their children inherit “the psychic structures that impeded mourning in the older generation in the first place” (37). In this situation the domestic sphere becomes the site for the unification of fractured wholeness through fantasies of a lost past and thus for the passing down a melancholic sense of loss from generation to generation.

Turning to D. W. Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena, Santner stresses the importance material objects can play in learning proper mourning for absence. He suggests that the disillusionment of the child depends upon the reintroduction of the mother at intervals to reaffirm the symbolic connection between signifier and signified: "the child is able to make use of transitional objects . . . insofar as he senses that his play is witnessed by the figure whose separateness he is coming to master" (25). Inherited defense mechanisms may impede this reintroduction, leading to a perception of the object as always already absent. These stranded objects, severed from signification, engender a sense of fracture and foment the desire for the return to wholeness in the subject. Santner analyzes films that, in an attempt to overcome this fragmentation of imaginary wholeness, seek to establish a connection with a prelapsarian past through a return to regional cultures. His analysis focuses on the films' attention to objects and the ways in which the experiences of a premodern, idealized community are represented as "still palpable in the timeworn textures of objects of daily use" (81).

Following Santner, I analyze the object worlds of my selected texts to find those objects that, through their connection with the past, construct a sense of melancholic loss in the subject, looking particularly at their role in defining regional culture. In particular, I am looking for stranded objects, those items that invoke the presence of absence, thereby instilling the subject with a sense of fracture and the desire for a return to the wholeness of a lost organic society. However, unlike the films Santner analyzes—which he suggests, though they reject Nazism on the surface, often work to reaffirm the values of fascism such as anti-Semitism—I argue that the texts analyzed here offer a self-reflexive view of cultural reproduction, exposing the role of women and objects in this process and revealing its fissures.<sup>8</sup> The southern women writers I

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<sup>8</sup> Though Santner recognizes the film's attempts at mourning for Germany's past, he also suggests that their focus on retrieving a past unfractured by the workings of fascism leads to discourses that necessarily entail the expulsion of

examine, rather than supporting Old South nostalgia by reproducing its narratives, also explore those moments when ambivalence comes to the fore and objects offer evidence of what is denied by ideology rather than support its narrative. The world of southern women's fiction is rich with meaningful objects, and critics have largely ignored this object world as a means of revealing the historical and material realm of this fiction.<sup>9</sup>

The first chapter examines Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda stories, looking at how Porter's texts represent the construction of female, southern subjectivity and how it changes from the antebellum era to the early twentieth century. I begin by reading Porter's short story cycle *The Old Order* (1955), paying specific attention to the relationship between Sophia Jane Gay and her once-slave now-servant Aunt Nannie. Critics have attempted to read this relationship as an essentially equal partnership between women who find common ground in their marginalization under patriarchy based on their gender. I argue, however, that understanding the relationship between these women necessitates a more nuanced view of how southern paternalism works to justify the privilege of white elites, both before and after emancipation. Throughout the story Sophia Jane turns to memorabilia from the family's history to memorialize the past generations that prove the family's aristocratic lineage. Reading the story through Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage, and paying particular attention to the bondsman's role in mediating privilege for the lord, I suggest that Aunt Nannie, like these cherished objects, signifies the past for Sophia Jane, justifying her sense of aristocratic privilege. Aunt Nannie's continued loyalty to Sophia Jane, post-emancipation, seems to naturalize their relationship as master and servant

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alterity in service of reunification. Thus their labor of mourning is "undermined by various reinscriptions of discourses of exclusion . . . as well as by nostalgias and narcissisms insufficiently chastened by homeopathic renunciations" (151).

<sup>9</sup> Yaeger has opened the door to this type of study of southern objects via her examination of the transference of object relations across racial lines in southern women's fiction. She stresses "things acquire such an aura in southern literature because they are shadowed by a world where people have been defined as things" (206).

within the diegetic world, but Porter reveals how Sophia Jane depends on her servant to conceal the constructed nature of her own sense of self as a naturalized aristocrat and her participation in a larger, modern economic network.

The second half of this chapter turns to the novellas “Old Mortality” (1937) and “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (1939) to examine Porter’s view of how this aristocratic subjectivity gets passed down through generations. Miranda’s grandmother, Sophia Jane, relays the story of Miranda’s Aunt Amy, the model of the southern belle, to Miranda and her sister. This romantic narrative of the family’s history, linking them to an Old South culture of chivalry and honor, teaches the children to revere and mourn the passing of this generation. The grandmother supports the narrative by showing the girls her treasured keepsakes from Amy’s life, including locks of hair, party clothes, portraits, etc. Reading these texts through Walter Benjamin’s ruminations on storytelling illustrates that the objects’ importance lies in their ability to bring the dead close to the listener, thus calling on the authority of the dead to verify the story. In this chapter I coin the term *necro-décor* to describe the way the grandmother builds the material domestic environment out of Amy’s death, thereby unintentionally foregrounding the objectification and marginalization of women under patriarchy. Though Miranda turns away from her family, moving to the West to pursue a different kind of life, in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” nearly dead from influenza, Miranda dreams of being back in the Gay home, demonstrating the lasting effect of Sophia Jane’s influence.

The next chapter examines two novels by Eudora Welty. Forming a historical progression with the Porter analysis, the first half of the chapter looks at *Delta Wedding* (1946). Welty’s novel, set in the changing plantation system of the Mississippi Delta in the early 1920s, depicts three generations of the Fairchild clan and their engagement with the memorialized past. While



the older women of the clan invest their household objects with stories from the family's history, interpolating future generations with the values inherent in the stories, the younger generation of Fairchild women rebel from those values. This rebellion most clearly registers in Dabney's marriage to Troy, the overseer, and the changes this union will bring to the family. Troy's addition to the family will tarnish their image as aristocrats, but his knowledge of how to run a modern plantation will ensure their continued success. Thus the novel depicts a plantation system in the throes of historical flux. Welty's novel, however, thematizes these changes in the subtle manner that the family uses to disavow its participation in modern economy, through the objects with which the family surrounds themselves. While the objects work to naturalize the Fairchilds' privilege, they also reveal the constructed nature of their identity, often revealing their own anxieties about that construction.

The second part of this chapter looks thirty years to the future with Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972). The novel depicts a South undergoing social change as a growing consumer culture offers new opportunities for self-creation and social climbing. In this new consumer climate, identity becomes less defined by lineage and more by what can be bought. Welty uses the object world of the novel to dramatize the struggle of the white southern woman to adapt to these changes. As Laurel McKelva Hand returns to her childhood home to oversee her father's funeral, she confronts a house full of objects that embody the past. She is caught between her need to move past her losses and the imperative to memorialize the past that is her duty as a southern woman. Her struggle is offset by Faye whose engagement with consumer products works as a means of self-creation unencumbered by the past. Through its investigation of the ways in which objects can work both to concretize class boundaries by enshrining the past and transgress those same boundaries, Welty's novel suggests the need for the southern woman

to find ways to transcend the monumental past and imagine a future. Laurel's final act of mourning is to burn all her parents' keepsakes instead of keeping them to memorialize her loss.

The last chapter, focusing on the work of Zora Neale Hurston, offers a counter-narrative to the previous two chapters' focus on elite white southern women. However, though the focus changes from naturalized aristocracy to organic folk culture, I argue that the nostalgic impulse felt by Hurston's characters does not differ much from those discussed in the previous chapters. The first section of this chapter examines Hurston's most lauded novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). While critics have tended to read Hurston's portrayal of the folk as an uncomplicated celebration, I argue that Hurston offers a critique of Janie's nostalgic turn to the folk as a means of escaping modern materialism. Janie rejects her first two husbands on the basis of their materialistic worldviews, associated in the novel with white bourgeois culture. After her second husband's death, Janie runs away with Teacake to live and work on the muck in the Florida everglades. Though Janie sees the folk community on the muck as natural and free of white materialism, the novel's attention to the material environment reveals that the folk is part of modernity and the muck is the site of labor exploitation.

The last section deals with Hurston's enigmatic novel *Seraph on the Suwannee* (1948), which centers on the rocky marriage of Florida crackers Arvay and Jim Meserve. Though critics have censured the novel for its representations of southern racial relations as paternalistic and naturalized, depictions that support the feudal order of the Old South, I argue that the novel reveals that investment in ideas of the Old South can engender unequal social relations from below as well as above. Arvay comes from a family of poor whites whose fortunes only decrease over the course of the novel, while Jim is a man of the New South working to increase his wealth and social standing. The novel focuses on Arvay's insecurities about the family's class ascension

and her longing to return to the turpentine camp where her family lives. Arvay, much like Janie, rejects her husband's materialism and desires to return to an organic folk community. Arvay's family believes in the myths of the Old South, as evidenced by the Confederate memorabilia that decorate their home. Jim, however, makes it clear that he looks to the future and not the past. Yet, in his relations with African Americans, Jim takes on the paternalist attitude of the Old South. Many of Jim and Arvay's problems result from her inability to hide her contempt for Jim's workers. As a poor white, Arvay has learned to view African Americans as competition, a view foregrounded by her fear that Jim values Joe Kelsey, his right-hand man, more than herself. Jim realizes that whites get ahead by taking advantage of their workers' precarious position as African Americans in the South. Arvay and Jim only become reconciled when Arvay burns her old home and all the things inside, thus severing her connection to her poor white past and joining Jim as an aristocrat in the New South. However, it is important to recognize that Hurston's novel is not an encomium to this paternal order as some critics have suggested, but instead offers a subtle critique of this system as both exploitative and undergirded by violence, suggesting how romantic investment in folk communities often supports the exploitation of African Americans and lower-class whites.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### “FAR TOO MANY ANCESTRAL BONES”: NARRATIVE, OBJECTS, AND NECRO- DÉCOR IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER’S MIRANDA STORIES

Katherine Anne Porter’s work provides an excellent resource for examining the ambivalent relationship between women and southern identity largely because her own relationship to her southern heritage was so vexed. Born in May 15, 1890, Porter, originally named Callie Russel, was raised in poverty in rural Texas. She found her home life confining and eloped with John Henry Koontz at age sixteen, and though her initial escape proved not entirely successful—her first marriage was a failure, and she left John in 1914—she eventually made it out of the South when she moved to Colorado in 1918 and never again lived in Texas. She claimed she would “die of melancholy in a place that reminded me every day of all I wish to forget” (qtd. in Stout, *Sense* 9). Porter also separated herself from the South of her youth through her work. She saw her pursuit of a career in writing as a direct rejection of the South’s traditional view of womanhood.<sup>10</sup> She also attempted to keep Texas out of her early writing. Janis P. Stout suggests that she felt if she were identified as a regional author, she would be “branded as a subliterate storyteller, a practitioner in a genre of frontier tales” (*Sense* 25). Her rejection of the

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Titus writes on the ambivalence caused by the conflict between Porter’s aspirations and her upbringing. She argues, “Katherine Anne Porter certainly rebelled against her upbringing, seeking far more expansive and varied opportunities for creative expression as well as intellectual, cultural, and sexual freedom” (6). She also remarks, however, that “[a] turn away from women’s traditional roles toward the independent creativity of an artistic career represented, Porter feared, a turn away from what she had learned was natural to female identity. To become an artist was to deny her sexuality” (6-7). Titus sees this conflict between “woman and artist” as a major theme running throughout Porter’s oeuvre (13).

South at this time also registers in a radical left swing in her political views. Porter became outspoken in her support of both communist and feminist causes. She took a deep interest in the fate of Revolutionary Mexico, a concern clearly present in her work of the time, and was even arrested at a protest against the execution of Sacco and Vancetti. By the early twenties, Porter had effectively separated herself from the South, geographically, politically, and in terms of her work.

Later in the decade, however, Porter turned back to her southern roots both to recuperate a sense of identity and as fodder for her work. Prompted by her genealogical research for a book she was planning to write on Cotton Mather, a book that never saw completion, Porter began researching her own ancestry. She originally planned to write a novel titled *Many Redeemers* based on her family's history, following her lineage from 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe to the modern South. Although this book never came together, her research did have a significant impact on her work, particularly the Miranda stories in *The Old Order* (1965) and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).<sup>11</sup> Robert Brinkmeyer argues that during this period Porter "began to search deep within the realm of memory, an activity that would become central to her life and art for the rest of her days" (7). Indeed, Porter's newfound interest in her southern roots affected not only her work, but also how she represented herself. From this time forward, she actively claimed her southern heritage as a constituent part of her identity. However, she tended to aggrandize the actual circumstances of her upbringing, claiming membership in what she called "the white-pillar crowd" of southern elites (*Conversations* 83). Her stories of her childhood painted a picture of a

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<sup>11</sup> Though *The Old Order* was not published as a complete cycle until its inclusion in the 1965 *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, the majority of the stories that compose the cycle appeared in print in the mid '30s. "The Witness," "The Last Leaf," "The Grave," and "The Circus" were all first published in 1935. "The Old Order," the title of which was changed to "The Journey" when it was published in the cycle, was first in print in 1936, and "The Source" was printed in 1941. Porter completed "The Fig Tree" in 1929, but the story was lost until 1960. All further references to Porter's work are from *The Collected Stories and Other Writings*.

family of plantation aristocrats surrounded by servants, a depiction more in line with the white southern ideal than with the impoverished conditions of her youth.

Porter's paternal grandmother, Catherine Ann Skaggs Porter, the woman whose name Porter adopted and who serves as a central figure in her work, likely prompted her tendency to embellish her history. "[H]er grandmother's stories about her affluent life in Kentucky," according to Darlene Harbour Unrue, "made her hunger for fine clothes and other comforts of wealth" (20). Porter also learned what Unrue calls the "technique of omission" from Cat's stories about the family (16). Cat had a habit of omitting anyone for whom she did not care from the family history, and she was particularly bad about writing the men of the family out of her record, including her husband Asbury. Porter also learned to omit certain details from her depictions of her southern upbringing and often outright lied about her origins. The details she added are telling. Stout notes that she often moved her childhood further east, "foster[ing] the belief that she had been born, not in Texas, but in Louisiana, and had been educated in a New Orleans convent school" (*Sense* 26). Stout recognizes that Texas was not only a borderland in its relation to Mexico, but also contained "that unofficial but nevertheless significant border running through the state north to south, the border between the South and the Southwest" ("Writing" 495). As Porter reimagined her past, "she turned east, toward the true South" ("Writing" 498). Although the section of east Texas in which Porter grew up was decidedly more southern than western in that the local economy was based in growing cotton rather than ranching, Porter felt that being associated with the east would make her all the more southern.

Importantly, Porter's return to her southern roots in the late 1920s also marks a decidedly rightward swing in her politics. She began to associate with other southern writers such as Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, and Andrew Lytle, and by the 1930s was completely invested in

their Agrarian political stance. Her conservatism only grew in later years. By midcentury she was firmly against racial equality, believing instead in the social hierarchy exemplified by the Jim Crow South. Regarding the assassination of Martin Luther King, whom she called an “agitator,” she conveyed relief that “he has been put out of the way” (qtd. in Stout, *Sense* 133). Her attitude toward homosexuality was no more enlightened, and she was no less public about it.<sup>12</sup> Though this seems a far cry from the radical Porter of the early 1920s, she reconciled her early activism with her later conservative turn by suggesting that she had always stood against capitalism, but not necessarily social hierarchies. There may be some truth in this claim as historian Richard H. Pells suggests American attentiveness to the Mexican Revolution often revolved around an interest in “folk cultures, agrarian communities, and peasant life” in contrast with postwar malaise (qtd. in Stout, *Sense* 46). Thus it is possible that Porter’s involvement in Mexican politics led her to see the South and its regional culture as aligned with the revolutionary aspirations of Mexico. However, Porter also aligned her views on class with the Agrarians who believed no more in equality between whites than they did between the races, instead viewing class hierarchy as just another facet of a naturalized social order. Porter’s comment that “[e]ighty percent of the people of this world [are] stuff to fill graves with” certainly conflicts with any notion of her as a leftist (*Conversations* 132). For Porter, as for so many others in the South, the aristocratic ideal became a justification for her prejudices and privilege.

Despite Porter’s conservative turn and her investment in the Old South ideal, the fiction that proceeded from her research into *Many Redeemers* offers a more ambivalent view of patriarchy, women, and their relationship with the past than her later political views would suggest. The stories in *The Old Order* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, though fiction, are largely

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<sup>12</sup> Titus notes that though Porter had a number of homosexual male friends, “her literary criticism is predominantly homophobic,” and she was prone to “episodes of intense homophobia” (166). Such episodes led her to condemn both Hart Crane and Carson McCullers as perverts.

autobiographical, and her grandmother's influence is a central theme in this work. Far from offering an uncomplicated, romantic view of her family history, Porter's work closely examines the difficulties of growing up in a world in which a romanticized past is always present and demanding. She accomplishes this critique by attending to the material world of her South, thereby cutting through the very same mystifications of ideology in which she would become so invested later in life.

The Miranda stories outline a dynamic relationship between southern women and their material environment developed across generations. *The Old Order* interrogates Sophia Jane's relationship with her former slave Aunt Nannie, foregrounding the ways in which Sophia Jane naturalizes the uneven power dynamic in their friendship by investing the domestic environment with narratives of family history that construct a sense of aristocratic identity. As the rest of the stories show, Sophia Jane passes down this aristocratic sense of self to her descendants by fostering a similar relationship to the domestic environment. In *Old Mortality* Sophia Jane (now identified as the grandmother) shares the family legend of Aunt Amy, the ideal southern belle, with Miranda, the character based on Porter herself, and her sister, reinforcing her tales with memorabilia from Amy's life. These stories and the objects associated with them produce a longing to emulate this ideal in the children, thereby reproducing the sense of aristocratic identity on which the family's privilege rests. As *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* demonstrates, however, these narratives and objects become a source of anxiety for an older Miranda who wishes, much like Porter, to escape the imperatives placed on her by the ideals of southern womanhood. Porter's prose transforms the material domestic environment, populated with objects associated with the dead, into a fantastical necro-décor, constructed out of the bodies of ancestors, and the southern home becomes of tomb from which Miranda cannot escape.



## “Scraps of Family Finery”

Porter’s short story cycle *The Old Order* is a key text for this study because it offers a variety of perspectives regarding the experience of womanhood in the South. Rather than merely presenting a nostalgic look at southern girlhood, the shifting perspectives of the cycle bridge generations, proffering a study of intergenerational relationships and their effect on female subjectivity. Particularly personal for Porter, the cycle gives considerable focus to the experiences of Sophia Jane, the character based on Porter’s grandmother. Through the cycle’s disjointed sense of the temporal, its destabilization of time between individual stories and the use of flashbacks within them, the text gives the reader an extended view of Sophia Jane’s life, both before and after the Civil War, and then after her death as the young Miranda reaches adulthood. The text follows the creation of a sense of loss in that generation that experienced defeat, its cultivation over decades as it formed the basis of a regional identity, and its passing down to a new generation of southern women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through narratives and relics.

*The Old Order* focuses largely on Sophia Jane’s relationship with her once slave and longtime servant, Aunt Nannie, thereby linking participation in racial capitalism to the modern South. Despite the inherently unequal relations between Sophia Jane and Nannie, the two women develop what appears in the text as a true friendship. This relationship has been interpreted in myriad ways by critics. Many see their relationship as a bond forged through the shared experience of womanhood that overcomes the complications of racial difference and inequality. For example, Jane DeMouy sees the two women as making up “two halves of one universal female experience,” (123) that of women confined under patriarchy. Michael Bibler reads an

even deeper bond in the relationship, suggesting Sophia Jane and Nannie enjoy a “homo-relational quality as double matriarchs” (150), though he also recognizes that their relationship is complicated by “their commitment to the traditions and values associated with the southern plantation” (151). Chandra Wells sees the tension between the women as a thematic innovation that challenges earlier representations of female interracial relationships on the plantation. She argues that Porter’s portrayal of the women’s relationship acts as a counterpoint to “the myth of harmonious and untroubled coexistence between the races that was endemic to the domestic fiction, proslavery propaganda, and postbellum ‘lost cause’ literature of generations before” (763). Porter’s work does often reveal the fractures of inequality running through the seemingly egalitarian friendship shared by Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie, exposing the work of ideology in naturalizing the imbalance of power in their relationship, even post-emancipation.

Understanding the complexity of Sophia Jane and Nannie’s relationship requires moving past the idea of a simple reciprocity based in the shared experience of womanhood to a fuller understanding of how Sophia Jane uses Nannie as an object that confirms her sense of aristocratic privilege. Paul Gilroy’s turn to Hegel’s dialectic of the lord and bondsman offers fertile ground for revealing not just the nature of their relationship, but also how it is a byproduct of modernity and not the result of an organic social order. Gilroy suggests that Hegel’s model is useful because it recognizes “the intimate association of modernity and slavery as a fundamental conceptual issue” (53). In Hegel’s account, modern subjectivity is characterized by the perception of the self as an object in the confrontation with an other. The subject may achieve “self-consciousness” only through the other’s recognition of the self (104). In the master/slave dialectic, however, the master, or lord, falls short of achieving full self-consciousness because the lord “achieves his recognition through another consciousness,” and the lord’s experience of

both self and the world is always mediated through the consciousness of the slave (116). Thus the seemingly independent consciousness of the lord is dependent on the recognition of the bondsman. The lord only achieves self-conscious subjectivity through the ability to exercise power over the other and define the bondsman's experience. Furthermore, because the bondsman's recognition is based in fear of death and not freely given, the lord's realization of self is always already compromised.

Another important aspect of Hegel's formulation of lordship and bondage, and one often overlooked by critics utilizing the dialectic, is his attention to the role of material objects in the relationship. Hegel suggests that the lord's experience of the material world is also always mediated through the bondsman. "[T]he lord," Hegel writes, "who has interposed the bondsman between [the thing] and himself, takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it" (116). The lord is able to act on the world through the bondsman and "what the bondsman does is really the action of the lord" (116). Through the bondsman's mediation the lord is able to enjoy mastery over the material world, yet Hegel suggests that this enjoyment is "a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence," and it is only the bondsman who experiences the object in its independence (118). Thus both the lord's self-conception as an independent subject and the notion of the lord's mastery over the material remain dependent on the mediation of the bondsman. This mediation must be disavowed to retain a sense of independence.

As Gilroy suggests, Hegel's allegory of the lord and bondsman works well to explain the relationship between southern whites and their slaves. In many ways, southern slaveholders defined themselves through slave ownership. Walter Johnson states that owning slaves was a way of purchasing one's whiteness, of buying into the aristocratic class. According to Johnson,

for poor whites “buying a first slave was a way of coming into their own in a society that had previously excluded them” (80). In this way, slaveholders bought slaves not just to fill the need for a labor force for economic gain, but also to build an identity in white society, “constructing themselves out of slaves” (88). Johnson recognizes, however, that this situation calls the independence defining the white aristocratic class into question. “Even the independent exercise of the privileges of their whiteness,” Johnson writes, “was constrained by the property regime of slavery” (82). Indeed, like Hegel’s lord, the white classes of the antebellum South built their identities and proved their right to independence and privilege through the practice of owning slaves, yet the reliance of this privilege on the dependence of others compromises any notion of their independence. This situation necessitates the intervention of a discourse to disguise this dependence. Paternalism fills this role by “transmut[ing] the reality of dependence on slaves into the conventions of slaveholders’ self-willed independence” (88).

*The Old Order* illustrates that in the postbellum era, southern whites still denied the material conditions of their relationships with African Americans through recourse to a paternalism grounded in a sense of an ideal past. The text establishes Sophia Jane’s relationship to the past in the first story, “The Source.” The story describes her yearly return to the farm from the family’s residence in town to set the farm back in working order. Sophia Jane yearns for the plantation, the source of social structure that justifies her privilege. The narrator notes that Sophia Jane’s return to the farm is marked by “an indefinable sense of homecoming, not to the house but to the black, rich soft land and the human beings living on it” (334). She takes these trips because she suffers from a sense of homesickness, but as these lines make clear, her real desire is to reinstate her power over the “black” land and the black “human beings” who work that land for her. She desires a return to authority over the African American labor force. Upon

her arrival at the farm, she makes her way through the grounds, but always keeps on “until she arrived at the row of Negro huts that ran along the bois d’arc hedge” (334). She immediately puts the servants to work restoring the grounds to ordered perfection. The text describes her on these visits as “a tireless, just, and efficient slave driver of every creature on the place” (336). On these visits Sophia Jane reclaims her place as the white landowner overseeing her slaves, and the restored order of the house acts as mere metonymy for the reestablished social order of the past.

The narration’s attention to material objects in “The Source” foregrounds this renewal of plantation social relations. She immediately sets the laborers to work restoring the house to its former glory: “Curtains came down in dingy heaps and went up again stiff and sweet-smelling; rugs were heaved forth in dusty confusion and returned flat and gay with flowers once more; the kitchen was no longer dingy and desolate but a place of heavenly order where it was tempting to linger” (336). Sophia Jane has the workers clean the dirt of the intervening years out of the house, returning it to its antebellum opulence. However, more than the housekeeping, it is Sophia Jane’s ability to command the servants that reinstates the “heavenly order” she desires. As Hegel suggests, the lord’s engagement with the world is mediated through his mastery over the bondsman, and, likewise, Sophia Jane’s engagement with the world is mediated through her servants. Jay Watson offers an astute reading of how the form of the passage reveals what he deems an “outrageous mystification,” writing, “this labor is going on right before our eyes, but since its agents never achieve a grammatical position, it can by implication be credited to the grandmother’s supervision, as if her disembodied gaze is not only omniscient but omnipotent” (220). The objects in the house justify Sophia Jane’s privilege, but only by mediation through her black servants. It is her ability to act on the workers as objects that invests the items in the house with meaning.

This disavowal of material conditions is evidenced as the workers take Sophia Jane's visit as an opportunity to address the real material problems of their disadvantaged position as a marginalized labor force. For example, the family forgot to buy shoes for Hinry, who was "barefooted the live-long winter," and Mister Miller, the man left in charge as overseer when Sophia Jane's son Harry is away, "had skimped them last winter on everything you could think of—not enough cornmeal, not half enough bacon, not enough wood, not enough of anything" (335). Perhaps most troubling, "Boosker, the three-year-old baby, had an earache in January and [. . .] was acting like she was deaf ever since" (335). Sophia Jane dismisses the material deprivations suffered by the workers as mere "annoyances [. . .] to be soothed" and turns her attention to "the main house, which must be overhauled completely" (335). The denial involved here becomes clear as, along with the complaints of the workers, the narrator also notes that "[t]he black horse Mister Harry bought last fall had gone clean wild and jumped a barbed wire fence and tore his chest almost off and hadn't been any good from that time on" (335). Listing the issue of the horse alongside the problems experienced by the workers indicates that though the workers are no longer slaves, their employers still fetishize them under the logic of racial capitalism. They are considered beasts of burden, and their suffering and the violence to which this logic subjects them only register with Sophia Jane if they disturb production, particularly the production of Sophia Jane's aristocratic whiteness. She turns away from their problems and sets her eyes on the upkeep of the house and the material objects within that justify her sense of nobility.

Though these return trips to the farm enact a return to the past, Sophia Jane also keeps the past perpetually present at home through her fetishization of cherished family heirlooms. The title of the next chapter, "The Journey," in which Sophia Jane and Nannie stay at home sewing

and talking about the past, invites the connection between her actual return to the plantation and her metaphorical return to the past in this chapter. The narrator notes that as they sit together,

[t]hey talked about the past—always about the past. Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it. They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly, but by the mysterious logic of hope they insisted that each change might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known. (339)

Thus Sophia Jane and Nannie do not merely reminisce about the past, but see it as a force on the present and the future, and they rely on objects to effect this repetition. They spend their time “cutting scraps of the family finery” and sewing them together into quilts. As Ann Romines notes, quilts act as “both a product and an emblem of domestic ritual” (15). The use to which Sophia Jane puts these quilts reveals what domesticity produces at this place and time. She covers the rolling pin made by her great-grandfather, “Kentucky’s most famous pioneer,” and the portrait of her father, “a notably heroic captain in the War of 1812,” in “patchwork,” “golden tassels,” and “velvet satin” before putting them away (338). These tales of her ancestors justify her claims to aristocracy by showing that her family pioneered the land and fought for the country and thus deserve to profit from it. However, dressing up these objects reveals the necessity of romanticizing these stories by repressing the material conditions of the family’s rise to prominence. According to Watson, this act of covering the heirlooms with the homemade cloth “evokes as it excavates an enormous weight of lived experience that must be repressed, misremembered, or otherwise ‘embroidered’ before the old order can be properly revered” (221). Nannie’s presence reminds the reader that what has been left out of these tales is the family’s

reliance on an enslaved labor force to build their fortune. Nannie is the object that allows Sophia Jane to enact the repetition of the past, and the objects they adorn with their handiwork mediate the reality of their relationship, disguising a history of racial violence as a history of hard-won privilege.

The façade of equality that grounds the bond between Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie relies on their orientation toward the past. The way in which the two women remember how they were brought together sheds light on the way in which ideology masks the unequal nature of their relationship. The narrator notes, “The friendship between the two old women had begun in early childhood, and was based on what seemed even to them almost mythical events” (342). Their interpretation of the events completely elides the material reality of the slave market so that they can view them as the workings of fate. However, what leads to this repression may be different for each woman. As the experience of being sold at the market was traumatic for Nannie, her repression of the events makes sense. Nannie’s recollection of the market lacks comprehension. She remembers the “shallow platform,” the “thick crowd around them,” and “[t]he red-faced man standing on a stump,” but as a child she did not understand the meaning of the events taking place, foregrounding her lack of control (343). Taking Nannie as her toy is disruptive for Sophia Jane in a different way. Sophia Jane’s father gives her both Nannie and a horse as presents, and upon seeing Nannie for the first time, Sophia Jane says, “I want the little monkey [ . . . ] I want that one to play with” (342). The narrator’s comment that “she could not decide which she loved more, Nannie or Fiddler” foregrounds Nannie’s reduction to a commodity (342). Sophia Jane’s participation in the complete objectification and dehumanization of her longtime friend threatens her sense of self, thus she must repress this



aspect of their relationship to escape implication. Their relationship depends on the mystification of the past.

While Sophia Jane uses some family heirlooms to construct her family's history and justify her privilege, she uses other objects to define Nannie. Many of these acts could be read as challenges to paternalism, but closer examination reveals the ways in which they support paternalist ideology. When they are young, Sophia Jane "made an entry of Nannie's birth-date in the family Bible, inserting it just below her own. 'Nannie Gay,' she wrote, in stiff careful letters, '(black),' and though there was some uproar when this was discovered, the ink was long since sunk deeply into the paper, and besides no one was really upset enough to have it scratched out" (340-41). As Nannie did not know her birthday due to her position as a slave, Sophia Jane merely picks a date at random to enter into the book. This act allows Sophia Jane to assume the role as Nannie's symbolic creator, conjuring her birth out of the air. Entering Nannie's name into the family Bible, an object that, through inscription, represents membership in the clan, appears an act of defiance against the social order of racial hierarchy, as evidenced by the suggestion that the family will be angered by the act. However, entering Nannie as one of the family only strengthens the paternalist ideology which defines the relationship between blacks and whites as akin to natural, familial relations. The placement of Nannie's name beneath her own and her inclusion in the entry that Aunt Nannie is "(black)" make sure her position within the family is well defined and the order is not disrupted.

Despite ideology's attempts to disguise the power dynamics at work in their relationship, the real material conditions often find their way to the surface, and in these instances Sophia Jane always returns to paternalism as a means of disavowing these conditions. At one point the judge who originally sold Nannie and her family to Sophia Jane's father comments that he had sold her

for just twenty dollars, a remark that dispels the idea of a naturalized social order by acknowledging the commodification of people on which racial capitalism was based. Nannie's feelings are hurt by the judge's recollection, but Sophia Jane dismisses the comments by suggesting that the judge is merely drunk. Just after this incident, the narrator notes, "they fought on almost equal terms, Sophia Jane defending Nannie fiercely against any discipline but her own," a line that accentuates Sophia Jane's alliance with her servant as they fight their way through the perils of womanhood together (345). However, in the context of the judge's comment, it becomes clear that what Sophia Jane fights is acknowledgement of the material conditions of her relationship with Nannie. Nannie also often questions why God has been so cruel to the black race, and whether He "might not continue His severity in the next world" (349). In these discussions Sophia Jane is "always brisk and opinionated," assuring Nannie of her seat in heaven: "Miss Sophia Jane took pleasure in reassuring her; as if she, who had been responsible for Nannie, body and soul in this life, might also be her sponsor before the judgment seat" (349). Sophia Jane takes pleasure in not just defining Nannie on earth, but in determining her place in the hereafter as well. This view allows her to see herself as Nannie's benefactor rather than her owner, yet, as Wells notes, her terse responses in these moments "forecloses any discussion of these matters, in which she is clearly implicated as both the former owner of Nannie and the economic beneficiary of slave labor, and her reticence suggests a latent sense of guilt" (773). Her responses allow her to construct herself as Nannie's savior and disguise her complicity in the violence of racial subjugation.

One area in which Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie seem on equal terms is in regards to child bearing and rearing, the work of reproduction on the plantation, but even this aspect of their relationship depends on the repression of materiality. The stories spend much space detailing

“their grim and terrible race of procreation,” ending with Sophia Jane having given birth to eleven children and Nannie having had thirteen. At first, the unequal nature of even this commonality is apparent as Nannie nurses all the children while Sophia Jane, in keeping with her role as immaculate southern woman, “suppress[es] her milk with bandages and spirits of wine” (346). After the birth of each of their fourth children, however, Sophia Jane stages another apparent challenge to the social order by nursing both children while Nannie is sick. She comments later, “I understand now[. . .] why the black mammies love their foster children. I love mine” (346). This act seems to subvert the social order, as evidenced by the futile interventions of her husband and her mother. Wells sees this moment as “transgress[ing] the restrictive codes of her own culture.[ . . . ]It allows her to step off the pedestal of ladyhood to claim an identity as a natural woman, corporeal and desiring, an identity suppressed by the injunction that ladies be chaste, abstract beings” (767). But while Sophia Jane rebels against the code of southern womanhood by acknowledging the material nature of her female body her comment, as Wells notes, reaffirms the notion that black women nurse white children as a familial duty and not because of the demands of a coercive system, whereas Sophia Jane’s nursing of Aunt Nannie’s child is “not contaminated by compulsion” (771). The act thereby naturalizes the patriarchal system while also characterizing Sophia Jane as “altogether just, humane, proud, and simple” (346). Perhaps most telling is that while nine of Sophia Jane’s children survive, “Nannie had lost ten of hers. They were all buried back in Kentucky” (341). These ten dead children are the material results of the unequal status of black women and children on the plantation.

Understanding Sophia Jane and Nannie’s relationship through Hegel’s model of lordship and bondage reveals the violent materiality camouflaged by paternalist ideology. The value of

turning to Hegel's dialectic, Gilroy suggests, is that his depiction of the struggle "foregrounds the issues of brutality and terror which are also too frequently ignored" in the discourse surrounding modern subjectivity (54). Gilroy looks at moments in texts that subvert the slave's acquiescence to the master under threat of violence, including the slave enacting violence on the master or choosing death over subjugation.<sup>13</sup> He sees the recognition of the terror and violence inherent in slavery as providing for "a redemptive critique of the present in light of the vital memories of the slave past" (71). However, in *The Old Order* Nannie does not look back on a violent past, instead reminiscing alongside of Sophia Jane. There are several reasons that could explain the lack of violent narrative from Nannie, including her status as Sophia Jane's favorite plaything, the fact that her past has been defined by Sophia Jane, or the inability to recall certain moments in her life clearly due to their traumatic nature, such as her family's sale at the slave market.

Though Nannie does not conjure clear images of a violent slave past, in the story "The Witness," her husband, Uncle Jimbilly, recounts the torture of slaves by their owners for Sophia Jane's grandchildren in graphic detail. Further, as Watson points out, his body acts as a physical marker of his years of labor (226). The narrator notes,

Uncle Jimbilly was so old and had spent so many years bowed over things, putting them together and taking them apart, making the over and making them do, he was bent almost double. His hands were closed and stiff from gripping objects tightly while he worked at them, and they could not open altogether even if a child took the thick black fingers and tried to turn them back. (352)

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<sup>13</sup> Gilroy reads the scene from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave* (1845) in which Douglass struggles with the slave-breaker Covey as a moment that subverts the master-slave dialectic. Douglass refuses to submit to Covey, "prefer[ing] the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends" (63). He also looks at the case of Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter to save her from a life of slavery, as another moment in which the slave rejects bondage in favor of death. Gilroy suggests that this case, on which Toni Morrison based her novel *Beloved* (1987), acts as an example of "black antipathy to the forms of rationality and civilized conduct which made racial slavery and its brutality legitimate" (65).

His body, bent and twisted around the material objects with which he works, becomes a grotesque that, in Yaeger's words, acts as a "metaphor[] for the literal" violence inflicted on black bodies (28). His grotesque form testifies to his stories of the violence inherent in racial capitalism, and his work of making tombstones for the children's pets invokes his position as one who raises the specters of the forgotten dead.

The children, however, brought up on Sophia Jane's idealized version of the past, are incapable of recognizing the truth of Jimbilly's stories. The narrator notes, "They knew, of course, that once upon a time Negroes had been slaves; but they had all been freed long ago and were now only servants. [ . . . ] The children thought that Uncle Jimbilly had got over his slavery very well" (354). The children are unable to see the connection between past slavery and the present and only feel "faint tinglings of embarrassment" when they hear these stories (353). The tales become even more abstracted as Jimbilly claims that he was never subject to the violence he describes. The children hear these stories in the same way they listen to his "incomprehensible ghost stor[ies]; listen ever so carefully, at the end it was impossible to decide whether Uncle Jimbilly himself had seen the ghost, whether it was a real ghost at all, or only another man dressed like one" (353). As Jimbilly brings what southern culture represses to the surface, his stories can only be heard as gothic tales, a genre so prominent in the southern literary tradition exactly because of the repression of violence inherent in southern culture.

This passage suggests that the children not only repress the reality of slavery in the past, but as the mention of men dressed like ghosts invokes the vigilante justice of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, they also repress violence enacted against African Americans in their present. This disavowal of present violence also registers as he threatens to perform unspeakable acts on the children: "He was going to skin somebody alive and nail the hide on the barn door, or he was just

getting ready to cut off somebody's ears with a hatchet and pin them on Bongo, the crop-eared brindle dog. He was often prepared in his mind to pull somebody's teeth and make a set of false teeth for Ole Man Ronk" (354-55). These threats against the bodies of the white children recall the threat of lynching, in which the body parts of African American men were often circulated among whites as souvenirs. His threat to give their teeth to Ole Man Ronk, the poor white morphine addict who works for the family, recalls not just the violence enacted against slaves, but also the degradation of poor whites at the hands of the southern aristocracy. However, these realities seem distant to the children, "so exorbitant that not even the most credulous child could be terrified by them" (354). Jimbilly's reclamations of the violent past of slavery, which has given way to an oppressive and violent present, are given the status of absurd fantasy by those raised on tales of an idealized past.

Though Jimbilly's revolt remains in the realm of abstracted tale, in "The Last Leaf" Nannie stages a successful revolt from her past after Sophia Jane passes away. Nannie, legitimately devastated by Sophia Jane's passing, does not lapse into melancholy or devote herself to the family. Instead, her process of mourning and moving past her grief for Sophia Jane enacts her emancipation from the family. She moves out of the house at once, taking a recently vacated cabin on the family's property. Released from her obligation to Sophia Jane, Nannie discovers a new sense of self free from the constraints placed on her by her role in justifying the family's privilege. Indeed, to their consternation, she shuns the family. Despite their attempts to cheer her up, the narrator notes, "She paid no attention; she did not care whether they loved her or not" (360).<sup>14</sup> The family's reaction to Nannie's departure reveals how deeply invested they are in the ideology of paternalism: "The children, brought up in an out-of-date sentimental way of

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<sup>14</sup> Wells sees this moment as undercutting Sophia Jane's comment about understanding the love of a Mammy by offering "the revelation [. . .] that Nannie feels very little for the white children she had no choice but to nurse" (771).

thinking, had always complacently believed that Nannie was a real member of the family, perfectly happy with them, and this rebuke, so quietly and firmly administered, chastened them somewhat” (362). Yet a few lines later the true nature of their relationship with Nannie becomes apparent. The narrator notes, “They missed Nannie every day. As their fortunes went down, and they had very few servants, they needed her terribly” (362). They need her because her presence as a servant bulwarks their claim to aristocratic whiteness, producing the social relations by which they define themselves. Without her there to mediate their experience of the world, they are left without the privilege assured by the Hegelian dialectic.

Nannie’s escape from the mystifications of paternalism register in her new relationship with her material environment. The narrator describes her change from “the faithful old servant Nannie, a freed slave” to “an aged Bantu woman of independent means” through her change in appearance; she trades in her servant’s clothes for a “blue bandanna” and begins smoking a “corn cob pipe” (361-62). She also begins “tak[ing] all sorts of odd and ends from the house. It was astonishing to discover that Nannie had always liked and hoped to own certain things, she had seemed so contented and wantless” (361). Watson reads Nannie’s claiming of items in the house as her “drawing on the ideology of possessive individualism to redefine her identity away from servitude” (225). Nannie, freed from her bond to Sophia Jane, finally takes ownership of those things in the house that hold meaning for her. The family’s surprise that she could want to own anything reveals their lack of recognition of Nannie’s personhood as someone who would rather own than be owned. Without Nannie at the house, the family notices that “[w]ork did not accomplish itself as it once had” (362). Still unable to allow her a subject position that recognizes her labor, the family does realize that things fall apart without her there. When she does come back and puts things in order, “work[ing] then almost as she had before,” they attempt

to bribe her to come back with “baskets and bales of the precious rubbish she loved” (362). They attempt to give Nannie recompense for her services by offering her items from the house, which, without Sophia Jane around to memorialize them, have become mere “rubbish.” Most importantly, Nannie begins “making patchwork and braiding woolen rugs” that she sells to the white community (361). Nannie’s labor is no longer used to mediate the will of others. She uses the gifts she honed with Sophia Jane to earn a living instead of merely existing to prove the privilege of others. She enters the market not as a fetishized commodity but as an economic participant, trading her labor with the white community for fair pay. Porter’s imagining this ending for Nannie seems to suggest that she saw a place for African American women outside the confines of a patriarchal system that views them alternately as family and property. “One would be hard-pressed,” suggests Stout, “to find an image of the older black woman, seen from an external vantage by a white narrator, that more fully validates her as an individual and as a social norm” (*Sense* 135).

Though the story appears to offer Nannie as a representation of an empowered African American woman, it also raises some troubling questions about Porter’s view of the position of African Americans in the early twentieth century, particularly in regards to their ability to join society without facing violence. The only mention of violence against African Americans in *The Old Order* comes in the form of Jimbilly’s stories that are regarded as mere tales without a real world referent. Violence against African Americans is cordoned off in the past and abstracted in such a way that those who hear the stories are never quite sure of their veracity. Porter, however, wrote a story that was meant to be part of *The Old Order*, “The Man in the Tree,” that addresses the reality of violence against African Americans in the modern era. The forty-eight-page unpublished document remains a jumble of starts and stops, and Stout notes that due to its



unfinished status, “it is difficult to be very certain of Porter’s intentions” (*Sense* 136). According to scholars who have worked with the document, however, the story clearly centers on the lynching of one of Nannie’s grandsons and the resulting attempts of Sophia Jane’s family, particularly the granddaughter Maria, to process and deal with the act. This story, making implications of Jimbilly’s stories and threats explicit, would raise the specter of violence that Gilroy sees as key for articulating a position of resistance to a version of modernity that refuses to acknowledge the centrality of racial violence to modern subjectivity.

“The Man in the Tree” also offers a reassessment of the role objects play in defining race relations. In some versions of the story, Maria offers Nannie money and clothes to help with funerary costs. These items recall the “rubbish” that the family gives Nannie after she has left their service. However, while Nannie was once glad to accept these items as recompense for her years of labor, she, at least initially, rejects Maria’s offer of assistance, leading up to a confrontation that would have been the story’s climax. For Nannie, this offer of assistance is far too little to make up for the degraded position she and her family have suffered. The lynching destabilizes the repression that naturalizes the social relations by making violence against the black body explicit, and Nannie refuses to allow Maria to reestablish them through this paternalist gesture. When Nannie and Maria have their confrontation, the text notes that Nannie fixes a hard stare at an unseen figure in the corner of the room; Jan Gretlund suggests that “[t]his reference most likely is to Maria’s grandmother” (14). Thus this story would introduce hard feelings into Sophia Jane and Nannie’s relationship, dispelling any sense that the two women shared an uncomplicated and essentially equal partnership. When Nannie is confronted with violence by whites against her family, she looks back to Sophia Jane’s ghost as the responsible party, implicating her work of disavowing the violence of the past as producing a violent present.

Perhaps the most disturbing materialization of violence in the story is the postcards of the lynching that circulate among the white community. The lynching, an act of explicit violence that establishes white racial dominance, assures the participants of their place in the social order. However, through the logic of modernity, that violence is mechanically reproduced, and the assurance of whiteness is distributed as a commodity. These souvenirs reveal that the white community, though no longer allowed to own people, still constructs whiteness from African American bodies and exercises their power by trading them in the market. As violence escapes repression, the objectification of black bodies, up to this point mediated through objects, becomes literal.

The focus of “The Man in the Tree” remains unclear, however, and scholars suggest that it often seems to revolve around the idea of the burden of slavery to whites more than the wrongs suffered by African Americans. Gretlund notes that in the story “Maria considers how white people are enslaved by their relationship with blacks. [. . . she] remembers that her grandparents did not believe in slavery, but is pointedly reminded that they had slaves just the same” (13). In this way the story appears to suggest slavery as an institution forced onto southern whites, and though they feel guilty, they can be viewed as victims alongside the African American characters. More interesting is the fact that Porter never finished the story and did not include it in the publication of *The Old Order*. It would certainly have changed the tone of the collection, disrupting the story of racial unity of two women by representing the real, material violence against African Americans in the modern era. Wells suggests that “perhaps like her fictional slave mistress, Porter found it difficult to countenance the emotional discomfort that might be elicited by fully engaging with an African American woman’s perspective” (774), and Stout argues that “[i]t might reasonably be regarded as a view that she tried to keep repressed, that

reflected deep-seated feelings of guilt for her participation in racial injustice and for misrepresenting both the South she knew and her own place in it” (*Sense* 137). Indeed, as the manuscripts of “The Man in the Tree” make clear, Porter understood the violence southern African Americans in the modern era faced, and whether she did not include the story because she found facing this guilt impossible or because she did not wish to present this view of the South in narrative, she repressed the manuscript, leading to a collection in which violence against African Americans is dematerialized and displaced into household objects.

### **Playing in Graves**

Thus far this analysis has dealt primarily with Porter’s depiction of how the older generation of women, those women who lived in the antebellum era, negotiated their relationship with the past of slavery through objects. Throughout the Miranda stories, however, Porter also depicts how the values of this older generation get passed down to younger generations, particularly the character most representative of Porter, Miranda. Porter’s grandmother, Cat Skaggs, definitely made a great impact on her view of the world, and Porter saw this influence as both empowering and restraining. This ambivalence is apparent in the description of Sophia Jane in the first chapter of *The Old Order*: “They loved their Grandmother; she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge, since their mother had died so early that only the eldest girl remembered her vaguely: just the same they felt Grandmother was tyrant, and they wished to be free of her” (336). These lines draw a connection between the loss of the mother, both in the text and in Porter’s life, and the grandmother’s authority. Many critics have noted the influence of maternal absence in the work of Porter.

Shirley Scott suggests that Porter's best work focuses on "the relationship of consciousness to death" (46), and Titus claims that "Porter's finest work records her efforts to draw on her maternal legacy to create meaning and order, a secure home in a world characterized by disorder and absence. Memory, making the lost past present, and homesickness, a longing for a people, a place, and a childhood peace that precedes loss, proved to be her richest resources" (75). As Titus illustrates, the feeling of loss drives the children to seek the comfort of wholeness in the order with which the grandmother presents them. This replacement of the absent mother with the grandmother's authority becomes clear as Miranda becomes confused about who her grandmother is, thinking, "but she wasn't Mama either, she was really Grandmother. Mama was dead. Dead meant gone away forever. Dying was something that happened all the time, to people and everything else" (366).

Miranda's fascination with death is apparent throughout the text as she is constantly associated with graves. She buries dead animals she finds on the farm, and it is her grandmother who teaches her the proper rituals for mourning the dead. The narrator notes,

When Miranda found any creature that didn't move or make a noise, or looked somehow different from the live ones, she always buried it in a little grave with flowers on top and a smooth stone at the head. Even grasshoppers. Everything dead had to be treated this way. 'This way and no other!' Grandmother always said when she was laying down the law about all kinds of things. 'It must be done *this way, and no other!*' (367)

Sophia Jane gives Miranda instruction on the proper way to memorialize in these lines. Her rules, however, do not just apply to burying dead animals. The emphasis that Sophia Jane uses

this same tone when teaching the proper rules for “all kinds of things” connects this attention to death to the rules of conduct expected from the old southern order.

The scene in “The Fig Tree” in which Miranda buries a chick she believes to be dead reveals how Sophia Jane’s lessons about memorializing the dead support patriarchy. Before Miranda can bury the chick properly, she is called away by her father and grandmother. As she is pulled away from her task, she hears the “Weep weep weep” of the chick and believes she has buried it alive (368). Watson reads the chick as evoking “the larger and more disturbing specter of child mortality on the plantation. [. . .] ‘The Fig Tree’ raises it specifically for Miranda, who learns, as Sophia Jane and Nannnie did before her, that mothering the plantation’s young all too often entails burying them as well” (229). Indeed, this moment reveals to Miranda the violent nature of life on the plantation for women, those responsible for reproduction. This violence should stay repressed, but Miranda’s inability to finish the rituals of memorialization turns the story into “a Poe-esque fable of premature entombment and the return of the repressed” (Watson 229).

Miranda’s Great-Aunt Eliza appears to act as a counterbalance to Sophia Jane’s influence as she quells Miranda’s fears by informing her that the sound she hears is not the baby chick but the sound of tree frogs. As many critics note, Eliza stands in stark contrast to Sophia Jane’s embodiment of southern womanhood. She is unattractive, large instead of petite, indulges in habits such as dipping snuff, and is associated with scientific knowledge by always tinkering with telescopes and microscopes. In many ways she could be considered one of Patricia Yaeger’s “anti-types” to the image of the ideal southern lady. Titus suggests that Eliza “provides her with a model for another way of being besides motherhood” (89), and Mary Ann Wimsatt sees Eliza as “expanding Miranda’s mental horizons” (88). However, aligning Eliza with a freeing

modernity elides the close relationship between modernity and the plantation order. Watson offers a reading of this scene that accounts for this relationship, suggesting that the two sisters work together to create the old order even while they seem at odds: “[T]he one’s science act[s] as the ideological handmaiden to the other’s plantation, toning down the latter’s uncanniness and horror by explaining away a haunting as a rational event, silencing the subversive cry of the dead chick” (231). Where repression fails, Eliza’s science steps in to banish the threat of realized violence.

Porter draws the connection between violence, womanhood, and the past even more clearly in “The Grave,” as Miranda and her brother Paul dig around in the old family cemetery. The family has sold the part of their land the cemetery was in, and the bodies were removed to “the big new public cemetery” (375). The empty graves represent the anxiety of the southern elite in the early twentieth century of losing status based in legacy. The family can no longer afford a familial property to separate their dead, who carry the burden of establishing their privilege, from the general masses. The narration makes this anxiety clear, suggesting “[i]t was said the motherless family was running down, with the Grandmother no longer there to hold it together” (377). Drawing a clear connection between the family’s fall in class standing and the absence of a matriarch to keep the old order present, the narration foregrounds the importance of this issue even to Miranda, who “knew this, though she could not say how” (377).

While digging around in the graves, Miranda and Paul find two objects that recall the grandeur of the past: “[A] silver dove no larger than a hazel nut, with spread wings and a neat fan-shaped tail,” and “a thin wide gold ring carved with intricate flowers and leaves” (375-76). The ring, for which Miranda trades the dove, recalls for her the romance of the idealized role of southern womanhood. While she looks over the object, she dreams of embodying the role of the

southern lady: “she had vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure” (378). Thus the narration explicitly recounts the production of Miranda’s desire for an aristocratic past called into being by the ring found in the grave. Miranda, however, overlooks that the ring, most likely a wedding ring, reveals that marriage and motherhood often lead to death. Shortly after finding the items in the grave, Paul shoots a rabbit and skins it, exposing its unborn offspring. As Miranda looks at the mother rabbit and her half-formed babies, covered in blood, “[s]he 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” (379-80). The sight of the rabbit forces Miranda to recognize the violent reality behind the romantic ideal inspired by the ring. Paul’s tone when he talks about the babies, “as if he were talking about something forbidden,” confirms that this knowledge must be disavowed (380). He warns Miranda not to tell their father, insuring that this realization will not be reported back to the patriarch.

The dove, which is actually a fastener for a coffin screw, remains harder to define than the ring. DeMouy sees it as representing freedom enjoyed by men, as it is Paul who takes possession of the dove, while the ring symbolizes Miranda falling into the constraints of southern womanhood under patriarchy. Years later, Miranda is at a market in “a strange country,” presumably Mexico, when upon being offered some candy in the shape of different animals, she recalls the day “she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded, and she saw clearly her brother [. . .] turning the silver dove over and over in his hands” (381). DeMouy reads this moment as Miranda “trad[ing] her ignorance, reclaiming the dove in its positive image: the spirit’s ability to fly free” (144). Titus

confirms this reading, arguing that “[i]n the dove’s range of meanings she can find freedom, traditionally belonging to young men, and claim it for herself, an ambitious young woman” (94). Watson, however, sees the dove as representing the violent conditions of womanhood on the plantation that the ring works to elide. He argues, “The dove, by contrast, is an explicitly embodied and gendered image, coded feminine by the cavity in a more genuinely womb-like enclosure. [. . .] the dove links fertility with physical invasion, suffering, and risk, and its literal function as a coffin screw head reminds us of the close proximity of maternity and mortality in the Old South” (232). The dove, representing the violent material conditions of southern womanhood, finds its proper place in the hands of Paul, the future patriarch. The scene in which Miranda suddenly remembers this day enacts the return of this repressed knowledge. However, the trauma of realization is avoided as the rabbit, though the initial trigger of the memory, remains absent from her recollections, and all she remembers is her brother holding the dove. In these last lines of *The Old Order*, it is apparent that ideology has done its work, and the “forbidden” knowledge remains buried in adult Miranda’s unconscious.

### **The Grave in the House**

“Old Mortality,” the first novella in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, focuses more directly on Sophia Jane’s interaction with the children in teaching them about the family history. “Old Mortality” centers on the passing down of the family legend of the romance between the children’s Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel. Aunt Amy’s story is a romantic tale of nearly unrequited love between a beau and a belle, Amy’s second cousin Gabriel and herself. Amy refused to be married until she had taken sick with tuberculosis, and she died only six weeks



after her marriage. Clay Kisner suggests that the story of Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel comes directly from stories told to Porter by her grandmother of her Aunt Annie and Uncle Thomas, reasoning that “[t]ales of a romantic, distinguished family past comforted the family, easing the pain of their poverty” (55). The stories of Aunt Amy work the same way in “Old Mortality,” recalling an idealized past for which the older members of the family long to return. The narrator notes, “They loved to tell stories, romantic and poetic, or comic with a romantic humor; they did not gild the outward circumstance, it was the feeling that mattered. Their hearts and imaginations were captivated by their past, a past in which worldly considerations had played a very minor role” (183). The older generation desires the ideal they build in the past, but it is the construction of “the feeling” that matters, the affect that produces the desire. Moreover, though the narrator claims that they do not “gild” the circumstances of the family legends, the claim that “worldly considerations had played a very minor role” in the past demonstrates the disavowal of material reality that makes this idealization possible.

Walter Benjamin’s ruminations on storytelling shed light on these narratives’ potential for the reproduction of cultural values. Benjamin links storytelling to history, memory, and death, suggesting that the storyteller passes on history and tradition through his ability to bring the stories of the dead into the present through memory. He asserts, “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (94). Thus the storyteller relies on the dead to lend authority to their stories. Importantly, Benjamin defines storytelling as a specifically premodern craft, suggesting that the decline in storytelling is due to sanitization of and separation from death in modernity. As death becomes removed from the everyday experience of life, the authority that death lends to the storyteller weakens. “There used to be no house, hardly a room,” Benjamin writes, “in which someone had not once died. [. . .]

Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs” (94).

Benjamin argues that this sanitization of death, the removal of death from the home to institutions designed to contain it, accounts for the decline in storytelling as an art form and the subsequent rise of the novel.

Joseph Roach draws many similar conclusions in his description of “circum-Atlantic performance” as he also sees the sanitization of death as important to the rise of modernity, describing the rise of the cemetery as “the segregation of the dead from the living” (7, 48). In outlining a process similar to Benjamin’s formulation of storytelling, Roach suggests the importance of death and performance in the reproduction of cultural values, specifically in funerary ritual. It is death and the performances surrounding death that foreground the importance of cultural reproduction or, as Benjamin would have it, lend authority to those performances meant to reproduce culture. Roach suggests that due to modernity’s banishment of death, such performances rely on “effig[ies]”, or stand-ins for the dead, to authorize the performance as authentic (36). When Roach refers to these “effigies,” he generally means actual people who stand in for the dead through performance. However, he also suggests that, “by virtue of an intense but unsurprising paradox, corpses” may fulfill this role (36). The objects presented throughout “Old Mortality,” in conjunction with the grandmother’s performance of Aunt Amy’s stories, function in the same way as Roach’s effigies. The importance of the objects involved in the telling of the story lies in their ability to bring the dead close to the listener, thus calling on the authority of the dead to verify the story.

The novella begins with a description of a portrait of Aunt Amy that evidences her authority by describing “her smiling gray eyes follow[ing] one about the room” (181). Amy,

though dead, or exactly because she is dead, acts as surveyor of the family, lording over them from beyond. The effect of the portrait on Miranda and her older sister Maria, however, appears to subvert the authority this figure should carry for them. Instead of revering Aunt Amy's portrait, they find her "reckless, indifferent smile [. . .] rather disturbing," and they do not understand "why every older person who looked at the picture said, 'How lovely'; and why everyone who had known her thought her so beautiful and charming" (181). They also see the clothes she wears and the furnishing in the background of the portrait, which invoke "a kind of faded merriment," as "not even romantic looking, but merely most terribly out of fashion" (181). The girls associate the portrait not with a living world of that past, but with "dead things: the smell of Grandmother's medicated cigarettes and her furniture that smelled of beeswax, and her old-fashioned perfume, Orange Flower" (181). For these young, modern girls, intrigued by fashion and novelty, Aunt Amy is not a model brought to life by the picture, but "only a ghost in a frame, and a sad, pretty story from old times. She had been beautiful, much loved, unhappy, and she had died young" (181).

These comments appear to indicate that the portrait of Aunt Amy has no bearing on the children, but a closer look reveals that they are affected more than they realize. Just after the description of the portrait and the girls' reaction to it, the narrator notes that Miranda and Maria "felt they had lived a long time. They had lived not only their own years; but their memories, it seemed to them, began years before they were born, in the lives of the grownups around them, old people above forty, most of them, who had a way of insisting that they too had been young once" (181). This passage illustrates that despite their indifference toward Amy's portrait and the stories surrounding it, they internalize the family's collective memory until they feel it is their own. Sari Edelstein pays particular attention to Amy's portrait, suggesting that "Porter's decision

to begin her story with this photograph illustrates her concern with the way the family uses photography and memorabilia to instill itself into the minds of future generations and to unite its members around a common ideal” (155-56).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the portrait, recalling as it does the plantation romance built around Amy, engenders respect and a desire for an ideal past. Edelstein further comments that the perpetuation of constructed memory through objects like the portrait works to “aestheticize history and actually promote forgetting” (159). The romance built around Aunt Amy only offers an ideal romanticized view of the past while disavowing the material conditions that made that past possible. Missing from this reading is how the photograph, as a product of a modern technological innovation as opposed to a painting, reveals the role of modernity in the construction of the ideal premodern past.

The portrait, however, is just the first mentioned of a list of objects tied to the memory of Aunt Amy. The grandmother accompanies the narrative by showing the girls her treasured keepsakes from Amy’s life, including locks of hair, party clothes, portraits, jewelry, and other personal items: “Grandmother, twice a year compelled in her blood by the change of seasons, would sit nearly all of one day beside old trunks and boxes in the lumber room, unfolding layers of garments and small keepsakes; she spread them out on sheets on the floor around her, crying over certain things” (183). The seasonal repetition of this act recalls Sophia Jane’s trips back to the plantation from *The Old Order*, invoking not just mourning for the departed Amy, but also a return to the idealized past of antebellum plantation culture. The young girls, however, react to these items much in the same way they react to the portrait. They “did not find them, in

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<sup>15</sup> Edelstein draws directly from Marianne Hirsch’s conception of postmemory. Hirsch writes that “[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood or recreated” (22). Though Hirsch originally applied the concept of postmemory to second generation Jewish Holocaust survivors, Edelstein argues that “because so many white southerners have been culpable in systems of racial oppression and violence, an inextricable and inevitable association with and responsibility for a traumatic past marks white southern experience” (153).

themselves, impressive,” and Miranda feels pity for Amy’s generation because these “faded things” were “all those vanished girls had to decorate themselves with” (183). Though the girls are not impressed by the items themselves, seeing their grandmother pore over them creates a sense of loss, and therefore a sense of desire, in the children. The grandmother’s performance of affect works to reproduce that affect in the young girls. The narrator notes that “they were drawn and held by the mysterious love of the living, who remembered and cherished these dead” (183-84). For these girls, the “visible remains were nothing; they were dust, perishable as the flesh” (184). These lines indicate the objects’ status as effigies of the dead, replacements for the flesh and blood that has passed away. What is important to them is what the objects represent, the “living memory” of the family (184). As Scott suggests, “these items [. . .] are chosen to testify to an absence and to imply and constitute a presence” (47). They represent the loss not just of Amy, but of the family’s past of dignity and grandeur. Miranda and Maria learn about their family’s history by “picking here and there among the floating ends of narrative, patching together as well as they could fragments of tales that were like bits of poetry or music, indeed were associated with the poetry they had heard or read, with music, with the theater” (184). Thus the family’s orientation toward the past is not achieved merely through the display of family heirlooms, but through the repetition of narrative for which these objects stand as proof. The lines recall Sophia Jane and Nannie piecing together the “family finery” as they compose a narrative of the past. The children are trained in this same art of composing narrative from the family’s history.

The comparison of the family narrative to the theater draws attention to the performative aspect of this production. The text makes several gestures indicating that these stories are not merely recounted facts of actual people but are carefully crafted, and just as carefully performed,

narratives. The children recognize that “Aunt Amy belonged to the world of poetry,” and that the story of her and Uncle Gabriel’s relationship “was such a story as one found in old books: unworldly books, but true, such as the *Vita Nuova*, the *Sonnets of Shakespeare* and the *Wedding Song of Spenser*; and the poems of *Edgar Allen Poe*,” who their father reminds them ““was our greatest poet,” and they knew that ‘our’ meant he was Southern” (186). The acknowledgement of the romanticized nature of these tales, however, does not render them ineffective. Miranda’s susceptibility to the romantic is confirmed as she remembers seeing “a long sad play with *Mary, Queen of Scots*, in it” and being disappointed “to learn that the real *Queen* had died long ago, and not at all on the night she, *Miranda*, had been present” (187). The memory implies that representation through performance and effigy creates a reality that holds direct influence over *Miranda*. The extent to which performance governs *Miranda*’s conception of the world registers when the narrator notes that trips to the theater “confirmed for the little girls the nobility of human feeling, the divinity of man’s vision of the unseen, the importance of life and death, the depths of the human heart, and the romantic value of tragedy” (187-88). The text also confirms that these lessons have direct bearing on how the girls view the family history. When *Cousin Eva* tells *Miranda* about *John Wilkes Booth*, she regrets that no one in the family is directly related to the event; “it would have been so pleasant to have the assassination of *Lincoln* in the family” (188). *Miranda*’s view of *Lincoln*’s assassination foregrounds the political implications of her investment in the romanticized past, hinting at the material consequences the performative can have on the world. Though *Cousin Eva* chides her that “no one, not even a good Southerner, could possibly approve of *John Wilkes Booth*’s deed,” *Miranda* “decided that, without the murder, there would have been no point to dressing up and leaping to the stage shouting *Latin*. How could she disapprove of the deed? It was a fine story” (188).

The mention of Poe as a specifically southern figure elucidates the way in which this family builds its history. The obsession with possessing dead women in Poe's work corresponds with the centrality of a dead woman, Aunt Amy, in the family's version of its history. In her work on literary representation of the dead female body, Elisabeth Bronfen argues,

Femininity and death cause a disorder to stability, mark moments of ambivalence, disruption or duplicity and their eradication produces a recuperation of order, a return to stability. The threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation, staging an absence as a form of re-presence, or return, even if or rather precisely because this means appeasing the threat of real mortality, of sexual insufficiency, of lack of plenitude and wholeness. (xii)

Thus while the death of a female disrupts order and structure, its representation enacts a recuperation of order through the play of absence and presence. This formulation relates to the family, specifically as southerners, as they conceive of the present in modernity as a fracturing of the wholeness of the antebellum past. By making the absence of Amy a continual presence through narrative and the presentation of objects associated with her, they create a desire for a return to the order of the past. This relation to Poe becomes clear when Uncle Gabriel writes a poem about Amy's death that he circulates "among the family" and "come[s] home [. . .] to see that it was carved properly" on her tombstone (188-89). Like Poe, Gabriel writes poetry about a dead woman, and he inscribes his representation on her headstone. The family continually constructs representations of the dead Amy that serve to recuperate their romanticized past.

"Old Mortality," however, rather than illustrating how this process of interpellation is always successful, reveals how such performances can fail when faced with the realities they attempt to disavow. Miranda's father, commenting on Amy's portrait's failure to capture her

beauty, asserts, “It’s not very good. Her hair and her smile were her chief beauties, and they aren’t shown at all. She was much slimmer than that, too. There were never any fat women in the family, thank God” (182). Miranda wonders how her father could make this claim when two of her great-aunts, Eliza and Keziah, are women of girth. The father’s denial of the material reality of the women in the family calls not only his memory of these women into question, but, more importantly, it casts doubt as to whether or not Amy was the great beauty the family memorializes. Miranda recognizes that this is not just her father’s peculiarity, but that “[t]his loyalty of their father’s in the face of evidence contrary to his ideal had its spring in family feeling, and a love of legend that he shared with others” (182). Discrepancies such as these inform Miranda that the family misremembers itself, changing their history to fit the ideal. In this case, her father fits the women of the family to meet the ideal of the southern lady, while “anti-types” such as Eliza must be forgotten.

Amy’s status as the ideal of southern womanhood hinges more on her being dead than on her physical attributes. Watson offers an excellent reading of the story of Amy as participating in the period’s “tuberculosis discourse” (238).<sup>16</sup> In the tales told about Amy, she conforms to “a consumptive aesthetic, stressing lassitude over vigor, a pallid complexion (preferably offset by dark hair, eyes, and mouth), bird-like shoulders, and thin, elongated limbs draped in sheer, gauzy fabrics” (239). Before Amy’s death, she was already defined by an ideal view of womanhood that privileges beauty over the grim realities of disease and death. The narration foregrounds the idea that Amy was always aware of her place in the family legend when she asks, “if I am to be

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<sup>16</sup> Watson sees this discourse as undergoing a profound change in the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis, known as consumption, was romanticized as a disease associated with “genius, passion, and the transcendence of the body” (238-39). These associations were strengthened by the fact that many literary figures of the time suffered from the illness. The discovery of germ theory, however, significantly altered this romanticized view of the disease. Now known as tuberculosis, the disease became associated with “anxieties about working-class life and conditions in European and American cities[. . .] recast[ing] the disease as a social and moral evil” (248). Watson suggests that “Old Mortality” utilizes both versions of the discourse to contrast the family’s romanticized view of Amy with Eva’s implications that Amy’s death was the result of moral failings.



the heroine of this novel, why shouldn't I make the most of it" (197). The idea that Amy's place in family lore was being constructed before her passing is evidenced by the portrait described at the beginning of the story. Bronfen argues, "As site for memory, the portrait as a whole is situated in a liminal position, between an original wholeness in some sense always already lost and a desire for this state. It self-reflexively doubles the uncanny position of its object of depiction—a woman made relic before her decease; the desired body always already lost before and beyond any material absence" (119). Before Amy's death, she had already been constructed as the symbol for the family's romantic conception of itself, and as the site for representing the loss of the romantic ideal. Amy's choice to wear mourning to her wedding attests to her knowledge of her place in the family. When the Grandmother attempts to make her rethink this decision, she replies, "it is *my* funeral, you know" (190). She already equates the ideal of southern womanhood with death, and though the Grandmother tells her "that marriage and children would cure her of everything," it is just after her marriage that Amy fulfills her role in the romance plot by dying.

The biggest discrepancy between the family ideal and reality comes as the children go to a horse race in New Orleans to see one of Gabriel's horses. When they meet Gabriel, they realize he is a slovenly, drunk, coarse man, not matching the image of the romantic beau from the family's stories. The discrepancy between the character of the story and real Gabriel leads Miranda to wonder "what did grown-up people *mean* when they talked, anyway?" (206). While the children's spirits are briefly raised when Miss Lucy, Gabriel's mare, wins the race, this change in mood is quickly struck down when they take a closer look at the horse: "Miss Lucy was bleeding at the nose, two thick red rivulets were stiffening her tender mouth and chin. [. . .] Her eyes were wild and her knees were trembling, and she snored when she drew breath" (207-

8). Watson points out the similarities between Miss Lucy's symptoms and those of the tuberculosis patient, an idea strengthened by Gabriel's decision to breed Miss Lucy in the future. "[T]he race scene," according to Watson, "materializes a southern market in female flesh, making its brutal logic explicit" (245).

Amy and Miss Lucy, however, are not the only victim of the family's adherence to romantic ideals. Gabriel's financial misfortunes are the result of his being cut out of his inheritance because of his participation in the horse races. His grandfather cuts him out of his will, not because he bets on the races, but because he "depend[s] upon them for a livelihood" (189). The races, based as they are in speculation, come too close to acknowledging the family's dependence on the capitalist market, a fact that tarnishes their view of themselves as natural aristocracy. As M. K. Fornataro-Neil suggests, "Gabriel's use of horse racing as a means to make a living, rather than as an idle pastime, is not considered gentlemanly" (351). Just as the races make explicit the old order's use of female bodies, it also reveals the ties between the old order and the market. Gabriel's diminished condition in the world represents the family's anxiety about their status in the modern era. After the race the children and their father go home with Gabriel. The narrator notes, "The little girls sat watching the streets grow duller and dingier and narrower, and at last the shabbier and shabbier white people gave way to dressed-up Negroes, and then to shabby Negroes, and after a long way the cab stopped before a desolate-looking little hotel in Elysian Fields" (210). The description reveals the truth behind the family's anxiety about Gabriel. His social standing has fallen even below the African Americans who should exist below him according to their conception of a naturalized social order. This anxiety is sublimated by belief in the romance plot that disavows the reality of Gabriel's degraded position, a reality that would subvert the family's belief in their claim to aristocracy. "Porter's choice of the New

Orleans street name 'Elysian Fields,' ironically juxtaposed against the degraded status of the neighborhood," Edelstein suggests, "recalls not only the eponymous Greek paradise but also conjures the image of a (fallen) southern plantation" (161). Such an image must be ignored by the family.

The visit to Gabriel's home only confirms his fall from the plantation ideal. They meet Gabriel's second wife, Honey, who is no match for the children's vision of Amy. The narration describes her as "[a] tall pale-faced woman with faded straw-colored hair and pink-rimmed eyelids. [ . . . ] She wore a stiff blue-and-white-striped shirtwaist and a stiff black skirt of some hard shiny material. Her large knuckled hands rose to her round, neat pompadour at sight of her visitors" (210). Honey, with her cheap clothes and gnarly hands, obviously falls well short of the ideal of southern womanhood. The rest of the apartment fits with Gabriel's fallen position. It is furnished with "rickety chairs," "a big lumpy bed, with a grayish-white counterpane on it, a marble-topped washstand, grayish coarse lace curtains on strings at two small windows, a small closed fireplace with a hole in it for a stovepipe, and two trunks, standing at odds as if somebody were just moving in, or just moving out. Everything was dingy and soiled and neat and bare; not a pin out of place" (211). There are no luxurious items in the apartment that would suggest an opulent past for which there may be hope of return. All the furnishings suggest poverty, strife, and deprivation. Moreover, the description of the apartment as feeling un-lived in suggests a complete lack of stability, as if Gabriel and his wife are not even secure in their reduced position and may sink further still. This feeling is evidenced as Gabriel, thrilled with his winnings, suggests that they move to a nicer hotel. Honey replies, "'I've lived in the St. Charles before, and I've lived here before [ . . . ] and this time I'll just stay where I am, thank you. I prefer it to moving back here in three months. I'm settled now, I feel at home here'" (211). Honey has

ceased wishing for better circumstances and has accepted their impoverished position. This acceptance breaks with the family's habit of denying the unpleasant in favor of imagining the ideal.

The family's romantic tale of Amy and Gabriel becomes further disillusioned for Miranda years later when she returns for Gabriel's funeral as a young woman. On the train, she meets Cousin Eva, a spinster who the family always rejected for not meeting the standards of ideal beauty (Eva has no chin), on the train, and the two begin discussing Amy. Eva gives Miranda a version of the story much different than the family's romanticized tale, suggesting that Amy had been promiscuous and that she had brought on her own death by purposely overdosing on her medicine, speculating that she "did away with herself to escape some disgrace, some exposure that she faced" (223). Her account of the old days of belles and beaux also takes a decidedly unromantic and more materialist stance. She describes the dances as a "market," discusses how Amy would drink "lemon and salt to stop her periods when she wanted to go to the dances," and finally declares that it was all "just sex. [. . .] their minds dwelt on nothing else. They didn't call it that, it was all smothered under pretty names, but that's what it was, sex" (225). Eva's recollection of the events, unadorned by romanticization, also extends to Gabriel. She remarks that Amy ruined his life and discusses his life with Honey, something no other member of the family ever does. She notes, "I wish you could have seen the life he led with Miss Honey, one day buying her Paris gowns and the next day pawning her earrings. It just depended on how the horses ran, and they ran worse and worse, and Gabriel drank more and more" (223). Eva acknowledges what no other member of the family will—Gabriel's reduced economic circumstances. Furthermore, her comment suggests that Gabriel remained invested in keeping up appearances through the purchase of expensive clothes for Honey, even though they were always

subject to being pawned to finance his gambling habit. Lastly, Eva laments the family's decision to bury Gabriel next to Amy, declaring it "an eternal infidelity" (220). Edelstein draws a direct correlation between this decision and Confederate memorialization, arguing, "Just as Confederate memorials, Decoration Day, and other Civil War remembrances encourage certain kinds of nostalgia, Gabriel's funeral and burial will enable the family to shroud their history in the most convenient, desirable narrative" (161). Burying Gabriel next to Amy allows the family to enact the forgetting that is part and parcel of idealized remembering. They can forget the tragic circumstances of Gabriel's later life that call their own social standing into question, and focus instead on the romantic tale that supports their conception of the family as plantation aristocracy.

Eva's frank discussion of these events leads Miranda to see through the family's mystifications, if only briefly. She has a vision of "watching a long procession of living corpses, festering women stepping gaily towards the charnel house, their corruption concealed under laces and flowers, their dead faces lifted smiling" (226). The vision recognizes both the violence inherent in the southern romance and the use of material adornments to disguise its grim nature. Miranda finds this vision perhaps most disturbing in that Eva's discussion has revealed her own participation in the romance. She has recently eloped from school, an act she feels won her independence from the family. When Eva warns her that she "mustn't live in a romantic haze about life," Miranda discloses her marriage, "feeling for almost the first time that it might be an advantage" (222). However, as Watson notes, "her gesture seems even to her to have little to do with defining a distinctive identity or shaping a meaningful future, and it ironically verges on a mere repetition of her aunt's impulsive, glamorous, yet ultimately unhappy elopement with

Gabriel” (251). In these moments Miranda confronts the possibility that she, much like Amy, is merely living out the role the family legend has scripted for her in advance.

These thoughts do not last long, however, as Miranda dismisses Eva’s view as bred from envy and bitterness. She shakes off her vision and thinks, “This is no more true than what I was told before, it’s every bit as romantic” (226). After arriving and seeing Eva with her father, she realizes that there is no difference between the two. She sees them as “Eva and Harry, who knew each other well, who were comfortable with each other, being contemporaries on equal terms” (228). Eva becomes not an outsider ready to upend the family’s romantic conception of itself, but one of the family who, due to a lack of beauty, made her way by performing the counter-narrative. In this light Eva’s progressive and feminist views—she was known for fighting for women’s suffrage—merely work to bolster the ideal (dis)embodied in Amy by providing a foil. Miranda feels a deep bitterness against the family, vowing, “*I will be free of them, I shall not even remember them*” (229). This is the worst fate Miranda can envision for the family, which seeks to prolong its greatness by passing memories down to its younger generations. Miranda thinks, “Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don’t care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me” (231). This denial of the family’s power over her seems hopeful, but the narrator’s emphasis that she makes the “promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance,” suggests Porter was as doubtful about Miranda’s ability to leave the past behind as she was about her own.

### **Necro-Décor and Pale Riders**

Miranda's rebellions from the family mirror Porter's own, and neither was successful in escaping her southern roots.<sup>17</sup> The eponymous last novella in the collection, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," follows Miranda to Denver where she works as a reporter, a move straight out of Porter's biography. As Deborah Cohn notes, "Her profession here is hardly fortuitous: as a journalist, she carries on the southern woman writer's struggle with social and literary traditions that define women as voiceless and passive, reduplicating women's fight for liberation from the ideal of the belle" (68). Gary M. Ciuba adds that her official position as theater critic directly conflicts with the romantic orientation toward performance that was part of her youth. The novella centers on Miranda's experiences in living through World War I and her near-death experience with influenza. Throughout the text Miranda is bullied by men who demand that she contribute monetarily to the war effort. Cohn suggests that the text draws comparison between the Great War and the Civil War as both resulted from "public distortions of truth. [. . .] Patriotism thus acts as the agent of ideology and the power relations that it sanctions" (71-2). She reads Miranda's illness as "indicat[ing] that she has internalized the rhetoric garnering support for the war, that the barriers protecting the private domain where she had tried to maintain her integrity have broken down" (72). Watson, however, sees her malady as directly related back to Amy's death by consumption, suggesting again that Miranda has not escaped the role of women in the family legend, though he argues that she perhaps cheats the story. As Miranda lives and her lover Adam dies, she "circumvent[s] the romance plot even as she circumvents death" (Watson 258).

The most obvious suggestion that Miranda has not escaped her roots, however, comes at the beginning of the novella as she dreams of being back home in Texas. These first lines reveal

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<sup>17</sup> Similarities between Miranda and Porter include their elopement, moving to Colorado to work as a reporter, and contracting influenza during the pandemic of 1918. For more on Porter's experience with the illness and the importance of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as a record of the pandemic, see David A. Davis, "The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

the nature of the hold Miranda's southern home still exerts over her. In her dream she wakes up in her childhood home while everyone else is still asleep and feels compelled to leave before she is discovered. She suggests the home as a place where the family acts as an omniscient, regulating power, watching over her every move. She worries their "faces will beam asking, Where are you going, What are you doing, What are you thinking, How do you feel, Why do you say such things, What do you mean," suggesting that in the house their lives are "tangled together like badly cast fishing lines" (281). She recognizes their tendency to memorialize the dead and the past as being the power behind their influence. Still attempting to get out of her bed, she notes, "Too many have died in this bed already, there are far too many ancestral bones propped up on the mantelpieces, there have been too damned many antimacassars in this house [. . .] and oh, what accumulation of storied dust never allowed to settle in peace for one moment" (281). These lines recall Benjamin's ruminations about the role of death as an authorizing force within the domestic sphere. The objects that furnish the house are transformed from effigies to actual remains of the dead worshipped in the family's stories. The obfuscations of ideology, as represented in the "antimacassars," so close to "anti-massacres," are swept away to reveal a house devoted to a naked necro-décor. The material domestic environment, constructed from the dead, authorizes the past that produces Miranda's confinement in the present. She then realizes that a "lank greenish stranger," a figure of death, is creeping about the house, and the stranger is not intruding but has been "welcomed by my grandfather, my great-aunt, my five times removed cousin, my decrepit hound and my silver kittens" (281). Miranda accuses her family of inviting death into the house to claim her. The implications of this accusation become clear as she attempts to decide which horse she will use to escape the stranger: "Fiddler or Graylie or Miss Lucy with the long nose and the wicked eye" (281). These animals recall passages from both *The*



*Old Order* and “Old Mortality” that implicate the southern patriarchal order in the violent exploitation of both African Americans and women in building, maintaining, and reproducing an aristocracy. The consequences for Miranda become evident as she notes that she has nothing without the family and wonders, “Do I even walk about in my own skin or is it something I have borrowed to spare my modesty?” (281). In Miranda’s dream world, the repressed content of ideology come to the fore, revealing the old order as an institution built on the commodification of flesh, even her own.

Though in the dream Miranda escapes the stranger, and though she escapes death and, according to Watson, the trap of the romance, Porter’s biography illustrates that the author did not avoid the ideology of the old southern order and only became more invested in its logic as time passed. Indeed, though the Miranda stories demonstrate her awareness of the problems and contradictions inherent in southern memorialization, she only became more and more invested in portraying herself as a southern lady of aristocratic heritage. She even mimicked the logic she specifically condemns in the previously discussed passages. As Titus notes, “She bought antiques and claimed them as cherished family heirlooms,” using them as proof of her belonging to the southern aristocracy (185). Furthermore, her practice of these methods went beyond mere posturing. Though Porter never lived as an aristocrat, her later politics certainly reflect the values of the old order. In 1936 Porter wrote in her personal journal that “[o]ne of the most disturbing habits of the human mind is its willful and destructive forgetting of whatever in its past does not flatter or confirm its present point of view” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 9). Though she recognized the “destructive” nature of “willful” disavowal, Porter apparently found the imperative as a white, southern woman to participate in such forgetting too strong to resist, and she crafted both her past and her present to conform to the ideal of southern womanhood.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THE POLITICS OF MOURNING AND MEMORIALIZATION IN EUDORA WELTY'S *DELTA WEDDING AND THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER*

Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty shared an intimate friendship and a close professional relationship from Welty's beginnings as a writer to Porter's death in 1980. Porter, one of the first to recognize Welty's talent, initiated their friendship after Welty began publishing at the *Southern Review*. Welty later conjectured that her work was likely only published because Porter "called my stories to [Ford Maddox Ford's] attention" (*Conversations* 40). Porter went on to write the introduction to Welty's first short story collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941), in which she hailed Welty's talent and imagination, claiming that "there is even in the smallest story a sense of power in reserve which makes me firmly believe that, splendid beginning that it is, it is only the beginning" ("Eudora" 588-89). Welty returned the favor by dedicating her novella, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), to Porter and writing "Katherine Anne Porter: The Eye of the Story," an essay exalting Porter's fiction. Welty also praised Porter's work for paving the way for aspiring writers, once claiming that "[i]f it had not been for *her* work, we couldn't ever have published" (*More* 152), and in an interview shortly after Porter's death, she lamented losing one of the "great founders" of southern literature (*More* 60). Summing up her feelings for Porter, Welty said, "I owe her a great deal and admire her whole life's work a great deal and, of course, love her" (*Conversations* 192).

Though the two women held a deep mutual respect for each other, both personally and professionally, they were very different women and writers. While Porter left her home in Texas at an early age, only returning for brief periods of time and never wanting to return, Welty lived in her childhood home in Jackson, Mississippi at the time of her death in 2001. Though Welty had lived and travelled outside of Mississippi—she attended college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Columbia College in New York and toured Europe in 1949 and 1974—she always returned to her home in Jackson. Another difference between these women was the way they represented their origins. Welty did not aggrandize her childhood circumstances to fit the southern plantation ideal the way Porter often did. This may have been because Welty grew up in a decidedly more affluent and stable home than Porter and did not feel the need to gild the facts of her upbringing. In Welty's memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), she recounts growing up with a loving and supportive family in the middle-class suburbs of Jackson. Though her childhood home was certainly southern, there is no indication of belonging to a “white-pillar crowd” of aristocratic southern elites. She knew little of plantation life, and her parents were far from invested in the southern past. Welty's mother belonged to no memorial societies, and her father, a Yankee, was busy building a different kind of monument in the Lamar Life Insurance building, “Jackson's first skyscraper” (Marrs, *One* 15). Indeed, Welty's parents were firmly entrenched in the business interests of the middle class and did not attempt to disguise those interests in Old South nostalgia.

Porter and Welty also differed in their political views. While Porter only grew more conservative as time passed, Welty always took an interest in representing underprivileged and minority classes of the South. This interest is apparent in the photography she produced while

working as a junior publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).<sup>18</sup> Though she found her official duties with the WPA tedious, she took the opportunity to record the poverty and oppression of her Mississippi home absent from her previous middle-class experience. In her personal correspondence, Welty described the impact of this exposure: “I didn’t really get an idea of the diversity and all the different regions of the state or of the great poverty of the state, until I traveled and talked to people. I don’t mean schoolgirls like myself that were at college with me, but *people*, you know, in the street (qtd. in Marris, *Eudora* 53). Her biographer, Suzanne Marris, argues that while “her privileged status as a white person made it almost impossible for her African American subjects to decline” to be photographed, her pictures still managed to capture the essence of her subjects: “Never are the pictures patronizing; never do they deny the subject’s dignity” (43). Welty carried this sensitivity to the suffering of others outside her race and class into her fiction.<sup>19</sup> She was also outspoken during the Civil Rights movement. Rather than supporting segregation like Porter, Welty refused to give a lecture at Jackson’s Millsaps College unless it was to an integrated audience. The stance was a direct response to a recent incident in which a professor from the African American Tougaloo College, where Welty had also spoken, was asked to leave a play he attended at Millsaps.<sup>20</sup> And while Porter derided Martin Luther King, Jr. after his assassination, Welty wrote the story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” in response to the assassination of Medgar Evers, the secretary of the Mississippi NAACP.

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<sup>18</sup> Carolyn J. Brown notes that the title “junior” in junior publicity agent referred to Welty’s gender and not her young age (Brown 34).

<sup>19</sup> In one notable example, during her WPA work Welty heard about an African American man who was forced to work as the geek at a carnival, eating live chickens for the amusement of patrons. This man inspired her to write the story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden.” Marris suggests that through exposure to such cruelty, “she came to understand more deeply the grotesque nature of racism” (*Eudora* 53).

<sup>20</sup> See C. Brown, 59-66.

Despite her outspokenness, critical consensus on Welty has tended to deem her work both apolitical and ahistorical. Porter may deserve partial blame for initially branding Welty's fiction as lacking political charge, as her introduction to *A Curtain of Green* states, "Miss Welty escaped [. . .] a militant social consciousness, in the current radical-intellectual sense, she never professed communism, and she has not expressed, except implicitly, any attitude at all on the state of politics or the condition of society" (584).<sup>21</sup> Welty's own comments on the dangers of engaging politics through fiction also do nothing to deter such thinking. For example, in "Must the Novelist Crusade," Welty rails against the "crusader-novelist" who fails to depict characters "as real, with minds, hearts, memories, habits, hopes, with passions and capacities like ours" (*Stories* 806). While Welty may not "crusade," her work offers politically relevant material for examining southern culture, particularly regarding the sense of historical dynamism embedded in her fiction.

Though Welty did not grow up in the plantation culture, she, like Porter, returned to this setting in her writing, particularly in the novel *Delta Wedding* (1946). Welty learned about the Delta from her close friend John Robinson, visiting his cousins in the Delta to gain source material, yet Marrs notes the novel "also draws heavily upon Welty's memories of childhood and college years." Even Marmion "is based upon a Columbus landmark Welty had often visited, a deserted antebellum home called Waverley" (*One* 79). The inclusion of details from Welty's middle-class existence in *Delta Wedding* invites connections between these two worlds.

If Welty can be connected to any character in the novel, it is Laura, the outsider from Jackson and the inheritor of the Fairchilds' valuables and values. A look into Welty's childhood in Jackson reveals the relationship between the South's middle class suburbs and the plantation.

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<sup>21</sup> Annette Trefzer suggests that "Porter's introduction to *A Curtain of Green* began the critical tradition of positioning Welty's writing against the 1930s trend of socially informed political writing" (108).

While Chestina Welty, Eudora's mother, was not invested in Lost Cause-ism, she did adhere to the prescriptions of the social order constructed by that ethos. "When a family whom Chessie saw as disreputable established residence on Congress Street," Marris notes, "she sought to deny her children their company" (*Eudora* 5). In another incident, Welty remembers her mother complaining about having to wait for an African American woman to wash her child in a public lavatory. Marris suggests that "though she objected to an absence of deference for whites, she did not object to an integrated facility per se" (33). Welty's childhood in segregated Jackson certainly made her aware of the South's entrenched social order in regards to both class and race, and even in her own family who were perhaps more socially progressive than most, she found an attitude that was at best ambivalent, "her own parents models both of social standards and of rebellion from them" (34). Through its examination of the cultures of both the plantation and middle-class suburbs of the South, Welty's fiction reveals what the South's middle class inherited from the plantation: the hegemonic social order that Old South memorialization helped establish as the culture of the South.

This chapter reads Welty's first and last novels, *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) respectively, examining Welty's portrayal of the changing relationship between southern women and the construction of identity from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century modern South to the postwar South of the 1950s. The form of these novels calls attention to the role material objects play in the perpetuation of melancholic memorialism, as Welty writes decentered narratives, displacing the central focus from the characters to the objects that surround them. This focal shift foregrounds the role of material objects in constructing southern identity. *Delta Wedding*, picking up where Porter's Miranda stories leave off, depicts this construction at a point of flux. Through her attention to the material, Welty exposes the fissures and slippages in this system and

foretells its necessary change. *The Optimist's Daughter*, taking place 30 years later, illustrates this alteration as it examines the relationship between southern women and the past in the consumer South of the 1950s. This novel interrogates the tension between southern women's task of constructing identity by memorializing the past and the new ability of subjects to construct identity through goods purchased on the market. The consumer economy acts as a destabilizing force for the construction of aristocracy as it allows for greater access to goods for those outside the elite. Again, Welty dramatizes this tension through her attention to material objects, contrasting memorial objects with consumer commodities.

### **Objects of Loss in *Delta Wedding***

Centered on the experiences of three generations of elite white women of the South, *Delta Wedding* investigates the power inherent in these women's ability to define loss by constructing the past. Although Welty, born in the spring of 1909, grew up after the apex of the women's memorial movement's influence, she certainly realized the importance of women's cultural authority at this time. In a 1980 interview, Welty commented on the power of matriarchy in the Mississippi Delta with regards to writing *Delta Wedding*:

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 gone and the women began to take over everything. You know, they really did. I've met families up there where the women just ruled the roost, and I've made that happen in the book because I thought, that's the way it was in those days in the South. I've never lived in the Delta, and I was too young to have

known what was going on in the twenties, but I know that that's a fact. Indeed it's true of many sections of that country after the Civil War changed the pattern of life there. (*Conversations* 304)

Welty understood that the women of the South, even as they were subject to a gender prescription that rendered them subservient to men, exercised great power in the region. She knew that this power was not confined to the domestic sphere, but found its way into "everything," and, importantly, she traced this power back to the loss of the Civil War. Centered on the experiences of white, elite women of the South, *Delta Wedding* investigates the power inherent in these women's ability to define loss by constructing the past. Yet, by exploring the varying responses of three generations of Fairchild women through their relationships with objects, the novel also illustrates how that power was subject to historical change. Each generation, faced with a different set of historical circumstances, bears a different relationship to the past.

From its first lines, *Delta Wedding* characterizes the women of the novel in relation to the work of mourning. Young Laura McRaven travels to the Fairchild plantation in the Delta to attend her cousin Dabney's wedding to Troy Flavin, the plantation's overseer. Laura cannot participate in the wedding, however, because she is in mourning for her recently deceased mother. When Laura, Shelley, and India visit Laura's mother's grave at the Fairchilds cemetery, Welty's description reveals much about the role of women and mourning in constructing the aristocratic identity enjoyed by the Fairchilds:

The cemetery [. . .] with the Confederate graves all running to a point in the direction of the depot, was surrounded by a dense high wall of honeysuckle, which shut out the sight of the cotton wagons streaming by on two sides, where



the roads converged to the railroad tracks, the river, the street, and the gin. The school, where the Fairchild children all went, was across one road, and the Methodist Church, with a dooryard bell in a sort of derrick, was across the other. The spire, the derrick, and the flag pole rose over the hedge walls, but nothing else of Fairchilds could be seen, and only its sound could be heard—the gin running, the compress sighing, the rickety iron bridge being crossed, and the creak of wagon and harness just on the other side of the leaves.

A smell of men's sweat seemed to permeate the summer air of Fairchilds until you got inside the cemetery. (221)

The Confederate cemetery, most likely constructed by women of the memorial movement, keeps the Fairchild girls separated from the daily business of cotton production—the gin, the routes for transporting the product, and the men who work in the trade. As plantation aristocrats, the Fairchild women are meant to attend to the past, which is precisely what keeps them from recognizing the realities of the mode of production that produces their wealth. The sweet honeysuckle smell of an idealized past of moonlight and magnolia covers the stink of men laboring in the cotton trade.

The work of mourning, however, does not stop at the gate of the cemetery, but is evident in the way the family surrounds itself with objects infused with narratives of the past. Importantly, the women of the Fairchild family act as caretakers for both the objects and the family history that provide the basis for constructing the family's aristocratic identity. As Robbie realizes, "It was notoriously the women of the Fairchilds who since the Civil War, or—who knew?—since Indian times, ran the household and had everything at their fingertips" (234). These women are the cultural curators of the Fairchild history. The most obvious example of this

aspect of the women's work occurs at the house at the Grove. Aunt Primrose and Aunt Jim Allen keep all of "Grandmother's and Great-Grandmother's cherished things" in the house, effectively a museum for the family (128). When the aunts give Dabney a nightlight, they convey its significance by telling her the story of Aunt Mashula's attachment to it: "Aunt Mashula loved it—that waited for Uncle George, waited for him to come home from the Civil War. [. . .] Our father and the children all gave up seeing him again in life. Aunt Mashula never did but she was never the same. [. . .] Only this little night light comforted her, she said" (133). The nightlight, far from existing merely as an aesthetic object, stands as a physical representation of the family's past, particularly the losses associated with the Civil War.

The nightlight embodies the melancholic sense of loss passed down in the family. For Aunt Mashula, who belongs to that generation of women who built cemeteries and monuments to mourn for very real deaths during the war, the nightlight works as a fetishized object that allows her to maintain her sense of loss and grief in response to her husband's death. While other family members accept the loss of Uncle George, Mashula "never did." She burns the nightlight as she sits up nights awaiting her husband's return. In this way, the nightlight is the presence of an absence for Mashula. The continued importance of the nightlight to the family—long after anyone can recall acquaintance with Mashula's husband—illustrates how the Fairchilds seek to perpetuate this sense of loss in later generations. Mashula passed this object and the narrative attached to it down to Primrose and Jim Allen, and they pass it down to Dabney. The family's remembered past is embodied in such objects, and they work to pass down familial identity. The narrator's note regarding Aunt Primrose that "[i]t made her nervous for people not to keep their kinfolks and their tragedies straight" foregrounds the importance of keeping the past an active presence for the family (133).

The Fairchild identity is shaped by the family history as presented by the Fairchild women. As Dabney recalls the stories told by the women of Mashula's generation, the power the women hold in interpellating the Fairchilds becomes evident: "Honor, honor, honor, the aunts drummed into their ears, little Denis and Battle and George, Tempe and Annie Laurie, Rowena, Jim Allen and Primrose" (209). This passage illustrates how the stories of loss passed down by the women of the Fairchild family work not just to provide the family history, but also serve to produce an aristocratic, Fairchild identity. The great aunts repeat the stories to the children, and as they internalize the sense of loss passed down by the aunts, they conform to the ideals implicit in the stories, such as sensitivity to matters of honor. The extent to which these narratives of family history shape the Fairchilds registers in a passage describing Robbie's thoughts on George. The narrator states,

Sometimes she thought when he was so out of reach, far away in his mind, that she could blame everything on some old story. [. . .] For he evidently felt that old stories, family stories, Mississippi stories were the same as very holy or very passionate, if stories could be those things. He looked out at the world, at her, sometimes, with that essence of the remote, proud, over-innocent Fairchild look that she suspected, as if an old story had taken hold of him—entered his flesh.

(281)

George internalizes the stories passed down by the women of the Fairchild clan, and they become a model of identification. Great-Aunt Shannon's inability to tell the living Fairchilds from their dead predecessors exemplifies how effectively this reproduction works; the dead Fairchilds walk around Shellmound in the bodies of the living. Even Laura recognizes this dynamic after gazing at the portraits in the parlor: "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” (102).

However, the next generation of Fairchild women, living in a rapidly changing South uses objects as a means of legitimating their place in the newly emerging social order. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Nan Elizabeth Woodruff explains, the construction of “an east-west railroad linking the Delta to the eastern seaboard” and the purchases made by “the Illinois Central Railroad...that linked the region with Chicago and New Orleans” firmly integrated the region into the national market (10). The thriving lumber and cotton markets brought changes to the region’s economy, and “the large companies and plantations drove out the smaller woodsmen and farmers” (13-14). While the Fairchild plantation survives the transition into the new economy, they are no longer members of an elite class, a point made clear as Robbie suggests, “You’re just one plantation. [. . .] You’re not even rich! You’re just medium” (253). Still, the objects the younger generation of aunts keeps on display establish the family as naturalized elites, thus legitimating their claim to the land.

Welty foregrounds the importance of material objects at the beginning of the novel through Laura’s first impressions of her arrival at Fairchilds. When the Fairchild family arrives at the train station to retrieve Laura, she is unable to identify her relatives. She has trouble “recognizing who anyone was,” and when she meets Shelley at Shellmound, “Laura did not know if she had been in the car with her or not” (93, 94). Yet, when Laura enters the house, the objects inside bring back her memories of past visits. She remembers “a clover-shaped footstool,” “the roll-top desk,” “the paintings,” “ornamental plate[s]” and “the big table” (96). Laura’s experience, defined more by the objects in the house than the people who live there, emphasizes the role objects play in defining life at Shellmound. Many of the objects mentioned

in the text tell stories significant to the Fairchild family's past, such as "the card table Great-Grandfather also made out of walnut trees when he cut his way in to the Yazoo wilderness" (106). Elizabeth Russ suggests, "[T]hese furnishings and decorative pieces help tell the personal, political, and economic history of the Fairchild family. [. . .] each holds a special place in the family lore" (90). The card table, for example, legitimates their claim to the land by constructing a story of family origins involving conquering the wilderness and taming the land for farming.

The Fairchild women's dissemination of family history does more, however, than just legitimate land inheritance. Susan Stewart's work on the souvenir suggests the importance of family heirlooms in creating a family identity. "Such a memento," writes Stewart, "is a souvenir of everyone in the family and of no one in the family. Its possession is a statement of membership, not in the event, but in the prestige generated by the event. [. . .] The function of the heirloom is to weave, quite literally by means of narrative, a significance of blood relation at the expense of a larger view of history and causality" (137). Thus these heirlooms, objects infused with family narratives, construct a sense of what it means to be a Fairchild while eliding all that does not fit the construction's parameters.

This fetishization of objects also produces social order, an important function for these women living in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a period of persistent anxieties among upper- and middle-class southern whites in regards to maintaining class and racial hierarchies, and the reproduction of aristocratic identity constructs the social hierarchy that gives the Fairchilds power over those who make up their workforce. Laura's experience of arriving at Shellmound illustrates how the fetishization of objects produces social order. Immediately after listing the objects that compose the family home, "She remembered the Negroes, Bitsy, Roxie, Little Uncle, and Vi'let" (96). Laura's inclusion of the African American workers at Shellmound in her list of

the material objects that populate the house relegates them to the position of possessions, drawing attention both to the history of slavery and the coercive nature of their current positions. Though slavery has long been abolished, the Fairchilds still treat their African American workers as possessions. Patricia Yaeger suggests that in the Fairchild home, “blacks become atmospheric” (104), just more objects that decorate the house. The attitudes of the Fairchild women toward the African American servants similarly reveal their disavowal of existing economic relationships. The aunts’ concern over Ellen, an outsider to the Delta, not using the African American servants properly foregrounds the importance of maintaining racial hierarchy in the home. Aunt Tempe notes, “She has never learned what is reprehensible and what is not, in the Delta” (109). While Great Aunt Mashula attaches her feelings of loss to the nightlight as she mourns for the death of her husband, the next generation of Fairchild women is much more concerned with preserving social order in a time of social upheaval. They use the past as a means of concealing the realities of the present in an attempt to naturalize a social order that maintains their dominance in the social hierarchy.

### **Fragile Objects**

Not all the objects in *Delta Wedding* work to support patriarchy, and many reveal the complications women faced in living out the paradox of white southern womanhood. Welty’s novel reveals how existing under the patriarchal system, even as they helped reproduce it, had serious consequences for the personal lives of southern women, and the anxiety produced by their ambivalent position is often embodied in objects. Ellen’s lost garnet brooch, for example, signifies the loss of her sexuality that has been appropriated in service of reproducing the clan.

Women subjected to the tenets of white southern womanhood were stripped of sexuality while paradoxically tasked with giving birth to as many children as the patriarch deemed appropriate. “[I]n the face of the idealization of the family and the aura of sanctity surrounding the word ‘mother,’” suggest Anne Firor Scott, “only in private could women give voice to the misery of endless pregnancies, with attendant illness, and the dreadful fear of childbirth” (37).

*Delta Wedding* captures this dynamic in part through its depiction of Ellen Fairchild, pregnant with her ninth child. Throughout the novel she reflects on the burden of her duties, once explicitly thinking, “she was tired, and sometimes now the whole world seemed rampant, running away from her, and she would always be carrying another child to bring into it” (166). The novel makes the connection between the lost brooch and Ellen's sexual anxiety clear as she meets a girl in the woods while looking for the brooch. The narration renders the girl in explicitly sexual terms. Ellen is struck by her beauty, and the narrator notes “her hazel eyes looking not downward at the state of her skirt but levelly into the woods around and the bayou” (158). The description of the girl also draws a parallel between her clothing and the lost brooch as she “look[s] down at the red glass buttons on her dress” (160). The encounter with this girl who shows no deference and appears in full possession of her sexuality reads like an encounter with the sublime for Ellen. She begins to reach out for her, but suddenly feels “as if someone had seen her naked” (158). Ellen immediately begins thinking about her role as a mother. The narrator states, “She felt sometimes like a mother to the world, all that was on her!” (158).

Though Ellen is intrigued by the girl's refusal to obey of the proscribed limits of female sexuality, she immediately recalls the violence to which such flaunting makes the girl vulnerable. After Ellen recovers from her shock, she begins chiding the girl for traveling in the woods alone, warning her about the ways men appropriate women's sexuality. “I wasn't speaking about any

little possession to you,” Ellen states, “I suppose I was speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men—men, our lives” (159). When George later reveals that he raped the girl, Ellen “seemed to let go in her whole body, and stood languidly still under her star a moment, then pulled her apron where it still shone white in the dogwood tree and tried to tie it back on” (167). Ellen accepts that men will always subject women to sexual violence for their purposes and steps back into her role as the southern matriarch. She ties her apron, its symbolic whiteness contrasting with the sensuous red of the lost garnet brooch, and goes to Dabney, who she knows “will be looking everywhere for her mother” (169).

Ellen’s daughters also feel the strain of living up to the image of white southern womanhood, and their rebellions from this role register in their relationship to objects. As the next generation of Fairchild women, they are less willing to be defined by the past. Shelley, with her interest in literature and her lack of interest in marriage, does not fit the model of the southern belle. The objects Shelley uses to decorate her room illustrate her rebellion from the family’s memorializing tendencies. There are picture frames on Shelley’s walls, but when Laura asks her if these are her grandparents, “Shelley had told her they weren’t anybody,” (170). Throughout the novel Shelley is preparing for a trip to Europe, and the only personal pictures she does display in her room are from her trip West, indicating her desire to leave the Delta. Though Shelley has a collection of family jewelry, she “would not be caught dead wearing any of them” (171). Significantly, the only piece of jewelry she is interested in wearing is Ellen’s garnet brooch, a symbol of her resistance to marriage and reproductive servitude. Shelley balks at the ideals of white southern womanhood as she criticizes her father and speaks frankly about sex, chiding him for “getting Mama into this predicament—again and again” (318).



Dabney's rebellion from the Fairchild identity registers in her treatment of the family's cherished possessions. Though Shelley is the most rebellious Fairchild daughter, it is Dabney, the perfect model of the southern belle, whose actions most threaten the family's norms. Dabney's decision to marry Troy jeopardizes the Fairchild identity as it puts it in explicitly intimate contact with its own typically disavowed economic base, thereby disturbing conceptions of the Fairchild aristocracy. The anxiety caused by this threat is palpable throughout the novel: "Troy Flavin was the overseer. The Fairchilds would die, everybody said, if this happened" (119). But Dabney seems unmoved by these concerns: when she visits Aunt Jim Allen and Aunt Primrose at the Grove, she sees the objects that fill the house as "foolish, breakable little things," and when she returns home with the nightlight, she completely forgets about it in her haste to meet Troy: "[S]he dropped the little night light, and it broke and its pieces scattered. They heard that but no cry at all—only the opening and closing of the screen door as she went inside" (129, 41). Dabney, who should cherish the nightlight as a piece of herself, disregards it for Troy, and it becomes "a little old piece of glass that Dabney would never miss" (141). As Dabney rebels against her prescribed role by marrying outside her class, she also rebels against the objects that work to define her.

As the nightlight illustrates, the objects that embody the Fairchild identity are breakable, and this breakability reveals the tenuous nature of their constructed sense of self. The novel often reveals this fragility by depicting objects as trembling. For example, the "throb of the compress" vibrates through Shellmound, and Laura feels it "in the handle of her cup, the noiseless vibration that trembled in the best china" (105). Yaeger astutely reads this trembling as "the simultaneous awakening and repressing of commodity creation, of the productive labor that makes the leisured life possible, providing the capital that underwrites the most trivial acts of consumption" (98).

The Fairchilds' objects embody the labor disavowed to naturalize the family's place in the social order, and their fragility threatens to expose it. Further, when the internal harmony between the family and their workers breaks, it disturbs the illusion of a natural, paternalistic relationship. Both Dabney and Ellen discipline workers in the novel, and they each break into "trembling" (315). Brannon Costello reads this reaction as the breaking down of the Fairchilds' illusion of domestic racial integration: "[T]he smooth pedestal on which these aristocrats stand is revealed, if only for an instant, to be instead a mass of black laborers. The true nature of their relationship with their workers threatens to break through layers of repression and mystification" (49). The Fairchilds build their aristocratic identity on the repression of their reliance on coerced labor, and the tremble threatens to expose its constructed nature.

It is Robbie, however, who rebels most from conforming to the norms of aristocratic identity, and she sets herself apart through the way she composes her material domestic space. Robbie's outsider status is a product of her class standing. After marrying George, she enjoys the Fairchilds' privilege, yet she aligns herself unapologetically with the new business class, eschewing aristocratic pretensions. Her rejection of the Fairchild life can be seen in the way she decorates the Memphis apartment she shares with George. The "rich velvet upholstery, blue with gold stripes" that covers the furniture, the "pillows with golden tassels," the lamps with "shades of mauve georgette over rose China silk," and the "mahogany bed," all "new shiny and expensive," and all "bought in Memphis," illustrate her denial of the Fairchild identity (227, 228). These bourgeois furnishings are not monuments to an aristocratic family history, but provide a sense of detachment from the Fairchild past. Furthermore, their sensuous nature foregrounds her refusal to abide by the family's restrictions on female sexuality.

Importantly, Robbie levels the clearest critique at the Fairchilds. She describes her previous attempt to become a Fairchild woman in terms of decorating. Arguing with the other Fairchild women, Robbie states, “Once I tried to be like the Fairchilds. I thought I knew how. [. . .] And I had a living room for him just like Miss Tempe’s” (254). Robbie attempted to become a member of the family by reproducing the object world of their domestic space, and her comment reveals the family’s reliance on material possessions to anchor their sense of aristocratic identity. In one of the most telling scenes in the novel, Robbie states, “‘You’re just loving yourselves in each other—yourselves over and over again!’ She flung the small brown hand at the paintings of melons and grapes that had been trembling on the wall from the commotion in the house, forgetting that they were not portraits of Fairchilds in this room” (255). Robbie’s outburst foregrounds the idea that the Fairchilds have merely reproduced themselves over the generations, but the trembling identifies the painting as an object that exposes the Fairchild identity as constructed. Her mistake about the portrait reveals the fundamental absence inherent in that identity, hinting that the painting of the fruit may say as much about what it means to be a Fairchild as a portrait of a Fairchild ancestor. This still life, a portrait of objects, illuminates the Fairchilds’ reliance on objects in constructing a sense of self. The painting’s subject, agricultural products, only serves to illuminate cotton production as the source of the Fairchilds’ wealth.

### **From the Delta to Jackson**

Costello notes that Welty chose to set *Delta Wedding* in 1923 “because so little happened in the Delta that year,” yet it is unlikely that 1923 would have been very quiet for the Fairchilds (39). The post-World War I era was a time of great social upheaval in the Delta, particularly in regards to controlling labor. Black veterans returned to plantations with a new assertiveness.

They had fought for their country and were unwilling to return to lives of enforced servitude. “The planters,” Woodruff suggests, “had realized their worst fears—that black people would not act in stereotypical ways, but as people making their rightful claims for the fruits of their own labor and the liberties guaranteed them under the Constitution” (108). Black residents of the Delta challenged white authority by forming unions, fraternal brotherhoods, and enlisting the help of the NAACP, an assertiveness met by increased racial violence. Those who were unwilling to risk violence to fight white supremacy in the South simply migrated north to find work in factories, and they did so in astounding numbers: “The U.S. Department of Labor estimated that nine thousand black people [. . .] had left the Yazoo Delta between the fall of 1922 and May of 1923,” and a survey conducted by the Associated Negro Press reflected that “the migration of the 1920s occurred because of intimidation and lynchings” (140-41). Indeed, the anxieties felt throughout the novel in regards to the workforce and the maintenance of a constructed social order make perfect sense in the 1920s Delta setting.

The novel gives the reader a portrait of a family in the midst of changing to meet the needs of a changing society. As the Fairchild women rebel against their constructed identities, they act as agents of change. The most obvious rebellion is the marriage that will alter the family and disrupt their carefully preserved aristocratic identity by allowing a member of the lower class to enter the family. This alteration, however, is necessary for the Fairchilds to maintain control over their labor and continue to be successful in the cotton trade. If Dabney married Dickey Boy Featherstone, a suitor from the same class as the Fairchilds, the family would stagnate with another patriarch who does not know how to run the business. As Liza Kramer notes, “While [Dabney’s] breach of aristocratic class solidarity offends the family, subconsciously they know that the skills and allegiances that Troy brings to the marriage will help bulwark white

(Fairchild) privilege” (144). The family will benefit from Troy’s inclusion in the Fairchild clan because Troy’s superior understanding of how to run a plantation in this economy will be important for maintaining their privileged place in the future. While they wish to maintain an image of solidarity and isolation, they must change with the changing world.

As *Delta Wedding* makes these changes to the Fairchild family apparent, it suggests the inability of plantation culture to reproduce itself indefinitely. The most striking image of the impending rupture of Fairchild identity comes as Laura and Roy explore the Marmion house. Marmion, which will be Dabney and Troy’s new residence, will one day be passed down to Laura. Though the house stands as a symbol of the Fairchild past, Laura’s experience at Marmion reads as more prophetic than elegiac. As Laura and Roy enter the house, they see that it is “quite empty of furnishings” (264). This emptiness implies the end of the objects and narratives that inform the Fairchild identity. Both the “little piano,” which there is no one to play, and the chandelier, “with its burned down candles, as though a great thing had sometime happened here,” suggest only the residue of the aristocratic opulence that once defined the Fairchilds (264). The Fairchilds’ vulnerability to the upheavals of historical movement is evident as the narrator describes the chandelier as hanging “like a pendulum that would swing in a clock but no one starts it” (264). As Suzanne Marrs notes, this imagery “seem[s] ominous and suggest[s] the finality of death. [. . . ]t is life’s transience that most members of the Fairchild family refuse to face, and it is this aspect of reality that young Laura McRaven encounters when she and Roy come alone to Marmion” (*One* 86, 87). While most of the Fairchilds look to the past to justify their aristocratic privilege, the youngest members of the family cannot escape the impending upheavals of historical movement.

The more potent threat in this scene, however, is the transience of the constructed social order. At Marmion, existing without the material possessions that mediate social relations, Laura and Roy encounter Aunt Studney, an old African American woman who, according to Roy, even Battle Fairchild is “scared of” (263). While in the house, a swarm of bees attacks the children: “All at once a bee flew out at her—out of the piano? Out of Aunt Studney’s sack? Everywhere! Why there were bees inside everything, inside the piano, inside the walls. The place was alive. She wanted to cry out herself. She heard a hum everywhere, in everything. She stood electrified—and indignant” (265). In this passage the future generation of Fairchilds is confronted with an African American worker who refuses to align with the constructed social order, who refuses to be atmospheric. Aunt Studney releases from her sack the hum of the compress and the workers that has haunted the edges of the narration and set objects trembling throughout the novel. The labor of the workers has finally been released from its embodiment in objects and confronts the young Fairchilds.

As Marrs notes, early reviews of *Delta Wedding* labeled it an “escapist” and “nostalgic” view of the Mississippi Delta plantation (*One* 75). In telling the story of a plantation family set in the past, the novel threatens to reproduce the melancholic structure ingrained in southern culture. Welty avoids nostalgia, however, by not romanticizing the Fairchilds as a representation of an ideal, static social order. Through depicting the changing lives of its characters, *Delta Wedding* reveals both the constructed nature of plantation culture and its inability to reproduce itself as a static insular system. Early reviewers of Welty’s novel can perhaps be forgiven for seeing the work as nostalgic, since Welty’s critique of plantation culture avoids a simple oppositional resistance, giving instead a much more subtle examination of the lives of the women who lived in this world. This subtlety suits these women’s relationship with patriarchal culture, which can

best be described as ambivalent: both complicit in and subject to the South's patriarchal social order, both constructing patriarchy and struggling under its confines. Welty's attention to material objects thematizes this subtlety, elucidating the effectiveness of these constructions in producing a lasting social order in the South. These atmospheric objects—portraits, decorations, family heirlooms, china sets—naturalize privilege in the most subtle, indirect way, by making it a concrete fact of the social world. While the family in the novel undergoes necessary changes, however, their relationship to the material domestic environment changes as well.

### ***The Optimist's Daughter* and the New Consumer South**

The Souths of *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* are very different places. As the South moved from an agrarian to an industrial economy and as women began to participate in this economy, the role of the southern woman began to change. New Deal agencies such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Civil Works Administration, and the WPA created jobs for women of the South, and the advent of World War II prompted even more women to join the workforce to supplement labor shortages: "As many as 4 million women worked outside the home in 1940 and by 1945 as many as 5 million did so. That national percentage of women in the workforce leapt from 24 percent before the war to 36 percent by its end. In the South, about the same percentage of women entered the workforce" (Turner 206-7). Southern women, no longer relegated to the domestic sphere, became participants in the industrial economy.

The new consumer economy was often used to reinforce patriarchal power structures already in place. The scene in *Delta Wedding* in which Laura visits the Fairchild store

foregrounds how the Fairchilds use the commodity market to support hierarchical social relations. The store itself, a general store run by wealthy landowners, acts as a site of economic control over the labor force. Grace Elizabeth Hale suggests that such general stores served as a means for storeowners and landowners to control African American and poor white farmers by mediating consumption. “[I]n many localities,” writes Hale, “the same white man served as storekeeper, creditor, and landowner . . . T]hrough the general store a new way a business reinforced an older localized white male authority” (172). At the Fairchild store, “any member of the Fairchild family in its widest sense, who wanted to, could go into the store, walk behind the counter, reach in and take anything on earth, without having to pay or even specify exactly what he took. It was like the pantry at Shellmound” (225). Though the store works as a site of racial ordering through the control of the workers’ consumption, the Fairchilds stay removed from the store as a site of exchange, thereby protecting their sense of a naturalized social order unaffected by economic circumstance. As Costello notes, “No currency changes hands in these transactions; no money begrimes the soft palms of the sons and daughters of Shellmound” (45).

The new consumer climate, however, also altered southern women’s relationships to objects. The scene in the store makes the generational difference in the relationship to consumer goods apparent. Though the Fairchilds can take anything they want from the store, it is also important to note the way they differentiate between the cherished family objects and those objects in the store made available to the community. For example, when Dabney chooses a glass bowl as her wedding present from the parlor at the Grove, the aunts protest, “‘No, no! No, indeed, you’ll not take that trifling little thing! It’s nothing but plain glass!’ ‘It came from the Fairchild’s store’” (132). Also, when Laura searches the store for a present for George, she exclaims, “Nothing you have is good enough” (227). The commodities at the store come into



contact with the labor force through the process of exchange and are actually a source of producing wealth in and of themselves. By representing a difference in quality, they also construct the social relations that produce the Fairchilds' privilege. However, while Laura realizes that nothing in the store will be "good enough" for George, her experience of the objects in the store is filled with wonder. After listing the numerous commodities for sale in the story, the narrator notes, "all these things held the purest enchantment for her" (226).

Laura's experience in the store mirrors Welty's own childhood experience with consumer culture. In her essay, "The Little Store" (1985), Welty recounts her mother sending her to the store for necessities as an epic adventure from her childhood. Welty notes that this was still a time when "it was possible to have a little pasture behind your backyard where you could keep a jersey cow" and when you could get your groceries delivered. She writes that to her knowledge, her own mother "never set foot inside a grocery store. It wasn't necessary" (*Stories* 819). When, in the case of emergency, a trip to the store did become necessary, Welty's mother would send her to do the shopping. Welty's description of the store uses the same language she employs to describe Laura's experience, invoking a new attitude toward shopping that favors pleasure over necessity: "Enchantment is cast upon you by all those things you weren't supposed to have need for" (822). Welty recognizes this feeling of enchantment as not singular, but part of a new orientation toward the material world experienced by her generation. She wagers, "I'll bet the nickel that would be left over that all over the country, for those of my day, the neighborhood grocery played a similar part in our growing up" (819).

*The Optimist's Daughter* depicts a postwar South undergoing social change as a growing consumer culture offers new opportunities for self-creation and social climbing. In this new consumer climate, identity became less defined by lineage and more by what could be bought.

The novel foregrounds the anxiety of the southern elite produced by these conditions through its depiction of the matriarchs of Mt. Salus who guard their world of privilege against lower-class interlopers. Though times have changed, these women still turn to the past as a means of enforcing the social order of racial and class hierarchy. As Laurel McKelva Hand returns to her childhood home to oversee her father's funeral, she confronts a house full of objects that embody the past. Laurel is caught between her need to move past her losses and the imperative to memorialize the past that is her duty as an elite southern woman. Her struggle is offset by Fay, whose engagement with consumer products works as a means of self-creation unencumbered by the past. Welty uses the object world of the novel to dramatize the struggle of the white southern woman to adapt to social change. Through its investigation of the ways in which objects can work both to concretize class boundaries by enshrining the past and transgress those same boundaries, Welty's novel suggests the need for the southern woman to find ways to transcend the monumental past and imagine a future.

Laurel McKelva Hand seems an odd character to serve as a focal point for this analysis as she does not fit the mold of the southern matriarch. She is not a domestic goddess, but rather works outside the home as a fabric designer, a career that ties her to textiles, an industry important to southern modernization. She does not live in the South, having migrated with her husband to Chicago. Furthermore, she is childless, and because her husband died in World War II, it seems unlikely she will have children to indoctrinate into southern society. In many ways, however, she represents the struggle of the white southern woman to adapt to changes in southern society. Her marriage to Phil Hand enacts the reconciliation of the North and South, an important trope in the industrialization of the South. And though Laurel works outside the home, her job as a fabric designer acts as an extension of women's traditional domestic duties, keeping

her tied to the domestic sphere. This idea is particularly important as the sewing, as it did in Porter, becomes a metaphor for the construction of family narrative. While in many ways Laurel has escaped the traditional life of the southern lady, she remains bound to the tradition, and this is nowhere more apparent than in her attempts to mourn the past.

At the opening of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel travels to New Orleans to help her father, Judge McKelva, deal with an eye surgery. When the Judge dies, she returns home to Mt. Salus to oversee the funeral and set her father's house in order. Very much a book about mourning, *The Optimist's Daughter* tells the story of Laurel's struggle to mourn not just for her father, but for her late mother and husband as well. Laurel's dilemma centers on her inability to escape from the past and the constant presence of her memories in the present in order to imagine a future. Throughout the novel, Welty portrays these differing attitudes toward the past in terms of people's interactions with objects, and in the end Laurel must shed herself of the items that most represent her past so that she can move on with her life.

Laurel's struggles with understanding the past are offset by her interactions with her stepmother, the Judge's new wife, Fay. Fay in many ways represents the antithesis of Laurel's attachment to the past. When, at the hospital, Laurel asks Fay about her family, Fay replies, "None of 'em living," and goes on to give a version of her family history obviously meant to criticize Laurel's decision to move to Chicago (898). When Fay's family arrives at the Judge's funeral, however, it becomes clear that Fay lies about her past. When Laurel and Fay have their final confrontation at the end of the novel, Fay states, "The past isn't a thing to me. I belong to the future, didn't you know that?" (990). In the new social climate, Fay refuses to be defined by her past, instead constructing a new identity for her future. As a member of the working class, she meets the Judge while working at a resort hotel as a typist. She uses her position as woman in

the workforce to find her way into the aristocracy. Fay, whose marriage to the Judge has both improved her conditions and disrupted the social hierarchy, is not interested in memorializing the past, but in self-creation.

In many ways Fay represents the new consumer culture that puts less emphasis on lineage and social standing than on what one can buy and own. Hale suggests the importance of understanding consumer culture as “designating not just the increasing importance of buying—including what and how a person eats and dresses and relaxes—but also consumption’s centrality to how she understands and locates her very self” (7). Thus consuming habits became a major factor in understanding identity in the new mercantile climate, perhaps supplanting genealogy and inherited wealth as indicators of social standing. Ted Ownby discusses the role of new forms of consumerism in changing the South, suggesting that the rise of cash stores, department stores, mail order catalogs, and national chains “opened new opportunities for shopping outside the yearly agricultural cycle of credit and debt” (88). Also, as the number of wage earners increased as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, more people from the lower class were able to participate in the consumer economy, erasing what one could buy and own as a defining difference between classes. Consumerism, the very tool the southern aristocracy had once used to control and define themselves against the lower classes, had increasingly become a means of blurring those very distinctions. Even the South itself had become something of a commodity by this point. Hale suggests that white southerners, who began to see farming as “hard work, not nostalgia,” “demonstrated their own regional and racial loyalties through the purchase of Robert E. Lee flour, the nationally and yet regionally produced Coca-Cola, and even the UDC-endorsed ‘Library for Southern Homes.’ The book and film versions of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* made white southernness a national bestseller” (147). In this new consumer climate,

identity, and particularly southern identity, became less defined by family history and a relation to the past and more by the commodities one chose to buy.

### **Carnival Souvenirs**

Welty renders the differences between Laurel and Fay immediately recognizable through their clothes. Laurel is described as wearing “clothes of an interesting cut and texture, although her suit was wintry for New Orleans and had a wrinkle down the skirt” (883). Laurel’s sober dress is contrasted with Fay’s “dress with gold buttons” and her “sandaled foot” (883). While Laurel’s dress is appropriate for a visit to the hospital with her father, the text foregrounds its out-of-placeness in the Carnival atmosphere of New Orleans. Fay, on the other hand, in her gaudy attire, appears dressed for the festivities, a view confirmed by her constant complaints of missing the parades. Robert Brinkmeyer argues that the setting of this early encounter with Fay is important for understanding her role in the novel:

During Carnival reigns a gay relativity that Bakhtin characterizes as subversive to the status quo, in that it suspends everyday conventions and hierarchies that structure people’s lives and determine how they perceive themselves and the world . [ . . . ] carnival freedom both repudiates and invokes traditional hierarchies, forefronting normally unquestioned categories of thought and social order and thereby demystifying their stranglehold on the consciousness. (431)

Fay’s alignment with the Carnival atmosphere foregrounds her position as a figure that disrupts the social hierarchy by revealing its constructed nature, and she does this primarily through her clothing. Besides her gaudy dress, Fay slips away from the hospital to purchase “long green

eardrops” and a pair of shoes, “green, with a stiletto heel” (897, 898). The purchase of the earrings and shoes, souvenirs of the Carnival, works in ways similar to the family heirlooms discussed in this analysis but with some key differences. Susan Stewart suggests that the souvenir works as an object that “authenticates the experience of the viewer,” much in the same way the family heirloom validates the position of the family member (134). The souvenir also depends on narrative, as it commemorates “events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative” (135). Stewart, however, recognizes the major difference between “purchasable,” “mass-produced souvenirs” and objects such as the family heirloom as the ability of the souvenir to allow the consumer “to instantly purchase a sign of their own life histories” (138-398). Fay’s purchases illustrate her attitude toward an authenticating past; it does not rely on a family history, but can be purchased at any time. The relation between her purchases and the Carnival foreground the threat this attitude poses toward a social order based in the past.

Indeed, all of Laurel’s experiences in New Orleans put her in close contact with the lower-classes, and the novel highlights their differences from Laurel through the objects with which they surround themselves. Laurel’s father shares his room at the hospital with Mr. Dalzell, an elderly man whose senility has left him on a perpetual camping trip with his son. Much like Laurel’s father, Mr. Dalzell is a southern patriarch who has been cordoned off in the past. Mr. Dalzell’s family waits in the waiting room, crowding Laurel while Fay joins in their conversation. Archie Lee, Mr. Dalzell’s son, bickers with his family about not wanting to visit his father, drinking whiskey and complaining, “He don’t know I’m living” (904). The family takes up all the space in the waiting room, spreading out on the couches while “open shoeboxes and paper sacks stood about on the floor” (903). Surrounded by the refuse of consumption, their

attitude toward their material environment reflects their attitude toward their family's past. Mr. Dalzell suffers from his family's refusal to pay reverence to him as an ancestor. As for Fay, the past is easily discarded for the Dalzells. As Daniel Traber suggests, the novel distinguishes between Laurel and the other people in the waiting room in that "they do not idealize dying as a transcendental moment worthy of mystification" (187). While Laurel waits for news about her father in quiet reverence, the Dalzell family only shows grief through a loud, raucous performance that recalls the Carnival performances, and Fay easily joins them.

Even the Hibiscus, the hotel Laurel and Fay share in New Orleans, represents the subversion of class distinctions that coincides with the Carnival. The Hibiscus "was a decayed mansion on a changing street; what had been built as its twin next door was a lesson to it now: it was far along in the course of being demolished" (892). This situation illustrates that Fay's identity construction perfectly reflects the logic of the postmodern era. Rather than serving as a monument, the hotel has been replaced, in the logic of mass production, with its replica. Laurel's experience in the hotel once again foregrounds the threat this logic poses to older modes of identity construction. In the hotel, Laurel and Fay share adjoining rooms separated only by a thin strip of wallboard, and "Laurel shrank from contact; she shrank from that thin board and from the vague apprehension that some night she might hear Fay cry or laugh like a stranger at something she herself would rather not know" (892). In every scene in New Orleans, Laurel is confronted with a lack of separation between herself and members of the lower class, and her discomfort is palpable.

### **Return to Mt. Salus**

If Laurel is the outsider in the Carnival atmosphere of New Orleans, Fay becomes the outsider when they return to Mt. Salus after the Judge's death. Laurel's bridesmaids greet her at the train station as a show of female "solidarity," and when they arrive at the McKelva residence, they are greeted by "the last, devoted remnants of the old Garden Club. [. . .] for Laurel's mother's sake" (912, 914). The presence of the Garden Club, representative of the Mt. Salus matriarchs, indicates that mourning in Mt. Salus is still part of the female, domestic world. They take care of Laurel, invoking her late mother's name in the task, by decorating the house with flowers and preparing an overabundance of food. The only man present when they arrive is Major Bullock, an old friend of Judge McKelva, and he acts as a disruptive force, getting in the way and saying the wrong things. Also, he is the only one present who continually worries about Fay. The other women understand Fay as an outsider who will not understand or appreciate their efforts. Fay distinguishes herself as an outsider almost immediately as she complains about their presence and asks, "What's Becky's Garden Club got to do with me?" (914). Although Fay is the outsider to the community, she claims the house as her own: "Fay expresses the meaning of place in capitalist terms," Traber writes, "This house and its objects are now Fay's private property; they belong to her, and the way they figure in the memories of other people is irrelevant to her own life" (193). While the matriarchs of Mt. Salus attempt to do their diligence in mourning with Laurel, Fay rejects their traditions. The home is hers because she has inherited it from her late husband, and she blocks their attempt to appropriate the domestic space in the name of Laurel's late mother.

Welty materializes Fay's intrusion into Laurel's life and home through the way she redecorates the house. Before the funeral the next day, Laurel checks on Fay and notices the changes she has made in her parents' bedroom:



Instead of her mother's writing cabinet that used to stand between those windows, the bed faced her. It seemed to swim in a bath of pink light. The mahogany headboard, rising high as the mantelpiece, had been quilted from top to bottom in peach satin; peach satin smothered the windows all around. [. . .] Then she saw the new green shoes placed like ornaments on top of the mantel shelf. (918)

Fay has replaced Becky's reserved décor with her own gaudy furnishings, their sensuality contrasting with the image of the reserved white southern woman. Fay's tropical, perhaps even Caribbean, tastes signal the entrance of the New Orleans Carnival into Laurel's home, enacting the upending of the social order in the domestic space. The scene recalls the furnishings of Robbie's Memphis apartment from *Delta Wedding*, which worked to distinguish her from the Fairchilds, yet this is more insulting to Laurel's sense of dignity in that Fay is redecorating her childhood home, covering over Laurel's sacred, domestic objects with her own consumer identity.

Importantly, Fay is also rendered an outsider by the Mt. Salus matriarchs because of her lack of domestic skill. When discussing what having her in Mt. Salus has been like, the women note, "she had very little idea how to separate an egg," and "'Frying pan' was the one name she could give you of all the things your mother had in that kitchen" (947). As Ann Romines suggests, "To these women, housekeeping is the medium in which women enact their values; continuity, order, fidelity, and filial piety" (259). The women chide Fay for not living up to the standards set by the community as exemplified in her mother's superior skills. Becky's memory, tied to the arsenal of cooking materials in her kitchen, is degraded by Fay's inability to carry on domestic traditions. Instead, Miss Tennyson notes that Fay did "[n]othing but sit-and-eat" (946).

Fay, rather than using the domestic sphere as a place of reproduction, as enacted through the traditions of cooking, is again identified as a pure consumer.

When Fay's family shows up unexpectedly at the funeral, they are immediately relegated to lower class intruders as Laurel compares them to the families in the waiting room at the hospital, suggesting that they belong to "the great, interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them" (934). Laurel's comment suggests that their inability to understand the past prohibits them from accessing meaning. Like the families in the waiting room, they do not follow the customs of the genteel class in regards to mourning and death. Mrs. Chisom makes herself too comfortable, sitting in the Judge's smoking chair and speaking of taboo subjects such as money, commenting, "A grand coffin my little girl's afforded. Makes me jealous" (922). While Mr. Chisom brings food, his modest offering of pecans comes with a bag of shells he asks Laurel to throw away, another bag of refuse from the consumers. Perhaps most telling, when discussing Fay's absent brother Dewitt, Bubba comments, "He's got folks' appliances stacked over ever' blooming inch of space. You can't hardly get in across those vacuum cleaners and power motors and bathroom heaters and old window fans, and not one of 'em running" (942). The story paints a picture of the lower classes mired in their own refuse of throw-away consumer products in contrast to the memorialized objects that construct identity for the elites. Perhaps most insulting, at the burial Laurel learns that Fay has moved the Judge's grave site away from her mother's grave to a new part of the cemetery. The Chisoms have appropriated the memorial to the Judge, thereby appropriating his memory and the Judge himself as one of their own. "Whatever he was," according to Fay's sister, "we always knew he was just plain *folks*" (941).

While Fay may not be a model for Laurel to emulate, her presence exposes the elite's practices as similarly performative and ultimately repressive. When Fay comes downstairs for the funeral, she is dressed for performance, "glistening in black satin" (933). She throws an unrestrained fit, fighting those trying to comfort her and throwing herself onto the Judge's body before being dragged out of the room. Later, her mother commends the timing of her performance, stating, "I'm glad you broke down *when you did*, Wanda Fay . . . ] There's a time and a place for everything" (941). Laurel is offended by her behavior at the funeral, but she is equally disgusted with the performance of the residents of Mt. Salus. They begin telling stories about the Judge, but Laurel realizes that the stories are idealized versions of the Judge's life. Much as Miranda's relatives do for Gabriel, the Judge's friends and family romanticize his life. She comments, "They're misrepresenting him—falsifying," and later when her bridesmaids are telling stories about the Judge and Becky, Laurel asks, "Are they just figures from now on to make a good story" (933, 960). The elite characters follow the dictum of southern mourning by idealizing the dead through narrative, and Miss Adele calls attention to the similarities and differences in their behavior and Fay's behavior by saying, "I think that carrying-on was Fay's idea of giving a sad occasion its due . . . ] She wanted nothing but the best for her husband's funeral, only the most expensive casket, the most choice cemetery plot" (949). Fay feels the best way to memorialize the Judge is by buying expensive things and putting on a show for the town, yet her behavior only calls attention to the performative nature of the mourning practices of the elite. Laurel feels conflicted by her duty as a southern woman to idealize her father through narrative and her need to come to a real understanding of the meaning of her father's death. After Laurel chides her bridesmaids for poking fun at her late parents, Tish asks, "Aren't we grieving?"

We're grieving *with* you" (960). Laurel realizes that she cannot follow the mourning customs of the collective if she is to find peace.

While race does not play a major role in *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel's interactions with Missouri, her family's house servant, remind the reader of the conditions on which the performance of the southern elite is based. When Laurel wakes on the day of the funeral, Missouri gives her comfort: "'Well, *I'm* here and *you're* here,' said Missouri. It was the bargain to give and take comfort" (917). Missouri consoles Laurel by suggesting that while some facets of social relations have been upended, others are still in place. Missouri, we learn later at the funeral, came to stay with the McKelvas after the Judge used her as a witness to a crime and protected her from vigilantes outside the courthouse: Laurel notes, "He brought her here afterwards and kept her safe under his own roof" (932). Missouri's story enacts the paternalism that props the social order. The Judge protects Missouri and keeps her safe. Her presence in the house is important because it retains some semblance of social order, even as Fay's presence disrupts that order. Although the house has been invaded by a woman from the lower class, Missouri reminds Laurel that they are both in the house, master and servant, and the social order is still in place. However, Missouri also reminds the reader that, just as in the relationship with the Fairchilds and their workers, "the bargain" of paternalism is based in coercion and performance.

### **Mourning with Empty Hands**

Laurel finds her chance to comprehend her parents in an unidealized way when Fay takes a trip home to Madrid. Significantly, she seeks this insight through an examination of the

remaining objects in the house that she remembers from childhood, hoping to reach a fuller understanding of her losses. In this section of the novel, Welty uses form to reflect Laurel's act of mourning. As Laurel moves from object to object, the narration flows seamlessly from the present to the past. This narrative compression of time demonstrates the active presence of memory in the present. Rather than recalling romanticized narratives, however, Laurel recalls the past in all its flawed and painful truth, working through her grief and mourning for her lost family.

Laurel begins by going through her father's things in the library. There are "portraits of his father and grandfather, the Confederate general and missionary to China, as alike as two peaches," hanging on the wall, and in the books on the shelves, Laurel "hear[s] their voices, father's and mother's (954, 955). The portraits invoke the idealized, genealogical past, and the books, which Laurel dusts and sets "back in the same order," represent the imperative Laurel feels to arrange her family narratives, putting them in their place (955).<sup>22</sup> When Laurel continues to search through her father's things, however, she discovers a version of him quite different from the southern patriarch in the stories told about him. She finds "lawbooks and journals," "civic papers dating from the days when he was mayor of Mount Salus, and an old dedication speech made at the opening of the new school" (955). Laurel remembers her father's everyday work as a lawyer and politician and thinks, "everybody had already forgotten all about that part of his life, his work, his *drudgery*. This town deserved him no more than Fay deserved him" (955-956). When Laurel looks through her father's business papers, she recovers an unidealized image of her father and chides both Fay and the residents of Mt. Salus for eliding the

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<sup>22</sup> Christina Neckles writes on the importance of the library, suggesting "the books become a vehicle for Laurel's willfully isolated memories. Laurel preserves the arrangement of texts to continue constructing her idealized story about her parents' marriage and her own; they are stories that—when Laurel thinks of them at all—she wishes to dust and then 'set them back in the same order'" (166).

unromantic, the “*drudgery*” on which he built his life. Just as Laurel rejects the Chisom’s appropriation of the Judge as “just plain *folks*,” she also rejects the Mt. Salus elite for forgetting this important part of his life as they construct an idealized memory of him.

As Laurel inspects the Judge’s desk, she constructs a more accurate memory of who the Judge was. The desk “stood in the center of the room, and it had been her father’s great-grandfather’s, made in Edinburgh—a massive, concentrated presence, like that of a concert grand” (956). The desk, a family heirloom passed down through generations, linking the family to an elite genealogical line, should act as a means providing aristocratic identity. Laurel is shocked at first to find “vermillion drops of... nail polish” staining the desk, taking this as a sign of Fay’s defilement of her family (957). When she opens the desk drawers, however, she finds them empty. She wonders what happened to the letters her mother had written to her father, but she soon remembers that “he hadn’t kept them . [ . . . ] He had dispatched all his correspondence promptly, and dropped letters as he answered them straight into the wastebasket; Laurel had seen him do it” (957). Laurel remembers that her father was never one to memorialize and dwell in the past. The titular optimist, he had always looked to the future. As a man of the New South, he did not use the desk to legitimize his identity as a southern aristocrat, but as a tool in his business practice. Laurel remembers the Judge making his retirement money after selling land to be drilled for oil after the flood had rendered it useless, commenting, “There was never anything wrong with keeping up a little optimism over the Flood” (956). The Judge, not one to perform the role of plantation aristocrat, saw the flood that would have ruined the Fairchilds as a lucrative business opportunity. As Laurel is thinking these thoughts, she turns to the window to see “Miss Adele was hanging something white on the clothesline” (955). The domestic chore and the symbolic whiteness of the laundry identifies Miss Adele as a figure of white southern

womanhood, but Laurel “realize[s] how often her father must have stood just here, resting his eyes, and looked out without ever seeing her” (955). Judge McKelva, his mind on his work, would not have recognized this central symbol of southern identity. He was never the Old South aristocrat, but a forward-thinking business man and politician, a fact obscured by the town’s stories.

In the Judge’s final days, it was an inability to see a future that finally ended his life. When he first tells Dr. Courtland about his eye trouble, he states, “I was forced into the conclusion I’d started seeing behind me” (884). And when Laurel recalls his last days in the hospital, she wonders, “As he lay without moving in the hospital he had concentrated utterly on time passing, indeed he had. But which way had it been going for him? When he could no longer get up and encourage it, push it forward, had it turned on him, started moving back the other way?” (976). The Judge had not constructed his identity based on the past while living, and his movement into the past—a movement evidenced when he calls Fay by Becky’s name at the hospital—leads to his death.

When Laurel finds herself locked in the old sewing room, the room immediately brings back memories of the time Laurel and her mother spent here: “Laurel sat on this floor and put together the fallen scraps of cloth into stars, flowers, birds, people, or whatever she liked to call them, lining them up, spacing them out, making them into patterns, families, on the sweet-smelling matting, with the shine of firelight, or the summer light, moving over mother and child and what they both were making” (964). These memories recall for Laurel her mother’s teaching her in the ways of domesticity, lessons that have followed Laurel into her professional life. Reminiscent of Porter’s depiction of Sophia Jane and Nannie, the scraps of cloth easily signify scraps of memory, sewn together to form an idealized past. Laurel’s current profession, making

fabrics for the theater, foregrounds the performative nature of pulling together memories to construct a family history. In the sewing room she finds her mother's secretary, "a plantation desk...small enough for a lady's use" (965). Within the desk, not empty like her father's, Laurel finds all her mother's letters arranged "according to their time and place...not by ABC" (965). This cataloging system illustrates the narrative quality of Becky's relationship to the past. That this work of constructing the past through narrative is part of the feminine work of domesticity becomes clear as Laurel remembers her mother commenting on the blouse she wore in one photo, made of "[c]loth from Mother's own spinning, and dyed a deep, rich, American Beauty color with pokeberries . [ . . . ] I'll never have anything to wear that to me is as satisfactory as that blouse" (966). The cloth that makes up the quilt of memory is spun by the matriarch and passed down to the daughters. The items Laurel finds in the room and in the desk also construct an idealized past of her mother's childhood and courtship with her father. Laurel finds a soapstone boat, carved by her father and given to her mother, and a photo album filled with pictures from her mother's home in West Virginia, each recollecting their courtship days. The objects, much like the scraps of cloth, have been sewn together by Becky, organized to construct a beautiful past.

When Laurel begins to recall the reality of her mother's past, however, she realizes it was less ideal than the version her mother constructs from letters and photos. Becky, originally an outsider to the Mississippi community, was brought there by the Judge after they were married, a displacement for which she never forgives him. Ann Romines suggests that for Becky, West Virginia represents a "mythical place of female prowess" where she learned the arts of domesticity, and her removal from the solitude of the West Virginia mountains proves traumatic for her, a trauma tied up with the death of both her parents (263). When her father dies, Becky



travels with him down the river to Baltimore only to see him die in the hospital, and when her mother dies, she blames the Judge for keeping her away from her. Laurel remembers that when her mother became ill, also of an eye illness, she became obsessed with thinking about her home in West Virginia. She becomes stuck in the past completely and can no longer see the present or future. Becky, never able to mourn properly for her parents' deaths as she idealized her past in the mountains, experiences these deaths again in their full trauma before dying. She repeats her father's dying words: "If they try to hold me, I'll die" (970). Becky feels that those around her are keeping her from going home to West Virginia, and she becomes paranoid and antagonistic, even blaming Laurel for her death. Laurel remembers that it was in her mother's final days that her father became "what he scowlingly called an optimist" (975). The Judge, unable to deal with his wife's illness, refuses to "see the tragic," instead trying to imagine an ideal future for his wife (972). This leads both Becky and Laurel to resent him for not being able to accept Becky's condition. In the end, Laurel notes that "[s]he had died without speaking a word, keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation" (975). In these memories Laurel remembers her parents, not as ideal southern aristocrats, but as a man and woman who, in her mother's final day, could find no way to understand each other. While her father looked to a hopeful future, her mother remained locked in the past, neither was able to find the other in the present, and each eventually died alone.

Having reached an understanding of her parents' lives, Laurel begins thinking about her late husband. She remembers that Phil, as much as her mother, had influenced her in her artistic pursuits. Phil, an architect, whose name invokes images of creativity and artistry, fostered Laurel's urge to create. Phil knew, however, that what he constructed was never ideal because "he had known they could equally well, with the same devotion and tireless effort, be built of

cards,” a sentiment that invokes life’s fragility and prefigures his death in WWII (981). Laurel describes Phil’s death—he died aboard a minesweeper in the Pacific—as “bodiless and graveless” (979). Phil’s gravelessness has kept Laurel from dealing with his death. She notes, “Nothing of their life together remained except in her own memory; love was sealed away into its perfection and had remained there. [. . .] She had gone on living with the old perfection undisturbed and undisturbing” (977). Unlike her parents, the memories of whom had been buried underneath the weight of idealized narratives, Phil’s death was marked by no monument whatsoever. Unable to memorialize Phil, Laurel has refused to deal with her loss at all, but now “the past had been raised up, and *he* looked at her, Phil himself—here waiting, all the time, Lazarus. He looked at her out of eyes wild with the craving for his unlived life, with mouth open like a funnel’s” (977-978). Laurel, confronting this image of Phil, recognizes the potential of the past to devour the present if not fully grasped in all its complexity. She spends the night thinking over her courtship and brief marriage to Phil, finally understanding and mourning for what they each lost in his untimely death.

In the morning, having mourned for her lost family, not by idealizing their memories but by seeking a full understanding of their lives and what she has lost through them, Laurel decides to burn her mother’s cherished objects: “She stood in the driveway burning her father’s letters to her mother, and Grandma’s letters, and the saved little books and papers . [. . .] She burned Milton’s Universe” (985).<sup>23</sup> Instead of saving the materials or claiming her mother’s desk to take back to Chicago, Laurel does not feel the need to memorialize her mother in cherished objects,

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<sup>23</sup> “Milton’s Universe” has important implications for understanding Becky, as her diagramming of Milton’s work suggests her need to order the world. The document also elucidates her connection with the Old South. As Schivelbusch notes, *Paradise Lost*, with its New World imagery, was an important work in the rhetoric of American politics: “Pollard’s Lost Cause can be understood as part of this tradition, as is confirmed by the title of his subsequent book, *The Lost Cause Regained* (1868), with its unmistakable echo of Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. The South having traditionally defined itself as ‘paradise on earth,’ in contrast to the ‘wilderness’ of the North, the Lost Cause was not a military defeat but a lost paradise” (60).

but feels she can love her in her living memories. Yet, in her final confrontation with Fay, Laurel considers taking the breadboard Phil had made for her mother. Fay lays claim to the breadboard, again foregrounding the differences between her and Laurel. While for Laurel the breadboard contains “[t]he whole solid past,” for Fay it is another possession granted by her marriage to the Judge (991). The breadboard could act as a monument for Laurel, both for her mother and, more importantly, for Phil who has remained graveless. Significantly, the breadboard represents a domestic symbol, a tool for producing bread by her mother’s recipe. The recipe works as a symbol of the endless reproduction of domesticity, endlessly turning out the same loaf of bread. While Laurel is fighting with Fay over the breadboard, she realizes her folly: “And in irony she saw herself, pursuing her own way through the house as single-mindedly as Fay had pursued hers through the ceremony of the day of the funeral” (990). Laurel sees herself in Fay, attempting to gain a sense of identity from the possession of inanimate objects. After nearly striking Fay down with the breadboard, Laurel finally comes to pity Fay as a person “without any powers of passion or imagination in herself and no way to see it or reach it in another person. Other people, inside their lives, might as well be invisible to her” (991). Fay, unable to understand the importance of the past, always living in a moment-by-moment performance, cannot connect to other people in any real way. Laurel understands, however, that memorializing the past also cuts a person off from those around them. Stuck in the melancholic grief for her father, mother, and husband, Laurel has been unable to make new connections in the world. In her mourning she also comes to a fuller understanding of herself, able to understand her subjectivity freed from the repressive structures of memorialization. She decides to leave the breadboard.

At the end of the novel, Laurel has learned to mourn for her losses by living with the memories of those she loves, not as an idealized past, but as a living, changing force. Like the

confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers that Laurel associates with her relationship with Phil, memory flows seamlessly from the past into the present and future. Laurel notes,

It is memory that is the somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world, like Phil, calling us by our names and demanding its rightful tears. It will never be impervious. Then memory can be hurt, time and again—but in that may lie its final mercy. As long as it's vulnerable to the living moment, it lives for us, and while it lives, and while we are able, we can give it up its due.

(992)

Laurel leaves the breadboard because she realizes that attempting to arrest memory by binding it in physical objects is as pointless as trying to stop the flow of rivers and is ultimately repressive. She does, however, keep the soapstone boat her father gave to her mother. In confronting her melancholic grief over Phil, she understands the comfort physical representations of the past can give as long as they do not objectify that past. As a symbol of the memory of love between her parents, more so than a symbol of their deaths, the malleable soapstone boat represents the ability to flow with living currents of memory rather than attempting to halt their ceaseless movements. She understands that it is better to live with the memory of loss as growing, changing thing, in full recognition of our losses: “Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams” (992). Laurel rebukes the melancholic practice of idealizing the past, making it into a concrete, unchangeable object. She mourns for her losses and lives on with her memories.

As Laurel leaves Mt. Salus she sees a group of school children in her rearview: “The last thing Laurel saw, before they whirled into speed, was the twinkling of their hands, the many

small and unknown hands, wishing her goodbye” (992). The empty hands of these children represent a possible future for the South. While they will hopefully not grow to be like Fay, pure consumers with no understanding of the importance of the past, they will also hopefully not grow to burden those hands with memorials to an idealized past. They recall Wendell Chisom, whom Laurel saw as “a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unvindictive Fay” (928). Welty imagines a future generation who, unencumbered with the monumental past, may find new ways to build the future.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### MELANCHOLY FOLK: THE MATERIALITY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE*

Zora Neale Hurston obviously stands in contrast to the other writers discussed in this dissertation. As this analysis has focused largely on the prerogative of white southern women to memorialize the past in support of white patriarchy, Hurston's experience of being a black woman in the South changes this dynamic considerably. Rather than struggling against an imperative to adorn the past in the service of bulwarking white supremacy, Hurston faced a different obstacle. As a figure of the Harlem Renaissance, she was challenged with the task of representing her race with the aim of confronting the social injustice of racial oppression in America, particularly the racist ideology behind the Jim Crow South, a prerogative Kenneth Warren has deemed *the* defining characteristic of African American literature.<sup>24</sup>

Despite racial difference and the urgency of corresponding political debates, Hurston does share some commonalities with both Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty. Like Welty, Hurston worked for the WPA. Contemporary reviews of Hurston's work, like Welty's, also labeled her work nostalgic. Biographically, however, Hurston had more in common with

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<sup>24</sup> Warren defines African American literature as "a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation," claiming that contemporary African American writers such as Toni Morrison, living in a postsegregation world, are "freed to become exclusively involved with the problem of identity" (1, 107). Though Warren does not acknowledge that Hurston was criticized in her time for not adhering closely enough to this definition, he does list Hurston as one of the authors of African American literature who exhibited "a preoccupation with identity" and a "desire for black unity" that forms a "line of continuity" between the past and the present (107).

Porter. She lost her mother at an early age, leading to estrangement from her father; each of her marriages was short-lived; and she also lied about her age, moving her birth date to make herself a decade younger so she could finish high school. Perhaps most interesting, like Porter, Hurston also took a severe right turn in her politics as she grew older, such that each writer opposed desegregation. Hurston's 1955 letter to the *Orlando Sentinel* in which she criticized federally mandated desegregation was used by segregationists throughout the South and, according to M. Genevieve West, "proved the death knell for her reputation with her contemporaries" (195).

Though there are some biographical similarities between Hurston and the other writers discussed, one major difference speaks volumes about the role race played in their careers; while both Porter and Welty were acclaimed authors when they died, Hurston died in obscurity and poverty. Hurston's canonicity, largely built around the novel considered her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is a recent development, the result of efforts by scholars and artists such as her biographer, Robert Hemenway, novelist Alice Walker, and others who found value in her work during the Black Arts movement of the 1970s. Hurston's fall into obscurity resulted from a perceived failure in her work to address the issues of institutional racism by her black contemporaries. Her choice to write about African American folk communities rather than confronting issues of racial oppression in urban areas garnered the scorn of contemporary critics such as Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Harold Preece. Preece was perhaps harshest on Hurston, suggesting in his essay "The Negro Folk Cult" that Hurston's use of folklore "capitalizes upon the artificial peculiarities of a group kept in systematic impoverishment and ignorance" and even going so far as to accuse Hurston of being a "literary climber" who pandered to white audiences, publishers, and patrons by perpetuating negative stereotypes of African Americans (qtd. in West 116, 117). Perhaps surprisingly, it is Hurston's

work more than the other authors discussed in this dissertation that has faced charges of romanticizing the southern past.

Critics have suggested that Hurston's interest in collecting folklore is connected to a traumatic incident from her childhood. In *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston's autobiography, she recounts the incidents surrounding her mother's death. Hurston's mother asked her daughter not to let the community take her pillow from beneath her head or cover the clock and the mirror in her bedroom, all of which were local folk customs performed for the dying. Hurston was playing outside when she saw "a number of women going inside Mama's room and staying" (86). Despite nine-year-old Hurston's protestations, she was restrained by her father while the women of the community performed the required rites. Hurston notes that although she felt immense guilt for not honoring her mother's wishes, "[t]he world we lived in required those acts. Anything else would have been sacrilege. [ . . . ] My father was with the mores" (89). Hurston's description of the effect this event had on her life speaks to its traumatic nature. She writes, "I was to agonize over that moment for years to come. In the midst of play, in wakeful moments after midnight, on the way home from parties, and even in the classroom during lectures. My thoughts would escape occasionally from their confines and stare me down" (88). These lines, characterizing the memory of her mother's death as a repressed trauma that returns sporadically, could indicate that Hurston's relationship to folklore and anthropology was based in traumatic loss and attempted recovery. "As an anthropologist," according to Claudia Tate, "she belatedly speaks for her mother by collecting and preserving the folklore of her mother's speech community. In this way Hurston seems to work through the trauma of her mother's death and her failed promise by professionalizing its execution in another venue" (160).



Tate argues that Hurston's interest in collecting folklore is "more than a vocation," but "a means of mourning and reparation" (160).

While Tate's assessment suggests that Hurston's interest in folklore acts as a means of recovering wholeness traumatically lost at an early age, this essay argues that Hurston's relationship to folk culture was more ambivalent than this. After all, her failure to her mother was not in failing to perform folk rites, but in failing to impede them. Hurston recognized that the recovery of the folk—as an authentic, natural form, antithetical to modernity—was always already impossible. In her essays on the subject, she repeatedly claims that folklore is not a static artifact but "is still in the making" (*Folklore* 836). In this formulation of folklore as an entity always becoming, the folk figures not as the authentic or natural set against the artificiality of modernity, but as central to modernity's production, both creating and created by the dialectic in which it's situated. This relationship is apparent in Hurston's assertion that "Florida *is* lush in [folkloric] material because the State attracts such a variety of workers to its industries" (875). Hurston situates the production of folklore as dependent on the processes of modernization to which they respond. Moreover, as Sonnet Retman suggests, Hurston saw how her own work contributed to this contradiction, as "the production of the folk and the primitive" were inherent in both anthropology and literary modernism as "market-driven formations of authentic identity" (155, 156). In this way, her pursuit of documenting an endangered authentic folklore is less an act of mourning and more a melancholic flow of desire, an ambivalent longing for an object always already lost because it never existed.

While most critics, whether in praise or condemnation, characterize Hurston's portrayal of African American folk culture as an unequivocal celebration, I argue that Hurston's novels offer a more complicated, ambivalent representation of the folk. Through her attention to

material culture, Hurston dramatizes the relationship between folk culture and white bourgeois materialism. Just as her mother's death rites were enacted by effacing her material environment—the removal of a pillow, the covering of a clock and a mirror—Hurston's texts demonstrate the dangers of romanticizing folk culture as removed from the material conditions of modernity. Rather than indulging in a nostalgic melancholia by representing folkloric practice as the means to an ideal, organic community, her texts subtly critique this stance, demonstrating that romanticizing folk community, located at the site of production and exploitation of labor, can work to produce rather than critique modernity's heterogeneous social relations.

Though the protagonists of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) occupy social positions different from the elite white women of the previous chapters, their work of romanticizing the folk does not differ much from those women's idealization of Old South aristocracy. In their turn to the folk, they create nostalgia for an idealized, premodern social order, and this work facilitates the production of modernity. In *Their Eyes* Janie rejects the bourgeois materialism of her first two husbands, but in following Teacake to the muck and its promise of utopian community, Janie is subjected to new forms of patriarchal control and violent exploitation. Her unflinching belief in the organic nature of folk culture, however, causes her to disavow the violence she experiences, leading to a deep melancholy and tragic demise. Reading *Their Eyes* alongside *Seraph* demonstrates the ubiquity of this logic of melancholic mystification in modernity, as *Seraph*'s poor white Arvay Henson follows the same nostalgic impulse as Janie. Arvay's insecurity over her husband's rise to middle-class respectability leads her to imagine Sawley, the turpentine camp where she was born, as an organic folk community, untainted by base materialism. Only after Arvay returns home does she recognize that Sawley is not free from materialism, but the absence of material wealth there manifests as bitter want and need. In each

of these texts, Hurston's attention to material conditions demystifies the characters' romanticization of folk culture as outside of and untouched by modernity.

### *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The history of the scholarship surrounding *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can only be described as convoluted. Its initial reception found favorable reviews among white audiences, but the novel was roundly criticized in the black press. It was faulted for not dealing directly with racial violence or segregation, and many found her portrayal of poor blacks living in the rural South problematic. Most famously, Richard Wright condemned her novel as relying on minstrelsy and suggested that “[h]er characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears” (qtd. in West 115). He accused Hurston of pandering to her white audience's stereotypical expectations, essentially confirming Preece's earlier assessment.<sup>25</sup> The renewal of criticism on the novel in the 1970s is characterized by a complete change in tone. New readers greeted the novel with overwhelmingly positive response. West suggests a number of factors that influenced this change in attitude toward the book including the distance from “Hurston's persona,” which had grown aggressively reactionary in the 1950s, and “the political lenses created by black nationalist and feminist thought” (237). While contemporary reviewers had criticized Hurston for portraying her characters as stereotypes, Alice

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<sup>25</sup> M. Genevieve West argues that Lippincott, her publisher, may have been partially to blame for promoting the novel as a romance, thereby “suggest[ing] that Hurston was not a serious writer in a time when the social crises of the Great Depression and rampant racial discrimination demanded serious change,” though the novel's decentering of racial oppression opened it to such criticism by black intellectuals concerned with advancing the race (107).

Walker would later laud her “sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings” (xii).

Current scholarship on *Their Eyes* is divided and contentious. Many still read the novel in an essentially positive light. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, for example, reads *Their Eyes* as a “daring exposé of female resistance [cloaked] in lush naturalistic imagery and rich folk idiom” (62). Many critics have emphasized the importance of natural imagery in the novel and in Hurston’s writing generally. Cynthia Davis, addressing the dearth of ecocriticism on black authors, suggests that Hurston’s “focus on the interrelationship of human and natural history, her foregrounding of non-human interests and subjects, and her ethical orientation to the environment” make her an important environmentalist figure (155). Hurston’s orientation toward nature, however, grows not solely out of respect for the environment but is intimately tied to her interest in folklore. In a study of Hurston’s work collecting Florida folklore for the FWP, Valerie Levy argues that Hurston saw folklore as growing out of “the hybridization of nature and culture,” suggesting a definite connection between people and place (91). These ecocritical viewpoints indicate that Hurston’s work characterizes the folk as having a direct relationship with the natural environment while portraying the middle class as vitiated by materialism, having lost this connection to the natural world and traded authenticity for an artificial modernity.

While many scholars see the muck as an Edenic retreat from materialism, others have more recently challenged this view, recognizing the muck as a locus of capitalist production and site for the exploitation of labor. Of the former category, Susan Willis describes the muck as a “mythic space” or “primal never-never land” that is set apart from modern capitalism and benefits from “the recovery of Caribbean culture” (48). Hazel Carby’s extension of this argument, perhaps the most resounding critique of the novel, suggests that Hurston’s

“representation of ‘the muck’” acts as “a displacement of the urban and issues of black American migration” (132). Carby sees this displacement as resulting in the “creation of a folk who are outside of history” (172).

Each of these stances, however, assumes that Hurston’s novel uncritically accepts the idea of a natural, folk community as a refuge from a materialistic modernity. *Their Eyes* centers on Janie’s attempts to avoid objectification, the reduction of self to object or commodity, at the hands of a masculine modernity, her position as a black woman in the South recalling the long history of the commodification of humans of which she is the product. Despite Janie’s distance from oppressive white power—the distance that led to initial critiques of the work—she still experiences objectification from within the black middle-class community, which has adopted its ideals from white bourgeois values. Janie turns to the lower-class folk community of workers, imagining it as a natural, organic alternative to the materialism of the middle class. In this way the novel seems to take an antimodern stance that rebukes modern materialism in favor of an organic folk community perceived as lost. *Their Eyes*, however, offers no easy alternatives to modernity as Janie’s engagement with the folk community leads her back to objectification. Furthermore, through the use of the frame narrative, the novel critiques nostalgia for the folk that elides the inextricable ties between the folk community and modernity, thereby bulwarking modernization and the continued exploitation of the folk. Thus the novel critiques the very process in which it was accused of participating: the romanticization of folk community that allows for the expansion of modernization and the racial exploitation inherent in it.

### **A Cracked Plate and a Mule**

Janie's tale, much like the previous authors analyzed here, does not merely consist of her life story, but reaches back to previous generations and examines the effect of their experiences on Janie's life. When Nanny catches Janie kissing a boy, she realizes that she has entered adulthood and sets her mind to marrying her off. Though Janie initially resists the idea, Nanny explains her motivations by recounting her own life experiences. These include a rape by her master, physical abuse by her mistress as revenge for having the master's child, her post-emancipation attempt to provide a good life for her daughter, and the rape of her daughter by a white school teacher that resulted in Janie's birth. Nanny's story introduces Janie to the perils that confront her as a possible object of white male violence, yet it also indicates that as a woman, Janie must guard herself against violence from men of her own race as well. Nanny notes that after emancipation, "Ah wouldn't marry nobody, though Ah could uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby" (190). Nanny sums up the lesson as she suggests that "de white man throw down the load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (186). Far from teaching her that she is supposed to exist on a pedestal, Janie's ancestral lesson is that she is subject to irremediable violence, not just from outside her community but from within as well.

Nanny tells Janie that her dream has been to provide her progeny with better circumstances than she experienced, emphasizing the negative effects of slavery on women. She notes, "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery" (187). Nanny suggests that slavery has kept her from realizing the full manifestation of womanhood, and she tells of the work she has put in attempting to offer her child and grandchild a better opportunity. "Ah didn't

want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow,” Nanny states, “and Ah didn’t want mah daughter to be used dat way neither. [. . .] so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness” (187). Nanny contrasts the dehumanizing condition of slavery that treats the slave as a base animal with her work as a domestic servant. The “broom” and the “crock pot” provided Nanny with the means to make life better for her descendants. While this work has supplied Janie—her mother, traumatized by the rape, has disappeared—with the chance to lead a better life, Nanny does not see this work as proper for a woman. This becomes clear as she tells Janie, “Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you. Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate” (190). Nanny wants Janie to avoid being objectified and used as a beast or a man’s “spit cup,” and she points to her own degraded position by referring to herself as a “cracked plate.”

As Nanny arranges for Janie to marry Logan Killicks, a prosperous black farm owner, it becomes clear that her conception of proper womanhood derives from bourgeois culture. Nanny feels that because of Logan’s “often-mentioned sixty acres,” a union with him means “marry[ing] off decent” (191, 185). When Janie comes to ask Nanny for advice about her unhappy marriage just three months after the wedding, Nanny replies, “Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo’ bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killicks, and you come worryin’ me ’bout love” (192). Nanny reveals her concern with material property as she tries to reason with Janie by reminding her that she has “de onliest organ in town. [. . .] a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road” (193). While Nanny sees the pinnacle of womanhood as being placed on a pedestal and provided with material possessions, Janie recognizes this situation as another form of objectification. Nanny

has adopted her ideas of what a woman should be from white bourgeois values, and she assumes she has done Janie a favor by arranging a marriage that provides material wealth.

Janie's marriage, however, does not enact the escape to freedom Nanny envisions, a point made clear as Logan attempts to put her to work on the farm. Logan tells Janie that he is going to buy a second mule, one that is "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im," implying that she will be expected to work the fields alongside him (195). At this point Logan threatens to do exactly what Nanny feared by making Janie into a mule to work his land. The text contrasts Janie's domestic work, the same type of work Nanny turned to as a means of escaping oppression, and the work in the fields, which resonates with Nanny's experience of slavery. Janie attempts to draw a clear line by stating, "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine" (199). Logan, however, makes his position clear when he replies, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (199). Janie is his commodity, much like the mule he purchases, and he will work her as he sees fit. Rather than acquiring progressively better circumstances than her forebears, Janie moves backward from her bourgeois position as wife of a wealthy landowner to Nannie's experience as a slave working the fields. Sondra Guttman suggests that the text enacts a kind of "temporal recursion" in which the temporal experience of different economic circumstances doesn't register (100): "Within this context, notions of the past and future are inoperative. Experientially, the difference between yesterday and tomorrow is negligible, at best" (99). Guttman's view of the past as repetition indicates that though the laws have changed, the experience of southern blacks has largely remained the same, and this is particularly true for black women who, regardless of emancipation, still suffer under patriarchal rule.



## Porch Talk and a Spit Cup

The appearance of Joe Starks seems to offer Janie the possibility of escape from the strictures she suffers in her marriage to Logan, but Joe's attitudes are based in white bourgeois materialism and only lead to further objectification. Rather than putting her to work in the fields, Joe contends that she "ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday," and suggests that "[a] pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (197). Joe's view of marriage follows the tenets of white womanhood, and Janie links Joe's urbanity to whiteness as she notes that "[h]e was a seal brown color but he acted like Mr. Washburn," and that he was "kind of portly like rich white folks" (196, 201). Joe tells Janie that he is headed to the black town of Eatonville: "He had always wanted a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin'" (196). These comments, disturbing in their justification of racial prejudice, reveal much about Joe's ideas on how community should work. Joe, the aspiring capitalist, has saved up his money and plans to "buy in big" to the new town (197). He sees the new all-black town as an opportunity to take the place that white men have always held over him.

Joe exhibits his power by setting Janie apart from the rest of the Eatonville community. At the first committee meeting to discuss the future of the town, Joe tells Janie that "[e]verybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang. So she put on one of her

bought dresses and went up the new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red. Her silken ruffles rustled and muttered about her” (207). Joe, relegating the women of the community to livestock, intentionally sets Janie apart to stand as a status symbol. As the town calls for Janie to make a speech, the restrictions of this position become clear. Joe answers for Janie, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (208). Janie’s extravagant garb does her talking for her, “mutter[ing]” her difference from the other women in the town who “had on percale and calico with here and there a head-rag among the older ones” (207). Janie becomes subject to the rules of patriarchy that relegate her to the home and banish her from having a voice in the community. Joe’s act, however, also alienates her from Joe. As they make their way home, “[h]e strode along invested with his new dignity, thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts” (209). While Joe has gained the respect of the community, he has also silenced and objectified his wife.

Joe’s use of material objects to exemplify his power produces hierarchical social relations in the town. The most obvious example is the street lamp, a symbol of the town’s entry into modernization, which Joe uses to set himself up as a kind of Prometheus, bringing light to the fledgling community. When the lamp arrives, Joe does not merely hang it in its place, but treats the occasion with sanctimony. The narrator notes, “He unwrapped it and had it wiped off carefully and put it up on a showcase for a week for everybody to see. Then he set a time for the lighting and sent word all around Orange County for one and all to come to the lamp-lighting” (209). Though the town enjoys the lamp-lighting festivities, they also begin to feel the complications modernity introduces into their lives. The community soon begins to feel the imposition of a class structure that had not previously existed in Eatonville. Joe builds a two-story house “with porches, with banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like

servant's quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (212). Significantly, Joe has the house painted "a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpool's wore" (212). The choice in paint puts Joe in league with these white men and makes "the village feel funny talking to him—just like he was anybody else" (212). As Guttman notes, "Eatonville, under the leadership of Joe Starks, seems like both a Reconstruction-era town and an antebellum plantation" (97). Indeed, the men of Eatonville liken Joe to a slaveholder as when he puts them to work digging a drainage ditch, "murmur[ing] hotly about slavery being over" (211).

Joe surrounds himself with more extravagant objects, producing stronger feelings of envy and resentment in the community and reinforcing the social hierarchy. When he buys "a desk like Mr. Hill or Mr. Galloway over in Maitland with one of those swing-around chairs to it," the narrator notes that "it weakened people" (212). He also purchases a "gold-looking vase that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front table. Said it was a spittoon just like his used-to-be bossman used to have in his bank up there in Atlanta" (212). The rest of the town develops bitter feelings about the spittoon, and the narrator describes them in terms of their place in an uneven modernity: "But how could they know up-to-date folks was spitting in flowery little things like that? It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them" (212). The community feels out of step with Joe's understanding of the world, which makes them feel humiliated, but it also changes their outlook on Joe, who becomes aligned with white oppression. The narrator notes, "It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not" (212-13). "[B]oth Starks's and the

community's sense of identity," writes Meisenhelder, "are damaged with the purchase of this spittoon, for he (as people recognize) becomes a freakish hybrid, neither black nor white" (66). Joe reaches his goal of achieving the status of his previous white bosses by subjecting the town to the same oppressive social relations that produce white privilege.

As Joe constructs social boundaries from the hard feelings of the town, he also isolates Janie from the community, producing a sense of alienation in her. Janie feels this alienation as "the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities. The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind" (211). Joe confirms Janie's position as separate from the community by buying her "a little lady-size spitting pot. [ . . . ] with little sprigs of flowers painted all around the sides" (212). While the spittoon cements her position as being above the rest of the community in class, this does not mean Janie shares in Joe's power. Rather, she is subject to his rule as evidenced by his insistence that she wear a head rag after becoming jealous of other men admiring her hair, the head rag acting as a symbol of his ownership of Janie. Just as Janie had nearly fulfilled Nanny's worries by becoming Logan's mule, now, as Joe has relegated her to the position of object owned, an object that represents his class status, she has essentially become Joe's spit cup, or, at least, shares a similar position as his spittoon. Janie is thus left in an awkward and lonely position in the now hierarchical community, above the other townspeople, below her husband, and sharing equal standing with no one.

Janie's alienation from the town is most evident in Joe's refusal to allow her to participate in the porch talk that happens at the store. The most obvious expression of folkways in the novel, the porch talk appears to symbolize premodern, folk community togetherness that persists through the introduction of modernity's alienating hierarchies. The most prominent

example of the porch talk in the novel are “the mule-talkers,” whose discourse revolves around Matt Bonner’s mistreatment of his stubborn mule (215). Janie longs to join in the fun, and even “thought up good stories on the mule,” but Joe strictly forbids her from participating in the community event: “You’s Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can’t see what uh woman uh yo’ sability would want tuh be treasurin’ all dat gum-grease from folks dat don’t even own de house dey sleep in” (217). Their lowly status as Joe’s renters makes them unsuitable company for his wife. Joe calls them “jus’ some puny humans playin’ round de toes uh Time,” effectively removing them from full participation in the modernity he has brought to town (217).

While the novel seems to set up a dichotomy between Joe’s hierarchical social relations and the egalitarian version of community represented in the mule talk, Joe quickly demonstrates his ability to use folk community to bolster his own authority. Joe doesn’t “talk the mule himself,” but he inserts himself into the mule talk when he buys the mule from Matt, a grand gesture that puts him above the rest of the community (217). Though Matt thinks he has cheated Joe by selling him a mule not worth the price, Joe takes the upper hand by announcing, “Didn’t buy ’im fuh no work. I god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let ’im rest. You didn’t have gumption enough tuh do it” (221). This act works as a display of opulence, as Joe can afford to buy a mule that he doesn’t even plan to work, but it also paints him as a magnanimous man, willing to part with his money to give an overworked creature some rest. Janie sums up what Joe has bought in this exchange: “Freein’ dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something” (221). The freeing of the mule extends Joe’s power by

making him the savior and emancipator of the story, a twisted inversion of his role in the town as the man who introduces and enforces class oppression.

When the mule dies, Joe takes the opportunity to cement his authority further by perpetuating the image of himself in the evolving folk tale as the emancipator of the mule. He gives a eulogy that “made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done” (223). While building and modernizing the town gives Joe official power, it also alienates him from the community by introducing a class consciousness that sets him apart from the citizens. Joe overcomes this problem by introducing himself into the folkloric practice of the mule talk as a hero, creating a space for his own immortality by entering into the realm of folklore. The novel, rather than setting Joe’s alienating modernity against the folkloric practice that binds the community, offers a view of folkloric practice that is ambivalent at best. As Leigh Anne Duck argues, “Hurston suggests that public folkloric practices are too easily made to serve the agendas of people in power” (142). Joe uses the mule drag this way, exploiting the community’s investment in folklore to transform his position from the town’s oppressor to the town’s emancipator.

Joe also uses the mule drag as an opportunity to cement his authority over Janie. Janie wants to attend the mule drag and be part of the community, but Joe forbids it, arguing that as the Mayor’s wife she is too high class to involve herself in “all dat mess uh commonness” (223). Joe does not allow Janie to join in with the rest of the community because, as his possession, she only brings him clout by being above the rest, thus he denies her the opportunity to join with the town in their bonding ritual. “The ceremony,” according to Patricia Stuelke, “mocks the system that could with celebratory pomp and circumstance grant ‘citizenship’ to a mule, but not a black woman” (766). Indeed, Joe sums up his estimation of Janie’s place when he says, “Somebody

got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (232). Joe relegates Janie to the position of an animal, perhaps even placing her under the mule.

Janie eventually retaliates by challenging Joe's patriarchal power, thereby reducing his prized possessions to mere things and interrupting their ability to signify as extensions of his own power. As Joe begins to age he grows insecure about his manhood, and he projects his insecurities onto Janie by implying that she has lost her value as a commodity: "Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is" (238). Joe, like Logan, makes the mistake of projecting his fears onto Janie, and when she retaliates she strikes a fatal blow to Joe's ego. She replies, "Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (238). Janie humiliates Joe by delivering this blow in front of all the men in the store. As she strips Joe of his masculinity, she also disrupts his identification with the material possessions that cement his place in the social order: "[S]he had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would envy at the things and pity the man that owned them" (239). As Newman suggests, "the fatal blow has been to separate the man from his possessions" (821). Janie exposes the emptiness behind Joe's displays of material wealth, revealing an insecure, petty tyrant. After his death she "burnt up every one of her head rags," destroying the material representation of Joe's power over her (246).

### **Through the Vergible Woods to the Muck**

Janie appears to find freedom from the restrictions imposed on her by Joe's bourgeois materialism when she meets Vergible Woods. He immediately sets her at ease by asking her to call him Tea Cake instead of Mr. Woods, dismissing any claim to male authority, and including her in games of checkers and porch talk, something Joe would never allow. In direct contrast with Joe, Tea Cake brushes Janie's hair, "luxuriat[ing] in the freedom her hair represents" (Meisenhelder 70). The town grows uncomfortable with the burgeoning relationship as a transgression of class lines, but when Pheoby suggests that Tea Cake is too low class for her, Janie replies, "Jody classed me off. Ah didn't" (265). Janie further argues that while her grandmother's dream was to sit on the porch "lak de white madam," she "nearly languished tuh death up dere" (267). Janie rejects the hierarchical social relations of the middle class that she sees as mimicking whites and decides to marry Tea Cake and leave Eatonville.

In Tea Cake Janie sees the possibility for an authentic and natural experience of love unsullied by gross materialism and the patriarchic power inherent in it. Her yearning for this natural love is evident in the novel from her first sexual awakening under the pear tree outside her grandmother's house, where she sees "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 the root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight" (183). Janie expresses her dissatisfaction with her two previous husbands in terms of them not living up to her experience under the pear tree. When she complains to Nannie about Logan, she states, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think," and when her marriage to Jody sours, the narrator notes, "She wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (193, 232). Janie opposes the materialistic world of her previous husbands with an ideal, natural relationship that mimics nature itself. She hopes that Tea Cake, whose name and nickname



conjure natural imagery, can fulfill this role, thinking “He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (261).

It seems that Janie has escaped the strictures of her middle-class life and found a more authentic experience of her identity in her relationship with Tea Cake. He takes her away from Eatonville down to work on the muck in the everglades. Rather than putting Janie on a pedestal, Tea Cake includes her in all his activities, including rolling dice, shooting guns, and picking beans on the muck. While the other workers “assumed she thought herself too good to work like the other women,” she soon gains favor with the community (283). She learns that the people here also talk porch talk, “[o]nly here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (284). Janie finally feels connected with the folk as she is no longer restrained from participating in their play or work, and her relationship with Tea Cake appears untainted by hierarchical power. She is neither worked like a mule nor put on a pedestal. Meisenhelder argues, “Hurston depicts [the muck] as a black Eden free of outside cultural influence and the deadly insipidity of the dominant white world” (70). Janie’s experience seems the fulfillment of utopian possibilities fomented by her new closeness with her environment and the folk.

While Janie sees her bond with Tea Cake as unbound by the strictures of middle-class materialism and patriarchal authority, the narration reveals that their relationship bears many similarities with her previous marriages. At the beginning of their courtship, the narrator describes all the things Tea Cake does for Janie as “signs of possession,” again relegating Janie to the status of an object that can be owned (264). When Janie discusses her elopement with Pheoby, she says she will wear “[h]igh heel slippers, necklace, earrings, *everything* he wants tuh see me in” (268). Much like Joe, who stressed the importance of Janie’s appearance, Tea Cake

dictates what she will wear. On their honeymoon Tea Cake steals the two-hundred dollars Janie has brought with her to go gambling. He later assures her that he is not after her money by telling her “[f]rom now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain’t got nothin’ you don’t git nothin’” (279). Though he is true to his word and never again bothers Janie about the money from her marriage to Joe, the situation renders her dependent on Tea Cake, bulwarking his role as the traditional male authority.

Their life on the muck also appears utopian in Janie’s eyes, but here too the narration suggests disturbing parallels with her former relationships. The muck is not free of class consciousness, an attitude embodied by Mrs. Turner, who worships whiteness and despises the folk of which Janie wishes to be a part. Mrs. Turner admires Janie for her “coffe-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair,” but criticizes her “for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake” (288). She attempts to set Janie up with her brother, who, through a description of a paper he wrote condemning Booker T. Washington, acts as a stand-in for blacks with middle-class aspirations. While Mrs. Turner’s antics introduce the fact of class consciousness on the muck, it is Tea Cake’s reaction to her that is most troubling. Though Janie pays no mind to Mrs. Turner, Tea Cake beats Janie because “it relieved that awful fear inside him” and “reassured him in possession” (294). Tea Cake has no wish like Joe to live a middle-class life, but his class position causes him such insecurity that he reacts in violence to any challenge to his male authority. Bragging to another man about what he had done to Janie, he admits, “Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause *she* done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss” (295). Tea Cake, unable to mark Janie as his possession through displays of material wealth, turns to violence to accomplish the same end.

Janie's experience on the muck also dramatizes the objectifying nature of racial oppression in the early twentieth-century South. Though critics such as Carby and Willis have argued that the muck represents a utopian space, removed from the historical pressures of modernity, the Florida everglades do bear historical relevance in regards to black migration during this period. "[T]hough many thousands of black southerners moved north," according to Tiffany Patterson, "most did not. And even those who moved north did not entirely abandon the South as home for several generations. Indeed, migration was both a cyclical and circular process for many, not merely a one-way avenue of permanent escape" (49). Patterson stresses that Florida's booming timber, turpentine, and agricultural industries attracted laborers from all over and outside the U.S., arguing that "[w]hile the racial violence built into southern labor relations was not all that different from the violence of slavery, the economic oppression that came with it was part of capitalist modernization" (64). Similarly, Martyn Bone sees Hurston's representation of the Florida muck "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). I would further argue that, contra Willis, the invocation of the Caribbean, rather than acting as a means of racial "recovery," suggests the similarities between life on the muck and racial colonialism, identifying the muck as a reiteration of racial capitalism.

Though the novel does not show any interaction between the white managers and owners and the black workers on the muck, the depiction of the hurricane and its aftermath illustrates the workers' exploited condition. Many critics read the hurricane as a positive or even revolutionary force. Meisenhelder describes the storm as a "symbolic destroyer of white power" that tears down "artificial hierarchies" (74). Similarly, Maureen McKnight, viewing nature in the text as "an ahistorical, apolitical form," argues that "Hurston conjures a hurricane to wreak havoc in

Janie's life," but that the trauma allows Janie and her fellow workers to "recognize and see beyond their own false assumptions about 'white folks' and then look for direction from a higher power" (86, 100, 103). McKnight misses, however, that the hurricane *was* a historical event that transpired on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1928, leaving Hurston no need to conjure it, and the event had dire consequences, politically and otherwise. Susan Parrish reports that "[b]etween 2,500 and 3,000 people died," and "[m]ore than three-quarters of the dead were African American and Afro-Caribbean," and other scholars suggest that each of those numbers were higher, estimations being skewed by unrecovered, and therefore unreported, bodies (31).<sup>26</sup> The disproportionate casualties suffered by black workers during the Lake Okechobee hurricane and flood resulted from the segregation of the white owners and managers and the black workers. The whites, living at a safer distance, did not bother to provide workers with safe living conditions, and Dawood H. Sultan and Deanna J. Wathington suggest that "outward expression of feelings of safety by whites were essential to avert a black public panic that had the potential for destabilizing economic production and the social order" (155).<sup>27</sup> Parrish adds that the black encampments "were structurally a part of the dike's function of protecting white agricultural property" (34). The muck, rather than a utopia of authentic folk communing with nature, is actually a center of capitalist production and site of exploitation, and the advent of the hurricane brings the inequalities of segregated society to bear in the most horrific of ways.

The hurricane, rather than breaking down hierarchies, foregrounds the segregationist logic that to this point has been merely implied. When Janie and Tea Cake attempt to find high

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<sup>26</sup> Another factor contributing to the under-reportage of black fatalities caused by the hurricane was the large number of workers who had immigrated from the Caribbean. Martyn Bone suggests, "it has remained all but impossible to trace the lives and deaths of the storm's Caribbean victims because of their tenuous social and legal status as black immigrants" (768).

<sup>27</sup> Judy Newman argues that "Teacake's tragic mistake had been to ignore Indian folk knowledge" in favor of trusting the whites due to his prejudice and greed (823). Sultan's and Wathington's comments demonstrate that rather than an example of Teacake turning his back on folk knowledge, his response, as a member of the folk, was part of a calculated effort of landowning whites to protect their interests.

ground, “[w]hite people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room” (308). When Tea Cake ventures out to find work after the storm, he is “pressed into service” burying the dead (313). Tea Cake’s experience recalls the corrupt convict leasing system that, according to Patterson, was a large source of labor in Florida industries and “part of the underpinning of Jim Crow and capitalism in the New South” (62). The work Tea Cake does burying the casualties of the hurricane makes the reinscription of Jim Crow law clear. The whites in charge of the operation force the coerced workers to separate the bodies, a literal segregation of the dead, so that they can bury the whites in coffins and dump the black bodies in a mass grave. Many of the corpses have reached a stage of decomposition that makes determining race difficult or impossible. The whites instruct the workers to “[l]ook at their hair” as an indicator of race and warn them against “dumpin’ white folks” and “wastin’ no boxes on colored” (314). The scene speaks to the ill-defined boundaries constructed by segregation, and Tea Cake emphasizes the absurdity of the situation when he comments to another worker, “Look lak dey think God don’t know nothin’ ’bout de Jim Crow law” (314). The effort put forth by the whites, however, has political ramifications as it labels the black bodies disposable—able to be discarded, as Patricia Yaeger puts it, “without proper rituals, without bearing witness to grief, without proper mourning” (17), while white bodies must be interred following the established rites. The whites bury the evidence of their inhumane treatment of others in mass graves while simultaneously building memorials to their dead.

### **A Seedy Melancholy**

Since its rise in popularity in the '70s, critics have tended to read the ending of *Their Eyes* in an optimistic light. It has recently been described it as a “quiet triumph of the spirit” and “an unequivocal tribute to Janie’s stature and power” (Grewal 104; Meisenhelder 80). Though the tone of the prose in the final paragraphs seems to support these readings, these critics overlook an implication that turns the optimistic tone into bitter irony; though never explicitly stated, the novel suggests that Janie has untreated rabies. Catherine Gunther Kodat has been one of the only critics to address the issue, noting that while Janie has every opportunity to receive treatment from Dr. Simmons and the knowledge of what will happen if she does not, the omission of a description of treatment leaves the reader no option but to assume that Janie has contracted the rabies from Tea Cake’s bite and willfully submits to her fate (319-20). Newman suggests that “Tea Cake becomes the cup himself, catching the disease from canine spit,” but fails to recognize that Tea Cake has finally made Janie the spit cup, passing the illness on to her (823). This leaves Janie at the end of the novel waiting on a certain and agonizing death.

Looking back on the opening lines of the novel sheds light on the source of the discrepancy between the novel’s tone and its tragic end:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they and do things accordingly. (175)

The narrator's claim that "women forget all those things they don't want to remember" reminds the reader that we are not hearing Janie's story, but Janie's version of her story as told by herself to her friend Pheoby. Janie's look back at her life with Tea Cake is colored by nostalgia, a purposeful forgetting that idealizes this period of her life. In regards to the beating Janie suffers on the muck, Tracy Bealer argues that she "consciously constructs a fantasy of her dead husband that excises the abuse and retains only love" (312). In this way Janie succumbs to melancholia, idealizing a lost object that can never be recovered. Moreover, she displaces her attachments into memorial objects. Remembering the hurricane, "[s]he wanted him out of the way of storms, so she had a strong vault built in the cemetery at West Palm Beach" (330). Having constructed a proper memorial, Janie returns to Eatonville where she tells her story to Pheoby. While the other women studied here memorialize their lost family through domestic material objects, Janie chooses to cling to her idealization of the folk as authentic and natural: "She had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake brought to plant. [. . .] she meant to plant them for remembrance" (331-32). Even at this moment, Janie rejects material possessions in favor of these reminders of her "bee-man," but her turn to the folk, produced by and producing modernity, does not help her escape the effects of patriarchy and racial oppression. Bealer suggests that at the end of the novel, Janie "foreclose[s] any other forays into the outside world where new bonds could be formed" (324). Indeed, Janie lapses into an intense and suicidal melancholy in which Tea Cake "could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (333).

Critics tend to read Hurston's representation of the relationship between the folk and nature as Hurston's answer to the objectifying and commodifying effects of modernity on southern black women. Indeed, Janie does seek a natural relationship with the folk, exemplified

in her relationship with Tea Cake, as a means of escaping objectification, of becoming “a mule,” a “spit cup,” or “a cracked plate.” Hurston, however, recognizes that there is no natural space outside of modernity from which to escape modern alienation and objectification. Janie’s journey, rather than leading her to a utopia away from the confines of white middle-class bourgeois values, leads her instead to the center of capitalist production and exploitation. Through the tension between tone and content at the end of the novel—the inspirational tenor of the prose contrasted with the extremely pessimistic situation in which Janie is left—*Their Eyes* offers a subtle critique of the romanticization of folk culture as a refuge from modernity. Janie has been fatally objectified, becoming the spit cup for the lethal poison of a racial exploitation that throws away black bodies to protect white ones, yet her story disavows the negative aspects of her experience on the muck. In the end she fetishizes nature as the thing itself, an object relieved of objectivity, as represented in her melancholic attachment to the seeds. Through Janie, Hurston illustrates the dangers of using nostalgia to imagine a space free from the complications of modernity, the very crime of which she so often stands accused.

### ***Seraph on the Suwanee***

Hurston’s last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), never had a chance to be successful. She had been working on a novel about the black middle class, but finding no interest among publishers, she wrote *Seraph*, focusing instead on the lives of upwardly-mobile Florida “crackers.” While the black press chose to ignore the book completely and reviews in the white press were “neither overwhelmingly negative or positive,” the novel “sold better than any of her previous books” (West 215). Not even a month after the novel’s release, however, Hurston was



arrested and charged with molesting a young boy in the basement of her apartment complex, and though she was cleared of all charges, her reputation was tarnished and the book disappeared from public interest (West 217-21). Even after the revival of Hurston scholarship in the '70s, critics looked down on *Seraph*. Alice Walker famously complained that it was “not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people who are bores, which is” (xvi), and Robert Hemenway suggested that in turning away from Hurston’s usual subject, black folk community, she “turned her back on the source of her creativity (307). Later scholars have described *Seraph* as “highly contrived,” “awkward,” and representative of “an artistic decline” (A. Davis 118; Washington 21; Wall 391).

More recent critics have found value in *Seraph* as a subversive text that engages in a thoughtful and nuanced critique of white culture. While Hurston’s turn to white subjects seems an odd choice, many black authors of the same period were writing white life novels, including Ann Petry and one of Hurston’s most vocal critics, Richard Wright. Veronica Watson has recently linked the novel to a longer tradition, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, of a “literature of white estrangement,” characterized by “the important critical project of unveiling Whiteness *to itself* by providing a revealing counternarrative to the myths of Whiteness” (6). This analysis agrees with Watson’s assumption that Hurston may have written a novel focusing on white characters simply “because she had something to say about Whiteness” (86).

Through the character of Arvay Henson, a poor white woman from the turpentine camp of Sawley, the novel examines the poor white community’s relationship with Old South nostalgia, foregrounding their investment in southern whiteness as a means of sublimating the anxiety caused by their exclusion from aristocratic privilege. Lacking the material wealth to claim membership in the aristocracy, their version of southern whiteness takes on characteristics

of a folk community. Much like Janie, Arvay spurns her husband Jim's materialism while idealizing what she considers her folk origins. Significantly, the difference between Jim's and Arvay's attitudes regarding their upward mobility registers in their relationships with the African American workers on whose labor they build their fortune. While Arvay can only view their black workers with suspicion and antagonism, Jim, who, as Cynthia Ward suggests, "has less need for overtly racist classification" (81), knows how to perform paternalism to gain access to black labor and exploit it for his benefit. Arvay, on the other hand, displays an antagonism toward the workers that, as Delia Caparoso Konzett explains, is characteristic of Sawley's residents, "a degenerate community of 'white crackers' desperately clinging to the Old South's grand myth of whiteness based not on the actual belief in white superiority but on white resentment, insecurity, and anxiety" (117). The novel dramatizes Arvay's struggle to adapt to her ascension to the middle class through her relationship with domestic materiality, most prevalently through her attitudes toward clothing and home furnishings, objects that she uses to assign social status to herself and others. *Seraph*, however, ultimately rejects Arvay's romanticization of the poor white folk, demonstrating through her reliance on material possessions to designate social boundaries that the lower class to which she longs to return, though deprived of material wealth, remains essentially materialistic.

### **Memorialization in Sawley**

The novel distinguishes between Jim and Arvay in terms of class when first introducing the characters. Jim, though he is as impoverished as the rest of Sawley, comes from a family "whose ancestors had held plantations upon the Alabama River before the War" (604). Jim's

plantation background separates him from the other residents of Sawley, “who had always been of poor whites who had scratched out some kind of an existence in the scrub oaks and pines, far removed from the ease of the big estates” (604). While the Civil War divested Jim’s family of their wealth and status, “Jim had a flavor about him. [. . .] he smelled of what he had once been associated with” (605). In contrast to Jim’s inherited air of success, Arvay’s family is depicted as belonging to the town of Sawley, known for “ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm” (599). Arvay’s father, Brock Henson, must vouch for Jim to get him a job at the turpentine still, because “‘teppentime’ folks are born, not made. [. . .] They are born in teppentime, live all their lives in it, and die and go to their graves smelling of teppentime” (605). Brock is one of these men, “a Cracker from way back” (605). Hurston renders the class difference between these men palpable through smells, Jim emitting the aromatic scent of upward mobility, Brock reeking of the acrid stench of poverty, deprivation, and the impossibility of improved circumstances.

These residents of Sawley are further characterized by their attitudes toward history. The narrator suggests that in Sawley “[f]ew were concerned with the past” (599). As evidence of this lack of concern for history, the narrator notes their disinterest in “the stubbornly resisting Indians” or the “conquering Spaniards” (599). The text reveals the irony behind this description, however, when the narrator relates the local population’s feelings on Northern visitors: “Nobody gave these Yankees any particular encouragement to settle around Sawley. [. . .] Damn Yankees were suspect of foraging around still looking for loot; and if not that, gloating over the downfall of The Cause” (600). These passages reveal an engagement with the past based in forgetting and selective remembering. While they see no need to remember Florida’s long history of violent European conquest, they remember all too well their own more recent conquest by the North,

still suspecting Yankees of stealing their money and bragging over their triumph. The residents of Sawley participate in Old South memorialization, yet, due to their class status, it engenders only bitterness while producing none of the material benefits.

The novel further distinguishes Arvay's class status through a catalog of her family's possessions. When Jim visits the Henson's home, he takes mental inventory of the decorations, including "sea-shells, a mustache cup and saucer with a motto on it in gilt letters, a cheap Japanese fan spread open, numerous other bits of cheap crockery," "the big family Bible," and a "cheap family album" (624, 625). The walls are crowded with "ill-assorted pictures," but "[t]he place of honor, over the mantelpiece was held by some artist's conception of General Robert E. Lee at Manassas" (625). The narrator takes a moment to poke fun at the painting, noting that "[t]hough the enemy was always right under the feet of the general's horse, he assumed that the men could not see them. Generals always pointed either their swords or their fingers to show his men the enemy" (625). Other paintings on the walls depict Bible tales, one illustrating Peter after "his unfortunate attempt to walk the waters like Christ," "[a]cknowledging his lack of faith and failure" while "squatting on the surface of the water" (625). Jim nearly makes a joke of this painting, suggesting that "if Peter could squat like that without sinking, he could walk [. . .] but remembered and held his peace" (625). These decorations recall the parlors of the Fairchilds or the Gays, but as a gaudy duplication. Lacking heirlooms and portraits of esteemed ancestors that prove aristocratic legitimacy, they decorate their parlor in cheap products and tacky Civil War paintings. Moreover, the paintings suggest an acceptance and even celebration of failure and defeat, a theme with obvious relevance for these poor whites resigned to the turpentine still. The jokes offered by the narrator and by Jim foreground the absurdity of this poor white family's interest in Confederate memorialization, as Confederate victory likely would not have made

much difference in their lives. They have always been and will remain of the lower, laboring class. These poor whites, bereft of the economic benefits of New South modernization, fall back on the “compensation of whiteness” implied in memorialization to deal with their lack of social power (Konzett 119).

When Jim describes his origins to Arvey later in the novel, the difference in his engagement with Old South memorialization from that of her parents becomes clear. He notes that “[w]hile my old man was sitting around reading and taking notes trying to trace up who did what in the Civil War, and my two brothers were posing around waiting for the good old times that they had heard went on before the War to come back again, I shucked out to get in touch with the New South” (782-3). Jim’s family, plantation aristocrats displaced by the war, immerses themselves in memorialization as a way of connecting with their past glory. Jim states that he rejected this course because he “had more sense” (782). He recognizes that the era of plantation aristocrats has come to an end and that the modernization of the South creates opportunities for those willing to find new ways of making money. Jim’s dismissal of Old South memorialization, however, does not preclude his taking advantage of the benefits of his standing as a white man in the South. As Brannon Costello notes, “we should not too quickly assume that his rejection of his family’s obsession with the Old South is complete. [. . .] Jim sets out to parlay some of the skills, behaviors, and attitudes gleaned from his ‘associations’ with an idealized version of the Old South into economic gain and aristocratic standing” (22). Indeed, while Jim is not interested in the particulars of the Civil War or in reviving his family’s plantation, he recognizes that in the New South, old power relations are merely refigured in new terms. Jim’s reliance on forms of racism reinscribed in the New South is most evident, as Costello suggests, in his “paternalistic manipulation of black labor” (22). Jim’s relationship with African American workers is best

encapsulated by his friendship with Joe Kelsey, whom Jim uses to get his start by having Joe operate a moonshine still for him. While Joe certainly profits from this venture, Jim makes most of the money from Joe's labor letting Joe take all the risk. Jim repeats this pattern on his rise to middle-class respectability with Joe's son Jeff, the African American workers in Citrabelle, the Portuguese family he hires to work on their property, and finally the multiethnic crews of the shrimping boats. Jim's upward mobility is based firmly in profiting from the labor of racial others.

### **“The Gospel of Sufficient Clothes”**

While *Seraph* foregrounds Jim's exploitation of black labor, the novel also recognizes the gendered domination inherent in Jim's patriarchal performance. Jim's courtship of Arvay is characterized by a litany of aggressions and humiliations committed to cement Jim's power over her. When Jim first visits the Hensons' home, Arvay falls into a religious fit, a tactic she has used to discourage the efforts of potential suitors. Jim, undaunted by her evasive performance, cures her of her fits by pouring turpentine in her eye. Having broken down Arvay's defense against men, Jim outlines his vision of their future, making the balance of power clear: “Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for. Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can't think with me” (630). Despite having already secured his role as the dominant person in their relationship, Jim makes a final gesture to ensure his authority over Arvay before he marries her, raping her under the mulberry tree behind her parents' house. After the attack Jim tells Arvay that they are now married and only need to go by the courthouse “to take out some papers on it” (650). When Arvay declares that she has been raped, Jim responds,

“Sure you was raped, and that ain’t all. You’re going to keep on getting raped” (650). Jim’s version of marriage, is complete domination, mind and body, over his intended. Jim’s treatment of Arvay reflects his engagement with labor; he fosters dependence through material deprivation and disguises his violence in familial commitment.

The novel establishes the characters’ social standing through their clothing, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the rape scene. The mulberry tree, much like Janie’s pear tree, represents a space in which Arvay conceived of her first childish ideas of romantic love. When they leave the enclosure of the tree, Arvay leaves behind her underwear, which Jim had recklessly thrown to the side: “Not wishing to leave such an intimate and revealing garment lying on the ground, Arvay looked around for a better place, and spied a dead snag of a limb at the level of her head, and she hung her drawers on that” (646). Arvay recognizes the drawers hanging from the limb as “a kind of sign and symbol” of her move from girlhood to adulthood, but she misses their full significance as representative of her submissive and degraded role in the new relationship (647). As Meisenhelder astutely notices, Arvay’s loss of her underwear in the mulberry scene “betrays surprising parallels” between her place in patriarchal society and “those of black women she distrusts and resents” (109). The condition of being left without underwear connects Arvay to two lower-class female characters: Belinda, the black child whom Jim and Arvay’s son Kenny humiliates by making her expose herself to passersby on incoming trains, and Fast Mary, the town prostitute, whom Kenny ridicules for not wearing underwear. It is worth mentioning that Kenny, heir to the throne of white manhood, sexually humiliates each of these females and even profits from Belinda’s trick, and while these acts are committed in youthful innocence, his lack of intention speaks to the unconscious nature of patriarchal ideology at work in the text. Though Arvay’s whiteness ensures her the material compensations that will come

with her marriage to Jim, the underwear hanging in the tree clearly place her in a situation similar to black women subject to the sexual whims of white men.

Clothing again becomes a point of negotiation after the death of Arvay and Jim's first child, the deformed and mentally vacant Earl. Arvay believes that Earl is God's punishment for her early yearnings for Carl, her sister's husband, a belief that intensifies her insecurities while Jim takes no interest in the child. These issues are compounded after Arvay gives birth to the healthy and beautiful Angeline and Jim begins doting on her. Jim shows his favor for his second child by buying her a gold ring and locket, already showering her with gifts of jewelry before she is old enough to wear them. Arvay recognizes that Jim already treats Angeline as if she belongs on a pedestal but does not see Earl as his heir: "There had been no little ring nor anything for poor Earl. [. . .] The lines were drawn, and she had become a partisan" (677). Arvay feels she and Earl are not good enough for Jim, Angeline, and Kenny, the real heir to southern white masculinity, and the conflict generates a tension between Arvay and Jim that threatens to destroy their marriage.

Earl acts as a central symbol of the conflict between Arvay and Jim. Several critics have suggested that the novel racializes Earl, thereby threatening the family's claim to whiteness. This conclusion makes sense, particularly regarding Earl's death. As Earl grows into adulthood, his sexuality becomes dangerous because he lacks the mental capacity to control his desire. After he brutally rapes Lucy Ann, one of the Corregio daughters, Earl is tracked down in the woods and shot by a gang of men with Jim in the lead. As Watson suggests, the scene "is suggestively reminiscent of a lynching party," in which Earl's bestial sexuality—he is described as a "hound dog," "[w]hining and whimpering and making growling noises in his throat" (710)—is punished by a group of white men. Laura Dubek argues that Lucy Ann is "here scripted as 'white,' despite



her being Portuguese,” and Earl “plays the role of black rapist” (348). Though this is a convincing argument, Earl’s attack on Lucy Ann also acts as a repetition of Jim’s courtship/rape of Arvay, and while Jim does describe the Corregios as a “white family,” his exploitation of their labor makes it clear that they are nonwhite (707). Rather than racializing Earl, the novel depicts him as whiteness stripped of performance, exposed as violent domination and objectification. Jim and his white posse lynch Earl for committing a crime against a nonwhite woman that cannot be disguised in a performance of whiteness. Earl is threatening because he reveals the violence inherent in white patriarchal gentility, and having expurgated themselves of the blight of Earl’s undisguised violent white masculinity, which Watson rightly registers as associating them with their lower-class origins, the Meserves can now claim their place in the middle class.

While Jim seeks closure on Earl’s life and death, Arvay constructs a memorial of Earl’s old clothing: “She gathered up all of Earl’s clothes and folded things one by one on the bed. She was going to put them somewhere out of sight. [. . .] She would store his things away out in the barn for a keepsake. She could creep out there at times unbeknowings to Jim and handle them when she felt to” (742). Arvay conspires to keep this secret monument to Earl as physical manifestation of her grudge against Jim and his refusal to accept Earl. After she witnesses Jim’s flirtations with Fast Mary, however, she changes her mind and tells Jim to take them to “Dessie’s house. No need letting ‘em lay round here and rot when somebody could be getting some good out of ‘em. They ain’t a bit of use around here” (750). Arvay’s decision to donate the clothes registers as her acceptance of Jim’s guidance in becoming the proper model of white southern womanhood. She looks to distinguish herself from the lower-class Fast Mary by ridding herself of the remainder of Earl, the sign of their lower-class origins, and she does so by performing an act of paternalistic charity toward their black workers, a sure sign of middle-class whiteness.

Despite this gesture Arvay continually causes disturbances in her family as she remains unable to detach herself from her poor white background. In a telling scene, Arvay is hemming a dress for Angie's graduation when a fight breaks out between the mother and daughter. As Angie stands on a chair with her mother working on the hem, "she could see only the lower half of herself in the glass. She could see her mother pinning a deep hem in the dress that let it hang just below her knees" (753). Angie suddenly throws a fit about the hem being too childish, finally admitting that she is trying to attract a boy. When Arvay discovers that the boy is a Yankee and shows her disapproval, Angie replies, "I don't care nothing about no old Civil War. I don't care nothing about Jeff Davis nor Abraham Lincoln nor Lee nor nobody else if it's got to come between me and Hatton Howland" (755). The scene outlines essential differences between Arvay and her children who have been raised in a middle-class family. The positioning of the mirror in relation to Angie offers insight into her behavior. She sees the lower half of her body reflected in the mirror, but also the lower half of her parentage, her mother. She knows that Arvay's lower-class allegiances will prompt her to disdain the match, so she rebels. Angie is correct in her presumption of her mother's reaction, as Arvay thinks of Hatton as a "Yankee scamp, the dirty Carpetbagger! Done burnt out and robbed and murdered all over the South, and now come back to take the under-currents of my child!" (760). Indeed, Arvay falls back on old prejudices born out of the Civil War. Jim, on the other hand, does not concern himself with Hatton's origin in a different region, but instead likes Hatton for what they have in common, his willingness to "make [his] own rules, and ignore all the ready-made ones" when it comes to making money (764). Just as Jim made his first real money running a still, Hatton has made his money running numbers. While Arvay cannot see past her outdated notions, Jim sees Hatton as a go-getter who

will provide for their daughter. He welcomes him into the family and sets him up as a land developer, clearing out the swamp by their house to build an extension to the town.

Arvay also becomes upset when she learns that Kenny and Felicia, one of the Corregios' daughters, are romantically involved. She feels the match is beneath Kenny as she still sees the Corregios as non-whites, but she is also intimidated by Felicia's dress. Arvay's description of Felicia's clothes highlights her view of the girl: "She was dressed in a fluffy ruby-red tulle dress with a girdle of crushed cloth of gold. All of her decorations were gold. Gold kid slippers and a big gold flower in her flowing hair. She looked like the daughter of some foreign ruling-man" (789). Arvay sees Felicia's garb as representing some luxurious exotic excess, something to be feared and avoided, and she feels inferior and jealous of the attention Felicia garners. Later, she imagines Felicia and her mother as "heathen idolators [. . .] not to be treated white. Arvay proceeded to set up images of them among the African savages and heathen Chinees. They were not fellow-humans, nothing of the kind. She stripped them bald-naked and mocked at them. They were stark-naked as a jay-bird in whistling time, and Christianity was the gospel of sufficient clothes" (817). Arvay's anxiety over Felicia derives from her feeling that a non-white girl more easily fits into her family's middle-class milieu than she does. She mentally strips the Corregios of their clothes so that they resemble the image of the naked savage that Arvay feels is proper to their racial station. She realizes that "[i]n order to hate deeply and completely, one must have an image stripped of everything but that which lends itself to scorn and hate," so she strips the Corregios of their basic humanity (817).

These insecurities lead Arvay to make a scene, inciting Jim to reassert his dominance over her. He belittles and objectifies Arvay, "look[ing] down on her as if she were a chair" (793). Jim then tears off her clothes and tells her, "You're my damn property" (795). He continues his

objectification by “stretch[ing] himself full length upon her, but in the same way that he might have laid himself down on a couch” (796). Jim once again curbs Arvay’s anxieties by putting her in her proper place in the patriarchal order as his possession, and, once again, the loss of clothing represents the assertion of dominance in the social order. Just as she attempted to gain superiority over the Corregios by mentally divesting them of their clothes, Jim has reasserted his dominance by stripping Arvay.

### **A Tale of Two Porches**

After the stripping incident, Arvay once again attempts to fall in line with Jim’s vision of the world, and he rewards her by adding a sleeping porch to the house. She feels intimidated by the addition at first, assuming that such extravagances belonged to “a class of folks whom she thought of as too high-toned for her to compare with” (810). Angie directs her on how to furnish the new porch, insisting that “there had to be brand new things, and things meant especially for a porch like that. Things built for coolness, and bright and reclining-like” (810). Angie recognizes her mother as incapable of knowing the proper things for the porch and takes over its decorating. At first Arvay does not feel comfortable on the porch, but after she shows it off to Hatton’s mother, she takes ownership of it as “a kind of throne room” (811). The “sleeping porch,” suggests Brannon Costello, “is simply another version of the Southern Woman standing on her pedestal” (33). As Arvay finally accepts her place on the porch and begins to enjoy the power she wields, she comes closer to accepting Jim’s request for her to join him as a member of the middle-class elite. The narrator notes, “out there, Arvay had the courage to visit the graveyard of years and dig up dates and examine them cheerfully. It was a long, long way from the turpentine

woods to her sleeping-porch” (811). Ownership of the porch gives Arvay the confidence to separate her current circumstances from those of her past and to perform the role of the southern lady.

Her acceptance of Jim’s way of life does not last long, however, as Arvay cannot overcome her feelings of inferiority in regards to the workers Jim exploits. The conflict between Arvay and Jim reaches a new climax when Jim wrestles with the giant diamond-back snake. Jim calls to Arvay for help as he begins to lose the struggle, but Arvay freezes, and it is Jeff, Joe’s son, who comes to his rescue. As Arvay misses her opportunity to align herself with Jim, she finds herself in a subservient position to Jeff, who “g[ives] her a look that halted her where she was. [. . .] Jeff wanted her to know that she had been judged” (831). Jeff looks down on Arvay for not taking her rightful position beside Jim and feels resentful that she has caused him the embarrassment of acting as Jim’s savior, disrupting the order of the relationship from which he benefits. After the episode Jim explains to Arvay that all the incidents that have caused her anxiety—his still with Joe, Angelina’s marriage to Hatton, Kenny’s courtship with Felicia—have benefitted their family economically, but that due to her anxieties about her lower-class origins, she has never “realized that I was scuffling like that to place you higher up” (839). Jim determines to leave Arvay because of her inability to join him in his class ascension. Later on, as Arvay sleeps on her porch, she awakens to find Jeff staring at her in “anger and dislike” (843). She considers scolding Jeff for his impudence but realizes that with Jim gone, Jeff is the ultimate authority at the house: “She couldn’t fire Jeff—nothing of the kind—and Jeff knew it” (844). Jeff recognizes that Arvay, unable to accept her place in the patriarchal order, holds no authority over him, and he displaces her from her “throne” by staring her off her sleeping porch.

Having been taken off her pedestal by Jeff, Arvey returns to Sawley to visit her sick mother, thinking of the trip as a return to her roots and her proper place. She idealizes her folk origins as an escape from Jim's materialistic world that has been the source of her insecurities: "The corroding poverty of her childhood became a glowing virtue, and state to be desired. [. . .] Home to the good old times and simple, honest things, where greed after money and power had no place" (845, 846). While Arvey romanticizes her trip home as a return to a folk unsullied by gross materialism, her preparation for the trip makes it clear that she is not the same woman who left Sawley. She packs "[h]er wardrobe bag, over-night case and combination hat- and shoe-box [. . .] with her initials on every piece in raised silver. The trade-mark in the rich linings said *Mark Cross*. It did not occur to Arvey that the people she was raised with didn't even know about things like these" (846). Arvey's expensive, name-brand luggage, things to carry her things, indicates that she has been changed by her time with Jim more than she realizes. The luggage, marked with her name, brands her as middle-class.

As she arrives in Sawley, she finds that the town has also felt the effects of modernization. The taxi driver informs her that the old industries that once defined Sawley—lumber mills and turpentine camps—have been rooted out due to deforestation and have been replaced by crops raised "in a better way" and service industry jobs serving the traffic brought by the "new paved highway" (847). Arvey, though she is impressed with the changes, attempts to reminisce about the good-old-days of the turpentine camps, but the taxi driver challenges her nostalgia by commenting, "The folks, white and colored, that follows that kind of work don't have the kind of money to spend to make good business. I'm glad to see 'em gone from here. [. . .] They hate like sin to take a forward step. Just like they was took out of their cradles, they'll be screwed down in their coffins" (847). Arvey's nostalgic mood is further disturbed when she

arrives at her childhood home, which, “[w]ith her own modest but modern home as a yard-stick [. . .] was too awful to contemplate” (848). The degradation of her childhood home shocks Arvay, who has been altered by her middle-class life. The distance between her current life and her beginnings becomes apparent as the taxi driver incredulously asks, “You want your things put off *here*?” (848). Arvay’s luggage is out of place on the “dilapidated porch” (849). She has left her sleeping porch, a symbol of her belonging to the bourgeois leisure class, due to her insecurities, but she finds herself out of place on the ramshackle porch of her youth.

Arvay soon finds that the people from her childhood, rather than being nobly above consideration of their material circumstances, are only too aware of what they lack. Her mother tells her that Lorraine and Carl’s family “is terrible absent of things” (851). She accuses them of “[d]isfurnishing me of the little money you sent me” (852). Arvay learns that her family has been fighting over the money they could get from her. In her mother’s home she finds “most of the things that she and her husband had sent Maria Henson in the last few years, arranged for display. [. . .] They were all there on display—that blue-worked chenille spread with the peacock in the center, the set of dishes that she had asked Jim for six years ago—rowed out on the mantelpiece, table and what-not to the most showy advantage” (849, 860). The tacky decorations that Jim noticed long ago have been replaced by gifts from the Meserve family, a link for the lower-class Hensons to the middle-class. Arvay notices “a cheap celluloid soap dish on the lower shelf” and realizes that “Raine or some of her family must have given Maria that” (860). Even in her childhood home, members of the family are ranked by the material possessions they can afford. “Maria’s display,” according to Dubek, “symbolizes the power of white middle-class culture and its place in white consciousness as a point of reference for the measuring of others” (350). Far from being a refuge from the materialism that has changed Arvay’s life, she finds that

her old home has also been altered by her rise in class, and that her family has been cashing in on her status to raise their own sense of worth. She recognizes that “both Carl and Lorraine felt themselves less than she was. Weak as she herself was, it was strange to know that people had been depending on her” (867).

In Sawley, rather than returning to a folk community unsullied by hierarchical social relations, Arvay finally learns to perform her class status by being brought into class conflict with her relatives. She aligns herself with Bradford Cary, a local banker turned politician, who offers to pay for her mother’s last request, a lavish funeral, as a ploy to make himself more popular with the lower-class residents. This association causes jealousy in Carl, who attempts to confront Arvay in the lobby of the hotel, threatening to sue her because he injured himself by falling through the “dilapidated porch” at her mother’s house. The manager of the hotel, catering to Arvay and her money, has Carl ejected from the premises. The incident firmly places Arvay and the Middletons in class opposition. Arvay realizes that “[n]ot having, and never having things made people do things that they wouldn’t if they ever had anything that they wanted” (871). She returns to her mother’s house to find that Lorraine and Carl have destroyed Maria’s shrine: “All the pictures of the Meserves were there, mutilated, and trod on the floor” (873). Arvay goes to her mulberry tree, which symbolizes her ideal vision of home, and looks out at the highway, symbolizing the modern world, “[b]ut between the tree and the world stood that house” (877). The house stands as the physical embodiment of meanness and poverty that has kept her from seeing her place in the modern world, and she decides to set fire to “[t]he physical sign of her disturbance” (879). Arvay releases herself from her class anxieties by destroying the material representation of her impoverished origins.



Arvay's new confidence in performing her class position becomes evident as she returns home, giving gifts to Jeff and his wife, Janie, prompting Janie to comment, "I declare, Miss Arvay, but you sure is folks" (884). Jeff confirms she is "[j]ust like Mister Jim. [. . .] And everybody knows that Mister Jim is quality first-class. Knows how to carry hisself, and then how to treat everybody. Miss Arvay's done come to be just like him" (884). Jeff's and Janie's praise illustrates that being "folks," or part of the folk, comes from understanding how to perform racial and class identity and how to treat those above and beneath you in the prescribed ways. Arvay has learned how to perform paternalism and has thus become part of the folk. She demonstrates her transformation when she tells her husband, "You'se a monny-ark, Jim, and that's something like a king, only bigger and better" (900). Arvay accepts Jim as the natural ruler of her life, and they set out to conquer the ocean, a last frontier to be brought under Jim's dominion.

### **We're Going to Need a Bigger Boat**

Hurston's choice to end the novel on the shrimping boat suggests she wanted to foreground the Merserve's relationship with their labor force. Most of the novel centers on the domestic environment, as Arvay attempts to make sense of her new social status by ranking others, and herself, according to how they fit into the domestic material space. Her insecurities regarding how well, or poorly, she fits into the space keep her from playing the part assigned her. In this last chapter, having accepted her position as the wife of Jim Merserve, a man on the rise in the New South, she finds herself situated not on a pedestal, but at the site of production. Having realized the importance of playing the proper role, Arvay dresses the part, accepting from Jim "the blue jeans that the fishermen wore, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots" (893). She

also asserts the proper role toward the workers, “taking care of them” and cooking them a “dinner in a warm family atmosphere” (910). Rather than scorning the shrimpers as beneath her, creating a sense of competition and antagonism, she takes a paternalistic attitude toward them, working to take care of them. Her dress and attitude create a sense of familial togetherness, the same feeling Jim has easily engendered in his workers throughout the novel.

*Seraph* appears to offer a happy ending for Arvey and Jim, seemingly supporting the idea that if everyone plays their part in the social order, it can only lead to happiness and prosperity. Obviously, for a novel set in the Jim Crow South, this conclusion leads to disturbing implications.<sup>28</sup> As is always the case with Hurston, however, the reader must look to the periphery to find her subtle critiques. While the novel follows the increasing fortunes of the Meserves, the edges of *Seraph* are populated with the people who make their ascent possible. Jim builds his family’s wealth on the exploited labor of racial minorities in the South, and while they all seem eagerly complicit in the narration, this is undoubtedly because the perspective centers on the Meserves’ side of these interactions. Reading the central plot against what is peripheral reveals that these characters merely perform the social role that the culture of the New South compels of them.

The shrimping boat offers a perfect example of the racial and class hierarchy on which Jim builds his fortune. Christopher Rieger sees the multiracial cast of characters on the boat as forming a “racial egalitarianism” (121), a seemingly fair observation as Arvey learns that “[t]here were as many if not more colored captains than white” (893). However, as Costello notes, “only Jim and other white men serve as *owners* of those ships” (34). Indeed, the fishing

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<sup>28</sup> Hurston’s controversial essay, “The ‘Pet Negro’ System,” also appears to espouse this view, describing it as a mutually beneficial system of friendship between whites and blacks. However, though the essay largely expounds on the advantages of the system, she also hints at its use in exploiting black workers, suggesting “it is an important thing to know if you have any plans for racial manipulations in Dixie. You cannot batter down doors down there, and you can save time and trouble, and I do mean trouble, by hunting up the community keys” (921).

venture, taken over from Corregio and manned by non-white workers, acts as another in the series of Jim's economic ventures. The only difference on the fishing boat is that Arvay has taken her place beside him, finally recognizing the privilege she gains from his exploitation of others. He appropriates those beneath him in the racial and economic hierarchy to profit from their labor.

The boat, however, also offers the only moment in the novel in which we see resistance from the exploited workers, though it is displaced from the boat owners to other objects of frustration. Arvay learns that the men often "cursed out the owners. Everything that went wrong on a boat was named after the owner. Did the fuel pump on the engine go bad? It was a Toomer, Meserve or whatever the owner's name so-and-so of a bastard" (893). Jim assures Arvay that the practice is all in good fun, adding, "I forget that I'm the owner and cuss my ownself out at times" (894). This practice, however, implies much more than Jim recognizes, indicating a genuine frustration with ownership and suggesting that, as Costello reads it, "like a faulty fuel pump, the owner stands in the way of their material gain" (36). These last scenes, then, offer some insight into the perspective of the workers, a viewpoint missing from the rest of the novel. While the Meserves cover their exploitation in the performance of gentility, a performance that includes gendered and racial violence, the workers displace their anger and frustration onto the closest surrogates, the tools of their labor. Thus the sea works as an apt metaphor for the situation at the end of *Seraph*. Just as Arvay sees the men haul in dangerous, hostile life—"strange unimaginable-shaped things"—from beneath the surface of the water, the workers' hostility seethes just below the calm surface of paternalistic performance (905). The metaphor also works to describe Hurston's enigmatic novel, as just below the story of a middle-class white romance there lay the stories of the workers' discontent displaced onto the material environment.

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## VITA

Travis Rozier earned his B.A. in English at the University of South Carolina in 2005. After spending a year teaching second-grade English in China, he enrolled at the University of South Carolina Graduate School in 2007 and earned his M.A. in English in 2009. His interest in modern southern women writers began while he was working on his master's degree, for which he wrote his thesis on Carson McCuller's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. He has an article forthcoming in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* on memorialization and melancholy in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*.