

THE EVOLVING SOUTHERN GOTHIC: TRADITIONS OF RACIAL, GENDER,  
AND SEXUAL HORROR IN THE IMAGINED AMERICAN SOUTH

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, “The Evolving Southern Gothic: Traditions of Racial, Gender, and Sexual Horror in the Imagined American South,” I advocate a reclaiming of the Gothic as a critical lens for study of literature set in the American South. The term “Southern Gothic” is one that has been maligned by some scholars who suggest it is too-readily applied to the region’s literature; however, because Gothic tropes—including grotesque figures, haunted houses, ghosts, and vampires—have enjoyed increasing popularity in literature and film about the American South over the past eighty years, it is imperative to theorize more fully the effects of this modal/regional pairing. Oftentimes, the Gothic is invoked to convey the oppressiveness of corrupt establishments or ideologies; it is little surprise, then, that when it is applied to a region with a unique history of slavery, lynching and prolonged segregation, the Southern Gothic frequently works to undercut institutionalized racism. However, the strategic ways in which Southern Gothic texts tend to link race to issues of gender and sexuality are rather more unexpected. Examining the trajectory of this repeated connection between race, gender, and sexuality in a variety of “Southern Gothic” texts from 1930 to the present, I argue that as opposed to simply rehashing the brutal racism of a Civil War or Jim Crow-era South, authors and filmmakers have used this literary mode not only to highlight the constructedness of racial caste systems, gender and sexual norms, and Southern exceptionalism but also to critique the often violent means through which these divisions are manufactured and upheld.

## DEDICATION

*For my dad, Tom Cothren*

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1960)

AW: Have you ever been called a Gothic Writer?

EW: They better not call me that!

AW: No?

EW: Yes, I have been, though. Inevitably, because I'm a Southerner. I've never had anybody call me that to my face. I've read that I'm Gothic, or I get asked by students to explain why I am.

AW: Why do they try to put all Southern writers in that mold?

EW: I don't know. It's just easy.

AW: I was never even sure of what it meant, exactly.

EW: I'm not sure either....it sounds as if it has nothing to do with real life, and I feel that my work has something to do with real life.

Alice Walker interviews Eudora Welty, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*  
(1973)

When author Ellen Glasgow coined the term "Southern Gothic" in 1935, she used it to describe Southern literature she saw as filled with "aimless violence," incapable of articulating a coherent relationship to modernity. She distinguishes the genre only as a means of condemning it, interpreting the Southern Gothic's "incurably romantic" distortion of reality as a futile attempt to run away from the South's dark past ("Heroes and Monsters"). Glasgow's sentiments are clearly echoed in the above statements from O'Connor and Welty, who are often identified as Southern Gothic writers. Both authors balk at the tendency of critics and readers to associate (literature about) the South with the macabre, and Welty even insists that such a label is inappropriate for her fiction since the Gothic has no basis in "real life."



In spite of resistance from authors and some critics, however, the term Southern Gothic has only become more popular since the 1930s. A search of scholarly publications in the MLA International Bibliography reveals that since 1960, more than thirty articles have linked the term to works by Harper Lee, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Cormac McCarthy, and Dorothy Allison. Recent book collections have identified Alan Ball's *True Blood* and Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as entries in the Southern Gothic oeuvre, and a slew of critical reviews have employed the term to describe texts such as Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective* and Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*. It seems somewhat paradoxical, then, that in spite of its increasingly frequent application as a literary/filmic descriptor and critical lens, very little work has been devoted to theorizing the Southern Gothic as a literary genre. Encyclopedias on *Southern Literature* (Snodgrass), *Southern Culture* (Inge, et. al.), *Gothic Literature* (Snodgrass), and the *American Gothic* (Crow) all include brief entries on the Southern Gothic, but at this time, Jay Ellis's *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature* (2013) is the only full-length text to explore in depth this compound genre's tropes, themes and participants.

That there are not more comprehensive studies of the Southern Gothic and its development is perhaps a result of academics' resistance to furthering negative perceptions of the American South—perceptions that some believe will be worsened by linking the “South” to the “Gothic.” As Leigh Anne Duck explains in *The Nation's Region*, the South has long been configured in U.S. discourse as removed from the contemporary national culture. During the 1930s, in particular, the South increasingly

was seen as a threat to national economic, social and political structures. As a result, dramatic gothic tropes proliferated in then-contemporary literature describing the region: the “tremendous and ghastly visions” of the South’s white supremacists, the Dantean “inferno” of its agricultural districts, the “lunatic, disintegrating wildness” of its evangelical Protestantism, and its culture “linger[ing] in the dark backward abyss of time” (18). Since then, the South has been continually characterized in film and literature by its “gothic excesses and social transgressions,” and to some, this may suggest the region has been made “the repository for everything the nation is not” (Goddu 76)—a space in which the rest of the nation attempts to confine the Gothic horrors of racism, anomaly and mindless ritual. Patricia Yaeger is one such scholar who recently has attempted to separate the Gothic from the South by painting it as a regressive and “helpless” mode. In her article “Black Men Dressed in Gold” (2009), she argues that the Gothic should not be the premiere genre for thinking about United States southern literature as it has a tendency to present history as an inescapable nightmare where “everyone bumps into the passive voice” and is “haunted by old ideas about race and class that will not go away” (13). As an alternative, she holds up the neo-baroque, contending that this new theoretical lens will allow readers to understand the past “not [as] as curse but a gift” (13).

To me, however, this attempted casting off the Southern Gothic is impermissible, not only because it seems like an attempt to wish away many of the recognizably—and still culturally relevant—Gothic themes that have continued to appear in Southern literature, but also given that so little theoretical work has been done to consider *why* the

Southern Gothic is, consistently, used as a descriptor for Southern literature in various academic and popular contexts. As Theresa Goddu argues in *Gothic America*, the persistence of this generic and regional coupling can be attributed in large part to the South's racial history. A region haunted by the ghosts of slavery, racism and Civil War defeat, it is little surprise that the American South has often been represented as "Gothic." Further study of such representations can be beneficial in enabling readers to more fully understand the "constructedness" of the region's history, particularly as it relates to racism. By "resurrecting" what these narratives repress about racial hierarchies, the Gothic has the potential to disrupt "the dream world of national myth," disclosing "the instability of America's self-representations" and unsettling dominant images of cultural identity (Goddu 10).

Admittedly, the South's fear of extending to African Americans "greater access to education, citizenship, economic resources" and overall equality historically *has* manifested itself in appalling images of "monstrous, ludicrous bodies" invented (and expelled) throughout Southern literature as a means of coping with African Americans' demands for change (Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire* 4). This dissertation will consider, for example, the "freakish," mutilated bodies of African American caretakers in works by McCullers, Capote and Tartt as well as the tortured, bloated African American "ghosts" in the novels of Faulkner and Butler. All of these figures' injuries and "deformations" are, in some way, connected to their ongoing struggles to overcome racism and segregation in a postbellum South. The recurring presence of such figures in contemporary novels does not mean, however, that Southern Gothic texts are always out

of touch with reality—as Welty contends—or that they take a sort of “stagnant” approach to depicting history—as Glasgow and Yaeger suggest. Rather, this project will demonstrate that examining variations in depictions of race in texts that are commonly identified as Southern Gothic will register a trajectory of change in regional and national thinking about identity construction.

Issues of racial identity construction are, undoubtedly, of primary importance to Southern Gothic texts; however, the Southern Gothic mode is often equally invested in addressing binary gender and sexual identities, oftentimes exploring the related constructedness of race, gender and sexuality in order to do so. Given that the “encounter with the unknown” is one of the most common themes in the Gothic tradition and that there is a strong tendency in the Gothic to define as “horrific” those individuals who do not meet or adhere to social norms, it seems somewhat expected that, like African American characters, gendered and sexual “deviants”—or “Others”—would find themselves imperiled in the Southern Gothic oeuvre. Just as the “passing” or African American Other is repeatedly construed (by either the novel or the novel’s characters) as a monstrous emblem of “unknown danger,” the sexual Other, or an individual who does not conform to society’s heteronormative expectations, is portrayed as frightening in that s/he does not bear “markers of difference” and could at any moment infiltrate the home or bed of the threatened Southern self. Often, these racial and sexual Others are used as counterpoints to one another, as are the African American caretakers and white gender-deviant children I will address in Chapter Two; in other cases, however, it is impossible to parse out studies of racial and sexual Otherness, for example, in examining characters

like the Southern Gothic vampire, since those aspects of their identities work in tandem to challenge the stability of the white, heteronormative Southern patriarchy.

The goal of this dissertation is to highlight the varying challenges that “Southern Gothic” films and literature have posed over time to oppressive systems of racial, gender, and sexual normativity. In doing so, it will intersect with several fields of critical inquiry: Southern studies’ interest in region as an imagined place, developing genre studies about the Southern Gothic, and theories of race and gender specific to the (Southern) Gothic mode.

#### The American South as Imagined (Literary) Space

Some scholars of the American South have taken for granted that literature about the region, or written by people from the region, is grounded in a specific place; yet, questions remain about how such a place is being/should be defined. Certainly, the answer has much to do with physical location. When one speaks of the “South,” this often means the states of the former Confederacy as well as Missouri and Oklahoma. However, it is reductive to think of the South only in terms of geography as it may also be understood as regionally distinct in terms of its economy (unique systems of labor), its ideologies (enforced norms, laws, practices and codes), its culture (specific speech patterns, rituals, and foods), and its history (Romine 28). Where literature and literary criticism are concerned, especially, the South is more viable when “conceptualized in

ways that are also fundamentally aesthetic, rhetorical, historical, ideological and cultural” (Ladd 46).

It must be understood, then, that the “South” is not some innate phenomenon but a product “culturally and historically fabricated to local specifications by narratives that are more or less cooperative and more or less conscious” (Kreyling ix). There does not exist, then, a single “authentic” version of the American South. Rather, there is only what Scott Romine calls the “real”/“South”—a concept comprised of transient and artificial terms that are themselves remarkably fluid and implicitly narrative.<sup>1</sup> Literature and film about the South, especially Southern Gothic texts, have undoubtedly played a tremendous role in shaping such narratives about the “real”/ “South.” But, far from simply reinscribing the South as the “nation’s dark Other” or as an “exceptional” space because of its social and cultural “backwardness,” I would like to suggest that Southern Gothic texts point to the constructedness of myths produced by and about the region as a way of dismantling related constructs about “appropriate” gender/sexual roles and established racial hierarchies.

There is, perhaps, no other author more responsible for shaping an image of the American South—or indeed the earliest Southern Gothic—than William Faulkner. His works are among the first to be tied to the genre, and the Yoknapatawpha novels adapt many aspects of the Gothic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Faulkner’s work has, unquestionably, exerted great influence over much of the Southern writing and filmmaking produced in its wake.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept is one that has been widely addressed in studies of the American South—not just by Romine. What Romine describes is quite similar, for example, to Diane Robert’s “South of the mind”—a place that may be geographically, historically, and culturally locatable but that is, nonetheless, imagined and invented by various cultures and peoples.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Elizabeth Kerr’s *William Faulkner’s Gothic Domain*.

This does not mean, however, that his is the only “official language” of the Southern Gothic or that his writing defines, exclusively, the material addressed by other practitioners of the genre. Indeed, while this project will acknowledge the ways that Faulkner’s texts *The Sound and the Fury*, *A Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* have often served as inspiration for later “Southern Gothic” writing, I will also accentuate the ways that later Southern Gothicists depart from Faulkner’s thinking about the South as a “Gothic” site, especially in terms of adapting Gothic tropes to changing social concerns regarding race, gender, and sexuality.

Oftentimes, literary critics fear that texts attempting to praise, preserve or even revisit the “American South” of previous generations are participating in a troublingly conservative venture—a “project of the white establishment” that is “heavily invested in a status quo” with roots in “slavery [and] exaggerated gender, race, and class roles” (Roberts 367). They see these efforts to “reterritorialize” the South as being mobilized exclusively under the “aegis of tradition [and] heritage” (Romine x). However, it is wrong to suggest that all, or even most, literary projects (re)mapping the American South are, by definition, motionless or “phantasmagoric”—looking back to a region and culture that is lost and longed for. As this study of the Southern Gothic will demonstrate, film and literature often revisit this imagined place to dynamic and subversive effect. In Southern Gothic texts, the South is not a stable site of tradition to which the reader is invited to return; rather, it is portrayed as more provisional—a locus of political and cultural transition that, always, is being adapted by cultural projects promoting acceptance and progress. As a space whose economic, political, and cultural

boundaries have—over the years—become increasingly permeable, the imagined South has developed as an ideal space in which to map a similar destabilization of long-standing and regionally-special racial, gender and sexual boundaries—as well as the Gothic effects of reinforcing/eliminating such divisions.

### The Southern Gothic as Literary Genre

The Southern Gothic has roots in both the American and European Gothic traditions. Scholars often identify the beginning of the literary Gothic with the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764. His work, like many "Gothic" texts to come, features a dark, decaying castle, an evil villain, a damsel in distress, and—of course—a host of secrets. This foundational novel is commonly grouped with others like Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* that established more firmly the tropes of the genre: eerie landscapes, characters' fixation on the past, violence, and mania. Other now-famous Gothic texts were soon to follow including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Not long after its appearance in Europe, Charles Brockden Brown initiated a literary Gothic tradition in America when he published *Wieland* in 1798 and, later, *Edgar Huntly* in 1799. Though relatively few early American authors—among them Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, and Nathaniel Hawthorne—are identified as participants in the American Gothic, the genre expanded significantly in the twentieth century and was



frequently adapted by writers whose setting was the South. William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote are recognized as some of the authors who made significant contributions to the mode identified as "Southern Gothic" today.

Many of these twentieth century authors writing about the American South found fruitful the Gothic's traditional themes—madness, decay and the influence of the past in the present—as a means of discussing ongoing problems in the region, particularly those related to racism. Often, European Gothic novels, like *Castle of Otranto*, are set in dark, oppressive buildings (e.g. castles or churches) whose architecture is meant to reflect not only the owners' fall from power but also their attempt to hide some terrible secret crime. Such structures also appear in Southern Gothic texts; however, they tend to take the form of a decaying plantation home owned by a villainous white master.<sup>3</sup> As is the case in European Gothic texts, the owners of the fallen estates in Southern Gothic texts are obsessed with their (loss of) power and prestige, and they commit severe violations of the laws of church and state, even incest, in an attempt to maintain their families' affluence. This trope is easily adapted to depictions of an ante-/postbellum South since slaves and their children were repeatedly raped by white masters.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, then, slavery, as well as this nation's more general history of racial violence and inequality, is one of the most important themes of the Southern Gothic, and its victims are consistently

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation, particularly Chapter Three, locates examples of such fallen estates in texts by Faulkner (including both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound of the Fury*) as well as Kazan's *Baby Doll*, Percy's *Lancelot* and Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*.

<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter Four, this is a trope that appears in a variety of Southern Gothic novels, including Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Joe Lansdale's adaptation of "Pigeons from Hell."

African Americans.<sup>5</sup> The Southern Gothic also employs, on occasion, traditional Gothic elements of the supernatural in depicting both its victims and victimizers.<sup>6</sup> However, as the horrors of these Southern Gothic tales often have a basis in real life, the supernatural alone is not a defining characteristic of the genre.<sup>7</sup>

Given that brutalized African American characters are often victims in Southern Gothic novels, it seems little wonder that “grotesque” images are another of the genre’s most recognizable tropes. The grotesque is a longstanding concern of the Gothic that involves physical disfigurement of the human body. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, for example, all encourage readers to consider whether bodily disfigurement indicates a similar moral deformity in the main characters. This question is one that is also raised in much of Flannery O’Connor’s well-known Southern Gothic fiction (e.g. *Wise Blood*)—so much so that her name has become synonymous with discussions of the grotesque in Southern literature.<sup>8</sup> As this dissertation will demonstrate, however, many other Southern Gothic texts are concerned with the race-related “grotesqueries” that have become naturalized in the Jim Crow-era-South. These are systemic bodily abuses against African Americans that white characters must learn to acknowledge, and, I will argue, one of the ways that they are able to do so is through their own experiences as the victims of gender and sexual normativity.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this topic, see Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*.

<sup>6</sup> Examples include the ghostly figures in works like Morrison’s *Beloved* and Howard’s “Pigeons from Hell” as well as the vampires of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* and Charlaine Harris’s *Southern Vampire Mysteries*.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see Bridget Marshall’s “Defining Southern Gothic Literature.”

<sup>8</sup> She addresses this connection in her piece “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” taken from a talk she gave in 1960.

## Gender, Sexuality and the (Southern) Gothic

The “encounter with the unknown” is one of the Gothic mode’s most common themes. Oftentimes, the unknown manifests in Gothic texts in the form of a supernatural figure; in the *Southern Gothic*, however, there is an even more frequent tendency to construct *humans* as dangerous “Others.” These characters lie “beyond the barrier of epistemological apprehension by virtue of being different from the subject” and take “the place of the ghost or monster as the source of Gothic horror” (Anolik 2). As I have discussed, African Americans, in particular, tend to be depicted as Others in the Southern Gothic, considered “inhuman” because they are a “different” race, and, further, a formidable danger in threatening to destabilize racial boundaries erected by the white hegemony.

It is also important to note, however, that the Gothic just as frequently takes up a (related) fear of the human *sexual* Other, a figure whose “deviance,” in my study, can be discussed in terms of both gender and sexuality. In “periods of cultural insecurity” about regression and degeneration, as are often associated with the “disappearing” American South, “the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender...becomes particularly intense” (Showalter 99). Thus, the gendered “Otherness” of characters such as the tomboy and sissy characters I examine in Chapter Two becomes an unknown and “Gothic” site as it poses a challenge to the socially established gender binary.

In many instances, the Gothic has produced depictions of “horrifying” sexual/gendered Others with the intention of concretizing those borders demarcating

gender/sexuality. Barbara Creed points out, for example, that in film particularly, there is a long history of women portrayed as “castrating” monsters, their mysteriously and abnormal femininity rendered inhuman. Creed argues that “as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, [the woman] is defined in terms of her sexuality, and her gender is key in the construction of her monstrosity” (3). Often, she is represented as monstrous in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions; however, she can also be demonized in terms of her sexual desire, for example, when she is made to take the form of a “femme castratrice, castrating mother or a vagina dentata” (7).

As this project will demonstrate, however, it is not always the case that the Gothic depicts women as monstrous because of their presumed “Otherness.” In fact, there exists a significant body of Southern Gothic film and literature that constructs the self as a female or “feminine” figure, gazing with horror at the male Other (or, rather, a system enforcing rigid hierarchical “norms”) as a means of challenging oppressive, hegemonic perspectives. One body of texts that participates in this tradition is the “Female Gothic,” works that focus on various concerns of women (e.g. the threat or experience of sexual violation, pregnancy and childbirth), revealing the cruelty and dangers of tyrannical patriarchal systems and the abuses of the men who oversee them. Some of the first examples of the Female Gothic included Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, novels that began a conversation about the roles that sexuality and gender play in what women fear and what others fear about women. Later fiction—including Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow

Wallpaper,” and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*—continued the tradition, establishing as a central theme of Female Gothic literature the “imprisonment and vulnerability of women within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety, especially the family home” (Bailey 95). Domestic spaces not only pose threats to the body, sanity and/or life of the heroines; they also speak to the oppression women experience under the control of an oppressive patriarchal system (Snodgrass). While early Female Gothic texts served primarily to highlight women’s confinement within these structures and the role of the patriarchy in restraining them there, later texts in the tradition began to imagine women asserting independence and sexual autonomy, reclaiming authority over both her home and herself.

Thus far, I have focused primarily on the ways in which Gothic “terror” is located around gendered Otherness; however, the rigid binary structure that maintains exclusive sexual male/ female gender categories also establishes a heterosexual/ homosexual or normative/non-normative sexual binary, and individuals who do not fit within these categories are equally likely to be construed as fear-inducing in Gothic works. The fear of homosexual figures is often coded as fear of an inhuman creature in the Gothic—a creature either “spectralized” or “demonized” depending on her visibility within the predominant culture. African American characters are commonly “disappeared” in Southern Gothic literature—made “weightless, sterile and diffident to the imperatives of physical desire” (Castle 46); however, as a result, they also sometimes come to epitomize a subversive “not-there-ness” with the power to “haunt back.” In this way, the spectral sexual Other, especially the ghostly figures in works like Octavia

Butler's *Kindred*, contain their own powerful and perverse magic, and demonstrate that, "used imaginatively...the very trope that evaporates can also solidify" (Castle 47).

To be sure, there are also "incarnate" sexual Others that remain highly visible in the Gothic, made all the more horrifying because of their threatening presence.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, this demonized sexual Other is used to encourage readers and viewers to "stay on the normative path," illustrating "the dangers that await those who deviate from the norm" (Anolik 3). However, I will argue that as the Southern Gothic has evolved, writers and filmmakers are, more and more often, shifting the horrified response away from monstrous racial, gender and sexual Others and toward a *society* that would depict them in such a manner. While some texts—particularly Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels—convey a somewhat reluctant sympathy for their "monstrous" characters, many more recent Southern Gothic projects have actually gone so far as to celebrate the sexual Other, praising their racial and sexual subversiveness while rebuking the socially-constructed binaries that exclude and demonize them.

## Chapter Overviews

Chapter Two, "Sissies, Tomboys and Domestic Servants: Modes of Resistance to the Horrors of Normativity in Southern Gothic Literature," critically examines

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<sup>9</sup> In *Horrifying Sex*, Anolik uses the vampire as an example of a demonized monster; however, this dissertation will demonstrate that the vampire is also portrayed in certain texts as "spectral"—less visible, especially in more recent Southern Gothic texts, because of his ability to "pass" as a member of the heterosexual white majority. A more visible sexual Other, I will suggest, is to be found in the example of the Southern Gothic freak show exhibit—non-supernatural figures whose inability to adhere to the norms of established gender and sexual boundaries nonetheless leads to their exhibition as monsters in public Southern spaces.

representations of “gender-deviant” children in McCullers’s *Member of the Wedding*, Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Tartt’s *The Little Friend*. I argue that it is the tomboys’ and sissy children’s deviance that aligns them with the Gothic mode as they are repeatedly forced to look on in horror at the gender and sexual “reprobates” consigned to freak shows in their Southern communities. While these communities ostracize the freakishness of gender and sexual deviants, however, the overabundance of brutalized black individuals among them is hardly remarked upon, and exhibitions of the racial “freak” endure as everyday occurrences. These so-called freaks are nonetheless presented side-by-side because the novels’ Southern communities rely on similarly cruel means to identify gender/sexual deviants and black individuals as deplorable Others. This fact is called into especially sharp relief through the relationships the gender-deviant children form with their often-brutalized black caretakers. I demonstrate that in the earliest three texts, neither the gender-deviant children nor their caretakers campaign for greater acceptance and anti-normativity on each other’s behalves. I then read the tomboy in Tartt’s *The Little Friend* as a response to the earlier literature’s divided anti-normative agendas, particularly in terms of the main character’s developing awareness of her community’s (related) racial, gender and sexual norming processes.

Chapter Three, “Maternal and Sexual Transgression and the Fall of the Southern Gothic Estate,” continues to explore the violent repercussions facing young white women who, as they approach sexual maturity, threaten to deviate from the established social norms for sexual and maternal behavior. The chapter points to a trend in Southern

Gothic literature linking women's sexual "misconduct" to the deterioration of the family estate. In this tradition, women are made responsible for the preservation of Southern legacies and honor through the generation and upkeep of a morally upstanding household. The chapter argues that this trend begins with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and is echoed in texts like Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Baby Doll* as well as Percy's *Lancelot* in which male characters attempt to define women's roles, particularly as mothers, in order to maintain control of the region. But whereas Faulkner continues to valorize motherhood as a beacon of hope for the disintegrating South through his portrayal of the Compsons' maternal black housekeeper, Dilsey, Williams, Percy and Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* refuse to martyr motherhood and instead employ the laughter, singing and strategizing of black characters within the "haunted plantation" as a means to undermine the mythology surrounding both maternity and the South. Referencing Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* to question the ethics of marginalized or "surrogate" blackness, I consider Allison's novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, as a possible response to this trend in the Southern Gothic that both criticizes the white patriarchy and works to destabilize the supposed fixity of gender and racial identities through its main character, Ruth-Anne "Bone" Boatwright.

Chapter Four, "The Ghosting and 'Haunting Back' of Black Bodies in Southern Gothic Literature," continues to explore the legacy of the Southern plantation in Southern Gothic texts, noting the quite different effect of this structure on characters who identify as African American or whose whiteness, like Bone's, is called into question. Repeatedly, such characters are defined in terms of "ghostliness," a trope that



is variously linked through slavery to the related construction of racial and sexual identity and (dis)empowerment. Whereas the white female protagonists I consider in Chapter Three are expected to define and uphold the regional South through *visibly* compliant sexual conduct, the racially indeterminate and black characters in the texts collected here—who are themselves often forced into reproducing for white masters—are denied sexual/gender subjectivity altogether and ghosted by whites aiming to uphold an image of their “natural” superiority. Grouping Faulkner’s *Light in August*, Howard’s “Pigeons from Hell” and Landsdale’s graphic novel adaptation of the latter, the chapter demonstrates that white characters in these texts are obsessed with successfully “performing” and policing whiteness by distancing themselves from (formerly) enslaved peoples. This obsession, I argue, is motivated by a desire to access the (sexual) power that accompanies the “invisibility of whiteness.” These novels are then compared to Morrison’s *Beloved*, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Butler’s *Kindred*—texts in which “ghost(ed)” characters self-identify as black. For figures in these texts, ghostliness represents a state of disempowerment characterized by the denial of gender or sexual identity to (formerly) enslaved peoples and their descendants, and both the Southern Gothic mode and the “ghost” are here used subversively to call attention to the constructedness of racial, gender and sexual hierarchies.

Chapter Five, “‘Defanging’ the Sexual Othering Process: Creole Culture, Louisiana Vampires and Destabilization of Sexual and Racial Difference,” suggests that, like ghosts, the vampires of Southern Gothic fiction often work subversively to challenge related racial and gender/sexual constructs. I argue here that texts like Rice’s

*Interview with the Vampire*, Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* and Ball's *True Blood* strategically mine the geographical and cultural implications of the South's history to encourage connections between the vampire and racism or enslavement. These vampire texts further provide a way to explore both past and ongoing racial tensions in the South through the explicit parallels they establish between interracial and interspecies (i.e. human and vampire) relationships. Rice, Harris and Ball also employ the trope of vampirism to comment critically on sexual "othering" processes wherein individuals marked as "deviant" are branded unfit and threatening to the Southern social/regional narrative of "normalcy." I demonstrate this is not only achieved through the "queer" embodiedness of the vampire—who both penetrates and acts as "menstrual monster"—but also through the strategic use of the Louisiana setting. The mixture of cultures and races that occupied the state throughout its history makes Louisiana the ideal setting for exploring through vampirism issues of difference as they pertain to the hybridity of culture, race, gender and sexuality.

The Southern Gothic has often depicted the transgression of racial, sexual and gender borders as a terrifying prospect, a trend that has caused some recent critics to write it off as a "genre of helplessness." However, Chapter Six, "Conclusion," reiterates that closer examination of this under-researched tradition will reveal increasingly anti-normative tendencies in its depictions of race, gender, and sexuality over the course of the last century. I close by promoting further evaluation of literary and filmic responses to the seminal works in the Southern Gothic tradition in terms of

the way they explore narratives of Southern exclusivity to highlight the constructedness of racial, sexual and gendered Otherness.

## CHAPTER II

### RETHINKING THE “FREAK SHOW”: PORTRAYALS OF GENDER “DEVIANT” CHILDREN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CARETAKERS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY SOUTHERN GOTHIC NOVEL

In one of the most significant scenes of Carson McCullers’s 1946 novella, *The Member of the Wedding*, twelve-year-old Frances “Frankie” Addams makes a visit to the Chattahoochee Exposition Freak House where she observes two key figures, a “wild nigger” and a “half-man half-woman.” A self-conscious tomboy occupying a similarly liminal space between masculinity and femininity, Frankie is particularly horrified by the man-woman and tries desperately to distance herself from the individual with whom, on some levels, she identifies. She finds comfort in the heteronormative assumption that, unlike herself, the man-woman will probably never get married or go to a wedding and seeks reassurance from her African American caretaker, Berenice, that she is not destined for a similar “freakish” future. However, it is important to note that while Frankie is hyper-aware of her community’s tendency to ostracize as “deviant” those like the man-woman who do not meet gendered and sexual norms, she is almost totally indifferent to the racial systems that oppress black individuals like the “wild nigger” and Berenice. Frankie quickly passes over the “nigger” in the Freak House because although the exploitative display of a “rat-eating” man from a “savage island” *should* give viewers pause, he is to white spectators like Frankie a common, and therefore unremarkable, victim of the everyday racism practiced in small Southern communities in the 1940s—likely just a “crazy colored man from Selma” (17).

In this chapter, I will focus on depictions of grotesquery in Southern Gothic texts, particularly the recurrent image of the “freak” and “freak show” in the Jim Crow South.<sup>10</sup> As Bridget Marshall notes, “the grotesque—in particular, physical disfigurement of the human body—is a longstanding concern of the Gothic, as evident in such texts as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)” (13). In all these novels, “characters appear severely disfigured (Frankenstein’s monster, the vampire Dracula, and the laboratory creation Hyde) and the physical deformities either indicate or are at least presumed to indicate moral deformity as well” (13). Southern Gothic literature, too, is obsessed with the theme of deformity, and many critics including Peggy Bailey have even suggested that grotesque characters “may be the most visible signs” of the Southern Gothic mode (Marshall 13). Indeed, the fiction of some of the South’s most celebrated authors—William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O’Connor—has become notorious for its use of bizarre, ugly, and distorted “freakish” figures (Snodgrass 167).

For the most part, however, Southern Gothic literature does not merely suggest that characters with physical deformities are depraved; rather, it attempts to complicate such assumptions in highlighting the role that the Southern social order, and specifically Jim Crow laws, plays in manufacturing images of the grotesque “Other.” Examining Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* (1946); Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948); Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960); and Donna Tartt’s *The Little Friend* (2002), I will demonstrate that Southern Gothic novels

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<sup>10</sup> For further information on the grotesque as a Southern literary style, see also Alan Spiegel’s “Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1972).

repeatedly establish symbolic connections between the “freakishness” of “gender-deviant” white children and their “deformed” black caretakers in order to call attention to the cruel means that Southern communities use to police and exclude both.

These four novels all link the gender-deviant child and caretaker via their exclusion from Southern communities, but only the white child in each text is policed with the intention of reform. For the child, gender deviance is a troubling state to be transcended with the assistance of her caretaker (and the freak show); for the black caretaker, freakishness is imposed in a way that is meant to seem both permanent and “natural.” In strategically detailing the grotesque scars that mark the caretakers’ bodies, however, these four authors are able to call important attention to the ways in which Southern society has played an active, wounding role in marginalizing African Americans, and by linking their experiences to the gender-deviant child’s, the novels emphasize that race—like gender—is a constructed category that has been violently carved out by white hegemony in the South.

In addition to incorporating many of the “grotesque” tropes that are common to the genre, these four texts can also be read as Gothic in their engagement with themes of repression. Oftentimes, literary critics have taken a psychoanalytic approach to studying Gothic literature, relying on Freud’s theories of repression, in particular, to gain psychological insight into characters. Freud held that there exist in the unconscious regions of the mind hidden or unspeakable thoughts and memories that, when released, can be described as “unheimlich” or uncanny. This term is one that is applied to Gothic characters like Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll whose repressed nature is brought to

light in the form of the murderous and sexually voracious Mr. Hyde. While I do not mean to suggest that *these* four novels' protagonists are similarly murderous (although the case might be argued for Tartt's Harriet), there *is* the possibility of a repressed and "perverse" (homo-)sexuality latent in each. This potential sexual deviance is perceived as a threat by the novels' Southern communities which then enlist the freak show as a means of further subduing such tendencies in the children. The fictional community members view as horrific the yet-unexpressed sexuality that they believe is developing in the gender-deviant child; however, the texts' authors actually employ the trope of the freak show to unearth that which they find *most* terrifying in the children's subconscious: the seeds of racism the characters have come to internalize from an upbringing in the Jim Crow South.

As Rosemarie Thomson explains in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, freak shows in a variety of forms share one common factor: the exhibition of "unnatural" individuals meant to stimulate curiosity and provoke titillation. Usually, these spectacles were regarded as simple entertainment by attendees; however, they also functioned to reaffirm spectators' sense of commonality and community (4), rendering them "safely standard" in comparison to the "freakish" bodies on display. Thomson goes on to explain that the process of enfreakment both "unite[s] and validate[s] the disparate throng positioned as viewers" (10) because, against the freak's "hyper-visible" physical particularity, "the viewer's indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral" entity (10). Thus, while this "privileged state of disembodiment" that the freak show confers upon its spectators is undoubtedly problematic and false, it is

almost certainly a seductive position for viewers—like McCullers’s Frankie Addams—who seek reassurance about their own legitimacy as citizens.

As Frankie perhaps intuits, her unstable identity as a tomboy in fact links her closely to many of the individuals made into “grist for the freak mill”—often people whose bodies “appear to transgress rigid social categories” (e.g. “man” or “woman”), thereby violating and imperiling the definitions of personhood used to order contemporary American civilization. For Sarah Gleeson-White, this sort of “grotesque” violation offers “greater possibilities for representation and knowledge” as it “queries borders and neat categories” by putting bodies in flux and “in a constant process of reformation and reemergence” (Gleeson-White 109-10). She suggests that McCullers’s use of freaks is closely related to the way in which Bakhtin imagines the grotesque as pushing the “very boundaries of how we understand the human being” (113). However, Gleeson-White fails to account for the fact that while the “freakish” nature of individual bodies may resist normative claiming, the carefully-ordered array of grotesques on display at the freak show still enables communities to silence and effectively police such noncompliance through the institutionalization of “enfreakment.”

Indeed, Jim Crow laws are themselves evidence of how institutionalized “freak show” spectacles worked to police bodily “Otherness,” enabling whites to systematically mark black Southerners as aberrant because of their apparent physical differences. These laws resulted in a variety of daily insults and injuries to African Americans—among them assault, murder and rape. However, Jim Crow’s enfreakment processes were perhaps most visibly manifested in the form of racial lynchings. As Amy Louise



Wood argues, lynching came to serve as the “defining metaphor for racial oppression in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century” as well as “an identifying marker of the South, especially the Deep South” (Wood 4). Like freak shows, lynchings were both public and spectacular, putting African Americans’ “tortured, mutilated, and hanged or burned” bodies on display for viewing by hundreds of white spectators in an attempt to restore/reinforce a white-dominated racial order. These displays of violence against African Americans were, like freak shows, also remembered long after the actual event via the circulation of news accounts, lurid narratives and photos/postcards. And, in spite of their relative infrequency, lynchings generated a “level of fear and horror that overwhelmed all other forms of violence. All the everyday humiliations and hostilities that black southerners endured under Jim Crow could...be distilled into the experience of lynching, so that it came to stand as the primary representation of racial injustice and oppression as a whole” (Wood 1). According to Richard Wright, “to be black” in the Jim Crow South was to be “the victim to a thousand lynchings” (qtd. in Wood 1).

Admittedly, neither systemic forms of racism nor gender policing is specific to the (literary) South as a region.<sup>11</sup> Just as lynchings often took place outside of the American South, the matter of the “dangerous” tomboy was of nation-wide concern at the time of these novels’ publication. In fact, Michelle Ann Abate contends that both of these issues—racism and gender normativity—are often brought together in a variety of

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<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note that the wealth of “gender-deviant” characters in the earliest of these Southern texts may, in part, be attributed to the authors’ own experiences as tomboy and sissy children. For more information about McCullers’ childhood as a tomboy and “freak,” see Michelle Ann Abate’s “The Tomboy Turns Freakishly Queer.” For more information on Truman Capote’s and Harper Lee’s childhood experiences as gender-deviant friends, see Gary Richards’s *Lovers & Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction*.

19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century American novels featuring tomboys. “Gender-bending female figures,” she argues, “are connected with an array of stereotypes about racial Otherness in general and blackness in particular” (xxvii). This seemingly unorthodox link, Abate suggests, is in part a product of old eugenic practices used to promote white supremacy. During the height of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” women were expected to be “Fair Maidens” in terms of both their skin color and deportment. The practices of wearing tight corsets and avoiding physical activity that “Fair Maidenhood” required, however, left many of these women too weak to reproduce, and the declining birthrate coupled with the increasing numbers of sickly or “defective” infants born to such women “elicited fears about the potential ‘race suicide’ of Anglo-Americans” (6). The tomboy, on the other hand, posed a solution to this trend. Daily exercise and regular play outdoors better prepared young girls for the “physical and psychological demands of marriage and motherhood” (6), yet it also caused them to develop “dark” or “brown” skin tones as well as the “racially charged traits” of being “wild” and “uncivilized” (xii), a fact that is represented in well-known literary tomboys such as *Little Women’s* Jo March and Laura Ingalls of the *Little House on the Prairie* novels. In this way, Abate proposes, tomboys—both in real life and in literature—came to reshape “acceptable notions of whiteness as they redefined acceptable notions of female behavior for middle- and upper-class white women” (xxvii).

Certainly, the gender-deviant characters in the four Southern Gothic texts assembled here are designed to challenge notions about male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries in a way that speaks to the similarly constructed divisions between

whiteness and blackness. It is important to note, however, that while the tomboys of Lee's and Tartt's later two texts display a growing sense of awareness about (racial/gender) Othering that is initiated by their relationships with their African American caretakers, McCullers' and Capote's earlier gender-deviant protagonists are quick to disavow the link between their wrongful subjection to gender (and later, perhaps, sexual<sup>12</sup>) policing and their black caretakers' racial victimization. This shift in the characters' understanding, I will argue, is not only marked by concurrent changes in the novels' depictions of the freak show but is also symptomatic of shifts in the South's racial climate at the time of each novel's publication.

The ultimate failure of McCullers's and Capote's protagonists to ally with their caretakers regarding issues of race registers the authors' bleak sentiments about prospects for civil rights in the South. In their work, the ubiquity of Jim Crow laws, and the carnivals whose freak shows they mirror, suggests there is no immediately discernible end to the process of (both literally and figuratively) branding black individuals as freakish Others. But whereas the metaphorical re-figuration of the freak show in Lee's and Tartt's post-Jim Crow fiction similarly highlights the continuation of racism in the form of courtroom and church spectacles across the region, the increasing attunement of these later novels' protagonists to the grotesque bodily wounds inflicted

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<sup>12</sup> Abate writes that:

the advent of sexology and growing popularity of Freudian theory during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced worries about the sexuality of [tomboys]...Many began to worry that it was only a matter of time until tomboyish figures who were dressing and romping like boys would begin loving and even lusting like them. As a result, tomboyism went from being seen as an effective preparatory stage for marriage and motherhood to a potential breeding ground for lesbianism. As Judith Halberstam argues, "there is always the dread possibility...that the tomboy will not grow out of her butch stage and will never become a member of the wedding" (xxi).

on their black caretakers—as well as their own susceptibility to such bodily “enfreakment”—is indicative of Lee’s and Tartt’s optimism that Southern communities can, first, come to acknowledge the constructedness of both racial and gender norms and, later, begin to challenge them.

### *The Member of the Wedding*

Through the freak show, and particularly the figures of the half-man half-woman and “wild nigger” on display there, Carson McCullers firmly establishes a link between gender normativity and racial Othering as practices of “enfreakment.” However, while these exhibits make explicit the shared plight of tomboy Frankie and her African American caretaker, Berenice, McCullers also emphasizes that the two remain almost entirely focused on the ways in which they, as *individuals*, are at risk of “enfreakment” and its repercussions. This is perhaps most obvious when Frankie and Berenice pause one day to fantasize about their “ideal worlds.” Frankie suggests that people should be able to “instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, which ever way they felt like and wanted” (92). Frankie’s fantasy is one that likely extends from her plans to join a “queer” union with her brother and his fiancé in lieu of pursuing a heterosexual romance like her maturing female peers. But while Frankie’s personal vision of a “queer,” non-heteronormative relationship has been widely read as progressive in terms of its gender politics, it is telling that McCullers depicts her fantasizing about an “all-white” wedding followed by both a residence on “Winter Hill” and travels to various other snow-filled

locales. Through these details, McCullers make clear that in spite of her great sensitivity to and pro-activeness about the injustices of heteronormativity, Frankie remains largely unaware of her own sense of white entitlement. Berenice, on the other hand, responds to Frankie's fantasy by insisting "the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved" (92), reminding Frankie that God only admitted animals to the ark in male/female couples (76). For Berenice, an ideal world would instead be one in which there were "no separate colored people...but all human beings would be a light brown color with blue eyes and black hair. There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives...but all human men and ladies and children as one loving family" (91). In other words, Berenice's ideal world would tear down socially-constructed color boundaries and undermine racial enframement practices while leaving intact the traditional heteronormative, sexually productive nuclear family that makes "freaks" of gender-deviants like Frankie.

The paradoxical nature of these two characters' relationship is one that McCullers further develops in their conversation about being "caught." Berenice tells Frankie that *all people* are "born this way or that way and we don't know why" (113), acknowledging a universal desire to "widen and bust free" in spite of the fact that "no matter what we do ...we each one of us somehow caught all by ourself" (113). Initially, this moment suggests the two characters are acknowledging a shared entrapment under accepted social "laws": whereas Frankie feels imprisoned within gender and sexual norms, Berenice feels imprisoned within racism. Both are susceptible to a network of

Southern social and legal systems that, like the freak show itself, work to police and order “acceptable” human identity—a fact that is emphasized by the positions of the characters’ bodies as they begin this talk. McCullers writes that Frankie “could feel Berenice’s soft big ninnas against her back, and her soft wide stomach, her warm solid legs. She had been breathing very fast, but after a minute her breath slowed down so that she breathed in time with Berenice; the two of them *were close together in one body*, and Berenice’s stiffened hands were clasped around [Frankie’s] chest” (113, emphasis added). As Patricia Yaeger has noted, the two characters’ bodies here form a sort of collage that breaks up the “conventional” and attacks “the deceptive surfaces of normalcy” (161). This unique position, much like the characters’ conversation, seems to emphasize that “the body is ‘not a continuous whole but an assemblage of conventional symbols and codes’” (Yaeger 161).

And yet, Berenice also points out in this apparent moment of unity with Frankie that, because she is black, she is “caught worse” than Frankie is. Of course, she is right. Frankie’s white skin secures for her a privileged position in the community, and as long as her gender-deviance remains safely within the bounds of childhood, she faces far fewer consequences for her “oddities.” McCullers makes this particularly clear in the two women’s attitudes regarding the local law enforcement—a juridical system that clearly echoes the freak show in its ability to regulate social behavior and decorum. Frankie, like all of the gender-deviant children in the collected novels, has a deep fear of police officers, jail and legal punishment that stems from insecurities about her gender and sexuality. Frankie believes, for example, that because she committed a “queer sin”

with a boy that “she could be tried in the courthouse and locked up in jail” (20).

Nevertheless, when it comes time to find her lost kitten—whose repeated name changes from Charles to Charlina mirror Frankie’s own gender ambiguity—she does not hesitate to contact the police for assistance. Berenice, on the other hand, warns Frankie against “trifling” with those people. Though Frankie only notes offhandedly that all the people she knows who have been in jail are “colored” (117), Berenice does not miss the significance of this trend nor the cruel role that law enforcement officers play in upholding it.

But while Frankie and Berenice tend to emphasize the *differences* in their personal experiences with “enfreakment,” McCullers always takes care to note that the characters do have untapped empathy for the unique aspects of one another’s plights as racial/gendered “Others.” In addition to bearing the “dark” characteristics that Abate contends link many tomboy characters to African Americans, Frankie also dreams of forging deeper bonds with people of many different ethnicities. She plans during the war effort, for example, to donate her blood to the Red Cross in the hopes that it will flow through the veins of “Australians and Fighting French and Chinese...and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people” (21). Berenice, too, demonstrates a great sense of compassion for individuals outside the bounds of gender and sexual conventions when she talks to Frankie about the “strangeness of love.” Berenice explains that she has known boys to fall in love with other boys and even knew one, Lily Mae Jenkins, who “turned into a girl” (77). Furthermore, when Frankie recounts seeing two “colored boys” in an alley whose behavior causes her to mistake them for her brother

and his fiancé, Berenice understands immediately, explaining the boys' relationship is what it is like when one is in love and seemingly acknowledging that love does not only exist within heterosexuality. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Berenice does not criticize Frankie's male cousin, John Henry, when he dons Berenice's pink plumed hat and high-heeled shoes. The boy's penchant for conventional women's clothing and habits does not incite commentary.

For some critics, these moments of understanding within the novella imply a bridging of differences in race and gender. Rachel Adams argues, for example, that McCullers's characters develop as "figures of possibility whose queer transgressions of sexed, gendered, and racial boundaries enable a productive reconsideration of normative social relations" (553). To Adams, Berenice is an apt role model for Frankie in that she defies normative hierarchies of difference and delights in situations of racial and gender transgression (568). However, Adams fails to account for Berenice's often adamant enforcement of more restrictive gender roles for Frankie, such as the instructions she gives to her ward regarding the proper clothing for a young lady to wear. In fact, McCullers suggests that Berenice is rather shortsighted in demanding that Frankie abandon her "foolish" idea of being the third member in her brother's wedding, especially when the character encourages Frankie to date a nice beau like Barney who, unbeknownst to Berenice, initiated the "queer sin," or possible rape, for which Frankie fears she will be punished. McCullers makes Berenice's complicity in the social agenda of gender norming all the more sadly ironic as the character has personally experienced the repercussions of compulsory heterosexuality. As Berenice mentions to Frankie, she



has not grown since her first wedding at age thirteen, and though the comment ostensibly refers to her physical stature, McCullers hints that it may also apply to a stunting of Berenice's spiritual/ emotional growth.

The conflict between the tolerant and intolerant aspects of Berenice's character is most strikingly represented in McCullers' depiction of Berenice's eye, a bright blue glass prosthetic. According to Adams, the eye is representative of Berenice's vision for a world in which physical traits do not dictate (racial) divisions. In one sense, Adams is right: with one blue eye and one brown, Berenice has begun to transform into the physical embodiment of the "dream" people she conjures up, individuals without distinguishing racial characteristics. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the Gothic aspects of Berenice's blue eye: that it is a blind, grotesque filler for the original organ that was gouged out during a violent encounter with a former husband. Although Berenice's obsession with keeping a beau—no matter how dangerous—subjects her body to violence, she continues to date men to whom she is not particularly attracted (and who, it seems, she should not trust) because flaunting her heterosexuality helps her to stake out limited access to "normal" community membership.

Critics like Adams also ignore critical aspects of McCullers's novella in suggesting that Frankie learns, from both Berenice and the freak show, to resist the bigotry and discrimination that accompanies racial and gender norms. To Adams, the novel's conclusion implies that Frankie "may be able to transform her experiences of gender confusion into more productive energies, rather than repressing them in favor of a socially acceptable heterosexual femininity" (559). In order to support this claim, she

references the relationship that Frankie develops with Mary Littlejohn, arguing that the “wonder” of Frankie’s love for Mary is suggestive of exciting “queer possibilities” for Frankie’s future (575). Pointing to the girls’ newly adopted belief that it is “morbid to gaze at Freaks” (152), Adams contends that “Frankie and Mary’s abstinence from the freak show indicates their recognition that the world is composed of freaks, [and] that they no longer need to secure their own normality by exploiting a less fortunate Other” (575). Adams therefore concludes that McCullers’s freak show fails to “cement the distinction between deviance and normality, instead calling the viewers’ own normality into question through their identification with the bodies onstage” (557).

This analysis problematically ignores the ways in which Frankie and Mary position themselves, and are positioned by McCullers, as separate from Berenice at the novel’s end, a division indicating that Frankie does *not*, as Adams suggests, learn to embrace the instability of predominant Southern (racial and sexual) hierarchies (570). While the freak show may have packed up and left the Chattahoochee State Fair, its departure by no means implies that Frankie similarly abandons her obsession with freaks or her obsession with distinguishing herself from them; rather, McCullers implies, the budding racism Frankie exhibits in the text’s final pages is an indication that the character has come to internalize the workings of the spectacle, condemning the racial “grotesquerie” of her caretaker in a way that is meant to establish her own normalcy. This becomes most evident when Frankie addresses Berenice with the “mean word she had never used before”—“nigger”—“for she wanted only to spite and shame” (135). Here, Frankie makes clear that while she is excluded from her brother’s wedding, she

will not simply resign herself to her caretaker's "freak" status by settling for a seat in the "colored" section of the segregated bus (135). And far from simply functioning as a symbol of the "queer possibilities" for Frankie's future (Adams 575), Frankie's new friendship with Mary Littlejohn highlights her ability to find refuge in her whiteness, if not her femininity or (hetero)sexuality, as a means of establishing her "normalcy." It is no coincidence, then, that Berenice's critique of Mary's "marshmallow" whiteness prompts a further falling out with Frankie (151). Though Frankie's brown skin and features may initially lead readers to associate her with the black characters in her Southern community, the former tomboy's final alliance with Marshmallow Mary and biting comment that Berenice could not "possibly ever understand" the white girls' friendship suggest that with her entrance into adulthood, the racial divide will continue to deepen between Frankie and her caretaker and potentially African Americans more generally.

Adams's attempt to locate in *Member of the Wedding* McCullers's "utopian imaginings of a better" future is even further undermined by the ultimate fates of two supporting characters, Berenice's brother, Honey, and Frankie's "effeminate" cousin, John Henry, a character who, significantly, is a keen admirer of the Chattahoochee carnival "freaks". While it is true—as Adams notes—that Frankie imagines for Honey a world where race is fluid and shifting, suggesting that he simply leave the South and take advantage of his light skin to "change" into a Cuban, McCullers's later revelation that Honey is arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison for stealing cocaine, or "snow," indicates that this is *not* the "moment of enlightenment" for Frankie that Adams

believes it to be. McCullers instead uses this detail to call attention to Frankie's naivety, suggesting that whiteness is not, as Frankie initially believes, simply available to whoever desires it. Though, as McCullers emphasizes and Frankie perhaps intuitively feels, both race and gender are constructed, it is not as easy for African Americans to secure a place within dominant Southern society by "playing white" as it is for Frankie to establish her community "membership" by performing conventional femininity. Neither is it reasonable to pass off John Henry's death to meningitis as a hiding, normalization, or punishment of bodily difference that leaves hope for change (Adams 575). McCullers very carefully details John Henry's failed attempts to convey the extent of his sickness to Berenice before his passing; however, just as she disregards Frankie's complaints about gender norming, Berenice also rejects John Henry's illness as a mimicking of her own—both her literal physical ailment and the "sickness" of racism that she is made to endure. It even seems possible to suggest that Berenice's negligence *contributes* to the child's death given that immediately before passing, his "eyeballs...walled up in a corner stuck and blind" (152). Though brief, this grotesque note establishes a direct connection between the child and caretaker in terms of their loss of sight and suggests the transgressive John Henry, infected with the blindness and narrow-mindedness of Berenice's normative worldview, must succumb to death.

McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* is thus connected to the Gothic in its penchant for depicting "grotesque" individuals and their (wrongful) public exhibition, but instead of reveling in their oddities, the text uses them to demonstrate how such grotesquerie is actively manufactured and upheld via systems of discrimination like Jim

Crow. What is meant to incite even more Gothic horror, however, is McCullers's suggestion that even the most ostensibly "innocent" residents of the South—children like Frankie—are capable of perpetrating discrimination if they remain indifferent to the ways that (racial, gender, or sexual) normativity wounds others and contributes to their "enfreakment."

*Other Voices, Other Rooms*

The freak show also plays a critical role in Truman Capote's 1948 novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, directly connecting the alienating experiences of the novel's gender-deviant children, including thirteen-year-old protagonist Joel Knox and his tomboy companion Idabel Thompkins, with those of Noon City's black citizens—especially Joel's sometimes caretaker, Missouri "Zoo" Fever. As in *Member of the Wedding*, the connection between these characters highlights the processes of enfreakment used to police both racial hierarchies and gender norms in Mississippi. But, as is also the case in McCullers's text, Capote suggests that the pervasive racism in the South ultimately leaves only the white child capable of "reform" (although in this instance, the reform involves the "gender-deviant" child's embracing of a queer identity). While Joel initially believes that his caretaker is, like him, capable of shirking (white, heteronormative) oppression, the character's prolonged immersion in the Jim Crow South ultimately leads him to adopt the same horrifying mentality as his community members—the belief that blackness is a "freakish" violation of nature.

Much like McCullers's Frankie, Capote's Joel struggles with the transition into a socially acceptable gender role and fears that his "pretty" appearance, delicate features, and "girlish tenderness" (4) will be distasteful to his father, a man he is travelling to meet for the first time at the novel's beginning. Equipped with nothing but his grandfather's wedding suitcase, one "colorful with souvenir stickers from remote parts of the globe" (6), Joel hopes to acquire a similar freedom by journeying to Skully's Landing and reclaiming his place within his father's patriarchal order. However, Capote notes that when Joel finally arrives, his suitcase appears "odd" in its new surroundings, and a quick glimpse into a Landing mirror reflects an image of Joel that "swayed shapeless in its distorted depth...like the comedy mirrors in carnival houses" (50). As the case and mirror indicate, the boy has not yet secured a place within the patriarchal order or a guarantee of his safety from "enfreakment."

Indeed, Joel immediately notices that gender-deviant children like himself are sorely abused in Noon City, especially Idabel Tompkins, who—when Joel first meets her—is being disciplined for refusing to obey gender norms. Whooping "like a wildwest Indian" in a "boy-husky" voice and chunking rocks, Idabel causes one citizen to exclaim that this "freakish" child who has never been seen in a dress will likely end up in the penitentiary (21). Instead of relating to Idabel's plight, however, Joel mostly regards her as a threat since she seems to have a stronger claim to masculinity than he. Assuming she is out to humiliate him for his shortcomings, Joel decides that he prefers Idabel's

twin, Florabel, who looks like a lady and flirts with him.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, Joel fantasizes about being a government official with the power to “sic the Law” on Idabel and does all that he can to avoid her.

As Joel distances himself from Idabel, he seeks comfort in another one of the community’s outcasts, Missouri “Zoo” Fever—the housekeeper at Skully’s Landing, the family estate now owned by Joel’s stepmother, Amy, and a descendant of the Skully family’s former slaves. At first, Joel only notes in passing that Zoo’s “giraffe-like” neck is mysteriously wrapped in a sweat-stained bandana and concludes that her appearance “almost” makes her a freak. In this way, Capote emphasizes the child’s sense of complacency about victimized black bodies: bodies whose abuse *should* be remarkable, but whose freakishness has been diminished, in part, because of their overabundance in 1940s Southern communities. When, for example, Zoo’s grandfather, Jesus Fever, drives Joel to Skully’s Landing, Joel assumes that the man is simply a gnome, primitive pygmy or “sad little brokeback dwarf crippled with age” (29). What he fails to realize is that Jesus has been subjected to years of persecution under slavery and that his disfigured back is part and parcel of the Christ-like sacrifices he has been forced to make to endure the South’s race-related “enfreakment” processes.

In the same manner, Joel does not pause to consider what processes have contributed to his assessment of Jesus’ granddaughter, Zoo, as “freakish,” even though her very name might encourage him to do so. Zoo’s enfreakment is, in fact, promoted by the community’s ongoing prejudices about race and gender and is especially well-

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<sup>13</sup> Capote’s depictions of the Thompkins twins—one a tomboy and one hyper-feminine—is an interesting play on the Gothic double.

supported by Joel's white caretakers, his stepmother, Amy, and her cousin, Randolph. When, for example, Amy and Randolph recount for Joel the wedding night knifing that leaves Zoo's throat scarred, they describe her husband and attacker, Keg, as a "strapping young buck" whose blackness simply made him prone to such violent sexual behavior (78). What's more, Randolph and Amy recall how they made no move to stop Keg, instead playing a raggedy carnival tune, "Indian Love Call," to drown out the noise of the struggle (78)—a song choice that itself implies violence is common to "primitive" people's romantic relationships.

Given Amy and Randolph's nonchalantly racist attitudes, it seems appropriate that Capote describes their estate, Skully's Landing, using the conventions of both the Gothic and the freak show. Beyond its "carnival-like mirrors," the home is in an extremely dilapidated condition (its wallpaper has faded from blood red to "crimson blisters" (50)), it is nestled among ominous surroundings (including swamp-like hollows in which logs shine in the water "like drowned corpses" (50)), and it even boasts "unnatural" inhabitants (the ghostly lady who appears in upstairs windows). In this way, the building functions in much the same manner as *Member of the Wedding's* Chattahoochee State Fair in that it provides a Southern stage on which the viewer, in this case Joel, is exposed to black bodies made freakish by victimization and encouraged to adopt a similar understanding of them as aberrant "Others."

Although, as I have demonstrated, Joel is initially very much like Frankie in his insensitivity to the victimized black individuals surrounding him, a stumble over a bell in the yard of Skully's plantation "like those used in slave days to summon fieldhands



from work” (66) actually encourages him—for a brief period of time—to be more mindful of his oversights. It is shortly after the slave bell rings out a note shattering the “hot stillness,” for example, that Joel glimpses what is concealed beneath Zoo’s ribbon: “a scar circling her neck like purple wire” (72). Capote writes that “it was as though a brutal hawk had soared down and clawed away Joel’s eyelids, forcing him to gape at her throat” (72). In this moment, Joel considers that maybe Zoo was “like him, and the world had a grudge against her, too” (72). Indeed, it is Joel’s newfound sensitivity to Zoo’s experiences that leads him to celebrate her intended departure of Skully’s Landing for Washington D.C.—the hub of the nation’s legislative and judicial systems and thus a space in which established ideas about racial discrimination are constantly in flux; Joel even dreams of becoming a judge or governor in order to write Zoo a “reprieve” (92) from racist badgers like his stepmother and her cousin. In this way, Capote prompts both his protagonist and the reader to acknowledge that it is systems of law and constructed racial hierarchies that contribute to the enfreakment of black individuals—they are not, as Jim Crow attempts to maintain, naturally “Other.”

Unfortunately, the joyful tone of Zoo’s departure is tempered by the parting gift that she bestows upon Joel: her “Papadaddy’s [i.e. Jesus Fever’s] fine handsome sword” (166). The legacy of the sword, which originally belonged to Amy and Randolph’s grandfather, Mr. Skully, is one that I wish to suggest haunts Jesus Fever and Joel in similar ways. Mr. Skully first presented the weapon to Jesus Fever on the day of his wedding, a ceremony over which the former presided in spite of the fact that slaves could not “officially” marry. When a traveling preacher later passes through the landing,

however, he tells Jesus Fever that his marriage is not “proper”—a comment that Jesus comes to identify as the catalyst for his son’s death and his wife’s suicide. When Joel inherits the sword, then, it already represents the curse resting on the institution of marriage as it has been reinforced by the white, patriarchal, heteronormative powers that be. Furthermore, that Zoo agrees to bequeath it to Joel on the condition that he stop acting like a little “ol gal” and be “man enough for to own it” (166) suggests she is naively participating in a similarly oppressive legacy. She thinks that encouraging Joel to “rise up” to conventional masculinity will protect him while she is gone. Instead, it only sets him up for greater failure.

Joel learns the difficulty of attempting to wield conventional masculinity when he takes the sword out on its first adventure with Idabel. Having discovered that he is actually descended from a now-paralyzed, paraplegic father being hidden in Skully’s Landing, Joel feels stronger and surer of himself with this powerful phallic weapon strapped on his body. However, when the children come upon a cotton-mouth snake in their forest wanderings—a creature whose eyes seem to resemble those of the boy’s father—Joel’s chance at achieving traditional Southern masculinity is only further compromised. An embarrassed Joel finds himself unable to confront the snake, a phallic symbol of traditional patriarchy, with his own unearned phallic weapon, and it is instead Idabel who takes up the sword to complete the kill. Alone in the forest, her bravery and swordsmanship are tremendous assets and are responsible for saving Joel’s life; as their escape leads the children through town, however, it becomes clear that such masculinity will not serve Idabel well within the hub of her southern community. In Noon City,

Idabel is denied food/service for acting like “Baby Face Floyd” and dressing “in no proper way to benefit a young lady” (189), and she is even instructed to learn “to fix a man his vittels” (190).

It seems intentional, then, that following Idabel’s rejection from the community, Capote depicts her and Joel as setting out on a journey to the local carnival and freak show. The space is one in which Idabel assumes her gender nonconformity will be a nonissue, and—indeed—she is thrilled when she meets a “darling little [show] girl” (191) named Miss Wisteria with whom she quickly falls in love (193). Idabel fails to realize, however, that the carnival also fosters communal notions of Otherness. What most closely links her to Miss Wisteria is not their attraction to one another but a certain “freakishness” that prevents them from participating in conventional sexual relationships. For Idabel, this freakishness is of course her attraction to other girls/women like Wisteria; for Miss Wisteria, it is her tiny body and, thus, her inability to partner with grown men—a failure that leads to her exhibition alongside a Duck Boy, two-headed baby and four-legged chicken. Considered a mere child by all her potential beaux, the twenty-five year old Miss Wisteria feels she must resort to pursuing boys like Joel—whom she, meaningfully, chases to an old house where a Yankee bandit once murdered three Southern women. This horrific space reflects the way in which both characters have come to represent for their community a threat to “normal” and “traditional” Southern identity.

For many contemporary critics of the novel, Joel’s decision to return to the effeminate, cross-dressing Randolph and Skully’s Landing following his evasion of Miss

Wisteria at the carnival seems like a positive step toward accepting his gender nonconformity and possibly latent homosexuality. William Pugh writes in “Boundless Hearts in a Nightmare World,” for example, that Joel and Randolph secure “freedom from the world’s homophobia at the Landing” and—“free from society’s bigotries”—they “serve for the reader as role models of individuals unwilling to forgo their need for love in order to appease the petty dictates” of their Southern community (Pugh). But, like McCullers’s Frankie, Capote implies that Joel has only marginally rejected the prejudices attendant to the freak show, and his return to the private carnival space that is Skully’s Landing by no means conveys to readers that “*all* human love is beautiful” (Pugh, emphasis added).

As I have suggested, the role of the carnival in *Other Voices* is quite similar to the fair in *Member of the Wedding* in that it establishes as “Other” those individuals who either refuse to or are incapable of staking out membership within white, heterosexual Southern society. Unlike *Member of the Wedding*, however, Capote’s carnival puts black bodies on display in a very different manner. Here, there are no rat-eating “wild niggers” featured in freak show exhibitions; nevertheless, Joel *does* internalize a message about black people as “others” vis-à-vis their relationship to Noon City’s carnival space. According to the external subjective narrator, the “colored folks” were not allowed to ride any of the carnival rides and “stood clustered at a distance getting more fun from its magical whirl than those astride saddles” (191). This note, when filtered through Joel’s perspective, reveals just how much the carnival, and the larger Southern community whose purposes it serves, has succeeded in numbing him to the

terrible effects of segregation. And though he does stop to consider that one “young Negro watched the [carnival] sadly from the isolation of the jail” (189), Joel merely attributes the sadness to the man’s inability to interact with a “rhinestoned colored girl” who “swished by” and shouted “lewdly up at him” (190).

Capote suggests that Joel again romanticizes conditions for African Americans in his community when he and Idabel catch a glimpse of a black (heterosexual) couple making love in the woods outside the carnival grounds. To Joel, the scene is one of great beauty, and seeing “two people with each other in witness” prompts him to reach for Idabel’s hand—as if he understands this moving moment as an affirmation of Zoo’s teachings about masculinity. It does not register that the “whirl of ferris-wheel lights [revolving] in the distance” (188) is more than a colorful backdrop: it is a reminder of a space to which the lovers do not legally have access. These scenes on the outskirts of the carnival thus indicate how Joel comes to believe black citizens’ freedom to pursue (hetero)sexual relationships is the true guarantee of their happiness, a misreading that causes him to ignore the injustice associated with their exclusion from other aspects of society.

Unquestionably, Capote provides ample indication that heterosexuality is no guarantee of African Americans’ happiness. When, for example, Joel awakens at Skully’s Landing following Wisteria’s pursuit and an extended bout of delirium, Randolph presents him with a postcard from Idabel. The card, featuring an image of “joyful cottonpickers,” indicates that Idabel has since moved to live with a preacher and help him pass the plate at church (210). To Joel, this card is unbelievable because Idabel

could only have left the fair to live happily ever after with Miss Wisteria. For Capote, however, the actual impossibility is the “joyful cottonpickers” adorning the card’s front. Joel has become so focused on his own plight to secure happiness in his gender nonconformity that he becomes insensitive to other related Southern myths and prejudices—namely the myth of the happy black subservient.

Joel’s willful insensitivity has, it seems, developed into a budding version of the racism promoted by both his stepmother and her cousin and the Noon City carnival he attended. When, for example, he is informed that he had to be nursed back to health, Joel also discovers that one of his primary caretakers has been Zoo—newly returned from her Washington D.C. voyage. Zoo’s trip has not been a triumphant one, however, and she explains to Joel that on the first day, she was approached by four men (three white and one black) who ripped her dress, took turns raping her and then stuck a cigar in her navel (116). Though initially Joel is happy to see her, this story is one that makes him “sick-sorry she’d ever come back,” and he even thinks that “she ought to be punished” for what he assumes are *her* transgressions. Her scar openly leering like lips (213) and her neck having lost all “its giraffe-like grandeur,” Capote implies that she is—for Joel—finally transformed into the freak that his community would have him see.

By novel’s end, Joel believes he has found a greater sense of self, and he zigzags and sings through the landing with newfound elation (226). Capote’s final images of Zoo, however, could not be more different: she is depicted in “a ridiculous scene” (228), attempting to uproot the Skullys’ slave-bell and spitting on it with vindictive futility (229). While she does manage to overturn the bell in the yard, Capote hints that Zoo

will not have similar success in overturning the estate's legacy of racism. She, like Joel, seems permanently consigned to hiding out at the stagnating Gothic estate where neither of them is prepared to take up the other's cause in upending their community's (related) racial and gender prejudices. It will be impossible to root out the effects of enfreakment, Capote suggests, without rallying simultaneously against gender, sexual *and* racial oppression.

For McCullers and Capote, the horrors of racism and the "racial Other" attendant to the Southern Gothic mode provided a strategic counterpoint, if not a true mirror to, the plight of the gender-deviant child in the hetero-normative Jim Crow South. That, following prolonged exposure to the freak show, the novels' gender-deviant protagonists become numb to the race-related issues plaguing their caretakers is, perhaps, a testament to the racial climate in which McCullers and Capote were writing prior to the height of the Civil Rights movement and *Brown v. Board of Education's* more extensive dismantling of Jim Crow laws in 1954. It is interesting to note, however, that the trope of the relationship between a gender-deviant child and injured black caretaker continues to reappear—with certain significant variations—throughout later texts often classified as Southern Gothic fiction like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*. The most notable deviation in these novels is, of course, the absence of the literal freak show itself: a spectacle whose disappearance seems to correspond, not coincidentally, with that of the laws upholding racial segregation.<sup>14</sup> And yet, as Lee's

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Lee's text does, in fact, depict a 1930s community in which Jim Crow laws are still enforced. I wish to comment here on race-related legislation at the time of the novels' creation and publication.

and Tartt's ongoing experimentation with the genre indicates, these institutions not only have lasting and wounding effects on marginalized individuals but also tend to rematerialize in variant forms—here, within a Maycomb, Alabama courtroom and an Alexandria, Mississippi church camp. The purpose of these spaces is the same as freak shows in earlier texts—to embed in the gender-deviant protagonist a fear of gendered, sexual, and racial Others; however, Lee and Tartt imagine very different results from the child's visit to such “freakish” spaces—a growing sense of awareness about (racial/gender) Othering and a commitment to promoting change in their Southern communities that is initiated by their relationships with their African American caretakers and deepened by their own susceptibility to bodily injury.

### *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Although the gender-deviant protagonist of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jean Louise “Scout” Finch, does not share Frankie and Joel's experiences at state fair and “freak” exhibitions, Lee demonstrates that Scout's upbringing in 1930's Maycomb has insured that she and her playmates are no strangers to the concept of freakishness and the repercussions of failing to adhere to social norms. At the novel's beginning, Scout, her brother Jem, and their neighbor Dill often play a game in which they attempt to mimic the bizarre acts that town lore attributes to their reclusive neighbor, Arthur “Boo” Radley. Unlike the freak show spectators in the first two novels I examine, Scout and crew have never actually seen Boo in person; and yet, I wish to suggest that their



initial perceptions of him are, nevertheless, a product of the same types of intersecting racism and heteronormativity promoted by the traditional freak show space.

Even before meeting Boo, the children's (subconscious) interest in the intersections of racial and gender "otherness" is immediately apparent in other aspects of their play, particularly in the snowman<sup>15</sup> they construct. A figure with a base of brown earth and thin snowy façade, Scout and Jem's "nigger snowman" is made all the more strange by items of male and female clothing in which it is dressed. It is, according to the Finches' neighbor, Miss Maudie, an "absolute morphodite"<sup>16</sup> (68) and prompts her playful accusation that the children are not being raised right.<sup>17</sup> In a certain respect, Lee hints that Miss Maudie is correct, but it is not Atticus or (as is the case in McCullers's and Capote's texts) her African American caretaker, Calpurnia, to whom Lee assigns blame—rather, it is members of Scout's distant family and other white community

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<sup>15</sup> Snow is an important trope in these novels. In *Member of the Wedding*, Frankie fantasizes about the snowy locales where she will live "in marriage" with her brother and his wife and intends to visit them on her European travels with Mary. Unfortunately, the only snow that materializes for Berenice is the drug that Honey steals. Joel, too, dreams of a snowy sanctuary which he ultimately finds at the Landing; when, in the novel's final pages, he accepts Randolph as a mentor and friend, Capote writes that "it was as if snow were falling there" (231), beautiful and blinding. But while Zoo also anticipates seeing this phenomenon when she visits Washington, DC, she tells Joel after her rape/return that there is no such thing. In fact, when he asks if she has seen snow, she bursts into a "scary giggle" (214) and violently exclaims, "There is none....that nigger sun! It's everywhere" (214). Clearly, access to a world of whiteness is unattainable for the African American characters in McCullers's and Capote's narratives. Lee's Scout and Tarrt's Harriet, on the other hand, break tradition in their interaction with snow, observing, in Scout's case its use as a façade and in Harriet's the way that her "memories" of its presence in the South are created entirely in her family's memories.

<sup>16</sup> Slang for an individual with male and female reproductive organs.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Yaeger suggests the messy armfuls of earth are buried and extinguished under a flimsy veneer of whiteness. These images, she contends, carry a traumatic subtext: the historical association of African American with earth or dirt. She writes the Lee represents the snowman as an abstracted black body that has both created and has been forced through its work and its traumas—to become a landscape. However, Yaeger does not consider the fleeting/melting nature of this snow, a state that suggests the possibility of doing away with the veneer and the idea that all people come from the earth—the very ideology that Scout comes to accept by novel's end.

members who attempt to cultivate in her a sense of her “proper place” as a white girl and a related fear of gender/sexual and racial Otherness.

When, for example, Scout’s Aunt Alexandra comes to live with the Finch family to provide a proper “feminine influence,” she encourages Scout to sit in with the women’s missionary circle, an event in which gender and racial policing clearly go hand-in-hand. The tomboyish Scout is forced to don a dress over her britches in order to assimilate with the room of ladies in “fragile pastel prints,” their nails and lips adorned in “natural” colors emphasizing the normalcy of both their femininity and whiteness; here, she must also listen to an account of the “squalid lives of the [African] Mrunas” who “put women out in huts when their time came,” “had no sense of family... were crawling with yaws and earworms” and who, as a result, seemed to require the “civilizing” influence of Maycomb’s white women (228). Aunt Alexandra’s missionary circle is, of course, meant to echo the trial at the novel’s center—one in which a black man, Tom Robinson, is accused and convicted of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell, despite overwhelming evidence pointing to her father, Bob Ewell’s, guilt. For those white individuals overseeing Robinson and Ewell’s trial, as for the white women participating in Aunt Alexandra’s missionary circle, there is a presumed relationship between blackness and sexual Otherness: black people are uncivilized; they are lascivious, unclean, and—without proper white policing—do not fulfill the gender and sexual roles that are essential to civilized Southern society.

Thus, when Scout’s father, Atticus, a widely respected lawyer, commits to defending Tom, it becomes possible to view the community’s response to his trial in

court as Lee's reconfiguration of the freak show—a space meant to restore community order by putting on display, and thereby reasserting the freakishness of, sexual and racial Others—here, Tom Robinson. As Rosemarie Thompson explains, the freak show frames and heightens the differences of seemingly abnormal individuals with an exhibition designed to render viewers safely common and separate. Lee suggests that in much the same way, Maycomb's white citizens aim to uphold their racial difference and superiority by transforming Tom and the black citizens of Maycomb into exhibits on the stand and in the courtroom's segregated seating. The courtroom also features elements of the traditional freak show's discourse—language that is “exaggerated” and “sensationalized”—seizing “upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature [is] laden with significance before the gaping spectator” (Thompson 6). This approach is, of course, evident in the way that the prosecution emphasizes Tom's brute strength and excessive interest in helping Mayella as well as in their attempt to define him as a black “buck” (198); yet, it is also important to note that Atticus, too, trades in the language of difference in order to establish a case for Tom's defense, functioning much like a showman who manages the exhibited person when he calls the court's attention to Tom's mangled arm. Atticus's intent is, of course, to argue that Tom could not have hit Mayella Ewell where she sustained injuries; however, it is no coincidence that Scout considers during the trial that “if he had been whole, [Tom] would have been a fine *specimen* of a man” (192, emphasis added). She, like Frankie and Joel, has not been taught to think of African Americans as complete, multifaceted individuals, and—

indeed—Tom’s injury from a cotton gin proves for Scout to be the central revelation in the case. It both reveals that Tom couldn’t have accosted Mayella and enlightens Scout to the ways in which the Jim Crow South’s systemic racism causes violent injury to those black bodies it then positions as “freakish.”<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the courtroom is bedecked with all the trappings of the conventional freak show, and Lee suggests that is, in part, why Scout’s caretaker, Calpurnia, is so opposed to the children’s presence there. While Calpurnia, like many other African Americans in Maycomb, is supportive of Atticus’s role in the trial, Lee emphasizes that the methods she uses to teach Scout about race and classism are markedly different from the spectacle at court. When she takes Scout and Jem to her church, for example, they are the only white children within a black community still reeling from the latest incident of racial violence. One woman even insists that Calpurnia has “got no business bringing’ white chillum” there since “they got their church, [and] we got our’n” (119). To Cal, however, the same God rules all, and she makes sure Scout and Jem are accepted as her “company.” Calpurnia again discourages the practice of Othering when she reprimands Scout for embarrassing her poorer, “white trash” classmate—Walter—by asking “What in the sam hill” he is doing pouring syrup over his meat and vegetables (24-5). In essence, Calpurnia likens Scout’s “disgracin’” of the child, or her insinuation that his mannerisms and upbringing are not up to the standards of her own, to a form of enfreakment.

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<sup>18</sup> Also at risk of being made “freakish” is Mayella Ewell who, like Capote’s Miss Wisteria, is put on display for her “abnormal” sexual desire and subjected to the gaze of the trial goers/freak show spectators.

Of course, Calpurnia is not alone in teaching Scout the basic tenets of racial and gender parity. Atticus plays a very important role in encouraging his daughter to consider things from other people's point of view—to “climb into [their] skin and walk around in it” (30), and—as Gary Richards notes—the chameleon-like Miss Maudie, too, serves as a role model since her “polished feminine performances are...as transgressive as any of Scout's” (133). Even Dolphus Raymond, a white man whose marriage to a black woman makes him the subject of relentless town gossip, plays a significant role in reshaping Scout's notions of “freakishness.” When, for example, Jem and Scout happen upon Dolphus during a break in the trial, Jem is quick to parrot the community's prejudices, identifying a nearby child as one of Dolphus's “sad,” “mixed,” brood who “don't belong anywhere” (161). To add insult, Jem also contends that the Coca Cola bottle from which Dolphus is drinking contains whisky instead of soda. Scout is not as easily swayed, however, by Jem's purported ability to qualify “otherness,” and in demanding to know *how* he can tell that Dolphus's children are “mixed,” she, in turn, causes Jem to hedge with the concession that “you can't sometimes, not unless you know who they are...you just hafta know who they are” (162). Finally, after much persistence and additional questioning (for example, “how do you know we ain't Negroes”), Scout forces her brother to concede that he *doesn't* really know how to define or identify racial “(im)purity”—race is, to some extent, a matter of construction. It is fitting, then, that when Scout later approaches Dolphus, she learns that he is actually drinking a Coke—a deception he claims “helps folks” since his illusory drinking problem allows them to explain why he does not adhere to the racial and sexual

boundaries established by “proper” Southern society (200). As a result of interactions like this one with Dolphus—a conversation that speaks to the fabrication of racial and sexual norms—Lee implies Scout is ultimately more willing to adopt the belief that “there’s just one kind of folks: folks” (227).

Dolphus seems content to maintain Maycomb’s segregated status quo by “strategically” fulfilling the role of the freak; Scout, on the other hand, most certainly is not, and Lee employs the tomboy’s now-infamous ham costume as a means of highlighting her budding commitment to anti-normativity. To be sure, the cumbersome ham is meant to function as comic relief, but the fact that it also saves Scout’s life from the murderous Bob Ewell who attempts to exact revenge on Atticus’s children for embarrassing him in court invites a closer reading of its significance. Scout’s time spent in the ham is an essential plot element because it enables her to identify to a somewhat greater extent with individuals subjected to (race-related) violence. Like Frankie and Joel, Scout has endured her fair share of torment because of her gender deviant behavior and her penchant for overalls. Lee makes her different from fictional predecessors, however, in that she is actually put at risk of *bodily* harm as a result of her family’s and her own “freakish,” non-normative ideas about race and sexuality. The ham is, in one sense, what marks Scout as part of the “freakish” pageantry—particularly when she misses her cue and runs onstage late to the tune of “Dixie”—but it also helps to save her life when it prevents Bob Ewell’s knife from making contact with her body. The ham serves as a symbol, then, of what is at stake for the child in the future. Although her

ideas may mark her, too, as “freakish” within dominant white Southern society, they will also be her own, and perhaps the community’s, saving grace.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, however, Lee assigns Boo Radley—the man whose “freakery” Scout and Jem once mocked in play—the most significant role in ensuring Scout’s safety from the murderous Bob Ewell when she depicts him as stabbing the latter with the would-be murder weapon. It is an act that both literally and figuratively saves Scout’s life and provides the novel’s final commentary on the ways that notions of “freakishness” are constructed. When Scout later sees Boo standing in her house, for example, she thinks only that he must have been a farmer in attendance at her school pageant and is surprised to learn that there are no physical indications he is the person whom she and her brother so often made the centerpiece of their own front yard freak show. This realization and her gratitude bring Scout to befriend Boo instantly, leading and coaxing him, and even walking him home before observing what the community looks like from the perspective of Boo’s porch. It is a conclusion that often has been “championed as the ideal for the advancement of social tolerance” (Richards 153) in that it implies interaction with cultural outsiders like the “othered,” “closeted,” and senselessly persecuted Boo will ultimately ensure their acceptance.

Certain critics like Gary Richards, however, have responded differently to the novel’s conclusion, rightly taking issue with the way in which the novel’s marginalized

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<sup>19</sup> It is also interesting to note the effects of this attack on Scout’s brother Jem—a character who, throughout the novel, has tended to parrot the notions of white Maycomb society regarding race and gender. After attempting to protect Scout from Bob Ewell, however, Lee notes that Jem’s left arm is severely injured and will forever be shorter than his right. This detail is significant given that Tom’s left arm too, is severely injured in Dolphus Raymond’s cotton gin. In this way, Lee suggests that this incident allows Jem to better understand the mental and bodily harm caused by racism, a concept he might not fully understand otherwise given his privileged position as a straight, upper-middle class white boy.

characters, particularly Boo and Tom, are depicted as helpless and dependent upon white characters in ways that suggest a disconcerting balance of power between them. But while Richards is right to call critical attention to the relationship between the novel's black and white characters, he fails to examine fully the ways that Scout's tomboyishness sets her apart from the empowered group and, at times, aligns her with the marginalized "mockingbird" figures she encounters. When Scout helps Boo back to his house, Lee suggests that it is not as a true "insider," but as a friend who—to some extent—has begun to understand his marginalized position, especially as a result of the (racially-motivated) violence to which she is herself subjected. Several other aspects of the conclusion—including the loss of Scout's dress and her developing plans for visiting Calpurnia at home<sup>20</sup>—provide further indication that change is in store for Scout and future generations of Southern children. When, for example, Aunt Alexandra distractedly brings Scout something to put on following the attack, she hands Scout her overalls, "the garments she most despised" (264). In this moment, Alexandra's action seems an important acknowledgement that the horror is *not* the (sexual/ racial) "freakishness" latent in the gender-deviant child; rather, it is the practice of enfreakment itself that forebodes "grotesque" mental and physical repercussions for all community members in the Jim Crow South.

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<sup>20</sup> This is a major development since, previously, Scout and Jem note that "The idea that [Calpurnia] had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one" (125). Scout learns to be ashamed of her ignorance by novel's end. She commits to learning about the details of her caretaker's daily life—her age, birthday, former places of residence, and—perhaps most importantly—the race-related threats to her community.



*The Little Friend*

More than forty years after the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Donna Tartt elected to revive the trope of the gender-deviant Southern child in her novel, *The Little Friend*. Like the other three novels I have discussed here, reviewers have repeatedly classified *The Little Friend* as an example of “Southern Gothic” literature given not only the significant decline of the Cleve-Dufresnes family, the once-aristocratic descendants of plantation owners at the heart of the text, but also the gruesome event that continues to haunt them: the unsolved murder of the Dufresnes’ nine-year-old son, Robin, who was found hung from a tupelo tree in the front yard. As I have suggested, the Southern Gothic was likely an appealing mode to earlier authors such as McCullers, Capote and Lee as it enabled them to better convey the horrific results of racial “enfreakment” that was rampant in the South during the time they were writing. Some critics have thus questioned why Tartt opts to take up elements of the Southern Gothic tradition in the twenty-first century—so many decades since Jim Crow and the height of the civil rights movement. I wish to suggest, however, that Tartt, like Lee, attempts to rework the Southern Gothic mode, using horror not only to describe the white hegemony and African American oppression that has come to be associated with the South but also the more general proliferation of racism and classism in the region and the latency of these biases in ostensibly “innocent” children like the novel’s protagonist, Harriet Cleve-Dufresnes.

While *The Little Friend*, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, does not feature a literal freak show, it is apparent that Tartt is interested in the ways that racial and gender “freakishness” are similarly institutionalized and branded as “grotesque” in traditional Southern communities like Alexandria, Mississippi. In the earliest two novels I examined, the authors suggest that the gender-deviant child’s African American caretakers are complicit in gender norming, and that the child ultimately adopts the racist ideologies promoted by their white communities, as well as those communities’ freak shows. In this novel, however, Tartt distinguishes her work from the tradition, suggesting that while Harriet’s African American caretaker, Ida Rhew, does not police her ward’s tomboyism, she is unintentionally responsible for promoting prejudice toward other cultural groups—namely Alexandria’s “white trash.” When, for example, Harriet learns that a man named Danny Ratliff once bragged to his fellow fourth-grade classmates about murdering her brother, Robin, she seeks affirmation from Ida Rhew that Danny could be a reasonable suspect. Ida Rhew is quick to confirm that not only was young Danny a “nasty little loudmouth,” but he also cussed, set off firecrackers, and stole Robin’s bike. Ida is adamant that Danny and the rest of the Ratliff family are a “sorry,” “mean,” and “filthy” bunch, and to prove her point, she rolls down her stocking to reveal a “six-inch patch of seared flesh on her knee: pink like an uncooked wiener, shiny and repulsively smooth...puckered and pitted...shocking in both color and texture” (147). This scar, a product of a church fire set by the racist Ratliffs, is deeply appalling to Harriet—not only because it provides grotesque bodily evidence of a hate

crime that has gone unpunished, but also because it is one to which she can relate on a subconscious level as a gender-deviant child.

Tartt portrays Harriet as an overall-clad tomboy in the tradition of Frankie and Scout, a girl who admires traditionally masculine individuals—men of action including generals, soldiers, and explorers—as well as her idols, Sherlock Holmes and Harry Houdini (85); according to both her health book and the board game that her father gives her, however, women are afforded only four career options: teacher, ballerina, nurse, or *mother* (85). It is perhaps because she has had heterosexuality, traditional femininity and even maternity forced upon her, however, that the gender-deviant Harriet seems to relate to Ida’s plight—a woman with a “wiener” burned into her flesh.

Harriet is furious at the injustice done to Ida Rhew and vows to stand up for her—even though the police and the other Cleves will not. Tartt is careful to clarify, however, that Harriet is not consciously combatting racism, and may not, in fact, understand the implications of racial prejudice. During the aforementioned conversation with Ida, for example, Harriet notices that in her recounting of Danny’s and Robin’s interactions, Ida Rhew conflates details about the “white trash” Ratliffs and the “white trash” Odums, another lower class family living nearby. But when Harriet calls attention to this mistake, Ida Rhew simply retorts, “same difference” (144). As a result, Harriet easily dismisses the discrepancy and resolves to kill Danny. In relying blindly on her caretaker’s discriminatory assessment of “lesser” individuals, Tartt therefore suggests that Harriet takes up a narrow, oppressive and racist viewpoint that is unmistakably

antithetical to her stated agenda and ironically reminiscent of the same racial hate crimes that both Ida Rhew's burning and Robin's hanging evoke.

Several critics, including *The New York Times*' A.O. Scott, have noted that Robin's murder "cannot help evoking the grisly history of lynching" given the Southern setting (Scott); however, while it is true that the hanging calls to mind crimes perpetrated against a racially-specific group, it is also important to note that Tarrt describes the dangling little white corpse as "frightening to *everyone*" in the community: "rich and poor, black and white—no one could think who might have done such a thing or why" (Tarrt 18, emphasis added). This comment makes clear that the community members automatically presume both the innocence of and preference for Robin, a white, upper-class Southern child. No one thinks him capable of evil, let alone capable of inciting racial or class-based hatred in others—thus, the hanging is universally mystifying. In much the same way, Harriet's character, and, initially, the reader, presumes that she, too, is above the influence of racism, in part because of the extent of her affection for her African American caretaker, Ida Rhew, who, to Harriet, smelled of "the very aroma of love" (291). Tarrt writes that Ida stands "at the firm center of Harriet's universe." Beloved and "irreplaceable," Ida Rhew acts as a mother figure to Harriet since her birth, and her smile is the first Harriet remembers seeing in the world.

Tarrt also gives the initial impression that Harriet is above prejudice by depicting other characters as the more immediately identifiable racists. These characters, namely the "white trash" Ratliffs, initially come off as the novel's true "freaks"—their penchant for shooting African American citizens at random making *them*, and not the Cleve-

Dufresneses, seem inhuman to both Harriet and the reader. Tartt strategically conveys, however, that there are more parallels between the Ratliff and Cleve families than the “innocent” Harriet is willing to concede. Though they may exhibit a far more subtle brand of racism, the Cleves often interact with their long-term black employees in a cruel manner, abruptly abandoning them with little thought to their future security or well-being. When Harriet’s Aunt Libby falls into a coma, for example, no one in the Cleve family thinks to tell her servant of fifty-five years, Odean, that Libby is ailing. Harriet previously describes the two women as “an old married couple...in their stoic companionable affection for one another” (453), but it is only after they have already buried Libby that Odean hears second-hand of her friend and employer’s death.

In much the same manner, Harriet learns how easily disposable Ida Rhew is to her family when a complaint to her mother that Ida has only prepared leftovers for dinner becomes grounds for her lifelong caretaker’s casual dismissal. When Ida Rhew reacts to her firing with the accusation that Harriet is “being mad and spiteful that [Ida doesn’t just] sit around all night cooking fried chicken and telling” stories” (337-8), Harriet realizes for the first time Ida has a life beyond caring for her family and herself. As is the case for Scout, the knowledge that Ida has to “get home and do [her] own work...after cleaning up for you folks all day” (338) is a shocking revelation and an affirmation of Patricia Yaeger’s suggestion that this Southern society provides the ideal “holding environment” for racism. Obviously, neither Harriet’s ignorance nor Charlotte’s decision to fire Ida can be equated directly with the violent forms of racism evidenced in the Ratliffs’ shooting sprees. However, these actions and ideologies *do*

reveal that Harriet and the Cleves are complicit in the “evisceration” of African American subjectivity, even if they are unaware, or in denial, about doing so.

Beyond simply establishing a parallel between the Ratliffs’ and Cleve-Dufresneses’<sup>21</sup> racist actions, however, Tartt also articulates the pervasiveness of racism and its reach in the community via the blackbird<sup>22</sup> metaphor that is incorporated throughout the novel to Gothic effect. A symbol associated with both race and racism, the blackbird is first mentioned when Harriet looks at pictures of her deceased brother wearing the “greedy crow” costume for a school play.<sup>23</sup> In this outfit, Robin appears “exhilarated,” running throughout the house with arms flapping and wings billowing behind him (46); as will later become clear, Robin is a child for whom race and/or class-based identities are, like his costume, constructed—constructed in the sense that they are fabricated by individuals in power and “put on” those they would have wear them. The happiness captured in the picture of Robin is set in stark relief by the gloom of the present day, ten years after his hanging. Since then, the bird outfit—like Robin’s mock-lynching—has become the stuff of legend. Both of Robin’s sisters (including Harriet) and many of the neighborhood children have borrowed the “greedy crow” when in need of a Halloween costume, the outfit’s fraught history establishing a link to the children’s role in perpetuating senseless racism in the South. Though, in life, young Robin worked

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<sup>21</sup> Tartt also creates several other parallels between these two seemingly disparate families—the “white trash” Ratliffs and “gentrified” Cleves. Both are comprised of four central family members, both valorize the tenets and ideologies of the Old South, and both have a striking inability to order time/differentiate between reality and the imaginary.

<sup>22</sup> This metaphor is one that prompts comparison to the mockingbird Lee employs and, in its descriptions, makes the bird an even more obvious racial symbol.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note the similarities between this costume and the one that Scout wears in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

to foster relationships with members of different social classes, the progress he made, like his costume, is now significantly damaged. Harriet's observation, for example, about "how black [the costume] looked, how small, dangling limp and bedraggled...like Peter Pan's shadow that he'd tried to stick on with soap" (497) is especially relevant in that it indicates Alexandria's children are no longer able to "stick on" the sort of innocence that is assigned to the now-mythologized Robin—especially in matters pertaining to race. Even when they believe they have their caretakers' best interest at heart, for instance, the failure of these white children to view African Americans as people and their insensitivity to ongoing class and racial issues makes them complicit in upholding the forms of racism their elders more openly advocate.<sup>24</sup>

Tartt again uses the image of the blackbird to make evident the ways in which Harriet, though well-meaning, contributes to the proliferation of prejudice in her community. When, for example, her sister discovers an injured blackbird in the street, Harriet rushes barefoot onto the burning pavement to help. She is horrified to find that one of the creature's wings is stuck in a puddle of tar, and she tries to lift it out in spite of a neighbor's warning that the bird is "nasty." This attempt to provide support for the bird backfires, however, and, in one of the novel's most grotesque scenes, Harriet inadvertently rips the creature's wing from its shoulder (131-2). In much the same way, Harriet believes that she is helping both Robin and Ida Rhew in avenging Robin's death, but in relying on circumstantial and racist evidence to incriminate Danny Ratliff, Tartt makes clear that Harriet is doing much more harm than good.

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<sup>24</sup> Harriet's best friend, Hely, is also able to have his maid fired because his word is taken over hers (337).

Harriet's limited qualifications to avenge Ida Rhew are also made evident via another blackbird incident—one in which Ida and Harriet observe the bird singing outside the Cleve-Dufresnes house. This sight prompts Ida to recount the strange story of how the blackbird got its red markings: a “fierce slash of scarlet cutting like a military epaulet across each wing” (291). Once upon a time, Ida says, all the animals lived in the big river and “there wasn't a whole lot of little second-class rivers and creeks like you have now” (292). Unfortunately, there was a little man was “so mad at everything he [decided] to burn up the whole world” (292). Before she can complete this story, though—one that, in the little man, seems to evoke the angry Harriet and, with reference to the many animals in the one big river, makes a statement about the arbitrariness of class divisions—Ida Rhew leaves for home. As she is fired the next day, Harriet never hears from Ida the story about how this man's anger resulted in the bird's “slashed” wing, and, in turn, does not learn how to respond to the acts of racism that she is beginning to identify in her town. It seems especially, appropriate, then, that when Danny Ratliff finally meets Harriet at the novel's end, he immediately associates her with a black bird. Before, Danny has only linked the creature with the African Americans that he and his brothers attempt to shoot on the creek: “black bird, black men and women and children scrambling for the safety of the creek bank” (527). Now, as Harriet pursues him with the intention of murder, Danny notes that she, too, seems to be a “creature, part blackbird...part devilish child” (546)—a detail that suggests Harriet both encourages *and* becomes the victim of the very form of prejudice that she intends to combat.



As I earlier demonstrated, Harriet's experiences as a gender-deviant child enable her to identify, to some extent, with Ida Rhew's race-related victimization. Like the other gender-deviant children examined in this chapter, Harriet is initially ignorant of the ways in which racial violence has contributed to the "enfreakment" and bodily disfigurement of African Americans such as Ida Rhew. However, after a stint in a gender normative church camp where she is herself categorized as "grotesque," Harriet comes to understand more fully the process through which "normal" gender and sexuality (like race) are upheld by institutions that function as modern day freak shows—in this case, the church. Tartt writes that Harriet "had not expected the horrifying new indignity of being classed for the first time ever a 'Teen Girl': a creature without mind, wholly protuberance and excretion, to judge from the literature she was given" (407), a pamphlet entitled "Your Developing Body." Reading this material makes Harriet feel that the "womb, and tubes, and mammaries...had been projected over her poor dumb body; as if all anybody saw when they looked at her—even with her clothes on—were organs and genitalia and hair in unseemly places" (407). Harriet also burns with "hatred and shame" at the church's assumption that she, like the other girls at her camp, is merely "preoccupied with under-arm odor, the reproductive system, and dating" (407). It is especially fitting, then, that these female campmates all hail from Tupelo—a town that happens to share its name with the tree on which Harriet's brother, Robin, was hung.<sup>25</sup> Just as her brother's murder calls to mind lynching, a freak-show-

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<sup>25</sup> Also significant is Tartt's note that everything at the camp seemed to be covered in the sweat of a hotdog, effectively calling to mind the "wiener" shaped burn that Ida Rhew sustains during the Ratliffs' racism-fueled attack on her own church.

like spectacle designed to uphold black Otherness, Harriet's reduction to "crude biological terms" at church camp (407) subjects her to an enfreakment process that she describes as "frankly pornographic" (407). In this way, Tartt strategically uses Harriet's experiences with gender normalization to reiterate the similarly cruel construction of race as a category.

Like earlier authors writing within this tradition, Tartt suggests that the freak show nonetheless has the effect of promoting a cycle of racism in the South's gender-deviant children, even while the child's gender/sexual Otherness allows them to relate, on some level, to the racial enfreakment of African Americans, particularly their caretakers. Tartt makes a minor departure from the genre, however, in painting a somewhat more complex picture of the freak show's effects on the gender-deviant child. Although Harriet, like Scout, comes away from her freak show experience, i.e. the church camp, with a greater sense of compassion for those individuals whose "Otherness" is upheld or held in check via the processes of enfreakment, her behavior is also comparable to Frankie and Joel's in that she becomes vindictive as a result, later perpetuating the very racist system that she allegedly wishes to overturn. Whereas Frankie and Joel respond to gender norming by developing more racist attitudes toward their *caretakers*, however, Harriet directs her wrath outward toward the same "white trash" individuals Ida Rhew has taught her to disdain—an attitude whose negative repercussions Tartt highlights in the novel's Gothic conclusion.

As is the case elsewhere in the novel, Tartt attempts to speak to issues of prejudice more generally—extending her comments beyond the white/black racial

divisions that are typical of writing about the South, and treating racism and classism as part of a complex matrix stemming from multiple sources and directed toward multiple others. When, at the novel's end, for example, Harriet climbs the town water tower to ambush and murder Danny Ratliff for the role she assumes he played in Robin's death, she thinks suddenly of a rhyme from an old baby book:

*Old Mr. Chang, I've oft heard it said,  
You wear a basket upon your head,  
You've two pairs of scissors to cut your meat,  
And two pairs of chopsticks with which you eat. (531)*

Harriet finds that what seems like a random memory actually propels her in her mission. The nursery rhyme's racial stereotypes of Old Mr. Chang's "pointed Chinese hat," "threadlike mustache," and "his long sly Mandarin eyes" (531) instill in her great fear and, ultimately, supply the motivation to complete her own hate-based crime. It is, of course, no coincidence that as she climbs the water tower to shoot Danny, a "great black cawing [explosion] of birds" settles near her, catching her eye with a "jaunty, wicked look" (552-3). The crows are evidence that, far from serving as justified retribution for the crime committed against her brother, the act that Harriet is planning is simply a perpetuation of the racism she purports to combat in Ida Rhew's name.

As I have noted, the conclusions of McCullers's and Capote's novels are somewhat ambiguous in that they do not specify what consequences, if any, the gender-deviant child will face for adopting their communities' racist attitudes. But while *The Little Friend* is by no means straightforward, Tartt *does* undercut Harriet's developing

(racial/classist) prejudices on two central fronts. First, she does so by incorporating in the novel a variety of narrative perspectives, not only Harriet's but Danny Ratliff's as well. Those moments in which the reader gains access to Danny's thoughts are particularly illuminating, as they help to define him beyond the limited figure that Harriet and Ida Rhew paint of a white trash, meth-addicted criminal and reveal a nuanced history in which he addressed issues of gender and class not altogether different from those that Harriet herself experiences. When, for example, Danny unsuspectingly makes his way to the tower where Harriet will attempt to entrap and shoot him, he thinks back to a time when he was attending school with her brother, Robin. At this point in the novel, following more than five-hundred pages of Harriet's suspicions and accusations, it is a revelation to the reader that Danny is not only innocent of the crime but that he was also very close to Robin: he was his "little friend."<sup>26</sup> Danny had, in fact, been playing with Robin the morning of the murder and recalls that when he got news of Robin's death, he "broke down sobbing" in front of his family and couldn't stop. Instead of comforting the then-fourth grader, however, Danny's father "yanked him up by the arm and offered to give him something to cry about" (517). Since Danny had already been "made to wear a woman's yellow wig for a whole week at school [as]

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<sup>26</sup> The relationship between Robin and Danny is especially important, Tartt suggests, because it develops in a way that breaches the established boundaries between the upper and lower classes. It is revealed, for example, that the older generations of Danny's family once worked for the Cleves on their plantation, picking cotton. Years later, the Ratliffs still resent the Cleves: a "snooty class of white" who, in regarding "white folks down on their luck as no better than the common yard nigger," are "traitors to their race" (515). Thus, when Danny is invited to the Cleves' plantation home for little Robin's birthday party, his family is adamant that he will not attend. When he does manage to find a ride, however, Robin observes that the estate, with its moth-eaten rugs, broken plaster and cracked ceilings, is not the prestigious and infallible monument to whiteness that he imagined. Robin, too, makes Danny feel like a friend and equal who is welcome at Tribulation, and the boys are able to bypass their families' long-established racial/class hierarchies.

punishment for something or other” (516), he is particularly susceptible to his family and classmates’ suggestions that his grieving must be evidence that Robin was his boyfriend (517), and he reacts in the only way that he believes will allow him to avoid “enfreakment”: claiming to have killed Robin himself. Gaining this information about Danny’s history therefore enables the reader to see through Harriet’s “typing” of his character and to question the effects of her prejudices on their own opinions about him.

Tartt again undermines Harriet’s established and prejudiced narrative about Danny in the confusing aftermath of her failed attempt to murder him. As Danny is unable to swim, she manages to evade him in the water tower, and when he pursues her there, she simply leaves him to drown. Harriet then returns home and climbs into the bed that Ida Rhew made up weeks before—the final mark of her caretaker’s fleeting presence in the house and a moment suggesting she feels justice has been served for Ida. However, the reality that Harriet has become an (attempted) murderer, not unlike Robin’s own killer, is emphasized by the overwhelming sense of disorientation that she experiences upon waking. All sense of victory disappears as a series of fainting spells lead to Harriet’s admittance in the local hospital. There are, Tartt suggests, several factors that contribute to Harriet’s convalescence at the novel’s end. She has indeed suffered various ailments throughout the course of the novel that are respectively diagnosed as heat stroke and an acute response to emotional distress. Her grandmother, on the other hand, suspects that the “fainting” might be attributed to Harriet’s filthy, newspaper-filled house, and the reader, in turn, wonders whether Harriet’s summer of Dead Man’s Floats (a breath-holding exercise she practices underwater at the pool) and/

or extended submersion in the water tower's crystal meth-laced water may be to blame. But in spite of all of these possible theories, Harriet's doctor only hears her family's claim that she has had a "seizure" before he declares her "an epileptic" and allows all of her other symptoms to fade into insignificance.

The doctor here ignores any information that does not fit with his theories about Harriet's symptoms and labels her with a condition that marks her as a danger to herself and others—one that some might construe as "freakish" given Harriet's purported inability to meet established requirements for "normal" social participation. In this way, the doctor's hasty epilepsy diagnosis ironically makes Harriet the victim of a cruel narrative-making process that is not unlike her assessment of Danny. And though Harriet may not face the same horrible implications of such labeling as the African Americans in her community who are being physically attacked, there will be some fairly significant limitations on her future rights and mobility that evoke the limits of Jim Crow. She will not be able to drive or operate other major machinery, and Tartt implies she will also face judgment from community members who, as a result of her condition, are less inclined to trust her, especially in her allegations about Danny.

In some ways, the conclusion of Tartt's novel is little more optimistic than McCullers's or Capote's. Readers are left with a final picture of a desperate Harriet who, in spite of learning from her father about Danny and Robin's friendship, believes that it would still be "easier" if Danny had killed her brother. Tartt notes that as Harriet imagined what she could tell her family about Danny, "rich possibilities of story began to open like poisonous flowers all around her" (620); however, the reader *also* knows

that Harriet's vindictive tales will not go unquestioned. Modern-day variants of the freak show (churches, public schools, and even medical practices) seem to promote the perpetuation of racism and classism in Alexandria, but Tartt's novel works to counteract them by exposing the processes through which "freaks" are manufactured.

As this chapter demonstrates, these "othering" processes are most readily identifiable in the form of freak shows featured in the earliest of the four novels assembled here. Such exhibitions, as well as their later reincarnations, are particularly frightening to the novels' children because they demonstrate how deviations from gender and sexual normalcy will be punished. The novels' greatest horror is *not*, however, simply the possible enfreakment of the children on the basis of their gender/sexual "abnormality"; rather, it is the racism that is latent in these children of the American South—children who fail to observe, even of their life-long caretakers—the ways in which those same freak shows subject African Americans to prejudice, violence, and even bodily disfigurement that signify the wounding effects of the Southern social order.

In all four texts, the relationship between the gender-deviant child and African American caretaker is of central importance as it is meant to explore possible parallels in the ways their behavior is "normed" and "policed" by the white, heteronormative hegemony. Each caretaker has essentially become a parent figure to the gender-deviant child, assuming the place of a mother who is either dead or absent and imparting information about the ongoing abuse of African American citizens in the Jim Crow South. What is unsettling, these authors suggest, is that the gender-deviant child (initially) adopts a racist worldview, nonetheless. But whereas McCullers and Capote's

works *culminate* with the onset of the child's racism in response to the caretaker's participation in their gender normalization, Lee and Tartt craft more hopeful conclusions that are perhaps indicative of the post-Civil Rights social climates in which they are writing. Neither author is so brash as to suggest that racism is ending—or even immediately on its way out. Nor do they imply that the gender policing Scout and Harriet experience are entirely comparable to the race-based violence their caretakers (and their caretakers' loved ones) have endured. However, the forms of bodily violence to which these gender-deviant characters are subjected—Scout in the Ewell attack and Harriet in her seizures and their diagnosis—certainly prompt the reader, if not the character, to consider more fully the ways in which freaks are made and why it is essential to deter the horrific processes of gender, sexual, and racial enfreakment that thrive in Southern communities.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE FALL OF THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC ESTATE: MATERNAL AND SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS AND RACIAL MARGINALIZATION

Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, is widely regarded as the earliest example of Gothic literature, and since its publication in 1764, the "haunted castle" at its narrative center has become one of the most readily identifiable motifs of the Gothic genre. Outside the context of the Gothic, castles are generally understood as spaces of domesticity, security, and refuge for their inhabitants—stalwart structures that, in their ability to endure, also represent centuries of history (Punter). Gothic literature, however, has long been interested in castles as repositories of secrets where "cruelty" and "repression" operate behind a grand or pious façade.<sup>27</sup> These buildings, which also occasionally appear in the form of dark cloisters or labyrinthine abbeys, are commonly symbolic of certain tyrannical social and economic structures that have survived over decades, terrorizing inhabitants with the possibility of permanent incarceration. Even after enduring years of decay and decomposition, the lingering ruins of Gothic buildings in film and literature—as well as the institutions they represent (like the aristocracy, patriarchy, and the church)—seem to suggest that the oppressions of antiquity may never really go away.

Texts participating in the "Southern Gothic" mode similarly tend to feature a version of the traditional Gothic castle—albeit one transported to the cultural and

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<sup>27</sup> Other examples of Gothic structures that reflect the fate of the characters/institutions they represent include Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*.

geographical context of the American South. Bridgett Marshall notes, for example, that what Southern Gothic texts lack in medieval castles, they make up for with plantations, “often sprawling and in varying degrees of decrepitude” (6). Like the traditional castles of the Gothic, the rooms of these (former) plantations conceal a terrible history involving the torture of helpless victims, frequently African American slaves. Southern Gothic plantations are also similar to the “haunted” structures of the traditional Gothic mode in that their post-Civil war destitution points to the (impending) fall of an earlier generation from wealth and power. The building’s desolation, in turn, echoes the “fallen nature of its inhabitants,” the white members of pseudo-aristocratic Southern dynasties that will never be fully restored (Marshall 7).

In the previous chapter, I examine the trope of the freak show in Southern Gothic literature, arguing that the young protagonists’ constant exposure to the “enfreakment” of black bodies in their communities—especially the bodies of their African American caretakers—is meant not only to instill in them a sense of blackness as “other” but also to emphasize a similar danger in failing to embody social gender norms. Some of the young protagonists eventually learn to identify the scars on their caretakers’ exhibited black bodies as evidence of both Southern society’s cruelty and the constructedness of race; and yet most struggle to acknowledge normative gender roles as similarly constructed, fearing social punishment comparable to their caretakers’ and, ultimately, relying on their whiteness to “pass” as “normal” members of their communities. In this chapter, my focus will move from the public space of the freak show to the private realm of the Southern Gothic estate; it is a recurring characteristic of Southern Gothic texts, I

will argue, to consider the possible, and oftentimes horrific, repercussions of requiring young people to adopt a “normally” gendered lifestyle—especially one in which maternity and reproduction within the confines of a patriarchal family is a crucial part of sustaining the South as a distinct region and culture.

The connection between Gothic structures and women’s bodies is not, by any means, unique to literature and film set in the South. In fact, since the 1970s, critics have used the term “Female Gothic” to talk about the Gothic mode’s recurring fascination with heroines, often vulnerable young women, who face the “threat, if not the reality, of confinement and/or violation” within “structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety, especially the family home” (Fleenor 273). Participating texts “highlight anxieties and fears” directly relating to female experience, particularly the threats of “sexual violation,” “pregnancy, and childbirth” (Fleenor 272), and make manifest these threats in the characters’ households—spaces that become “the analogue of the [female or maternal] human body” (Creed 55). These Gothic elements also frequently appear in twentieth-century literature and film about the American South—including texts like William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Tennessee Williams’ play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Elia Kazan’s film, *Baby Doll* (1956), Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* (1977), and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992)—where white Southern women’s sexual misbehavior and/or inability to mother is repeatedly linked to the destruction of Southern estates and the culture they represent.

What sets these Southern Gothic texts apart from other, geographically unspecific texts in the genre, however, are the supporting casts of African American

characters grappling with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow segregation in the region. As I will demonstrate, each of the aforementioned texts relies on the presence of African American characters to counter, echo, or even entwine with the white Gothic heroine's relationship to the falling Southern estate, often calling into greater relief connections between white women's sexual/maternal disobedience and the impending cultural destruction of the South.<sup>28</sup> This sort of "surrogate" role, as Toni Morrison aptly points out, is one that has long been assigned to African American characters in American literature. It is tempting, Morrison explains, to think that black characters signify "nothing in the imagination of white American writers"—that the "marginal impact that blacks had on the lives of the characters" is a reflection of their marginal impact on the author (20). However, in reality, "the fabrication of an Africanist persona" is a "powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (21). Often in the form of a "choked," marginalized presence, African American characters tend to function as allegories and metaphors for American authors to talk about themselves, especially the neutrality of their whiteness (22).

Certainly, the African American characters featured in Faulkner's, Williams's, Percy's, and Allison's texts are marginal—many are not named and appear only briefly while others remain essentially voiceless in spite of their more substantive textual presence. It seems, furthermore, that their earliest function, as Morrison suggests, is

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<sup>28</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Southern Gothic literature has not depicted African Americans in the role of Female Gothic heroine. In fact, texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (2004), and Joe Lansdale's *Pigeons from Hell* (2009) all feature black female protagonists made to inhabit brutal, haunted plantations. However, this literature depicts the women (as well African American men) as responding in a much different way to the oppressiveness of the plantation than white characters, a "ghosting" phenomenon I will explore at greater length in the following chapter.

primarily to “limn out and enforce” the normality of an “unracialized, illusory white world” (46). However, in taking a chronological approach to examining this body of texts, I hope to highlight significant changes over the course of the past sixty years to the trope of the Southern Gothic’s “haunted” houses, particularly the changing relationship of African American characters to “entrapped” and maternally-tormented white heroines. In tracing African American characters’ transitions from maternal martyrs to chorus members/satirical figures cautioning white women against motherhood, it becomes apparent that the Southern Gothic has, over time, become a vehicle for undermining the notion of motherhood and/or whiteness as capable of sustaining a discreet Southern culture built upon patriarchy and white hegemony.

### *The Sound and the Fury*

William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* does not take place on an active plantation; however, “the history of the [Compson] property parallels the development and decline of the plantation economy” (Beebee 65), and according to Thomas Beebee, it is built on a large piece of land that, following its purchase in 1855, would likely have been used for economic purposes requiring a “contingent of slaves” (Beebee 65).<sup>29</sup> That the home nevertheless functions as a Gothic structure is undisputable, as both the Compsons and the grounds they inhabit are in a terrible state of decay—one that

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<sup>29</sup> This possibility is strengthened by Jason’s angry claim about how “his people” long owned slaves in the area, but Beebee is careful to note, too, that even if the home were not used for economic purposes or attended by slaves, there was no aspect of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mississippi life that remained unaffected by the slave culture (65).

correlates directly with the decline of Southern aristocracy.<sup>30</sup> Over time, the land has been sold off piecemeal to pay the family's debts, and what is left is described as a "square, paintless house with [a] rotting portico" (372). Outside, the mentally handicapped Benjy is regularly taken to visit "his" graveyards<sup>31</sup> or retained within a gated lawn, a potential precursor to the asylum where his brother would have him committed. Inside, the living family members are often shut away behind closed doors—an isolation that is self-imposed by the disgraced Mrs. Compson and enforced upon the disobedient Miss Quentin. The home's collection of locked doors, behind which Jason hoards stolen money, and abandoned rooms, left empty after Quentin's suicide and Mr. Compson's alcohol-related death, composes a dismal picture of a fallen Compson family that is slowly being entombed.

The Compson family will not endure its death throes in silence, however, as *The Sound and the Fury* serves as a sort of platform from which each of its three would-be male heirs is given the opportunity to pinpoint, to the best of his ability, the immediate cause of his family's decline. Without exception, each incriminates his "sexually promiscuous" sister, Caddy, in Gothic terms that cast her and her "filthy" body as monstrous. The brothers' incrimination of Caddy is foreshadowed in what Faulkner identifies as *The Sound and the Fury's* central image: the three Compson brothers—

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<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, the tale of the decaying Sutpen plantation, is more frequently recognized as his contribution to the Southern Gothic. Like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* is interested in the ways that antiquated ideas about marriage and lineage contributed to the disappearance of a ruling "white" class; however, I have opted to focus on *The Sound and the Fury* in this chapter as it is more concerned with the relationship of (white) mothering to the preservation of the South.

<sup>31</sup> This includes both his pretend graveyard and the plots where Damuddy, Mr. Compson and Quentin are buried.

Quentin, Benjy, and Jason—looking up their “family tree” at Caddy as she tries to get a better view of her grandmother’s funeral. Faulkner famously praised Caddy as the only one of the youngest generation “brave enough to climb the tree,” and—in doing so—to come to terms with the impending death of herself and her once-powerful family. From the ground, however, all her brothers are able to see is their sister’s bottom and very “muddy drawers,” a sight they interpret as proof of her bodily impurity and register in direct relation to the fall of their family and estate.<sup>32</sup>

For Benjy, Caddy becomes a castrating mother figure<sup>33</sup> whose “impure” sexual impulses are responsible for his dismemberment and the upheaval of the Compson home. Although Benjy’s mental abilities are described in the novel as comparable to those of a three-year old, the ability to detect and denounce his sister’s “illicit” sexual behavior seems hard-wired in his body. In his happiest memories, Benjy recalls how Caddy smelled like leaves and trees—vegetation in the natural world that, to him, is indicative of her sexual purity and, thus, her suitability as a mother figure. During this time period, it is Caddy who feeds and dresses Benjy, who protects him against Jason’s cruelty, who carries and comforts him and tucks him into bed at night. As a result of her

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<sup>32</sup> For a more in-depth reading of Caddy’s muddy drawers and their connection to bodily impurity, see Mary Dell Fletcher’s “Edenic Images in *The Sound and the Fury*.” Here, Fletcher argues that just as Eve disobeyed God the Father by eating fruit from the tree of Good and Evil, Caddy disobeys Mr. Compson to gain forbidden knowledge of life and death. Her father’s lenient response to Caddy’s disobedience, Fletcher contends, stems from the belief that all women are always already lost. As he later explains in a conversation with Quentin, women are never “pure” or “virgins” since they are helpless to the corrupting force of menstruation, a process that reveals the monstrous qualities of the female body as it gives way to “periodic filth” and “liquid putrefaction.” Even though Mr. Compson holds the ostensibly liberal viewpoint that virginity is a male-created concept that cannot name/tame women into submission, the demonization of women’s bodies and unregulated reproductive functions nevertheless endorses that taming/naming process to the Compson sons. As a result, her brothers (and mother) come to understand Caddy only as a symbol of their family’s fall, like the “unclean” blood of the menstrual cycle associated with the sin of the biblical foremother, Eve.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this trope, see Barbara Creed’s chapter on castrating mothers in *The Monstrous-Feminine*.

nurturing and kindness, Benjy clearly prefers Caddy to his biological mother, Caroline. However, Benjy's surrogate mother-relationship with his sister is only operative while he can be sure of her sexual "innocence." Whether she is applying fragrances in preparation for a date or returning home from an evening with a beau, Benjy can smell the scent of his sister's "impure" actions, and even though he cannot communicate this in words, his frantic sobs are enough to shame Caddy into washing her mouth and body in order to pacify him, promising him that she "won't anymore."

Eventually, however, Caddy becomes pregnant and must marry quickly in order to preserve her family's honor. Though Benjy is not capable of understanding such social mores, he is nonetheless able to detect that his sister has committed a sexual "crime" for which she cannot atone with a mere bar of soap and water (79). On that night when she first has sex, Benjy remembers:

We were in the hall. Caddy was still looking at me. Her hand was against her mouth and I saw her eyes and I cried. We went up the stairs. She stopped again, against the wall, looking at me and I cried and she went on and I came on, crying, and she shrank against the wall, looking at me. She opened the door to her room, but pulled at her dress and we went to the bathroom and she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed her, crying. (79)

Because Caddy can never regain the scent of trees or the Compson family's honor, she is banned from her home, and Benjy attempts to search elsewhere for the motherly comfort that he found in his sister. Unfortunately, he looks to a group of young girls who are



passing the Compsons' house at the same place where he always waited for Caddy to return from school (60-1). Pursuing these young girls may seem logical to Benjy because they—like his childhood image of Caddy—have yet to sexually mature. In chasing them outside the bounds of the property's fence, however, his actions are interpreted as attempted rape, and he is castrated as a preventative measure. Mournfully observing his missing testicles, Benjy experiences a flashback to the evening of Caddy's tree climb as their maid and caretaker, Dilsey, declares that although mud has "done soaked clean through" Caddy's clothes, she "won't get no bath this night" (84-5). It becomes clear through this mental connection, then, that Benjy equates his horrific bodily mutilation with Caddy's "gross" sexual impurities and the loss of his childhood home as he knew it.

Quentin, too, holds the "sexually disobedient" Caddy responsible for the Compson family's destruction, though his characterization of her maternal monstrosity is slightly different from his brother's. To Quentin, Caddy is a "womb monster,"<sup>34</sup> a creature whose ability to conceive, gestate and give birth makes her capable of "supplying whatever...evil lacks in itself...until the evil has served its purpose" (111). Though Quentin attempts to slight his sister's fertility as a mere form of "crop production," it is apparent that he is deeply fearful of the potentially evil power that she is able to harness in giving birth. A self-proclaimed Southern gentleman, Quentin believes women are meant to be governed and protected, yet when he cannot

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<sup>34</sup> See Creed's chapter on "Woman as Monstrous Womb" in *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Here, Creed notes that from classical times, the uterus was "frequently drawn with horns to demonstrate its supposed association with the devil. 'Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing'" (Creed 43), a power that, in certain respects, can seem to occur without the agency of the male.

convince her to stay with the family to conceal her “illegitimate” pregnancy, the only way he is able to conceive of himself as similarly capable of exerting such power over life, death, and family is to imagine *himself* as a mother, specifically the mother of Caddy’s lover, Dalton Ames. Quentin wishes that he “could have been [Dalton’s mother] lying with open body lifted laughing, holding [Dalton’s] father with [his] hand refraining, seeing, watching [Dalton] die before he lived” (91). He again attempts to usurp Caddy’s maternal power when he asks her to tell their family that he is the child’s father. Her rejection of this request is, to Quentin, a final, crushing denial of his masculinity, and believing their family’s honor destroyed, he decides that there is no other option for him than suicide.

Caddy’s brother Jason also scorns her as the cause of the Compson family’s decline, but for him, the destructive effects of Caddy’s unchecked sexuality are most easily observed in her “evil” offspring, Miss Quentin. Jason, like Mrs. Compson, believes that Miss Quentin is a sort of uncanny “double” of her mother, but whereas Mrs. Compson attempts to shield Miss Quentin from the legacy of her mother’s illicit sexuality—forbidding Caddy’s presence or even the mention of her daughter’s name—Jason assumes it is inevitable that Miss Quentin will inherit her mother’s “curse.” He notes, for example, that if sexual impurity is “in [a woman’s] blood...you can’t do anything with her” but “get rid of her” (268), and it is this attitude that makes him feel justified in embezzling the money Caddy sends for Quentin’s support. When Miss Quentin later breaks into Jason’s room and steals this stockpile before leaving town with one of her many lovers, Jason regards the act as further proof that she is her mother’s

double since Caddy similarly “robbed” him of his fortune, as well as the Compson family’s security, when her extramarital affair cost him his job.

According to Elizabeth Kerr, Caddy and Miss Quentin are the recognizable, if somewhat unconventional, Gothic heroines of *The Sound in the Fury*—a reading of the characters that seems possible to entertain since, as I have demonstrated, both are persecuted by a family trying desperately to confine them within the bounds of the estate and the oppressive patriarchal system that it represents. But Kerr’s argument nonetheless involves a few problematic assumptions, the first being that Faulkner implies Caddy and Miss Quentin are the same “brand” of Gothic heroine. Faulkner, if not Jason, takes great care to highlight the differences between mother and daughter, particularly in terms of their treatment of the novel’s moral touchstones, Benjy and Dilsey. Whereas Caddy leaves her beau on the porch swing and promises Benjy that she won’t “mess around” with him anymore, a defiant Miss Quentin threatens to whip Luster if he allows Benjy to spy on her while she swings with her companion. Whereas Caddy shrinks away from Benjy because she is ashamed he can “smell” her impurity, Miss Quentin rails that Benjy “needs to be sent to [the asylum in] Jackson” since she can’t stand to live in a house with him (79). And while Caddy patiently feeds Benjy to keep him from crying, Miss Quentin demands to know why he can’t be fed in the kitchen since eating with him is “like eating with a pig” (80). Miss Quentin’s brutal mistreatment of Dilsey, such as the scene in which she calls her a “damn old nigger,” is also particularly jarring when held in contrast to Caddy’s deep affection for her childhood caretaker. Obviously, Caddy and Quentin are not merely the “doubles” that

Jason would make them out to be, and they are not—as Kerr puts it—simply fleeing toward ruin because they fail to defend their virginity (58). Rather, it seems that Faulkner suggests both women have both been *subjected* to destruction: Caddy because of a paradoxical cultural system demanding that she act as both mother and virgin and Miss Quentin because she has been forced to live entirely without the influences of her biological mother.

Some critics have argued that Faulkner highlights the potential for sexual liberation in Caddy and Miss Quentin’s shirking of their family’s tyranny. Dana Medoro, for example, points to the soiled pair of pink underwear that Miss Quentin leaves on the bedroom floor as a ceremonial dismissal of the Compson “curse” and notes that Miss Quentin happily descends the same tree her mud-soaked mother once climbed before driving off with the man in the red tie. This is not to say, Medoro clarifies, “that Caddy and her daughter thoroughly menace the white patriarchal system that defines the South,” and their victory is admittedly qualified as they “move out of the family and into a wider ideological version of it” (110); however, “Caddy and her daughter represent or gesture toward the possibilities latent within such uncertainty or indeterminacy,” and Faulkner’s tale of their escape, at the least, helps “expose the cracks” in the South’s antiquated “phallogocentric structures” (110) that attempt to contain them. But while Medoro both complicates oversimplistic readings of Caddy and Miss Quentin as facing “unequivocal ruin” because of their sexual “deviance” and points out Faulkner’s own criticism of the myth tying women’s sexual purity to the preservation of the South as a

culture, she does not account for the novel's continued and problematic veneration of maternity, especially in the figure of Dilsey.

Dilsey fails, on many fronts, to meet the typical criteria for a Gothic heroine: she is no longer young; her sexual "purity" is not threatened by a lusty pursuer; furthermore, she is not being held against her will at the Compson estate as she is merely a servant there and *technically* free to leave when she wishes. And yet, the absence of Dilsey's first-person narrative in a section of the novel that Faulkner repeatedly identifies as "hers" nevertheless suggests that she, like the voiceless Caddy, has been confined to the narrative margins in a way that echoes her entrapment in the doomed Compson household. What's more, Dilsey exhibits the "purity" of a traditional Gothic heroine in ways that Caddy, both Faulkner's "heart's darling" and, paradoxically, the eventual mistress of a Nazi general<sup>35</sup>—is never allowed to, all the while upholding her role as dutiful mother. Dilsey is what Sandra Milloy calls the "only stabilizing force" and "solid foundation" of the novel, exuding maternal "love, compassion, understanding, generosity and faith" as she calms Benjy, restrains Jason, protects Miss Quentin from the wrath of her uncle, and runs an ordered household for Mr. and Mrs. Compson (70). It is she who bakes Benjy's birthday cake when his mother will not and she who picks up and puts away the soiled undergarment that Miss Quentin leaves behind.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This information is included in the appendix written for *The Portable Faulkner*.

<sup>36</sup> As many critics have noted, Dilsey is modeled on Faulkner's own black mammy, Caroline Barr. Sandra Milloy writes that "Caroline Barr came to the Faulkner household...when William was only five years old. She remained and loyal and loving servant until her death in 1940" (70). Faulkner was "deeply grieved" by her passing, and he later dedicated *Go Down, Moses* to her, noting that she "gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love" (qtd. in Milloy 70).

Obviously, Dilsey, a grandmother, has not maintained the virginity that is typical of the traditional Gothic heroine; however, Faulkner implies that in her religious devotion to family, she is able to keep her “purity” intact nonetheless. As Philip Weinstein notes, this seemingly paradoxical achievement is particularly evident in one of the novel’s final scenes where Dilsey attends Reverend Shegog’s Easter sermon on Christ and his mother, Mary. Here, Faulkner establishes significant parallels between Dilsey and Christ’s mother. Like the Virgin Mary, she is an “inexhaustibly loving ‘mammy [who] suffered de glory en de pangs,’ who ‘helt [Christ—like her Compson wards] at de nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep,’ and who filled heaven with ‘de weepin en de lamentation’ (342) and his [and the Compson family’s] death” (Weinstein). I do not mean to imply that Faulkner is uncritical of the maternal expectations that the Compsons, and the larger Southern community, place on Dilsey. He includes several incriminating details about the Compsons’ treatment of their longtime servant, noting that they regard her with little more than sarcasm and condescension. Miss Quentin calls Dilsey a “damn old nigger” when she tries to protect the child from her uncle. Jason has, on occasion, caused Dilsey physical injury, and Mrs. Compson complains that Dilsey and the other “niggers” are lazy and untrustworthy (70). Neither does Faulkner presume to suggest at novel’s end that she is capable of or responsible for shoring up the fading Compson family, whose fate is fittingly represented in Benjy’s broken flower. But in noting that Dilsey “endures,” in spite of this failure, Faulkner also seems to suggest that her unwavering maternal devotion is, in large part, what enables her to remain strong where his other potential heroines falter.

The Gothic is, for Faulkner, a mode that facilitates criticism of the oppressive notion that the already impossible survival/resurgence of the “glorious” old South is contingent upon women’s sexual and maternal compliance. But whereas Faulkner nevertheless tends to martyr devoted mothers in *The Sound and the Fury*, playwright Tennessee Williams employs Gothic elements in texts such as his 1955 play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and his screenplay for the 1956 film, *Baby Doll*, to call attention to the gruesome effects of culturally-mandated motherhood. Williams, too, incorporates African American characters at the margins of his narratives as a means of undercutting hegemonic narratives about women’s maternal roles in the South; however, he is careful never to make saints of these characters, instead using them to express discontentment with, and at times outrage at, their own tangentially-related experiences with racial oppression.

#### *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Baby Doll*

On its surface, the 28,000 acre plantation that serves as the setting of Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* exhibits none of the ruin or decay that might immediately establish it as a traditional Gothic structure. The Pollitts’ fertile land has made them the Delta’s biggest cotton planters, and the family patriarch, Big Daddy, lords over a large brood of children and grandchildren who could potentially carry on his legacy. Williams does acknowledge that the plantation is occupied by the ghosts of its former owners, the

“old bachelors” Jack Straw and Peter Ochello; however, they are described in the stage notes as haunting the space in a “gentle” and “poetic” way that speaks to the uncommon tenderness of their relationship (xiii). Big Daddy, too, celebrates Straw and Ochello’s implicitly homosexual relationship as a sign of the plantation’s culture of acceptance, and he refers to the two men repeatedly as a way of reassuring his own likely closeted son, Brick, that there is nothing wrong with “knocking around” with other men (99). But while Big Daddy insists that “one thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!—is *tolerance!*” the experiences of women and African Americans within this plantation economy suggests a limit to his capacity for sexual “deviance”—a “cancer” underlying outward signs of the plantation’s/Big Daddy’s prosperity and happiness.

In his book, *Cotton’s Queer Relations*, Michael Bibler provides compelling evidence that the marginal voices of Big Daddy’s African American servants and field hands effectively undermine Big Daddy’s claims of acceptance. Bibler notes that, as the Pollits squabble over the inheritance of the estate, their “black servants create brief but telling disruptions that remind the audience of the greater social consequences also at stake in the preservation of the plantation system” (104-5). This is nowhere more evident, Bibler argues, than when Big Daddy’s conversation with Brick about his tolerance of homosexuality is interrupted by the disembodied voices of field hands singing him “Pick a Bale of Cotton” as a birthday present. These voices make clear that while Big Daddy may advocate “a progressive sexual politics (at least for men), he



clearly practices a regressive racial politics” (105) that “contributes to the persistent inequality of African Americans in the South” (105).

Big Daddy’s claims of tolerance are also complicated by his plantation’s reliance upon a system of “patrilineal inherence” that “depends upon heterosexual relations and procreation” for its survival (Bibler 111). Such a system is troubling not only for the closeted Brick but also for his wife, Maggie, who, like Big Daddy’s field hands, must produce a “crop” in the form of heirs in order to guarantee her personal security at the plantation. Using Gothic tropes of confinement and monstrosity, Williams suggests that such an obligation is dehumanizing and even horrifying for women such as Maggie. Indeed, much like the African American voices to which Bibler calls attention, there exists throughout the margins of the play a chorus of children who constantly interrupt Maggie’s claims that she is on board with Big Daddy’s “breeding” agenda. Though Maggie insists repeatedly that she “[does] SO like children!” (27), private comments to Brick about “those no-neck monsters” reveal instead that they are a constant torment to her (1). Maggie even describes the children in terms of the grotesque, noting “their fat little heads are set on their fat little bodies without a bit of connection” (2). However, nowhere do the voices of these “monster” children more forcefully call into question Maggie’s proclaimed readiness to proffer a Pollitt heir than the scene in which her niece, the aptly-named Dixie, bursts into her bedroom—a restricting space that, meaningfully, Maggie never leaves throughout the play—and fires a cap pistol at her. The spawn of a woman Maggie earlier dubs a “monster of fertility” (6), Dixie taunts Maggie about not being able to have her own children (45) and pretends to slay her with a raucous “bang,

bang, bang” (44). This “slobbering” insolence disturbs Maggie enough to “utter a scream you could hear across the Arkansas border” (2); nevertheless, she resigns herself to birthing her own monstrous “Dixie” at the play’s end as it is the only way she knows to gain currency on the Pollitt plantation.

Williams continues to explore the relationship of women’s maternal roles to the (imagined) conservation of a white patriarchal South in his later work, particularly his screenplay for Elia Kazan’s 1945 film, *Baby Doll*.<sup>37</sup> Here, as in *Cat*, Williams’ white female characters are pressured to become mothers in order to sustain both the individual and cultural legacies of their Southern families; however, in *Baby Doll*, Williams relies even more extensively on tropes of the Gothic ruin and maiden to criticize the dangers of this economy in which women are equipped only to produce children. *Baby Doll* also sees Williams contemporizing the Southern Gothic mode by further developing thematic connections between the oppression of white women and African American minorities in the context of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement.

Tiger Tail, the plantation on which *Baby Doll* is set, is immediately recognizable as a conventional Gothic estate that is crumbling both as a literal structure and as a symbol of the patriarchal, slave-owning society responsible for operating it. The current owner, Archie Lee Meighan, is struggling to maintain the dilapidated cotton gin on the property, and, as a result, has been forced to return most of the furniture in the main home. To his dismay, the sagging front porch and loose boards that remain only call greater attention to the barrenness of the rotten mansion. Not coincidentally, however,

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<sup>37</sup> The *Baby Doll* screenplay is based on two of Williams’ short plays, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1945) and *The Long Stay Cut Short/or/The Unsatisfactory Supper* (1946).

there are two rooms for which the furniture has been fully bought and paid: the kitchen and nursery, or the realms to which women like Archie Lee's wife, Baby Doll, and her elderly aunt, Rose Comfort McCorkle, have historically been relegated. As this detail makes clear, even when the patriarchal plantation shows signs of disintegrating, women remain firmly entrenched in their traditional roles. It is no surprise, then, that Baby Doll, as a vulnerable young woman trapped within the confines of a home purportedly designed for her safety, shares many similarities with traditional Gothic heroines.

Baby Doll is not a prisoner in the most literal sense of the word. However, her father did not consult her when he brokered a deal with Archie Lee to provide for the underage Baby Doll on the condition that she will become a "loving wife" to him upon turning twenty. Now, until her twentieth birthday, Baby Doll must work diligently to stave off the sexual advances of her lusty older husband by bedding down each night in a tiny crib in the nursery (Figure 1). As in much Female Gothic fiction, the room and larger plantation become an analogue of Baby Doll's sexually policed body and obvious symbols of her stunted emotional and psychological growth.

There are, furthermore, distinctly Southern tinges to Baby Doll's Gothic confinement within this plantation economy as her white skin is described in terms of cotton: "smooth," "soft," and "fine fibered." In spite of her objectification, however, Baby Doll is initially very much like *Cat's* Maggie in the sense that she does not attempt to escape this oppressive system and instead barter her sexuality as plantations do cotton— as a good to be exchanged for financial security.



Figure 1. Baby Doll's plantation nursery. In this shot from Elia Kazan's 1945 film, *Baby Doll*, the protagonist's husband, Archie Lee, peeps in at her through a hole he has whittled in the plantations' already-disintegrating wall.

While *Baby Doll* is naively confident such a plan will prove effective, the African American characters in the film's periphery make clear that such a system is deeply oppressive—to both women and racial minorities. *Baby Doll*'s black characters are, indeed, “much more than bemused retainers or silent by-standers” in that they “disclose the vulnerability of the white infrastructure” (4) and comment on the need for social change (Kolin 4). Critic Philip Kolin points to several occasions in which black characters “undercut Archie's white supremacist views” by “effecting a reversal of traditional power roles based upon racial divisions” (4). In one scene, for example, Archie Lee's black employees refuse to fix the holes in the roof of Tiger Tail plantation, and in another, a group of black men working for the local moving company come to repossess Archie Lee's furniture, thereby “stripping him of the possessions he needs to maintain” any “claims of economic superiority, often invoked to justify racial hegemony” (5). In this way, *Baby Doll*'s black characters appear as catalysts for change during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, facilitating the disassembly of the looming Gothic structure that historically oppressed black people in the South.

While “resistant” characters like Archie Lee's black employees and the men in the moving company begin the work of taking apart the plantation itself, it is Archie Lee's local ginning rival, Silva Vacarro, who helps enlighten *Baby Doll* to the ways in which the traditional plantation culture subjugates women and minorities and must, therefore, be reformed. Though Vacarro, a Sicilian, is not African American, Kolin contends that the film creates an “analogous relationship” between him and the black characters through a “series of mutualizing references and actions” (7). Noting that both

are “diminished through racially insulting names” and are represented in similarly dark color schemes, Kolin argues that the African Americans are “coopted into [Vacarro’s] valorized plot.” These outcast, disenfranchised characters thus become what Kolin terms a “coalition for resistance” within a “bigoted Southern community that would control and punish” them (7).

Vacarro is most obviously punished for his position as outsider when Archie Lee burns down his gin and the local law enforcement refuses to adequately investigate the fire—both because he is of Italian heritage and because his plantation has taken a good deal of business from the locals. It is little wonder, then, that when Vacarro is forced to bring his cotton to Tiger Tail for ginning, he notices immediately that the house is haunted with “spirits of violence—and cunning—malevolence—cruelty—treachery—[and] destruction” (78). Critic Rachel von Duyvenbode even goes so far as to suggest that Vacarro here functions as a “ghostly ancestral spirit, resurrected from the bodies of dark others who were enslaved and died on the Plantation” (213), who is therefore more capable of channeling the evils that have occurred there. Vacarro listens while Baby Doll suggests that cruelty and cunning are nothing more than basic human characteristics, but he is adamant that they are not inherent in people, instead insisting that they “take possession” of the human heart and spread from one to another in the same way that “fire goes springing from leaf to branch in a tree” until “everything green and beautiful is destroyed” (79). Thinking back on the happy expressions of the men who stood by as his gin burned, he is certain of “ghosts, in haunted places” like Tiger Tail whose occupants’ hearts are overcome “by demons of hate and destruction” (80).

At first glance, it does not seem that the child-like Baby Doll could be such a demon-hearted person; however, her interactions with Vacarro reveal a sort of cultural ignorance that Williams and Kazan suggest can be every bit as dangerous. When Vacarro first arrives at the house, for example, Baby Doll naively parrots back the hate speech that she has encountered all her life, asking, “So. You’re a wop?” (51). Even when Vacarro politely corrects her, explaining that the appropriate term is “Sicilian,” she has great difficulty pronouncing it—“Sish! Sish!”—and eventually stops trying, muttering “how unusual” in order to be done with the exercise (52). She later attempts to lock Vacarro out of the house when he insists that Baby Doll sign an affidavit incriminating her husband as the person responsible for burning the gin. But when Vacarro breaks back inside and initiates a game of hide and seek with Baby Doll, she gradually comes to “seek” the truth: that her fear stems more from the haunted house itself than it does her interaction with Silva Vacarro. When he forces her into the attic, or “hidden,” portion of the house, for example, Baby Doll attempts to gain safety on a beam only to find that the floor gives way beneath her, causing a shower of plaster and a rising cloud of dust throughout the home. Since she’s never been up to explore the recesses of the plantation before, she had no idea it was “in such a weaken [sic] condition” (100); in other words, she did not know that this plantation system is deteriorated to its core and that she is in danger of going down with it. Although Baby Doll’s inherited racial biases initially cause her to fear Vacarro, his act of forcing her signature on the affidavit triggers a new sense of awareness in her, not only regarding her husband’s racist and criminal acts but also her own hidden prejudices.

Significantly, Williams underlines Baby Doll's epiphany about racism with a new understanding about her own limited role in the plantation as a sexual object and, later, a mother. As Vacarro leaves the house, she suggestively asks him if her signature is all that he wanted. Playing against audience expectation, however, Baby Doll does not pursue a sexual relationship with Vacarro and instead leads him to her bedroom, only to kneel beside his sleeping figure in her crib. Here he stays curled up, thumb in mouth, as she sings "Rock-a-Bye Baby" until he falls asleep (Figure 2). When she awakens, she is "considerably disarrayed," but nothing suggests Baby Doll has had her first sexual experience. Instead, Williams implies, she has had her first (though unconventional) experience as a "mother," having "given birth" to a new sense of social/racial understanding as represented by Vacarro's now-docile and innocent form.

It is further possible to register Baby Doll's cognitive transformation in both the new black dress she wears, which so closely matches Vacarro's clothing, and in her new approach to the racist and misogynist Archie Lee. When, for example, Archie Lee soon after threatens to send her to a bureau in Washington, D.C. where useless women are rounded up and shot, she angrily retorts, "they have plans to round up men that's destructive and shoot them too...men that blow things up and burn things down because they're too evil and stupid to git along otherwise. Because fair competition is too much for 'em. So they...do things like Arson" (113). At this moment, too, Baby Doll accuses Archie Lee of trapping her in a house that is haunted and resolves to end the agreement that her father negotiated, a clear indication that she has come to reject the forms of oppression that Archie Lee and the plantation have historically supported.





Figure 2. Silva Vacarro occupies Baby Doll's crib. Kazan incorporates this scene in *Baby Doll* to mark the protagonist's "maternal" transformation.

That Baby Doll, like Williams, is committed to fighting the tyranny of Archie Lee and the plantation system becomes particularly evident in her later treatment of Aunt Rose McCorkle, who, as a childless woman, is similarly threatened by this “haunted” plantation. Throughout the film, Archie Lee constantly threatens to “haul off” Aunt Rose should she fail to “git on back in the kitchen,” and he serves Baby Doll notice that “if that ole woman breaks down and dies on my place, I’m not going to be stuck with her funeral expenses. I’ll have her burned up...and pack her ashes in an ole Coca-Cola bottle” (20). Later, when Aunt Rose proves an ineffectual cook, Archie Lee announces that she has overstayed her welcome and resolves to put her out of the house. The prospect of being evicted is especially terrifying to Rose as she would have nowhere to go and no children to take her in. Indeed, in the short play *The Long Stay Cut Short/ or/ The Unsatisfactory Supper*, Aunt Rose responds to Archie Lee’s dismissal in Gothic fashion, plunging into the winds of a developing tornado while the images of

nieces and nephews and cousins, like pages of an album,...rapidly turned through her mind. Some of them loved as children but none of them really her children and all of them curiously unneedful of the devotion that she had offered so freely, as if she had always carried an armful of roses that no one had ever offered a vase to receive. (208)

Rose’s very identity has been formed around her devotion to extended family (i.e. the “armful of roses”), but as the storm nears, she finds herself pushed toward the rose bush outside, the “beauty” of which is now “somehow sinister looking” (191).

Importantly, Williams and Kazan omit this scene from the film, making Baby Doll leap to her Aunt Rose's defense, celebrate Rose's cooking and arrange to relocate her in Silva Vacarro's home. In these ways, Baby Doll's character comes to reject the notion that a woman must either cook or produce children in order to make valuable contributions to the plantation economy. Unlike the original screenplay, however, Williams' and Kazan's film does not feature a happy ending, suggesting instead that women like Aunt Rose and Baby Doll face an indeterminate future in the twilight of the patriarchal, patrilineal South. Though Aunt Rose and Baby Doll are hopeful that Vacarro will remove them to his own (racially) "syndicated" plantation, he leaves abruptly with only a vague promise of bringing back more cotton to gin the next day. The film then concludes as the town clock tower chimes ominously, signaling Baby Doll's twentieth birthday and the local Election Day. Following the day's experiences with Vacarro, Baby Doll knows that she must make some important choices about her future as she and her aunt hold no currency in the plantation system; and yet, the bleak prospects lead her and Aunt Rose to return, at least for the time being, to the confines of Archie Lee's "haunted" house.

Clearly, Williams' texts are critical of a Southern plantation economy in which (white) women are reduced to capital—Maggie to livestock and Baby Doll to a crop—and retained only if fertile and easily cultivated. Following a Southern Gothic tradition, Williams explores how these women are positioned by their male "captors" as analogues for the estate itself, insisting that the upkeep of the family and grounds is dependent upon women's maternal compliance. As Williams demonstrates, however, these estates

are *actually* disintegrating because of their legacies of oppression against women and minorities, and he suggests it is little wonder that mothering has become such a horrifying prospect for women like Maggie and Baby Doll given the limitations mothers face as arbiters of Southern morals and honor. This theme is one that goes unexplored first-hand in Faulkner's novel and, indeed, stands in stark contrast to *The Sound and the Fury's* glorification of Dilsey, a woman whose unwavering maternal goodness equips her to "endure," even as the rest of the (mythologized) South faces destruction.

The depiction of African American characters in Williams' later Southern Gothic text, *Baby Doll*, also distinguishes it from *The Sound in the Fury* and *Cat* in that the laughing, defiant black servants featured throughout (whom Kolin identifies as symbolic representatives of the then-ongoing Civil Rights Movement) not only work actively to destroy the Gothic estate and the white patriarchal legacy it represents but also demonstrate to the white heroine the importance of rejecting such a system. The parallel that Williams here develops between the related oppressions of African American and female characters in the fading Southern plantation system also works, primarily, in the interest of "educating" the white heroine about the terrors of white entitlement/black subjugation. In Walker Percy's later text, *Lancelot*, however, the "educational" experience falls more squarely on the reader who, in filling the position of the protagonist's silent confidante, is meant to react with horror to his ideas about white men, women, and African Americans within a "resurrected" and "restored" American South.

## *Lancelot*

Walker Percy's novel, *Lancelot*, replicates Faulkner's and Williams' texts in considering the link between the destruction of the plantation-style estate and the sexual "misbehavior" of women; however, Percy's adaptation of the trope takes a markedly more satirical bent, attempting to shock readers with the excessively violent response of the novel's protagonist to his wife's "failures" as a virtuous and devoted mother. Undoubtedly, incidents of domestic abuse like Lancelot's took place in the mid-1970s Louisiana (when and where the novel is set); and yet, by imagining this violence playing out in the context of a refurbished plantation home, Percy aims to make a mockery of the anachronistic ideas about womanhood and maternity that inspire the protagonist's acts. Lancelot's violent attempts to entrap and police his wife's sexual behavior, Percy suggests, are the stuff of Gothic novels and eerily reminiscent of the oppression that once drove the South's slave culture.

Like Caddy, Maggie and Baby Doll before her, Walker Percy's Margot Lamar is a woman whose sexual behavior is directly linked to her husband, Lancelot's, plantation-style Southern estate and its later downfall. Her very body is described in terms of Southern land, and Lancelot celebrates the fact that "all Louisiana, its fecund oil-rich dark greens and haunted twilights," were all "gathered and fleshed out in one creature," his wife (117). Margot sweeps into Lancelot's life wearing the full costume of a Southern belle and transports the home and her new husband back in history, making real for him the blissful "glory days" of Southern grandeur. Lancelot notes that Margot

“orgasmically” converts the home’s pigeonier into his new study, and here, behind a plantation desk and chair “made by slave artisans,” he feels like a true “Jefferson Davis at Beauvoir” (18).

Margot undertakes these restorations of Belle Isle with the intention of preparing it for local tours to educate the public about the antebellum South. What she does not realize is that underneath the many layers of pigeon poo she scrapes away, there remains almost perfectly preserved the plantation home’s legacy of violence and oppression. It is in this “Jefferson Davis study,” after all, that Lancelot first comes to suspect that Margot has not been as effective in preserving and restoring the tenets of his plantation home in the way he initially believed. Perusing some documents that Margot drew up in preparation for their daughter’s trip to camp, Lancelot notices that the child’s blood type indicates she could not be his biological offspring.<sup>38</sup> This shock is one that at once makes Lancelot feel “dislocated and weightless in space” (27), his understanding of himself as a patriarchal authority figure and leader of this revived plantation completely unmoored, and he concludes that *all* women have come to behave as “indiscriminately as in a baboon colony” (35) and must face some great, rapture-like catastrophe in payment for their sins.

What Percy suggests these comments actually reveal is that Lancelot feels compelled to regulate women’s behavior—not only because he sees them as responsible for upholding the South’s “honorable” regional identity but also because their bodies’

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<sup>38</sup> Not long after this, Lancelot begins to notice qualities in his young daughter which he links to Margot’s sexual impurity. He complains of the eleven-year-old, for example, that she likes to show “her little biscuit” (117). This description calls to mind the Compson brothers’ treatment of Caddy and Miss Quentin—their theory that sexual impurity is a characteristic that descends from the mother. Daughters of Eve are always already sinful and sexually impure.

ability to mother allows them to wield significant power that must be restrained in the interest of preserving patriarchy in the South. As Maria Herbert points out, Margot is quite successful at acting like a traditional Southern patriarch. She curses like a cowboy, cradles the wheel of the car in her arms like a man, boasts the strength and size of a man in her physical appearance, and—in conceiving Siobhan outside of marriage—even asserts control of an “alternative” family lineage. Thus, with a wife like Margot, Lancelot feels he has no role “except the passive one once assigned to women” (Herbert 132). That Lancelot senses he is being made to accept the passive, prototypically-feminine role also becomes apparent in the way that he later characterizes his son as “choosing” to be gay because “he was terrified of all the pussy after him” (177). Lancelot implores the reader to “think of it: all those hot little cunts waiting to see if [his son] was up to servicing them” and to understand why “he found it easier, the scared little prick, to be with other scared little pricks” (177). However, as Herbert suggests, Lancelot is likely projecting his *own* fears of women onto his son in the face of threats to his manhood. Lancelot is, then, much like the Compson brothers and Archie Lee in that he constantly threatens and eventually practices violent behavior against women as a means of retaliating against and reigning in the threat of their sexual/maternal non-compliance.

Percy’s novel also echoes earlier Southern Gothic plantation-style texts in its presentation of African American characters that, while mainly limited to the periphery of the novel, work to criticize the worldview of the patriarchal white protagonist, especially in terms of his attitudes about women’s sexual/maternal roles. In *Lancelot*,

this figure is Elgin, an African American youth Lancelot hires at the plantation as a tour guide and occasional personal assistant. Elgin is not the sort of martyred servant that many critics see in *The Sound and the Fury's* Dilsey. While Lancelot certainly admires Elgin, bragging of the young man's academic potential and predicting that Elgin may go on to become a US Senator or win the Nobel Prize for his work in chemistry (44), Lancelot's narrative also reveals an unflagging racism toward the young man as he marvels that a "muffle-mouthed" Louisiana "pickaninny" could leapfrog "the entire South [and] all of history as well" in order to earn a place at M.I.T. (92). Nor does Elgin serve as a sort of mocking or explicitly educational presence in Percy's work—as do the laughing servants of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or the teacherly Silva Vacarro in *Baby Doll*. In fact, Elgin initially seems to be somewhat complicit in upholding Lancelot's white patriarchal agenda when he consents to film Lancelot's wife and daughter at a nearby hotel in order to document the women's sexual misdeeds. But, while Lancelot celebrates the talents and discretion of "[his] nigger" (142) in an aside to the reader, Percy makes clear that Elgin's filmmaking is *not* a simple carrying out of his employer's plans.

Elgin does technically manage to record Margot's and his daughter's sexual affairs, leading certain critics like Lewis Lawson to believe Elgin is complicit in producing Lancelot's "cinéma vérité (79). However, it is important to note that Lancelot is not an active director in this project, and—indeed—Elgin as "cinematographer" exerts quite a bit more control over the final project and its representation of the women's "true" natures. Elgin explains, for example, that the tape suffers from a "negative effect" (181), as though its images have been pulled out of shape. He is careful to remind



Lancelot that “the images [are] nothing but electrons, of course” (181), and in his final product, the “lights and darks [are] reversed...the [subjects look] naked clothed, clothed naked...the figures seemed to be blown in an electronic wind” (185). In this way, Elgin makes clear for the reader what Lancelot refuses to: that Lance is assigning meaning to the women in his life in a distorting and, ultimately, “negative” way. This visual effect of Elgin’s tape is, essentially, a representation of Lancelot’s own twisted efforts to establish his wife and daughter’s sexual exploits as proof of their destruction of his home—a backwards notion that Elgin’s tape, in part, works to reverse by obscuring the “traditional” way in which the women are viewed.

Admittedly, Elgin regards this tape as a failure because of its technical “defects”; but to Percy, it seems the true failure is that the material has not been able to sway Lancelot’s understanding of Margot as a “defiled” wife and mother. Indeed, Lancelot simply takes advantage of the tape’s blurriness to further assign the images and their warbled speech the significance he desires. In fact, this “altered” perspective fuels him with such extreme hatred for Margot that he immediately carries out her murder, tapping into a gas line and igniting a fire that consumes both her and the plantation she “sullied.” Margot and Belle Isle’s incineration does not mean, however, that they are “as gone with the wind as Tara” (106), at least not in the way that Lancelot later claims. Lance insists at the novel’s end, for example, that he plans to establish a New World that is “neither North nor South but both and neither...betwixt and between” (219) where he will marry a different woman he can “love and protect” (159). But while he fantasizes that this union will herald the first of a new order of women treated with the “timeless,” and

“placeless” virtues of “respect, chivalry, and courtesy” (159), Percy makes clear his proclamation is tinted by the dangers and bigotry that accompanied this once-popular code adopted by Southern “gentlemen.”

Elgin’s tape is, certainly, instrumental in warning readers to question Lancelot’s pursuit of a future that is “absolutely new” (63), but an even more telling sign of Lance’s regression is the fact that the entire novel is narrated from the confines of the community’s “Center for Aberrant Behavior,” or—in the character’s words—the local “nut house” (3). By setting the novel in this space, Percy attempts to pass off as laughable Lancelot’s plans to move into a “little Negro shotgun cottage” with the woman in the asylum cell next to his. Clearly, this “new world” he imagines is no different from his idealized version of the South’s dark past, particularly in terms of his vision for women and African Americans. Thus, when Lancelot paradoxically insists that, in his future utopia, “violence will attend [the] breach” of any “gentleness toward women,” the reader knows to reject as the rantings of a madman the notion the only way to make women “strong and modest” (159) is to save them “from the whoredom they’ve chosen” (158).

Obviously, Lancelot’s stay in the detention center has not reformed him by the novel’s end. Though he has done away with both his adulterous wife and refurbished plantation, he continues to think in racist, sexist terms that, for Percy, are inextricably linked to the “Grand Old South” Lancelot adores. This does not mean, however, that Lancelot is able to restore this imagined South in the way that he hopes. His very name, of course, calls to mind the Arthurian legend of a kingdom toppled by infidelity;

however, while Lancelot spends the entirety of the novel attempting to convince readers that Margot (as “Guinevere”) is responsible for the destruction of the “round table” because of her sexual “misbehavior,” Percy makes clear the even greater extent to which Lancelot’s own violence and bigotry compromises the “chivalrous” Southern code he claims to revere.

Percy’s critique of Lancelot’s values is perhaps most vividly represented by the reaction of Anna, another patient in the asylum, to Lancelot’s plans for her in his new “world order.” Her character is very much like *The Sound and the Fury’s* Caddy in that she remains voiceless through the text, even while she is positioned at the center of the narrator’s thoughts. The reader is nevertheless able to guess at what she says based on Lancelot’s insulted reaction to her comments, and she proves how very different she is from Caddy in her refusal to accept his assessment of her. In the novel’s final moments, for example, Lancelot indicates to Anna that she has “suffered the ultimate indignity, the worst violation a woman can suffer, rape at the hands of several men” (251), and he proposes to save her from her sexual contamination by taking her away and marrying her. However, Anna is all too aware of the demons accompanying Lancelot’s warped revival of Southern gentility and is rightfully leery about it will play out in his imagined, “region-less” future. She turns out to be every bit as bold as Margot, adamantly asserting her power when, according to an incensed Lancelot, she balks at the notion that: “I, myself, me, my person, can be violated by a man” (251). With Anna’s retort, “Don’t you know that there are more important things in this world?...You goddam men” (253), Percy assigns the last word to the women Lancelot would silence and harm,

making them essential to the novel's biting and satirical critique of white male entitlement. In this way, the novel refutes the male-authored notion of women's sexual/maternal "purity" and dismisses as maniacal the policing of women's bodies in the interest of an already ill-fated attempt at Southern cultural preservation.

Percy's closing message, essentially, is not so different from Faulkner's and Williams's: the "real"/"South" as it is defined by white Southern patriarchs is a dying institution, and sexually/maternally non-compliant (white) women have been wrongly incriminated for its demise. Percy also seems to follow an established Southern Gothic trend of incorporating African American characters at the novel's edges as a means of both critiquing white hegemony and establishing connections between the objectification of women and racial minorities in the vestiges of the plantation-era South. But while he takes a markedly different and more satirical tone than his predecessors toward depicting women's ongoing domestic entrapment, pointing to the irony that such "imprisonment" continues to affect women so many years since active plantation life, his female characters are given no more opportunity to explore safe alternatives to motherhood than Faulkner's or Williams's. And while Percy does use dark humor to criticize traditional gender, sexual, and racial positions, his novel does not go so far as to challenge the fixity of racial and gender categories altogether, a challenge that I would like to suggest Dorothy Allison undertakes in her later "disintegrating Southern Gothic estate" novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992).

*Bastard Out of Carolina*

At first glance, the setting of *Bastard Out of Carolina* may not seem to merit consideration alongside the ruins of the Compson, Meighan, and Lamar estates. Poverty-stricken Ruth-Anne “Bone” Boatwright and her family have never lived in a “great” house, nor have they ever been able to afford servants. And yet the dream of owning such an “estate”—a “house with a nice lawn and picture windows framed in lined curtains” (81)—looms large in the mind of her stepfather, Daddy Glen, who believes that such a home would validate him as a patriarch and provider. Out of work and embarrassed by his inadequacy, Daddy Glen constantly moves Bone and her family from place to place, but “every new house [only] made him happy for a little while” (104). Daddy Glen takes some pride in the fact that these houses are in a “decent neighborhood” (106), away from the “nigger shanties,” but Bone notes that they always look “naked and abandoned” (102), like somewhere “nobody ever really wanted to live” (102).

Within these white-walled tract houses, the vulnerable young Bone, like many earlier Female Gothic heroines, faces confinement and, later, sexual victimization by her stepfather.<sup>39</sup> Bone is subjected to such entrapment, in part, because of her mother’s embarrassment at the word “ILLEGITIMATE” marking Bone’s birth certificate. Marrying and establishing a home with Glen, Anney reasons, will redeem her and Bone as “legitimate” citizens in the eyes of the paternalistic South Carolina court system; and,

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the connections between the Female Gothic and Allison’s work, see Peggy Dunn Bailey’s “Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*.”

thus, Anney continues to stay with Glen, even after he becomes verbally and physically abusive. Anney's belief that women are validated by marriage and children is also widely held by her female family members, particularly the women Bone resembles in name and appearance. Bone's Aunt Ruth, for example, expresses pride at having given birth to eight children over the course of her life since "being pregnant [is] proof that some man thought you were pretty sometime, and the more babies she got, the more she knew she was worth something" (230-1). Bone's Aunt Alma, on the other hand, continues to stay with her husband even after he rejects her request to have another baby, telling her she is "old and ugly and fat as a cow" (272) and causing her to have a mental breakdown. With these as her role models and namesakes, it is no wonder that Bone first believes Daddy Glen hurts her for some fault of her own, most likely her failure to behave properly within the confines of his home.

Initially resigned to victimhood, Bone anticipates that she, too, will become one of the many Boatwright women whose bodies, in the production of children, are "worked to death, used up and thrown away" (249), not unlike Daddy Glen's string of discarded houses. And yet, certain aspects of Bone's identity clearly set her apart from her compliant mother and aunts. Family lore holds, for example, that the Boatwright women all have "caustic pussy" (54) that burns off anything "unusual," producing "purebred" children so white they might have been "rinsed in bleach" (73). Bone, however, is born with a cloud of "blue-black," midnight colored hair and "black Indian eyes" (41) that cause her cousins to joke that she has a "little of the tarbrush" on her (72). Significantly, Bone fails to distinguish between the intended insults that address

her darkness and those regarding the illegitimacy of her birth. When, for example, one classmate calls her “nigger,” Bone simply assumes that this is another way of branding her a “bastard” (74). Such a conclusion, Allison suggests, is somewhat merited as both racial integration and extramarital reproduction pose significant threats to the stability of the white patriarchal order. Thus, in her “darkness” and “illegitimacy,” Bone actually comes to embody a rejection of the system that her family and the larger Southern community attempts to uphold—a living challenge to the notion of racial and marital “purity.”

Bone further defies her family’s and community’s expectations of young women in her nonconformist attitude toward children. Much like Williams’ Maggie, Bone sees kids as wholly monstrous figures and often describes them in grotesque terms. When she is asked to babysit, for example, Bone mischievously tells her charges stories featuring “bloodsuckers who [consume] only the freshly butchered bodies of newborn babies,” “boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, [and] cooked in pots of boiling beans” (119). Overhearing these horrific tales makes Bone’s Aunt Alma “so upset she looked like she would piss herself” (149), and she reacts by urging Anney to correct this problematic attitude in Bone rather than considering why her niece might regard childbirth and care as such horrifying experiences. Bone’s disgust for children, Allison suggests, is a direct result of the brutal and closely linked reinforcement of racial and maternal “legitimacy” that her family and community practice in order to uphold white patriarchal power as the status quo. As a threat to the stability of these groups, Bone realizes that she is in great danger, so much so that her fear of familial/community

retaliation actually manifests in the form of Bone's morbidly white and aptly named friend, Shannon Pearl.

Bone initially befriends the rather grotesque Shannon because she believes that Shannon is like her, a fan of telling horrible stories about the grisly deaths of innocent children. One of Shannon's favorites, with distinctly Southern tinges, features a small boy who is backed over by a thresher that cuts his body into pieces. According to Shannon, when his mother comes outside to serve iced tea, she unknowingly puts "her foot down right in his little torn-open stomach" (157). Stories like this are remarkable because, unlike Bone's made-up fantasies, Shannon's have "an aura of the real" (157). It seems, initially, that she is the kind of "monster" Bone can understand because she acknowledges the horrors of mothering and the violence that is practiced on children's bodies. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes more apparent that Shannon is not what she first seems. A sweaty and overweight girl with "pale pink eyes...offset by the blue-veined white skin and white hair of an albino" (155), Shannon hunches "between her mother's legs...wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction (155). Allison suggests that she is Bone's nightmare children brought to life and a horrific embodiment of the link between socially constructed expectations regarding the purity of motherhood and whiteness.

It makes sense, then, that Bone and Shannon's odd friendship eventually falls out around related issues of race and maternity. Peggy Dunn Bailey argues convincingly in her article "Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities" that "the event that destroys the complex friendship between Bone and Shannon Pearl...is racially charged. Standing in



a cemetery, Bone and Shannon hear gospel singing in the distance” (282), but whereas Bone’s response “is more than appreciative” and she “is in awe of the authentic beauty and power,” Shannon hatefully dismisses the group as a “churchful of niggers” (283). Bailey rightly points out that it is this racial slur that causes Bone to attack her former friend, calling her a “monster.” This is because Bone feels deeply connected to African Americans, both in terms of her appearance and her experiences with discrimination as a “bastard and “poor white trash.” Allison does not just put Bone in a black costume, like Kazan’s *Baby Doll*, to indicate her growing allegiance to and alliance with other victims of racial oppression. Nor does she rely only on marginalized black characters to bring about Bone’s moment of awakening. It is, instead, Shannon’s monstrous whiteness that makes visible for Bone the promising instability of her own racial identity, the constructedness of white heteronormativity, and the potential hurt caused by the enforcement of rigid racial binaries.

It is also important to note, however, that Bone’s intense exchange with Shannon is first ignited by Shannon’s relatedly limiting notions about motherhood, an opinion she makes clear when the girls visit the children’s section of the graveyard. When they arrive, Shannon cries genuine tears over the children’s tiny graves, telling Bone to “think about, losing your own little baby girl, your own little angel” (168). Wishing aloud that she could “take [her] one of these home,” she asks Bone if she wouldn’t “like to have [a baby] you could keep up” and tell stories to (169). Bone reminds herself that it is “too hot to fight” before simply replying “you crazy” (169), but the scene lays the groundwork for their disagreement. Part of the reason that Bone so readily befriends

Shannon is because, as a girl abused for her ugliness, she thinks Shannon will understand the importance of escaping and fighting off oppression. But as *both* her racist comment and her mother fantasies make clear, Shannon is less concerned with fighting oppressive systems like racism and patriarchy than facilitating them, and it is perhaps for this reason that Allison later kills off the grotesque character by engulfing her in the cleansing “hell-fires” of a barbeque pit. Indeed, Allison implies that Shannon’s later self-immolation acts as a sort of exorcism for Bone, better-equipping her to determine the course of her future, even as it becomes apparent that her mother will choose to stay with the abusive Daddy Glen instead of her.

For Anney and Daddy Glen, Bone’s prospects were always shaped by the belief that her role as a woman was to settle down with a man and have his children, and she notes that they are especially hostile to her Aunt Raylene who has no children of her own. At first, because she has heard championed so often commitment to the traditional nuclear, patriarchal family, even Bone parrots her mother’s hurtful words to her Aunt Raylene, saying that “other people don’t move out alone to the edge of town without a husband or children...run around all the time in overalls and sell junk by the side of the road” (258). Bone knows better than anyone the horrible possibilities for abuse inherent in a system of living that assigns power to men and makes women to do their bidding. After all, her stepfather suggests Bone should get married and start a family only moments before raping her for tearing their own family apart (281). Moreover, this act takes place in the house where Bone’s Aunt Alma is already so bandaged, sore and thin from her own spouse’s abuse that she couldn’t even begin to protect Bone if she wanted.

But even after years of being bloodied and battered, Bone cannot find the strength to criticize the system until Shannon is removed as the horrific representative of the culturally-constructed notions of whiteness and maternal “purity” that previously shaped Bone’s worldview.

By novel’s end, after Bone has experienced a brutal rape and beating at Daddy Glen’s hands, she goes to live with Aunt Raylene outside of the city limits in order to recover and regroup. This is a space where Bone can “do just about anything [she] damn well [pleases]” (259), following in the footsteps of her unconventional aunt. “Refusing to perform the cultural scripts of heterosexual romance and romantic thralldom that shape her sisters’ subjectivities” (Baker 24), Raylene’s freedom is a positive model for Bone in terms of demonstrating the possible alternatives to existence under the dominating structures of patriarchy. In this space, Bone observes that it is possible for her aunt to maintain her household without becoming a “fugitive” to marriage or traditional factory work, to practice domestic tasks without being forcefully subjected to them, and to use her skill at cooking, home brewing and even roadside scavenging as the means to living an “outlaw” existence on the skirts of (hetero) normative society. Family and home, Bone discovers, do not have to mean power relationships, ownership and abuse.

It seems promising, too, that it is in this space that Bone originates the game “Mean Sisters,” dons her Southern rebel cap and pretends to be the mean sister of the Rifleman, Johnny Yuma, Francis Marion and Bat Masterson: all male “gunslingers” in various regions of the South, often before those regions were recognized as states.

According to Bone, mean sisters “do everything their brothers do. Only they do it first and fastest and meanest” (212). This game is one that allows Bone to reimagine the territorialization of the American South—not only fashioning for women a role in establishing regional boundaries but in staking claims to women’s independence and ferocity of spirit as well, and, in part, this feminist form of play seems inspired by Raylene’s de-territorialized lifestyle. Bone hears from her cousin Butch, for example, that Raylene had once worked at a carnival, cutting off her hair, calling herself Ray and dressing in overalls (178-9). Her cousins have always said girls can’t go roaming, but Bone takes pride in Raylene’s travels and life outside of city lines, and she dreams of living this way too (197).

Bone and Raylene’s rejection of patriarchal abuse immediately calls to mind Miss Quentin’s decision at the end of *Sound and the Fury* to take all of her mother’s money and leave the furious Jason screaming in her wake. But, in spite of their similarities as “bastard” daughters who are “abandoned” by their prostituted mothers and subjugated to the horrible atrocities and attempted policing of a Southern patriarchal system, Allison makes clear that the two young characters do not ultimately face the same fate. Whereas Quentin is never allowed to speak her mother’s name and escapes the horrors of the Southern plantation home with only her mother’s money, Bone finds herself unable to speak the name of her mother for a different reason: because her mother has betrayed her for the love of an abusive man. And yet, when the novel comes to a close, Anney appears one last time at Raylene’s to bestow Bone with a gift: a birth certificate with only her mother’s name on it and her own, no longer the marker of her

mother's sexual disgrace. It is at this moment that Bone realizes that while her mother cannot fully escape the bonds of Southern patriarchy that have been integral to her existence for so long, it is possible for her to ensure that her daughter does not suffer the same fate. Bone, unlike Quentin, is promised hope in the name of the mother and knows at this moment that she "was who [she] was going to be, someone like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309).

Dorothy Allison, as I have demonstrated, is among many authors since Faulkner to (re)imagine within a specifically Southern context the Gothic tradition linking women's sexual "misbehavior" to the deterioration of the family estate. She also echoes Faulkner's, Williams's and Percy's works in suggesting that men attempt to define women's roles, particularly as mothers, so as to maintain control over the region. But whereas Faulkner continues to valorize sacrificial motherhood as one of the last great virtues in an otherwise-doomed South, and Williams and Percy find themselves unable to imagine for women an "out" from the maternal positions they equate with restrictive plantation economies, Allison insists on alternative spaces and roles for women. In addition to rejecting traditional notions of maternal obligation, Allison further challenges accepted boundaries of gender and sexual identity by imagining them as inextricably linked to the region's historical construction of racial "Otherness." By portraying "bastardy" in the terms of race and non-whiteness as an indicator of social "illegitimacy," Allison reconfigures the conventions of the Southern Gothic, not simply depicting African Americans as allegories for white women's oppression but, rather, challenging the fixity of race itself

CHAPTER IV  
THE GHOSTING AND “HAUNTING BACK” OF BLACK BODIES  
IN SOUTHERN GOTHIC LITERATURE

It is to be expected that Southern Gothic literature often engages issues of slavery as “the terror of possession, the iconography of entrapment and imprisonment, and familial transgressions found in the Gothic novel were also present in the slave system” (Goddu 73). Some literary critics are concerned, however, that the Gothic—like race—has become “most visible in a southern locale,” and they warn that by “associating the Gothic with the South, the American literary tradition [attempts to neutralize] the Gothic’s threat to [a] national identity” that celebrates equality and freedom (Goddu 76). In short, these critics fear the possible misuse of the Gothic to “contain” the horrors of racism within a “backward” American South. And yet, several authors have re-appropriated Gothic conventions for their own ends in order to grapple with the region’s (as well as the nation’s) role in the perpetuation and aftermath of institutionalized slavery. While the Southern Gothic texts I examine in this chapter—including Faulkner’s *Light in August*, Howard’s *Pigeons from Hell* (as well as Lansdale’s later graphic novel), Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Morrison’s *Beloved* and Butler’s *Kindred*—may initially seem to run the risk of fictionalizing slavery’s horrors in their reliance upon (metaphors of) the supernatural, I argue their use of ghosted/ghostly figures functions subversively to destabilize related racial, gender and regional boundaries.

As Kathleen Brogan contends in *Cultural Haunting*, ghosts are more frequently populating recent literature by and about African-Americans and play a significantly

different literary role than they do in traditional Gothic novels. In the traditional texts, ghosts typically function as a plot device, uncanny thrill and/or illumination of the repressed feelings/thoughts of individual characters. However, as Brogan suggests, ghosts in African-American literature are often symbols of characters' attempts to recover their erased cultural histories. Otherworldly beings in this context are the vehicles by which forgotten histories are remembered and confronted, and—ultimately—allow African American characters to “ground themselves anew.” However, while Brogan takes a “pan-ethnic” approach to studying ghosts that allows her to uncover interesting similarities between apparitional figures of different cultural groups, I plan to demonstrate that a more specific focus on literary representations of ghosts and ghosted figures within a southern context calls important attention to the way that racial hierarchies are constructed and transitive.

I also move in a new direction from Brogan and Goddu's work by demonstrating how race-related “ghosting” is directly linked to Southern Gothic characters' depiction in gendered and sexual terms. As Hortense Spillers explains in “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,” enslaved Africans “lost at least gender difference...and the female body and the male body [became] a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific” (Spillers 67). And yet, the captive body is reduced to being a “source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” that “translates into a potential for pornotroping” (67). Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Sexual Politics* that chattel slavery relied on forms of gender oppression that spawned controlling images of African Americans. Enslaved black women were subjected to institutionalized rape and

characterized as “jezebels” or sexually-wanton women, their bodies redefined as sites of “wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued” (56). The image of the breeder woman also emerged “to defend the reproductive policies of slavery that encouraged enslaved Black women to have many children” (Collins 56) with whomever their owners saw fit. Oftentimes, for black women like those in *Pigeons from Hell*, *Beloved* and *Kindred*, this meant their masters. These women’s bodies were annexed to a system of profit in which “sexuality and fertility were neither designed for Black women’s pleasure nor subject to their control” (Collins 56)—thus, they were “ghosted.” Chattel slavery also took gender-specific forms for African American men. Thought to be naturally violent, black men were characterized as “bucks” whose deviant sexuality “had to be directed toward ‘appropriate’ female partners” (Collins 56) In this way, black men were “reduced to bodies, identified primarily for their muscles and penises” (Collins 56). This history of sexual dehumanization, I argue, is often recounted through “ghosting” that not only represents the theft of black individuals’ gender and sexual identities within and beyond slavery but also illuminates the constructedness of racial, gender and sexual identity as well as its potential destabilization.

As in the previous chapter, I wish to begin with an examination of Faulkner since his work sets the stage for several other authors writing in the Southern Gothic tradition. Although it may seem unconventional to include *Light in August* in a chapter on the fictional narratives of slaves and their descendants given that no slaves are included in the novel’s present, Faulkner uses his main characters’ relationship to the legacy of slavery in such a way as to expose the process through which identities, including raced



and gendered identities, are constructed and imposed on bodies by the white heteronormative majority. I follow with an examination of both Howard's short story, "Pigeons from Hell," and Lansdale's graphic novel adaptation, since the texts' main characters are similarly linked to ghost-like qualities via their attempted policing of whiteness. Finally, I consider how and why the "ghost(ed)" figures in Ellison's, Morrison's and Butler's novels differ from characters in the aforementioned texts given that they self-identify as African American. Ghosting often represents in white-authored Southern Gothic texts a form of identity loss occasioned by white individuals' obsession with policing identity borders (*Light in August*, *Pigeons from Hell*). African American-authored/centered texts like *Invisible Man* and *Beloved*, alternatively, use the ghost figure to represent the loss of identity that slaves and their descendants experienced at the hands of hegemonic white society, and Butler's *Kindred* envisions ghostliness as a state of power enabling the African American protagonist to confront her would-be oppressors and to reassert her subjectivity.

### *Light in August*

*Light in August* takes place almost fifty years after the end of slavery in the South, but vestiges of the institution remain highly visible not only in the form of some of Jefferson's fiercely racist citizens but also in those characters descended from resolute abolitionists. Into this community of race-invested citizens, Faulkner introduces two

arrivals that cause a stir because the townspeople are unable to categorize them “correctly.” The first of these two characters is named Joe Christmas.

When Joe Christmas appears in Jefferson, the townspeople notice that there is “something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home” (31). Although the men working at the mill where Christmas first seeks employment decide that he must be a foreigner because of his unusual name and attitude, they note that his flesh is a “level dead parchment color” as though “molded in a still and deadly regularity and then baked in a fierce oven” (34). Phenotypically, he appears to be white, and, indeed, the ghostly qualities of his skin and body symbolize his success in passing as such.<sup>40</sup> Even Christmas does not know the specifics of his origins, however. Orphaned as an infant, he has never learned who his parents are, let alone their ethnicity. He has suspicions, though, that he is partly black as the other children at the orphanage where he grew up used to bully him by calling him “nigger.” These childhood jeers haunt Christmas all his life, causing him to pursue an existence where his race will be “invisible” rather than alienating or associated with “visible” (and therefore vulnerable) black individuals.

Other critical readings, particularly Kevin Bell’s “Maladjusted Phantasms,” suggest that Joe Christmas can only be understood as ghost-like in the sense that he lives in a state of “non-being.” Indeed, during his childhood years, Christmas is initially described as being “like a shadow” of whom his caretakers at the orphanage “could not have said just when and where he vanished, into what door, what room” (120). It is also true that

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<sup>40</sup> See Mary Joanne Dondlinger’s “Getting Around the Body: The Matter of Race and Gender in Faulkner’s *Light in August*.”

Christmas pursues a state of “non-being” all the more determinedly after his school mates attempt to impose an identity upon him. But the “race discourse” that they use to exclude and “nigger” him at the orphanage do not transform him personally into a “repository of undefinable excess and nothingness,” as Ball suggests (120); rather, they make him all the more determined to craft an identity of whiteness that only appears like “nothing” in that it is readily taken for granted.<sup>41</sup> And though Ball deftly articulates that Christmas “already survived his own obliteration” many times over in the sense that he never knows his parents, is rejected by his grandfather, is made to forfeit his original name, these “unmoorings” do not resign him to the “social status of nonbeing” (121). Rather, they only make it easier for him to step into the guise of (invisible) whiteness without complication.

Paradoxically, that which the ghostly/ ghosted Christmas *himself* regards as phantom-like in terms of both its apparition-like and horror-inducing qualities is the specter of race itself. His fear is perhaps most apparent when at one point he wanders into the ironically-named “Freedman Town.” Here, he finds himself surrounded by the smell and voices of “invisible negroes” and panics as they

enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring talking laughing in a language not his. As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed by cabinshapes...as if the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself

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<sup>41</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that Christmas presents himself exclusively as white throughout the course of the novel. Rather, he works to craft an identity of whiteness that he can assume when such an appearance will best serve him.

must become fluid and accrete slowly from particle to particle, of and with the now ponderable night inseparable and one. (114)

Christmas's ability to "sense" race indicates he perceives it as something transcending embodiment. And in spite of the fact that he is haunted by blackness, his understanding of race's constructedness or malleability encourages him to reshape his own identity as a white man. This is made evident in a scene during his teen years where he and several other young boys rape a black girl. The shed where the rape occurs is completely dark, and Christmas can see nothing upon entering it. Suddenly, however, he is "overcome by a terrible haste. There was something in him trying to get out...but he could not move at once, standing there, smelling the woman smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste...it [then] seemed to him that he could see her—something, prone, abject," her eyes, he imagines, like "dead stars" at the bottom of a black well (156). In a fit of rage, Christmas begins to kick the woman—an act for which Deborah Clarke accounts by suggesting the woman's blackness threatens Christmas's repressed racial identification. He decides to beat her, then, in order to ward off the threat that she represents to his passing as white; but while the act is one that might allow him to maintain the "illusion" of whiteness among his fellow rapists, Faulkner notes that Christmas only emerges from the shed where the woman is trapped, "fading" and more "phantomlike" than ever (158). In one sense, the act has preserved Christmas's "invisibility" in that it allows him to maintain his position as a white man "entitled" to power. And yet, the reader's access to his sense of fear also conveys what he would hide: that race is also "spectral" in the sense that it tied exclusively to body—it

is also constructed, fluid and therefore, malleable. As such, Faulkner suggests, Christmas's empowerment is not permanent or guaranteed.

Given his obsession with distancing himself from blackness and the sense of hatred and discrimination that accompanies it, it might seem fortuitous that, after arriving in Jefferson, Christmas ends up at the home of Joanna Burden, a woman descended from a passionately abolitionist family. She has lived in the town since she was born, yet she, like Christmas, is still considered a stranger and foreigner. She is branded "a Yankee, a lover of negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes" (46). Indeed, Joanna often volunteers to help young girls in dozens of "negro schools and colleges throughout the south," and Christmas himself observes a steady stream of black community members entering her house for fellowship. But in spite of the fact that Joanna shows the outward signs of acceptance, Christmas is to discover that her philosophies are firmly steeped in preserving racial distinctions and hierarchies.

Joanna tells Christmas at one point, for example, that as a child, she had looked at black people as she did "rain, or furniture or food or sleep" (253). There is nothing unique about them, and their "ordinariness" is something she takes for granted. However, Joanna's abolitionist father later teaches her that God put a curse on the whole black race, "a race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins" (253). His words are spoken in an effort to convince her of the importance of the abolitionists' cause, but from that moment, she sees blacks "for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a *shadow* in which [she] lived, [they] lived, all white people, all other people" (253, emphasis mine). As a result, Joanna—very much

like Christmas—learns to regard race as “spectral” in the sense that it haunts and threatens white hegemony. Given this attitude, then, it is unsurprising that the Burdens’ former plantation home still boasts a “Negro cabin,” the same cabin in which Joanna houses Christmas, as it provides her a space through which to restore the “natural” order. Although Joanna gladly bears the “burden” of “[raising] the shadow” that is the black race, a task that—in her mind—she achieves by taking in and “helping” Christmas (253), her philanthropy is still rooted in a system of differentiation designed to maintain the “invisibility of whiteness” by positioning individuals of “other races and ethnicities” as “gradations of distance from the idealized, invisible norm of heteronormative bourgeois whiteness” (Lopez 74). In other words, what passes as altruism is really an attempt to secure already-existent racial stratification and its accompanying power divisions.

The townspeople do not suspect, however, that Joanna’s association with black people does not necessarily preclude the possibility that she is racist. Because of her family’s history, they sense in Joanna’s plantation home the “phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and the anger and fear” of relatives slain in defense of “negroes”’ right to vote (47). This makes the other citizens read Joanna as someone “dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman” (47). They fear that it is her intention to *erase* the color line via integration and, in so doing, threaten white power. Little do they know, this is not her mission at all, as made evident by her treatment of Joe Christmas as racial and sexual Other.

When Christmas first comes into Joanna’s house, “he seemed to flow into the dark kitchen: a shadow...without a sound and without locomotion” (230). Hungry, “he ate

something from an invisible dish, with invisible fingers, invisible food” (230), but his entrance into the kitchen is described as a “return” to the “allmother of obscurity and darkness” (230), and as Joanna finds him eating in her home and shines a candle on his face, she begins a strategic process of “illuminating” him as Other. Thus far, Joe’s passing as white has enabled him to move freely and shadow-like throughout the town. As a white man, his power is invisible, unopposed. He finds this subjectivity challenged in his interactions with Joanna, however, and his return to the “allmother of obscurity and darkness” describes the position he is forced to assume upon entering into a relationship with Joanna as she undermines his gender and racial self-positioning.

Based on later discussions with Christmas, Joanna knows that he is unsure of his racial heritage—he has no distinct “proof” that he is black. Nonetheless, she proves determined to impose that blackness upon him, to force him to identify with an ethnicity he would not as doing so bolsters her own “invisible” position of power, one that she struggles to maintain because she is “but a woman.” She initially succeeds in doing so by cordoning Christmas off in her former plantation’s old Negro cabin and continues her agenda when she attempts to blackmail him into attending a “Negro college” so that he can take over her work. But her most forceful, if somewhat less private, assertion of hierarchical racial difference is in the sexual relationship that she later develops with Christmas. This relationship is one that illuminates the parallel Faulkner establishes between race and gender, suggesting that both are constructed and imposed upon bodies in order to police them within the bounds of social norms. More specifically, he suggests that masculine power has been established as an “invisible norm” in the same

way whiteness has in that men are regarded as the rightful owners of property, conductors of business and heads of households. To attain power in its fullest, then, Joanna attempts to stake her claim to both.

When Christmas notices that Joanna has not invited him into her “house proper,” he decides to enter by night and mounts the stairs to the bedroom, an invasive act that refuses the boundaries that (he believes) she would impose on him as racial Other. After all, he has mistreated women like the “womanshenegro” in the past as a way of differentiating himself from weakness—be it femininity or blackness—and preserving his own “invisibility,” and he thinks he can repeat this approach with Joanna. But when Christmas reaches Joanna’s bedroom, he not only finds her waiting, but ready to surrender to him with an almost “manlike yielding” (234). He later reflects that “it was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either” (235), and he even pauses for a moment to consider that “it was like [he] was the woman and she was the man” (235). Ever more determined, he steels himself to “[make] a woman of her at last” through sexual penetration, but even after returning to her on many occasions, “it was as though each turn of dark saw him faced again with the necessity to despoil again that which he had already despoiled” (235), as if Joanna has “nothing under her clothes” that would have made possible a sexual act between them (240).

In this way, Joanna’s forceful imposition of race on Christmas meaningfully coincides with his inability to differentiate himself from—and, hence, dominate—Joanna on the basis of gender. In fact, the longer Joanna succeeds in thwarting Christmas’s



attempts to “make her a woman” through sexual penetration, the more she seems to him to transcend gender categories altogether, her rapid weight gain a physical sign of her increasing power. She does not *merge* sexually with Christmas—allowing their two forms to become indistinguishable. Rather, she sleeps with him as a form of conquest. Waiting almost rabidly for him in the bushes, she calls out to him with the frantic chant, “Negro! Negro! Negro!”, that subjugates him both sexually and racially (260). Later, when Joanna claims that she is pregnant with Christmas’s child, she does not imagine it as one born of their *union*; it is, in Joanna’s mind, “a bastard negro child”—more Christmas’s than her own (266). Any penetration he has achieved, then, has only served to further establish his ethnicity in Joanna’s view. It seems appropriate, then, that Joanna Burden is ultimately described as outfitted in a “rotten richness” ready to “flow into putrefaction at a touch” (262). By daylight she appears to Christmas to be a “phantom of someone whom the night [version of herself] had murdered” (262) because she has used the relationship to create the foundation for her own racial “invisibility.”

By the time of their final meeting in her bedroom, Christmas notes that Joanna’s voice has become “sexless” (281), a sign that she is weakening in her performance of power. Until this point, Christmas’s sexual “penetration” of Joanna only has the effect of further establishing his blackness (and, thus, his “inferiority”). But after observing for months that she has not begun to “show” her pregnancy, he reaches the conclusion that she is not actually with child, guessing correctly that she has simply stopped menstruating because of her age. As I discussed in Chapter Three, a woman without the ability to reproduce has little to no value in a southern plantation economy, and

Christmas cruelly suggests that “there is not anything the matter with [Joanna] except [her] being old...and not any good anymore” (277). This retort immediately has the desired effect, drawing attention to the struggle that she must undergo to maintain power, and in doing so, compromising it. When he meets her for the final time, she makes one more desperate attempt to retain control, pulling a shotgun, an obvious phallic symbol, with a “monstrous...cocked hammer, backhooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake,” to shoot Christmas (282). The gun misfires, however, a clear indication of the corroding of her gender performance, and Christmas rallies by cutting her throat. Significantly, as he kills her, “his body seemed to pull away from him” (282), and the quiet dusk around them feels “peopled, as though from their loins, by a myriad ghosts” (292). Unable to carry an actual child to term which would—in both their minds—establish Christmas’s blackness, Joanna’s relationship with him ultimately generates a broader, if only temporary, blanket of ghostly invisibility for the latter.

Privately, Christmas believes that in killing her, he is able to assert his whiteness/power/“invisibility” over Joanna. Publically, however, he does not enjoy the same success. The dead woman’s body raises questions, and when Christmas’s roommate and business partner, Joe Brown, suggests to the sheriff conducting the murder investigation that Christmas secretly self-identifies as black, it is impossible for him to continue to “pass.” Although the Jeffersonians have always regarded Joanna as a threat and an outsider because of what they assumed to be her willingness to promote the intermingling of white and black people on equal terms, her brutalized body warns that

white hegemony is threatened. Thus, even though they secretly “hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward” (288), the townspeople use Joanna’s murder as justification to lynch the man who threatens the Southern womanhood (and, by proxy, Southern morals, honor and racial hierarchies) to which she has been restored in death. She faces a similar fate to Christmas, then, in the sense that they are both, respectively, reinstated in the disempowered positions of womanhood and blackness from which they attempt to disassociate themselves.

For Christmas, this reinstatement meaningfully involves a simultaneous and forced resignation to the black and feminized identities that the townspeople would impose on him. While fleeing the mob, he stops briefly to trade shoes with a woman so that the pursuing dogs—themselves described as “cringing phantoms,” or extensions of their white masters—will not be able to detect his scent. They are women’s shoes, and upon putting them on his feet, he feels a “black tide” that creeps up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves” (339). No longer able to lay claim to his invisibility or masculinity, he is susceptible to attack from Grimm, a militiaman descended from a long line of opponents to abolition and who more forcefully asserts his own (white) power by castrating Christmas after killing him. As he cuts off Christmas’s genitalia, Grimm yells “now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (465). Some critics have argued that Christmas’s castration allows him to transcend identity altogether, but the fact that “from his loins [and pale body] the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath” or “the rush of sparks from a rising rocket” (465) more

logically implies the gruesome success of the white agenda; in spite of the fact that his body reads as white (or “pale”) and male, those in power have used whatever means necessary to code it as black (blooded) and not male (perhaps even female if the reader, as does Deborah Clarke, considers the blood a stand-in for the menstrual blood that Joanna Burden could not produce). Although the description of Christmas rising and “soaring into [his pursuers’] memories forever and ever” (465) seems somewhat spirit-like, his death is *not* characterized in the same terms that his invisibility has been throughout the novel. His mutilated corpse drawing greater attention to him than ever, he is preserved in the townspeople’s minds as a terrible warning against the intrusion of the racial other, making them hyper-aware of the necessity for racial policing.

The townspeople’s policing of Christmas is linked directly to their treatment of Gail Hightower, a former minister who lives alone on the outskirts of town and to whose home Joe Christmas ultimately runs when the lynch mob is pursuing him. Christmas has never met Gail Hightower, and yet his murder and castration on Hightower’s property holds great symbolic significance. Faulkner notes that Hightower’s father will not even eat the food that their black servant prepares, so opposed is he to slavery. Significantly, however, the memories that Hightower holds of the war are densely peopled with phantoms. The cloth of his father’s uniform, for example, “assumed [for him] the properties of those phantoms who loomed heroic and tremendous against a background of thunder and smoke and torn flags” (469). Even in his sermons, “like phantoms God and salvation and the galloping horses and his dead grandfather thundered” (66). It is no coincidence that Faulkner uses the term “phantom” to describe Hightower’s imagined

soldiers, Christmas, and Joanna Burden as all three parties are deeply invested in maintaining their “invisibility”—or hegemony—throughout the region via their claim to whiteness. When Hightower discovers, for example, the two blue patches on his grandfather’s uniform indicating the number of union soldiers he must have killed, he realizes that his grandfather’s hands are not clean, even if he did only serve in the war as a doctor. His grandfather may have attempted to remove himself from the cause, but he was still a party to the region’s violent attempts to preserve enslavement. Similarly, the present-day Hightower prides himself on the fair treatment of his black employees and repeatedly tells his friend, Byron, to say “negro” instead of “nigger”; he even helps one black couple to deliver their child when the town doctor is not to be found. But the child’s death at his hands is perhaps an indication that Hightower is not yet ready at this point to assist in the “birth” of racial equality. Indeed, this seems the case when, as he looks out upon the singed remains of Joanna Burden’s plantation home after Christmas sets fire to it, Hightower does not think of the fire as a purging of the region’s haunted past, choosing to remember instead “the rich fecund black life of the quarters, the mellow shouts, the presence of fecund women, the prolific naked children in the dust before the doors; and the big house...loud with the treble shouts of the generation” (407). Thus, when Byron asks Hightower to help Christmas, who is being accused of murder, he initially finds himself unwilling to descend from the “high tower” on which his alleged morality has placed him. This stagnancy and aloofness is also directly related to Hightower’s treatment of Lena Grove.

Byron approaches Hightower with concerns for both individuals, Christmas and Lena, throughout the course of the novel, and his worries for the two individuals are quite similar. Knowing how quick the townspeople are to judge (i.e. impose identity upon) outsiders, particularly since he has just seen what happened to Christmas, he is afraid of how they will react to the visibly pregnant and unwed Lena. So, when she arrives alone in Jefferson looking for the father of her baby, Joe Brown, Byron attempts to shelter her from their prying eyes for as long as possible. But Lena is not secretive about her story; she tells anyone she meets about her marital status and her search for the baby's father. The beginning of the novel states "you just let one of them [women]...get into trouble without being married, and right then and there is where she secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race" (15). But this is never Lena's objective. Although she wears men's shoes, she never ostensibly tries to shirk her "proper" place in the Southern patriarchal system, reveling in her pregnancy and intent on finding a man with whom to pair off before the child's birth. As Mary Joanne Dondlinger notes in her article "Getting Around the Body," Lena circumvents cultural categorization much more successfully than Christmas by "properly performing the roles prescribed to her gendered body" (112). While the "cultural construction of women...specifically mothers and mothers-to-be, dictates that they must be contained within the sphere of the home" under the control of a man, Lena gets around outside the domestic realm by pretending to "comply with the Law of the Father" (114). Thus, she has greater success in donning men's shoes

than does Christmas, as she manipulates the system from within, fulfilling her own desires to travel by *appearing* to fulfill social expectations.

Uncannily, Lena seems to know before setting out on her trip the sort of man who Joe Brown is and even anticipates that he will run, effectively shirking his responsibilities as husband and father. Unfazed, she uses Brown as an excuse to travel unaccompanied through Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. Furthermore, she also disinterestedly describes Joe Brown as being dark complected with skin set off by a white scar. His last name and residence in close relationship with his partner, Joe Christmas, seem to reiterate the possibility of his race as being other than white. This possibility is of no concern to her, however, even when Byron takes Lena to the “Negro cabin” that Joe Christmas and Brown used to co-inhabit. It is highly significant that this cabin is the one in which Lena gives birth. Unlike Joanna who could only fabricate a child and imagined it a “bastard negro,” Lena delays giving her child a name (and, hence, a label). She only comments that Mrs. Hines, Christmas’s grandmother who happens to be present for the birth, keeps calling the child Joey. She explains: Mrs. Hines “keeps on talking about [the baby] like his pa was that...Mr. Christmas. She keeps on, and then I get mixed up and it’s like sometimes I can’t—like I am mixed up too and I think that his pa is that Mr.—Mr. Christmas too” (410). However, in spite of being “afraid” of such a mix-up, she still delays naming the baby; in resisting “labeling,” the child comes to embody the transcendence of racial boundaries that Christmas is never able to accomplish. That Lena takes the baby out of the Negro cabin and onto the road, reflecting both her and Christmas’s mobility at the novel’s beginning, is indication

that the child faces a hopeful future—one in which he will not be oppressed because of the color of his skin. In this way, Lena’s last line, “A body does get around,” carries all the more significance. Fully embodied as a “heavybodied” and “swolebellied” woman, not at all phantomlike, she and her child are able to enjoy literal and figurative movement, transcending limiting regional, racial and gender identity construction and refusing to kowtow to the illusory grandness of white “invisibility.”

The same cannot be said for Gail Hightower, however. Although he does not go down in flames like the novel’s other descendent of abolitionists, Joanna Burden, he remains staring out the window with his huge, bandaged and ghost-like head, absorbed by the apparitions “borne now upon a cloud of phantom dust” (492). Hightower is responsible for delivering Lena’s child, yet he is not yet saved by it—the figurative child of “Christmas.” This may be because, as Alfred Lopez convincingly argues, Hightower has suppressed his own identity as a gay man.<sup>42</sup> He thinks he is doing his wife and the community a kindness by marrying. In reality, however, it is as if he kills his wife with his negligent, dishonest behavior. The same may be said about his history in an abolitionist family. Like Joanna, Hightower’s inability to understand the constructedness of race is directly related to his inability to achieve sexual/gender transcendence. Certainly, it is no coincidence that his wife’s departure is soon after followed by reports that Hightower is cavorting with “negroes,” has begun a romantic relationship with his black cook and possibly fathered a black baby. Just as he hides his

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<sup>42</sup> Lopez’s reading of Hightower as gay is supported in part by analysis of the character’s fantasy of gazing upon “boys riding the sheer tremendous tidal wave of desperate living...that fine shape of eternal youth and virginal desire which makes heroes” (483). For a more detailed analysis of Hightower as a “queer” character, see Alfred Lopez’s “Queering Whiteness, Queering Faulkner: Hightower’s ‘Wild Bulges.’”



true homosexual identity with disastrous effects, he hides his feeling about black people's rights for equality. The result is that they, particularly his serving man, are hurt—in this case, by the KKK.

It is fitting, then, that Hightower is described at the novel's end in ghostly bandages, his chair as having housed a phantom, because his refusal to accept his identity (like Christmas) out of a desire to maintain his power and “invisibility” as a white, heterosexual man turns him into a metaphorical ghost. In this way, it becomes evident that phantoms are for Faulkner those characters who strive to maintain power by preserving their “invisibility” as white, heterosexual and male. Although, in their struggles, these characters acknowledge that race is itself a “specter” in the sense that it is not a finite, intransitive entity, they actively attempt to preserve the illusion of their natural superiority by systematically classifying others within gender, racial and sexual hierarchies.

### *Pigeons from Hell*

The themes of ghostliness, invisibility, and constructed racial superiority in Faulkner's *Light in August* are also significant to the work of Robert E. Howard, an author born and raised in Texas who was widely known for his *Conan the Barbarian* stories. Neither Howard's 1938 short story “Pigeons from Hell” nor the 2009 graphic novel adaptation by fellow-Texan Joe R. Lansdale have received any critical attention of which I am aware; however, both texts' treatment of racial ghostliness in the context of

the former plantation demonstrates that their work engages with the Southern Gothic tropes of authors like Faulkner and insists that ongoing attempts to police racial identity are akin to the imbalanced (sexual) power dynamics that once existed between masters and slaves.

In Howard's text, two New England men, Griswell and Branner, happen upon a deserted plantation house in the woods that "stimulated their imagination with its suggestion of antebellum splendor and decay" (12). They decide this is a safe place to sleep, but after Branner wanders off in the night, he reappears holding a hatchet that he has used to cleave his own head. Horrified, Griswell flees from the animated corpse that was once his friend and encounters the sheriff, Buckner, who agrees to return with him to Blassenville Manor to investigate. Griswell tells Sheriff Buckner that he has noticed many pigeons around the home, a fact which Buckner finds remarkable since Griswell is a white man and the only people to report seeing them are "niggers" who believe the birds are the "souls of the Blassenvilles, let out of hell at sunset" (20). This detail is significant in that Griswell's understanding of the region's horrors transcends racial divisions, enabling him to more thoroughly reassess his vision of the South as a lovely vacation spot for New Englanders. Thus, as he is led back to the structure, he is able to detect "a scent of decay and moldering vegetation" that caused him to "grow faint with nausea, that rose from a frantic abhorrence of these black woods, these ancient plantation houses that hid forgotten secrets of slavery and bloody pride" (21). Previously, he "thought of the South as a sunny, lazy land washed by soft breezes laden with spice and warm blossoms [where] life ran tranquilly to the rhythm of black folk singing in sun-

bathed cottonfields” (21). In this way, the Gothic setting (and Howard’s Gothic approach) are useful in that they convey to both the reader and main character, Griswell, the horrors of a racist history the South has attempted to suppress: “a dark, brooding, fear-haunted side” that is repellent (21), as is made particularly pronounced in the short story’s treatment of the former plantation owners. However, the story also suggests that these horrors are *unique* to the old South as a region, a fact reiterated by Griswell’s observation that these dark elements of the South are “more terrible than any New England legend—these somber pines, old deserted houses, lost plantations, mysterious black people, old tales of madness and horror” (35). “God,” he exclaims, “what frightful, *ancient* terrors there are on this continent fools call young” (35, emphasis added). Griswell speaks in the present, conveying that the horrors of slavery and racism linger, even if they are suppressed; however, he also suggests that they belong to an earlier time and, for this reason, need to be laid to rest—a comment that implies they no longer have a place in the contemporary world.

Admirably, Howard *attempts* to condemn whites for their role in upholding slavery as well as their continued racism; yet, several details in his story also distance the cruelest of the white characters as active participants in the institution’s horrors. The Blassenville family is originally from the West Indies, for example; they are not native to the South. This foreignness from the “genteel” Southern culture, then, is allowed to account in the story for the “streak of cruelty” in the Blassenvilles, even more so when the bulk of the family’s misdeeds is assigned to one particular family member, Miss Celia Blassenville. Celia is the last member of the family to arrive in the South, and

even though the region has already freed its slaves at that point, she continues to “whip her mulatto maid,” Joan, as if the institution is still actively functioning. A late arrival, Celia is not so much excused for her inappropriate cruelty; rather, she is branded an outsider (more a historical relic) who has yet to learn how to “treat [her] niggers as well as the other planters” do (32). After Celia finally ties Joan to a tree naked and whips her, no one is surprised that the latter runs away. A legend forms, however, that Joan hid in the woods and “glutted her hatred of the Blassenvilles by murderin’ Miss Celia” and her three sisters (32), thereby realigning the violent acts associated with the (vestiges of) slavery with Joan and directing attention away from white culpability.

Joan’s guilt is reaffirmed for Griswell and Buckner when they pay a visit to a nearby “voodoo man,” Jacob, who purports to be more than a century old and remembers when, long ago, Joan came to visit him after discovering he was a maker of zuvembies. Jacob explains that a zuvombie is a creature that is no longer human and “knows neither relatives nor friends. It is “one with the people of the Black World” (38). It can “fetch darkness to blot out a little light” (38). And it can turn corpses into “slaves” as long as their blood is still flowing (39). What’s more, the zuvombie can only be female. For these reasons—that the zuvombie is associated with alienation, femininity, blackness/darkness and the command of its *own* slaves—both Griswell and Buckner assume that the zuvombie must be Joan and, as white men, are all the more horrified by the prospect. They rationalize that Joan turned zuvombie to avenge herself on the Blassenvilles as “she probably hated the whole family as much as she did her mistress” (44). They first postulate that the zuvombie is a product of some drug that

“voodoo-men concocted to induce madness in women” and then conclude to the contrary that “a züvemie can’t be merely a madwoman. It’s a monster, something more and less than a human being, created by the magic that spawns in black swamps and jungles” (46). Jacob has, thus, in his description of the züvemie, provided the white men a way to account for the atrocities of the ghostly presence in a manner that does not tamper with their idea of white superiority and black inclination for evil.

Because of this interpretation of Jacob’s comment as a reaffirmation of their prejudices, then, the men are wholly unprepared for the figure that they encounter when they return to Blassenville Manor in search of answers. After deliberately luring the züvemie out of hiding, Buckner is able to shoot and kill it, a “thing” that does not quite register as woman with “that skulking gait...face of horror...[and] that leering yellow blur of lunacy (48). Griswell asks, “was that thing a woman once,” comparing the “claw-like hands, with black talons” to “those of a beast” in apparent assessment of Joan’s (i.e. black woman’s) true “bestial nature” (48). They become perplexed, however, when they notice that it wears the “rags of an old ballroom gown”—a garment a “mulatto maid” would be unlikely to own. It is this clue which enables the men to reach the truth: Joan did not imbibe the “Black Brew” of the züvemie herself; she gave it secretly to Celia Blassenville. Thus, as the men finally realize, the distorted züvemie is actually the “creature that was once Celia Blassenville” (51). With this epiphany, Howard effectively overturns his protagonist, Griswell’s, racist assumptions that it is their “bestial nature” which leads black women to practice voodoo—a magic that enables them to exact a revenge with a power they never knew under slavery (46). It is

not the true “bestial nature” of the *slave* that is brought to light in the züvembie; it is the bestial nature of the white *master*, particularly one who—in life—distinguished herself from her black subordinates as a lady of good breeding.

In his 2009 adaptation of Howard’s original “Pigeons from Hell,” Joe R. Lansdale attempts to alter the story in ways that, like Faulkner’s work, call attention to not only the constructedness of discrete racial identities but also to the ways in which racist identity policing is directly related to the sexual power dynamics played out between masters and slaves. In this graphic novel, the züvembie becomes the “Shadow in the Corn”—the now ghostly remains of a woman named Deidra. Deidra is one of several ostensibly white sisters living in Louisiana who were all cruel to their slaves “for the sake of cruelty,” but Deidra is the worst. When she discovers that her lover, “a young white man who had an eye for the ladies—of any color” has fathered a child with Anna, a slave on the plantation, she takes the child and drowns it in a tub of water (60). This news makes Anna so furious that she calls on the “Shadow in the Corn” for vengeance. Her approach works fairly well: the ghostly Shadow turns the plantation owners, Mr. and Mrs. Blassenville, into zombies who eat each other’s flesh and who are ultimately disposed of by the slaves. The other sisters are also killed by the Shadow, but Deidra remains untouched, if painfully frightened. What Deidra does not know at the time she commits the murder is that Anna is both her mother and sister, as Mr. Blassenville not only fathered Anna but also fathered Deidra with Anna. Thus, when Anna levels the curse at the Blassenvilles, it cannot harm Deidra because she has some

of Anna's blood. And yet, because she is a Blassenville, Deidra is made to bear the curse by keeping it alive. Thus, she *becomes* the Shadow in the Corn.

Howard and Lansdale imagine ghostliness in similar ways to Faulkner, then, as both Celia and Deidra Blassenville, like Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower, long to maintain social standing by separating blacks from themselves and the idealized norm of heteronormative bourgeois whiteness. Celia tries to achieve this distancing through her whippings of Joan, and Deidra tries to achieve it by murdering her lover's child. However, in both versions of "Pigeons," the women's plans backfire. Although they do not face immediate death in return for their horrific and racist quests for power and social capital, neither are they simply depicted, like Gail Hightower, as pitiable, misguided relics of a bygone age where "racists will be racists." Rather, Howard and Lansdale expose the evil of Celia and Deidra's white supremacy and turn them into monstrous phantoms, the zuvemie and the Shadow of the Corn, that are warped versions of the "invisible" individuals they once aspired to be. Like *Light in August*, the "Pigeons" texts demonstrate how superficial racial divisions actually are; racial categories, like ghostliness itself, are fluid because they are constructed, not based solely, or even primarily, in embodiment; this is made patently obvious by the fact that the visitors to the Blassenville plantation in Howard's text can only deduce the zuvemie's identity given her clothing which is itself a "performance" of social standing. Deidra, too, finds out how unstable discrete racial categories are when she learns she is herself born of a relationship between a slave and slave master. The "Pigeons" phantoms differ from Faulkner's, however, in the quality of their

representation: Christmas, Burden and Hightower's ghostliness remains figurative whereas Celia and Deidra's becomes literal. As a result, these terrible monsters are successful in conveying not only to the reader but also to the other characters who encounter them that racial policing is a monstrous act that involves active "haunting" of "inferior" peoples—their whiteness is horrifically cultivated, not innately superior.

Given the stories' message about the cultivation/construction of racial hierarchies, it is important to consider the racial self-identification of the graphic novel's twin protagonists, Claire and Janet. Whereas the two men who visited the plantation in Howard's story are described as white, Lansdale's version imagines as the estate's new owners two African American women who acquired the Blassenville name and land from their ancestor, Anna (belle), a slave woman who inherited the house. The sisters are torn between refurbishing or destroying the plantation as it abounds with images of their enslaved relatives "picking cotton...doing laundry...[and] doctoring fresh whip marks" (9). They understand the irony that they, descendants of slaves, now own the place, as this ownership indicates a significant shift in the power and racial dynamics of the contemporary South. However, the women do not realize upon their arrival how deeply they are linked to the home's legacy, and their encounter with the Shadow in the Corn is designed to help them come to terms with that aspect of their identity. When they arrive, the sisters have dismissed as "voodoo" their grandma's crazed, supernatural stories about the plantation. They have also continued to maintain an "us" and "them" mentality which causes them to identify with the estate's black slaves and vilify the estate's white owners. In listening to and accepting as truth the "voodoo" man's history



of the Spirit, however, they must come to terms with the fact that they are possibly descended from the sexual union of master and slave (i.e. institutionalized rape),<sup>43</sup> and in so doing accept in a way that Deidra could not that race is constructed and the policing of racial hierarchies futile and hypocritical. It is highly fitting, then, that Claire and Janet are only able to exorcize The Spirit of the Corn by showing it a mirror (Figure 3). It is only in truly seeing her identity—and the ugliness heaped upon her as a result of her racial/sexual policing—that Deidra is able to haunt no more. Similarly, only in learning about their own unstable identities are Claire and Janet able to leave Blassenville plantation behind.

Both Lansdale's and Howard's "Pigeons from Hell," like *Light in August*, actively work to undermine the stability of race by making visible the often-brutal ways that "white" individuals in the antebellum south maintained their power. But whereas ghostliness functions in these texts as a way of undermining and making fluid the related racial and gender subject position of the main characters, ghosts serve somewhat different roles in Southern Gothic texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, resurrecting a history of African Americans' oppression in the region and demonstrating how black individuals were violently robbed of their identities.

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<sup>43</sup> The graphic novel does not specify whether Anna had children with men other than Mr. Blassenville. For this reason, Claire and Janet—like Joe Christmas—cannot be certain of their racial heritage.

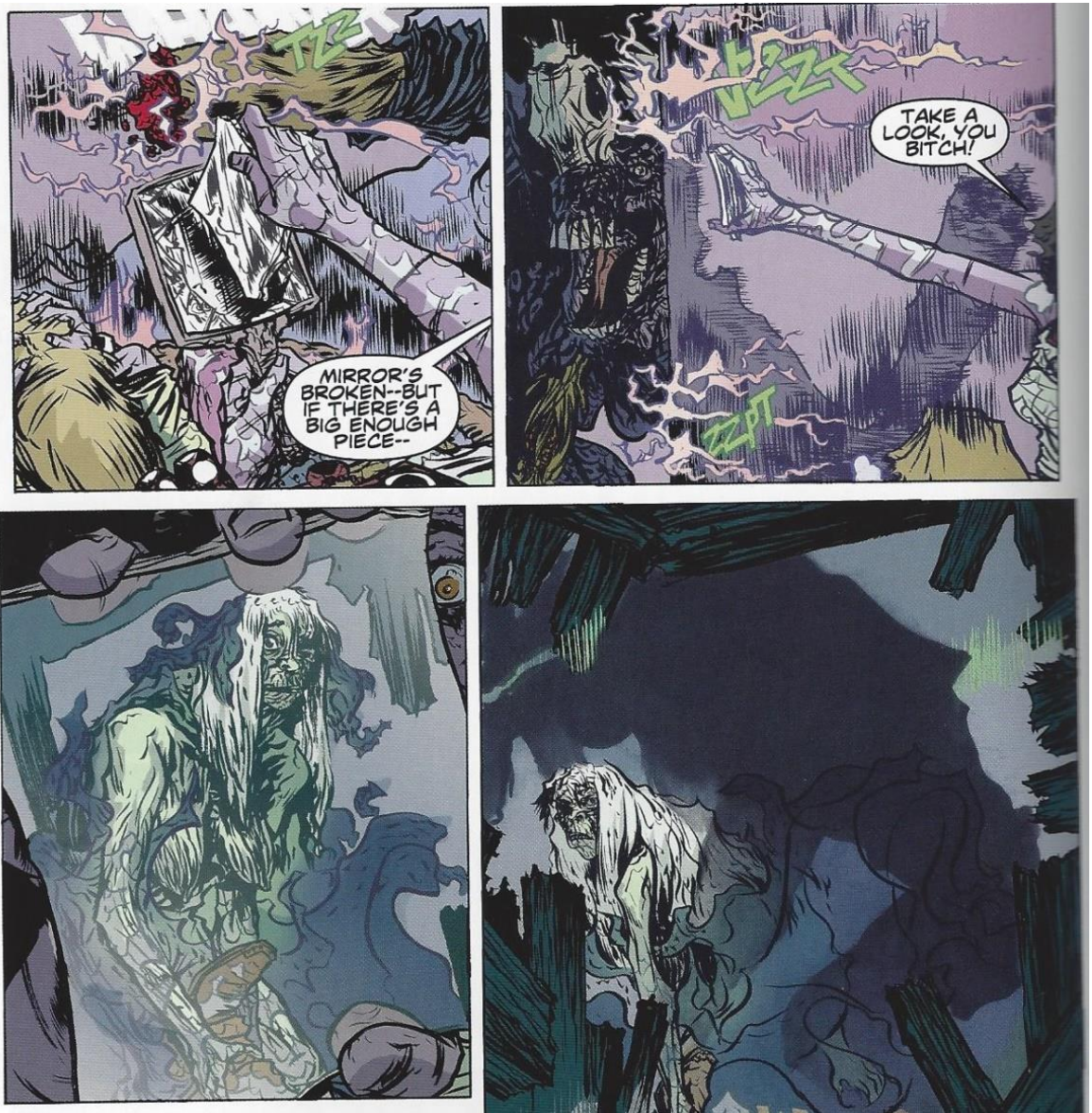


Figure 3. The Spirit of the Corn sees her reflected image. From Joe Lansdale's 2009 graphic novel, *Pigeons From Hell*.

*Beloved*

Beloved joins Celia and Deidra as one of the three “literal” ghosts to appear in the novels I have assembled. After her mother kills her as a child, Beloved haunts her family’s home from “beyond the grave,” but when her presence is rejected, she returns in the form of a young woman to avenge her murder. In spite of the fact that she is the novel’s only true apparition, Beloved comes to live among a variety of characters that have been robbed of their identities, particularly their gender or family identities, because of slavery.<sup>44</sup> Like Beloved, the formerly enslaved characters in the novel have suffered a loss of “embodiment” as a result of the institution’s dehumanizing effects. However, Morrison suggests that by sharing their stories within a community, as opposed to simply accepting the ghosts that continue to haunt them, they and their descendants can dispel slavery’s lingering horrors.

Before her death, Beloved’s grandmother, Baby Suggs, models the achievement of embodiedness through community. While some might think she lived a fairly easy life as a slave on the Garner plantation, Sweet Home, in that she was never physically beaten, or verbally abused, or made to work beyond her physical abilities, she was also forced to watch as seven of her eight children were sold into slavery. Now she does not know where they are buried or “what they looked like if alive”; yet, sadly, “she [knows] more about them than she [knows] about herself, having never had the map to discover

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<sup>44</sup> For a reading of *Beloved* as engaging with contemporary conversations about the African American family as a “site of violence—emanating both from a racist society and from within the family,” see James Berger’s “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report.”

what she was like” (165). Suggs does not know if she can sing, if she is pretty, a good friend, loving mother, faithful wife, a sister, or a cherished daughter (165). Slavery has not allowed her any opportunity to consider herself an actual person, and it is not until she “[steps] foot on free ground” that she begins to consider herself as such. She thinks, “these are my hands”; she feels a knocking and discovers her own heartbeat. She discovers her own name. And in spite of the fact that her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue have been “busted up” by slave life, she still has a heart with which to make a living, and she puts it to work at once (102), offering food, a safe space, spirituality and community to her neighbors.

Suggs’ home is the Promised Land for her daughter-in-law, Sethe, who longs for a similar sense of freedom, “embodiment” and family as she flees Sweet Home in Suggs’ tracks. For a long while, Sethe, like Suggs, is relatively content on the aforementioned plantation. None of the men abuse her, and she is even allowed to select one of them to marry: Halle. And yet, Sethe’s own wedding dress makes her look like a “haint peddlin,” forewarning that these token gestures on the part of the Garners do *not* indicate that she is allowed personhood within slavery. This she finds out all too well when a new master, School Teacher, arrives at Sweet Home. His abuse scars Sethe for life, both mentally and physically. And though she achieves a measure of progress toward recovery when she arrives in Suggs’ community, School Teacher soon tracks her down to Suggs’ home, 124, and she can take no more, attempting to kill her four children rather than see them sold back into slavery. The act is evidence that she has given up on the prospect of family community within slavery, and when she is later

released from jail, she similarly rejects the neighbors who once held up her and Baby Suggs as well.

All that is left of their traumatized family after her two sons are frightened away, Sethe and her daughter, Denver, resign themselves to living with the ghosts that would haunt them, most obviously Sethe's slain daughter, Beloved. As Denver has never known what it is like to live within a "traditional" nuclear family, and—in a way—regards her own absent father as a ghost, she initially reacts positively to Beloved's haunting of their home, appreciating in a manner that others cannot the comfort of her dead sister's "ghost company." To Denver, Beloved makes their very house seem alive with weeping, sighs, trembling and fits—a welcome alternative to absolute solitude (35). But in spite of all her longing for a family, Denver is not accepting of their most recent visitor, Paul D. It is as if this man who knew her mother at Sweet Home represents a sort of embodiment that Denver cannot tolerate, and she rejects him completely.

One of the reasons that she does so is because Paul D reacts quite negatively to the baby ghost's presence, detecting in it immediately an element of evil (10). When he tries to comfort Sethe, touching the scars of the whips marks on her back and helping her to trust and remember her history again (21), the baby ghost is furious, making the house pitch and terrifying her mother. But Paul D does not tolerate such behavior. "Wrecking everything" and "screaming back at the screaming house" (22), he is able to exorcise the ghost, and—in Denver's estimation—scare away her only remaining sibling. Denver is incapable of seeing the positive in Paul D's presence as he, like Baby Suggs, fosters a sense of community that Denver has wrongly been coached all of her life to distrust.

Sethe, too, remains skeptical of taking in Paul D because her experiences in slavery suggest that it is impossible for her to enjoy her family. Thus, although Sethe initially responds with tentative excitement at the shadow she, Paul D and Denver cast on the ground—three shadows that appear to be holding hands—she later reinterprets the shadow as herself, Denver and Beloved since she has taught herself to regard her family in terms of lack (actual shadows) as opposed to embodiment (a unit that exists, thereby *casting* a shadow). As a result of this mentality, Sethe begins to take on the qualities of ghostliness near the novel's end, and Denver struggles more and more to tell Sethe and Beloved apart (283). Sethe withers away, her eyes becoming “slits of sleeplessness” as “Beloved ate up Sethe's life” while “the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (295).

Slavery has not only robbed these characters of their families and their ability to imagine family/community for themselves; it has also robbed them of the ability to identify as gendered or sexual individuals, particularly as mothers and fathers. For Sethe and Paul D, this loss of gender/sexual identity haunts them in the ghostly and horrific figure of Beloved. Sethe never knew her own mother—a woman who discarded all of her other children aside from Sethe because they were born of white rapists. Sethe, too, learns to understand how slavery abolishes the bonds of motherhood when, with the arrival of School Teacher, she comes to be regarded as valuable property because of her ability to reproduce without cost. It is unsurprising, then, that after School Teacher allows his detestable nephews to take Sethe's milk from her swollen breasts she feels like nothing more than a crawling graveyard for her unborn daughter,

Denver. The beatings bring her to an extreme emotional low point, but this sexual degradation is entirely dehumanizing.

The lessons that Sethe is taught, then, about her “reproductive worth” have horrific side effects in terms of the way that she conceives of, or rather is unable to conceive of, herself as a woman and mother. After she attempts to kill her children in order to prevent them from being sold back into slavery, their blood remains on her body, and—without noticing—she breastfeeds young Denver, her milk mixing with Beloved’s blood. The incident is one that suggests motherhood in this institution is tinged and tainted; as a slave, there is no sanctity in such an identity. This is further made evident when Sethe must sell sexual favors to pay for the inscription on Beloved’s gravestone, an act to which she resorts with little self-pity as she is so used to thinking of herself as a sexual commodity on the plantation. It is to be expected, then, that when Paul D reappears at 124, Sethe does not know quite how to react to his presence. They have sex, but she notes that she has forgotten how “desire works,” and when they are finished, she feels repulsion more strongly than any other emotion. Her history also explains why she is so upset when, after learning that she attempted to kill her children, Paul D reminds her that she has two feet, not four. Because of her former enslavement, Sethe has been made to regard herself as less than human for much of her adult life. When Paul D critiques her desperate attempt to retain her motherhood by laying claim to her children as opposed to allowing them to be sold off, this is the final blow that sends her back to Beloved’s greedily waiting arms, resigning herself to a ghosted and tormented existence at the mercy of the daughter she killed.

It is surprising that Paul D would dare to insult Sethe in this way as he—better than anyone else that Sethe knows—understands what it means to be robbed of one’s personhood, gender identity, and family through slavery. He, like Sethe, originally believes his life on Sweet Home is not intolerable. After all, Mr. Garner always brags to the other slave owners that “at Sweet Home, [his] niggers is men everyone of em” (12). And yet, while Garner may never have said as much, the fact that his “man” slaves are resignedly having sex with cows means that they, too, have been reduced to beasts in that system. This is a fact that Paul D only comes to realize later when, after attempting to escape, he is chained up in a collar, or “neck jewelry,” as Sweet Home’s rooster struts freely around him. It had been Paul D who saved the rooster, Mister, from death after his egg was abandoned. Now, chained up with a horse bit in his mouth, Paul D is forced to watch as the rooster “smiles” at him, envying how the creature looks “better than [him]. Stronger, tougher” (86). He emphasizes his state of “non-being” when he notes, “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead...I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting...on a tub” (86). When he is later sold from Sweet Home, Paul D is stripped of his masculinity yet again as he is put on an auction block and made to hear the monetary worth of his body, including his penis (267). He is also forced to have oral sex with the unfathomably cruel men guarding the chain gang. It is no wonder, then, that he, like Sethe, initially finds himself repulsed after his first sexual encounter with her. He, too, has forgotten what desire is because he hasn’t been



allowed to experience it, and the ghost, Beloved, immediately picks up on this fact—using it to manipulate him into leaving her mother’s home.

Whereas Beloved haunts Sethe in that she is a constant reminder of her “failed” motherhood, she haunts Paul D as a testament to his failed masculinity (as a lover and a potential father). It is his desire to stay with Sethe and help her to rebuild her life, but as Beloved wills him out of her mother’s bed, he finds himself powerless against her, moving further and further away until he begins to sleep in the shed outside the house. Beloved then appears there, offering herself to him, and even though he is repulsed by her, he cannot stop himself from having sex with her. The act is one that he characterizes as further emasculating by suggesting that his giving in to Beloved makes him no better than “Lot’s wife” with her “womanish need” to see the sin behind her (137). Afterwards, Paul D feels he is “not a man” (151), and concludes that he can only “document his manhood” and “break out of the girl’s spell” by impregnating Sethe (151). But when he later discovers Sethe’s attempted murder spree, Paul D temporarily forgets his own experiences and calls her an animal, effectively putting an end to their relationship and seemingly cementing her dependency upon Beloved.

Sethe and Paul D thus find themselves at odds because they are unable to fulfill their personal gender expectations. Paul D does not feel like “a man” because—as in slavery—he has no control over his sexuality: in spite of the fact that he longs for Sethe, he copulates against his will with Beloved. And without his masculinity or sexual freedom, it seems there is no way he will attain his dream of having a family. Sethe, too, struggles with identity issues. She cannot trust Paul D, believing the only reason he

wants to have a child is out of jealousy that he is not the head of her household. She also questions her efficacy as a mother since *Beloved* constantly makes her apologize for her past abuse and becomes so remorseful that she almost forfeits not only her mental and physical health but also her daughter, Denver. Although Sethe and Paul D's sense of identity loss has its root in slavery, it continues to be a problem for the characters because of *Beloved*. Indeed, *Beloved* comes quite close to successfully making Sethe and Paul D into eternal "ghostly" victims like herself by robbing them of the femininity/masculinity that they were denied in slavery and preventing them from establishing the family (a smaller-scale community) that would allow them to heal.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to note that, in a way, the (gender/sexual) ideals that Sethe and Paul D imagine for themselves seem somewhat restrictive in that that they are limited to participation in a heteronormative family. However, Morrison suggests through various other means that true "family" need not be conceived of as a child-bearing marriage between a heterosexual man and woman. This is made evident in Morrison's treatment of Sethe's daughter, Denver; Denver's namesake, Amy; Denver's teacher, Lady Jones; and the larger community of free black women who live near Denver and her mother in Cincinnati. For the majority of her life, Denver has taken a cue from her ghost-harboring mother, remaining almost totally isolated from the community around her. When she finally takes the initiative to attend a local school, she meets a boy who tells her about her mother's secret. Petrified, Denver asks her mother if it is true that she

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<sup>45</sup> David Lawrence argues in "Fleshly Ghosts" that *Beloved* acts as an embodiment of uninhibited desire, projecting a "bottomless longing" (58) for love that places impossible demands upon the body" (195). His reading of her characters suggests that she not only prevents Sethe and Paul D from reconnecting to their own desires—she is also an embodied and traumatized version of the desires they have been denied.

murdered Beloved, but before she can hear the answer, she goes deaf for a period of two years. Although she later regains her hearing, Denver remains isolated from the community in the sense that she is not willing to know or encounter anything that does not pertain to her and her mother. In fact, one of the things that annoys Denver the most about her returned sister is that she keeps bringing up elements of the past that have nothing to do with her. Denver's isolation is highly ironic, however, as she is named after a woman who embodies the very essence of community building, Amy Denver.

It is when Sethe is at her very lowest point, violently beaten, on the run from Sweet Home and about to give birth to her daughter that she first encounters Amy. Significantly, when Sethe first hears Amy's voice, she thinks it is that of a 16-year-old "whiteboy's." In reality, Amy is the "raggidiest" looking whitetrash girl that Sethe has ever seen and speaks frankly and proudly of the fact that she has "been bleeding for four years but...ain't having nobody's baby. Won't catch [her] sweating milk" (98).

Whereas the comment might come across as insensitive from another, these words out of Amy's mouth are better interpreted as simple resistance to conformity, not as judgment of her new friend. Typically imposed social/racial/gender boundaries are invisible to/in her as made evident not only in the help that she selflessly provides Sethe when she gives birth, but also in her plan of going to Boston in search of velvet—a fabric that she imagines in a shade of brown that is so "clean and new and so smooth" it is like "the world was just born" (41). Through this fantasy, Amy imagines a world for herself and her friend in which they are untouched, unscarred by racial hatred. She does the same when, instead of speaking of Sethe's cuts as wounds, she dubs them a "cherry tree,"

making something lovely out of something terrible. She finds beauty in the horrific aftermath of slavery, promoting community through her help to others and her non-traditional embodiment of race and gender.

Although Denver never has the opportunity to meet her namesake, the fact that she was first clothed in Amy Denver's underwear and continues to revel in her mother's stories of the woman suggests that Amy acts as a tremendous influence on Denver and sets an example of how best to interact with the community. Morrison does not explicitly draw a connection between Amy and Denver's acts of altruism; however, she implies that Denver learns to follow Amy's example when—after living in almost total isolation for eighteen years—Denver bravely goes into town in search of help for her dying mother. The woman whom she decides to approach, Lady Jones, is much like Amy Denver in that she embodies an alternative to racial norming and the heteronormative family. Morrison notes that Lady Jones “was mixed” and had “yellow woolly hair, every strand of which she hated” (291). She had been listening to “all that yellow gone to waste” and “white nigger” since she was a girl in a houseful of silt-black children, so she married “the blackest man she could find” (291) and had “five rainbow-colored children (291). It is Lady Jones's belief that the children hate her as a result, but Morrison seems to prize the woman's ability to give birth to diversity. Her reproductive capabilities also mirror the approach that Lady Jones takes toward the children in her Cincinnati community. Since, as a child, she was picked for a special school because of her light skin, “she paid it back by teaching the [other] unpicked,” saving her real affection for them (291). Like Amy, Lady Jones acts as a sort of alternative family for

Denver. Whereas Amy helps her mother give birth to Denver as a baby, Lady Jones nourishes her and “inaugurates her life in the world as a woman” (292). Under Lady Jones’s influence, the women of the community are encouraged to reach out to Denver and her mother once again, not only providing them food but also helping to exorcise the ghost that lingers in 124. When thirty neighborhood women arrive at the home singing, their voices break over Sethe and she trembles as if baptized in them (308). This baptism, or reacceptance of community’s importance, is only made complete, however, when Denver prevents her mother from lashing out at Edward Bodwin (whom Sethe mistakenly identifies as School Teacher, returned for her children). Denver’s frequent retelling of the Amy story as well as her interaction with Lady Jones have equipped her to protect her mother from further harm, ensuring she lives a ghost-free life and encouraging her to rely again on the support of the community.

It is fitting that soon after this event, Beloved disappears from 124 and Paul D returns once again. By the time the collection of neighborhood women arrived, they were able to observe that Beloved had taken the form of a pregnant woman. In this way, the ghost baby had taken on the form of that which had been denied both Sethe and Paul D. Sethe constantly struggled to prove herself as a mother after murdering her daughter, and Beloved’s own pregnancy acts as an usurping of that role—especially given that the baby must be Paul D’s. And she similarly haunts Paul D who has always longed to prove his manhood by starting a family. That she carries this ghost child—a child that he wanted to conceive with her mother, not her—indicates just one more way that Paul D is emasculated. Her disappearance, then, not only suggests that Sethe and Paul D can

return to “normalcy” but also that they can renew their quest for gender identity, for their identities as members of a family.

When Paul D comes to visit Sethe at the novel’s end, their rejection of Beloved has made both characters better prepared as partners for each other. Paul D now knows that it is not “having a baby” with a woman he loves that will make him a “man”—it is *her* recognition of his masculinity. He recalls Sethe’s past tenderness about his “neck jewelry,” or the collar he was made to wear after his attempted escape from Sweet Home. “She never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that” (322). As a result, he knows he wants to “put his story next to hers” (322). Their rekindled relationship is not about power dynamics or ownership, nor is it about allowing one’s painful memories to fester. By sharing their histories with one another, reshaping and decorating them, Sethe and Paul D are able to forget Beloved “like an unpleasant dream” (324).

*Beloved*, as a novel, however, does not aim to forget and instead allows Morrison “to work through” the trauma of slavery and “[give] shape to a new narrative, a new history” (Berger 410). By exorcising Beloved’s ghost, the novel resurrects a gruesome part of the nation’s history and resists the “ghosting” residual effects of slavery. This, too, is the function of the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a character who—though often dehumanized and emasculated—uses “his” narrative, the novel, to “haunt back” from a ghosted position.

*Invisible Man*

The unnamed narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* is similar to the "phantoms" of Faulkner's *Light in August* insofar as he is "a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids" (3), not a literal ghost. And yet, Ellison's depiction of the narrator as "invisible" is quite different in the sense that, as a self-identifying black man, he is *made* "invisible" because other people refuse to truly see him. The people he encounters see in him only his "surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except [him]" (4). Whereas Joe Christmas maintains his power during much of the novel through his invisibility (normality, superiority) as a white man, those who meet the invisible man largely *cast* him as invisible or insignificant because he self-identifies as black. The most significant commonality that the invisible man and Christmas ultimately share, then, is that racial and sexual identities are imposed on them to horrific effect—feminizing and forcing undesired embodiment in the former and emasculating the latter to the point of ghostly "nothingness."

In part, the imposition of this identity stems from racist attitudes linked to slavery. Although the invisible man, like Joe Christmas, lives during a time that is somewhat removed from the South's "peculiar institution," he, too, still finds it possible to detect slavery's bitter side effects in his southern hometown. In fact, he is related to formerly enslaved peoples, including his grandfather, a man he is said to resemble. On his death bed, the invisible man's grandfather advises him to "Live with your head in the lion's mouth...overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death

and destruction, let 'em swooler you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). Following his grandfather's advice initially wins him praise when the narrator adopts humility as the theme of his graduation speech; however, he comes to regard these comments as a "curse" when the speech leads to his participation in the "battle royal," an event where several black boys including the narrator are blindfolded and forced to box each other before an audience comprised of the town's most influential white citizens. As Wilfred Samuels convincingly argues, the entire Battle Royal scene can be read as "an extended metaphor for the brutality of chattel slavery" (49). Several other references to slavery are present throughout: in the statue of the invisible man's college founder who is either lifting or lowering into place a veil covering the figure of a slave, the row of homes near Trueblood's that have been standing since "slavery times," the buildings at the school which resemble a plantation manor house (98), the slave's shackle on Dr. Bledsoe's desk, and the many "relics from slavery times" students might observe at the college museum (178). However, none of the references to slavery, with the possible exception of the homes near Trueblood, work as well as the Battle Royal to recreate the sexual dehumanization of black men that occurred within the institution. This ritual requires the subordination and humiliation of exposed black bodies for the viewing, and possibly even sexual, pleasure of the town's most powerful white citizens. The invisible man naively believes that he will leave these vestiges of slavery behind once he moves away from the South, but Ellison is careful to demonstrate that slavery and its aftermath haunt the narrator wherever he may travel. While the South may have been constructed (often in Gothic literature) as a uniquely backward space for its horrific, sexually dehumanizing



past, Ellison's narrator discovers much evidence of similarly brutal forms of racism throughout the northern United States when he is forced to move there following his expulsion from school.

Significantly, much of the racism that the invisible man experiences in Harlem is directly linked to his masculinity and stems from stereotypes about black men that evolved during slavery as a means of policing racial divisions/hierarchies. When the narrator observes the beautiful, naked and submissive woman made to dance at the Battle Royal, the American flag tattooed immediately above the "V of her legs" comes to signify for him an elusive, repulsive and yet tempting dream. He concludes based on the white men's reactions to the dancer that they achieve social and political capital through sexual domination of white women. As the veteran later predicts, the invisible man associates the freedom he has "heard about up North" with white women and wants to see if what he's heard is true: that "any man's most easily accessible symbol of freedom" is a "woman, of course" (150). Indeed, the narrator interacts with white women in New York on a number of occasions; however, time and again, these interactions effectively undermine any fantasy that he might have held about white women as objects that man can possess to claim power/recognition. He assumes, for example, that when he is assigned a position in the Brotherhood speaking on the woman question, he will be advancing their mission of erasing lines between people, even when it comes to gender (398). Furthermore, he anticipates that speaking to the women at this event will allow him to regain recognition and acceptance within the organization and society more generally. What he does not anticipate, however, is that the white women

he encounters harbor their own uniquely racist stereotypes about black men's sexuality that prevent them from truly "seeing" him, let alone uniting with him to fight for social change. When he attends the first speaking engagement, for example, he meets a woman who invites him back to her home to discuss further his ideas about feminism. Once they are alone, however, she praises the invisible man's "primitive" speaking for its ability to "convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement" (402-3), and after taking a moment to admire the "tom-toms" she hears beating in his voice, she whisks him off to bed. Instead of becoming recognized or empowered, as he had hoped, the invisible man becomes the unnamed pawn of an unnamed woman.

When he later determines that he will retaliate against the Brotherhood for his continued exclusion by extorting information from one of their wives, Sybil, she too, reduces him to invisibility by troping him as the "black buck." A more modern version of Joanna Burden, Sybil entertains a fantasy of not only sleeping with a black man but of being violently "taken" by him—of being raped. She asks the narrator to threaten to kill her if she doesn't give in, longs to be called filthy names, and envies her lovely, delicate, creamy-complexioned friend who was ravaged by a brutish "buck" with huge, white teeth (507). Horrified by her perception of him as a "house-broken and domesticated rapist" but acknowledging his own role in setting up this "trap," the invisible man slaps her once and then grabs her "purplish" lipstick to write on her belly: "Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus surprise" (511).

Douglas Steward argues that "in this scene, Ellison unveils the phallus itself as a fraud when he exposes the illusion of the narrator's activity as a man" (528). According

to Steward, there is nothing “more ‘actively’ phallic than rape, nothing a more convincing sign of [the invisible man’s] own black hetero-phallic freedom than a subordinate ‘cock-hungry’ white woman” (528). That he does not go through with the requested act thus distances him from actual phallic agency in the same way that the lipstick substitute does; his “adoption of the role to which he has been called” by Sybil and the women’s movement participant means that he is “effectively emasculated as a sexual individual by total absorption into the white myth” of the “brutishly virile black man” (529). Steward rightly notes that both the invisible man and Sybil project a “fantasy image” on each other, misrecognizing one another’s ability to “fulfill a deep desire” (530). For the invisible man, the desire is that domination of a white woman will convey power to him; for Sybil, the desire is that the invisible man will fulfill her fantasy of the “black buck.” As their hopes are both steeped in illusion, however, the message that the invisible man writes on Sybil’s stomach about Santa Claus is highly appropriate. All three—the narrator as “black buck,” Sybil as the facilitator of phallic agency, and Santa—are “impossible fantasy figures” that, in reality, are incapable of fulfilling the “untenable promises of obscene gratification” imagined of them. Although it is important to note that Ellison fails to imagine any of the novel’s female characters as attaining subjectivity, Steward concludes that the invisible man’s scene with Sybil, like his later castration dream, reveals *all* “hetero-phallic agency as a lipstick masquerade”—an illusion or phantasm.

In certain respects, the conclusion of *Invisible Man* calls to mind Christmas’s fate in *Light in August*. Both characters are ultimately pursued by angry mobs with the

intention of teaching them their “(in)visible” places as black men. However, the invisible man reacts to his temporary entrapment in the manhole by burning all of the paraphernalia that has been used by others to define him—his diploma, the Sambo doll, the letter telling him to tread cautiously in the Brotherhood, and his assigned Brotherhood name. Nothing is genuine; all has been imposed upon him and is therefore destroyed. In a metaphorical sense, the invisible man becomes the “ghostly” figure mentioned in the novel’s introduction in that, enclosed in darkness, he no longer has tangible evidence of his identity. And though the narrator is not ultimately killed, as is Christmas, he imagines facing a very similar fate when he dreams that Jack, his Brotherhood boss, Old Emerson, his would-be employer, Bledsoe, his college president, and Norton, the wealthy school donor, come at him with a knife, causing him “bright red pain” and taking “two bloody blobs” from his body before casting them over a bridge (557). The two novels’ treatments of castration have very different effects on the (imagined) mobs that orchestrate them. Whereas the mob that castrates Christmas is appeased by the act, solidifying their understanding of him as a black “buck” deserving of punishment for transcending racial (and moral) boundaries, the invisible man’s dreamed castration enables him, in effect, to understand how crucial his “invisibility” (i.e. subservience) is to maintaining the illusion of white supremacy.

At first, when the “bloody blobs” that were the narrator’s testicles catch on the bridge “to hang there, dripping down through the sunlight into the dark...water,” the members of the castrating mob laugh with satisfaction and the narrator’s world turns red in apparent defeat (557). Pointing at his “seed wasting upon the air, Jack exclaims that

the invisible man is now “free of illusions” (557), presumably about his masculinity and power. However a glittering butterfly suddenly appears and circles the “blood-red parts,” causing the narrator to laugh too. He tells these men who have, for so long, controlled his life, that he is no longer afraid since their act, in spite of its brutality, demands a certain attention to him. He imagines that in his bloody blobs “hang not only [his] generations wasting upon the water” but white men’s sun, moon and world (557). Defiantly, he tells the dream figures “there’s your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you’ve made, all you’re going to make” (557-8).

Although, when then the novel concludes, the invisible man is still anonymously taking up residence at the bottom of a coal-filled manhole, his imagined response to his would-be castrators is a crucial finale to the text. As part of his attempt to pass as white (and hence maintain invisibility/power) throughout *Light in August*, Christmas clings forcefully to his manhood—abusing his adoptive mother, the black woman in the shed, his prostitute lover, and Joanna Burden—by defining himself in contrast to women. His castration, then, is a crucial part of what kills him as his “manhood” is one of the most central aspects of his “empowered” identity. This approach to establishing masculinity is one that the invisible man takes as well, using women like Mary Rambo and Sybil as pawns for his advancement within the ranks of patriarchal society. But whereas Christmas kills Joanna for her attempt to sexually emasculate him and is killed/castrated as a result, the invisible man takes away from his interaction with Sybil a recognition of the role that his emasculation plays in maintaining not only black people’s social

invisibility (or powerlessness) but also the illusion of whiteness as the “natural” or most superior race.

This recognition regarding both racial and gender constructs allows the invisible man to conceive of his socially-imposed invisibility from a position of agency. He realizes the importance of stepping outside “the narrow borders of what men call reality” (563), and accepts that although doing so could bring about chaos, it may also lead to greater imagination and appreciation of diversity. “Even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play,” he contends, before indicating that in “being invisible” and “without substance,” a “disembodied voice, as it were,” he has managed to tell “you,” the reader, “what was really happening when your eyes were looking through” (568). In other words, although invisible, he’s managed to haunt back by encouraging readers to identify and extract prejudice from their own lives and communities. At last, as “invisible,” the narrator is able to appreciate that his grandfather, in spite of his history as a slave, never had any doubts about his humanity. “He accepted his humanity...it was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity” (567). Because of his new understanding of this legacy, the narrator transforms his own “ghosted” condition, appropriating his lack of embodiment as a means of transcendence. Though white oppressors would rob him of embodiment, masculinity and power, from this position, he comes to see that he alone is responsible for establishing his own humanity; it is not something earned or bestowed upon him by those individuals in power.

## *Kindred*

Echoes of Ellison's progressive use of figurative "ghosting" can be heard in Octavia Butler's 1979 science fiction slave narrative, *Kindred*. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Morrison's *Beloved*, *Kindred* centers on an African American character's journey between the Southern and Northern regions of the United States. But whereas the invisible man and Sethe's families move from South to North in the often futile search for emancipation and/or racial equality, Octavia Butler's heroine, Dana Franklin, moves from West to South, rediscovering the legacy of slavery that in 1970s California has long been confined to the history books. Dana's character is also unique to this collection of texts in that she also travels across time—teleporting against her will from the present day into antebellum Maryland.

While critics like Nadine Fligel have commented compellingly on the ways that this teleportation links Dana to "alien" characters in much other science fiction,<sup>46</sup> I would like to suggest that it may also prove fruitful to explore Dana's experiences in terms of ghostliness. Dana's husband, Kevin, describes his wife's departures as disappearances or vanishings, and when she meets Rufus Weylin, the white boy she later discovers is summoning her (his several times great granddaughter) to his aid in life-threatening situations, he asks her if she is "like a ghost" (23). Dana concedes that her movement could be comparable to smoke, but she is adamant that she is not an

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<sup>46</sup> Fligel argues, for example, that the novel's attempts to fix Dana as "non-human" reveal that she is not some "monstrous figure from a distant planet" but an "invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien...more specifically, the black woman" (226). These women, Fligel suggests, are "othered and alien within a patriarchal society...and blacks are aliens in racist, hegemonic culture" (226).

apparition. “Don’t go getting the idea that I’m a ghost,” she chastises Rufus, reminding him that “there are no ghosts,” even as he continues to look at her like one (24, 30). It seems that part of the reason Dana is so insistent that Rufus and others stop identifying her as a ghost is because she demands recognition. In 1815 Maryland, black people are considered “subhuman” (68), and Dana refuses to be regarded as such. Although she knows that she must obey many of the slave society’s rules in order to protect herself while she is there, she never completely loses her sense of identity and her fierce independent streak. She refuses, for example, to call anyone master, secretly teaches other slaves on the Weylin plantation to read, and insistently addresses Rufus as an equal. As a result of both her spirit and her time travelling abilities, no one is quite sure of what to make of Dana. Tom Weylin, Rufus’s father, asks her at one point “what are you” and suggests she is “something different.” Whether witch or devil, he is not sure, but he knows that the way she comes out of nowhere and goes back into nowhere makes her “unnatural” (206). Instead of using ghosting to represent loss of identity, then, whether at the hands of hegemonic white society (*Invisible Man, Beloved*) or out of one’s own rabid attempt to police identity borders and maintain white power (*Light in August, Pigeons from Hell*), ghostliness becomes in Butler’s novel a state that strikes fear in Dana’s would-be white oppressors and empowers her, to a certain extent, to manipulate them.

This is not to say, however, that Dana escapes the brutality to which other black people, including her ancestors, are subjected on the Weylin plantation. Initially, she is only made to perform less demanding tasks like preparing dinner in the kitchen, cleaning



inside the plantation home and taking care of Rufus's ailing mother, Margaret. When Rufus gets angry with her, however, she is forced to work a day in the fields, and on many different occasions when she "misbehaves," Dana is violently whipped. In this way, slavery becomes an embodied experience for Dana. At one point, she considered the labor agency at which she worked in California to be a "slave market" and the hires there "non-people" (53). However, returning to her ancestors' roots in Maryland and experiencing slavery first-hand teaches her just how inappropriately she had applied the term. Although she has the ability to time-travel, she has no control over her ability to come and go from the plantation and knows she cannot leave unless her life is in extreme danger. As a result, Dana's body now bears the marks, like Sethe's, that she once only saw in history books. Even her ability to transcend time and space cannot protect her from the way that slavery has marked her and her enslaved ancestors.

Butler also devotes significant and related attention to the way that Dana's gender performance is interpreted during her travels back to the antebellum south. When Rufus first sees Dana, for example, he observes that she was "wearing pants like a man," as she does on almost every one of her travels back, and initially, he thought she was a man. He is not alone. A patroller comments on the fact that she looks like Alice's (her many times great grandmother) sister "dressed up like a boy" (41), another slave asks "how come you're dressed up like a man" (60), and several others pluck at her blouse and pants so repeatedly and with such pity that Dana makes excuses. Really, the clothing belongs to her white husband, Kevin, who, to protect Dana, poses as her "master" when he travels with her to antebellum Maryland. Thus, when people question

her, she replies that Kevin forces her to dress in such a masculine fashion, concluding it was “probably easier for the people [there] to understand a master too poor or too stingy to buy [her] proper clothing than it would be for them to imagine a place where it was normal for women to wear pants” (71). The confusion also has an added benefit in that the uncertainty that others initially experience about her gender relates directly to confusion about her race, social status and even humanity. The Weylins are equally stunned, for example, to learn that Dana can read and speaks “like a white person”—“better” English than them. She defies easy categorization in her education, ways of speaking, behavior, and dress. As a result, the people she encounters begin to question her humanity in a subversive manner. She proves to them that black skin does not equal inferiority and that it is possible to transcend identity constructs.

As the novel progresses, however, Dana becomes more and more conscious that the clothes she is wearing cause her to stand out in undesirable ways—an awareness that mirrors her attitude about actively protesting Maryland’s slave society. As Dana attempts on one occasion to prepare for possible future time travel, she thinks that she would have put on a dress if she’d had one. However, as the more revealing modern-day clothing would only make her stand out, she concludes it is best to go on being the woman who dressed like a man. She reconsiders this conclusion only a few pages later, however, when Alice’s husband Isaac mistakes her for a man and, in her frustration, she wishes she had “risked going out to buy a long dress” (118). Significantly, this thought precedes a crucial portion of the novel in which Rufus asks Dana to encourage Alice to sleep with him so that he will not have to rape her. Under pressure, Dana eventually

concedes to bearing the message, but when she goes to meet Alice, she finds that her friend and ancestor has made her a long blue dress as a sort of peace offering. Although Dana insists that she sometimes forgets she is wearing jeans and touts their benefits (e.g. they keep her from having to serve dinner), her previous comments make clear that this gesture is one she has been moved to appreciate. Her gender performance is so repeatedly questioned that she finds herself irritated and willing to accede to the social conventions just to avoid further conflict. Now, in taking the dress, as Alice suggests, Dana can “look like a woman when [her] man comes for [her]” (166), and for this, Dana expresses an uncharacteristically conformist thanks.

After Dana reveals the actual purpose of her visit, however—delivering Rufus’s message that she is to sleep with him or be whipped—Alice reacts by threatening to dispose of Dana’s gift: to “throw [that] dress in the fireplace and light it” (166). While she is angry at the suggestion, Alice nonetheless accepts that her body is a commodity belonging to Rufus as he has “bought” and “paid” for it, and understands that one is often made to pay the greatest price in refusing to conform to social expectations. She knows the horrible consequences of refusing to accede to her white masters’ demands, and she believes that Dana will feel similarly threatened by her inability to conform through her loss of the dress. Instead, in a crucial turning point for her character, Dana replies “I don’t give a damn what you do with that dress” (166). The longer she stays in antebellum Maryland, the more Dana slips into the gender roles, styles of dress and subservient behavior that accompanied erasure or “ghosting” of identity among enslaved

people. In rejecting the blue dress, however, Dana firmly refuses to be consigned to “ghostedness,” and her dismissal of the blue dress adds emphasis to her resolution.

In spite of her refusal to self-“ghost” in donning the dress, however, Butler suggests that Dana still mistakenly equates power with masculinity. When she decides to run away from the plantation, for example, she carefully considers what to wear and decides to steal a pair of Rufus’s old trousers and one of his shirts. Rejecting Alice’s dress that looks like and would equate her actions with “every other slave woman on the place” (171), she attempts, symbolically, to put on the power of the white master. In one way, it is her refusal to acknowledge the distance that white masters attempted to create between themselves and their slaves—recognition of the fact that racial and gender hierarchies are constructed and race and gender are performed. In another, however, it suggests she simply attempts to usurp masculine power in male clothing that will allow her to get by. When she tries this approach to escape, however, Dana is caught, identified as female, and punished severely.

Dana has more success navigating her surroundings, Butler implies, in attire that undermines the gender binary/ hierarchy entirely. When she is called back to Maryland for the last time on Independence Day, Dana’s clothing reflects her preparedness for emancipation. Wearing a “kind of loose smocklike garment that little children of both sexes wore” (199), her outfit both asserts her embodiment as it drips and clings to her form and yet avoids labeling her as masculine or feminine. This outfit, Dana notes, “clearly offended [the Weylins]...more than [her] pants ever had” (199), not only because it would have been considered “immodest” at the time, but also because it

suggests about her a sort of transcendent quality that extends beyond her clothing to her time travelling abilities and disembodiment of race. Unlike Faulkner's Joe Christmas, who tries to avoid the imposition of blackness and aspires toward invisibility (as power) through a maintaining of his "white" and "masculine" characteristics, Dana understands that blackness, femininity, and empowerment are not mutually exclusive and that true invisibility accompanies a *surrender* to social/cultural expectations and comprehension of power, not a *fulfillment* of them. Her refusal of prescribed social boundaries suggests this time and again.

Much like the white mob that attacks Joe Christmas and the ghost, Beloved, that haunts Sethe and Paul D, the white plantation owners in *Kindred* make a final attempt at "ghosting" Dana, robbing her of her sense of identity, through sexual dehumanization. Rufus has noted on several occasions the great similarities between Alice and Dana and often speaks of them as one woman. Following Alice's suicide, Rufus propositions and then attempts to rape Dana in Alice's stead, as if he intends her to "take the place of the dead" (259). Submitting to such a proposal would not only literally place Dana in the position of her enslaved ancestor, but it would also force Dana to "ghost" herself, compromising her identity and her earlier claim to Rufus that she is *not* a specter. It is fitting, then, that Butler characterizes Dana's resistance of the rape in terms that assert her embodiment at the same time that they allow her to transcend limiting gender, sexual and racial categorization. Outfitted in her smock and armed with a knife, Dana punctures Rufus instead of allowing him to penetrate her. Following the attack, her body instinctually attempts to travel back to the present and safety, but before she can do

so, she feels something clamp down on her arm, “melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow...[it] were being absorbed into something...cold and nonliving” (261). When she arrives back in her own living room, she has victoriously asserted her own identity, but she is not untouched by the experience. Instead, she is shocked to find that a large portion of her arm has been amputated and presumably remains in antebellum Maryland.

Unlike *Beloved*, Celia, Deidra or any of the other “phantom” characters featured in the novels I’ve collected in this chapter, Dana is able to avoid a “ghosted” existence. As a “college-educated, twentieth-century writer,” Dana has read many texts that shaped her perceptions of slavery but allowed her to understand the conditions at a remove (Flagel 230). Time travelling, however, allows Dana to experience first-hand the related ways that gender, sexual and racial identities have been constructed throughout history and can, like time and space, be transcended. This does not mean, however, that the construction and imposition of certain identities on individuals does not have real, embodied and often horrific effects. As Dana’s arm attests, even though her enslaved ancestors’ experiences may be relegated to the history books and defined as specific to the Southern region of the United States, the institution of slavery is one that significantly marks her and other African Americans throughout the United States, though they, like Dana, courageously refuse to regard such marking as debilitation.

Although ghosts have long been a popular trope in Gothic literature, they take on special significance in the context of the American South and have been variously linked through slavery to the related construction of racial and sexual identity and

(dis)empowerment. In their characters' obsession with successfully "performing" and policing whiteness by distancing themselves from (formerly) enslaved peoples, Faulkner, Howard and Lansdale's texts acknowledge that racial categories are, in fact, unstable and amorphous. What motivates their characters' desires to pass as white or police their ostensible whiteness, these authors suggest, is a desire to access the power that accompanies the "invisibility of whiteness," an understanding of whites as the innately and therefore unnoticeably superior race. Whereas Faulkner punishes such individuals with death (Christmas and Burden) or death-like existence (Hightower), Howard and Lansdale exaggerate the "phantom"-like qualities their characters strive to attain, transforming them into monstrous versions of their personal ideals (the züvemie and the Spirit of the Corn). However, the authors I reference in this chapter whose "ghost(ed)" characters self-identify as black differ from Faulkner, Howard and Lansdale in that ghostliness represents for them a state of disempowerment characterized by the denial of gender or sexual identity to (formerly) enslaved peoples and their descendants. While Morrison's ghost embodies the loss of that (gender/sexual) identity and thus, she suggests, must be exorcised, Ellison's invisible man finds ways to "haunt back" from his ghosted position and Butler's Dana refuses ghosting altogether, demonstrating that embodiment and (gender/ racial) transitivity can coexist. All six authors thus use the Southern Gothic mode and the "ghost" subversively to call attention to the constructedness of racial, gender and sexual hierarchies and link transcendence of regional boundaries to a similar transcendence of racism, and Butler and Ellison go one step further, demonstrating that the horrors of slavery and residual racism are not unique

to the American South but, rather, transcend both regional and temporal boundaries and must be combatted accordingly.



## CHAPTER V

### “DEFANGING” THE OTHERING PROCESS: CREOLE CULTURE, LOUISIANA VAMPIRES AND DESTABILIZATION OF SEXUAL AND RACIAL DIFFERENCE

In the opening pages of Charlaine Harris’s *Dead Until Dark* (2001), the first of her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels, protagonist Sookie Stackhouse reveals that she has been waiting for years to meet a vampire. “We had all the other minorities in our little town,” she reflects—“why not the newest, the legally recognized undead?” (1). According to Sookie, New Orleans is an important geographical center for vampires because of the “whole Anne Rice thing” (1), and she expresses hope that one will soon find his way to her neck of the woods, a fictional town called Bon Temps in rural northern Louisiana. Though brief, Sookie’s comments highlight two important points: one, that Sookie (like Harris) perceives the vampire as a “minority,” and two, that she identifies Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, as a mecca for that minority group.

The approach that Harris takes in depicting the vampire as minority is one that has a long history in both literature and film. As Margaret L. Carter notes, the vampire is repeatedly portrayed as a “rebellious outsider, as persecuted minority, as endangered species, and as a member of a different ‘race’” (29). Critics have often argued, for example, that Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, one of the most well-known literary vampires, “is someone who threatens and terrifies precisely *because* he is an outsider” (Stevenson qtd. in Rabin). The novel *Dracula*, as Joseph McCabe explains, “presented the Victorian male’s worst kind of nightmare—one in which a foreign invader, from the supposedly less civilized East, would take advantage of Britain’s weakened state, [and] invade his

country” (104). It is little surprise, then, that *Dracula* was so appealing to then-contemporary British audiences as “the story showed the triumph of the Englishman over an Eastern European invader, symbolically reasserting England’s dominance in the world” (104).<sup>47</sup>

While the location of the Count’s castle in the Carpathian Mountains makes clear his “outsider” status to both the British Jonathan Harker and Stoker’s Victorian reader, the later vampires of “Southern Gothic” literature are, in a way, all the more threatening because they have already infiltrated the American South and live there undetected. There are, of course, certain physiological aspects of the vampire that suggest to the locals that he<sup>48</sup> may be other than human (e.g. susceptibility to sunlight and/or silver, over-developed fangs, and dependence upon blood for sustenance); however, he exhibits no physical features that are immediately discernible as “foreign.” In other words, it is quite possible (at least during the night!) for a vampire to “pass” as human, free to reveal/conceal his vampirism whenever he so chooses.

Given that they are reputed to be and often identify as a race outside the (human, and, hence, also the white) hegemony but are nonetheless capable of “mainstreaming,” American authors and filmmakers have taken great interest in exploring parallels between the “passing” vampire and the (history of) the “passing” African American. It makes sense, then, that over the last half-century, vampires have appeared with increasing frequency in New Orleans and other portions of Louisiana, a region

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<sup>47</sup> For more information, see Stephen D. Arata’s “The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization.”

<sup>48</sup> Though I use the masculine pronoun here, there is no shortage of female vampires in literature or film; however, this chapter will address only a few of them, namely Claudia in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*.

historically associated with racial “hybridity.”<sup>49</sup> As Charles Crow explains, the racial heritage of Louisiana and New Orleans is “even more complex than the rest of the South”; even when the “Southern binary system was finally imposed on Louisiana, the state, and especially New Orleans, remained [very] racially cosmopolitan” (Crow 89). Crow notes, for example, that “while other slave-holding states had a binary racial system... Louisiana’s laws long recognized mixed-race people as a separate category,” Creoles, a term meant to describe Louisianans of mixed African and European racial heritage (89).<sup>50</sup>

For Crow, the term “Creole” is one that is inherently Gothic in that it speaks to a “realm of hidden reality” in the “shadow-self or dark twin” and alludes to “things known but not spoken” (Crow 90). Crow even goes so far as to suggest that the horrors associated with racial passing, suppressed genealogy, and cultural/racial “blending” in texts like George Washington Cable’s *Old Creole Days* (1879), Kate Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” (1893), and Charles Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899) constitute a regionally-specific “Louisiana Gothic” tradition. Crow fails to address, however, the way in which vampires have become a crucial part of that tradition.

As is implied by the concerns about lineage in the aforementioned text—particularly Chopin’s, however, fears of racial “mixing” were not only associated with the blurring of boundaries that occurred when African American “outsiders” *passed* as members of the dominant white society; they also applied to the fear that such passing

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<sup>49</sup> In addition to the texts I mention here, Nancy Collins also set her vampire novels, the *Midnight Blue Collection* (1995), in New Orleans, and a recent television series titled *The Originals* (2013) features vampires in New Orleans as well.

<sup>50</sup> For more, see Robin Cohen’s “Creolization and Cultural Globalization: the Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power.”

would lead to “exogamous” *sexual* intermingling or “miscegenation”—another concern that the vampire figure has frequently been used to address. Unable to “perform the vampiric version of sexual intercourse (sucking blood) with his own kind,” the vampire is portrayed as dangerous “interracial sexual competition” for humans in that he is constantly seducing untransformed partners, corrupting and stealing them before then “releasing their sexuality in demonic ways” (Carter 28).<sup>51</sup>

Beyond simply portraying vampire/human (sexual) partnering as reckless in its blurring of “racial” boundaries, however, traditional treatments of vampirism have also depicted the figure as dangerous because of the alleged threat that he poses to the established male/female gender dichotomy that is essential to both heterosexuality and patriarchy.<sup>52</sup> As Barbara Creed observes, the vampire’s “extreme uncanniness” is, in part, associated with the way in which he “collapse[s] boundaries between... male and female” (68). Since his sexuality “encompasses all desire” (Creed *Phallic Panic* 70), the vampire figure “[undermines] the play of sexual and gender opposites on which so-called proper sexual identity is founded” (Creed 70-1). And though, with his snake-like fangs, the vampire may seem to “assume a phallic appearance” (Creed 72), it is also important to note that he sucks blood from his victims orally as opposed to penetrating them—an act that, in its circumventing of genital penetration—seems to “[threaten] the very basis of phallic patriarchal civilization” (Creed 72). But no matter whether we interpret the bite of the vampire as “symbolic of genital (the plunging of teeth) or oral

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<sup>51</sup> For more information, see Phyllis A. Roth’s “Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

<sup>52</sup> See also Christopher Craft’s “Kiss Me with Those Red Lips?: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

sex (the sucking mouth), the act itself is genderless” since the vampire can be “male or female and the vampire’s victim can be of the opposite or the same sex” (Creed 81). Furthermore, that victim potentially can be transformed into a vampire as well—a “child” born not of heterosexual intercourse but from the vampire’s deadly bite. In these ways, Creed contends, the vampire comes to embody “a breakdown of boundaries between sex and gender” (82).<sup>53</sup>

Given that the figure of the vampire is frequently used to blur or destabilize established gender and sexual roles, it comes as little surprise that he also tends to function as “a changing symbol for the sexual problems of the ages” (Creed 81). Theorists such as Nina Auerbach, Joan Gordon, and George Haggerty each have suggested that every generation “embraces the vampire it needs” to discuss contemporary sexual issues (145): while, for example, the budding feminist politics of 1970s America may have contributed to the simultaneous increase in the popularity of “lesbian vampires,” the spread of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s led to the casting of the vampire as a stand-in for anxieties about the disease. As these two examples indicate, early vampire incarnations spoke to the danger of “voracious” or “unconventional” sexual desire, particularly in women and homosexuals; however, vampires more recently have been read as eliciting sympathy or understanding for “sexually-Othered” beings, calling greater attention to the many similarities between humans and “blood-suckers.”

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<sup>53</sup> In both *Phallic Panic* and *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed makes many other interesting points about why the vampire is ambiguous in his gender and sexuality. As an example, she identifies the vampire as a “menstrual monster” whose reveling in woman’s blood flow places him in close proximity to the feminine world. She also suggests that the male vampire is feminized in death in that he can only be killed with the penetration of a “phallic stake.” The female vampire, on the other hand, is frequently masculinized in her role as an “active, predatory seducer” (*The Monstrous-Feminine* 63).

A similar trajectory exists in depictions of vampires (and vampiric figures) who live in (former) plantations within the American South: from the “demonic” Sutpen and Charles Bon of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) to the reluctant Louis of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and the myriad “vampers” of Charlaine Harris’s *Dead Until Dark* (2001) and Allan Ball’s *True Blood* (2008)—the Southern vampires that have manifested over the past decades reflect fears about gender and sexuality that are specific to the time period in which they were introduced—particularly concerns about the longevity of the patriarchal (and “pure” white) nuclear family.

In order to explore these concerns more succinctly, the chapter will focus specifically on the relationship of the vampire figure to the white men in each text whose futures are most ostensibly threatened by the encroaching “vampire”—*Absalom*’s Quentin Compson (as well as his counterpart, Henry Sutpen), *Interview*’s Louis de Pointe du Lac, and *True Blood*’s Jason Stackhouse. As I have argued in earlier chapters, the Southern Gothic’s treatment of sexuality is always inextricable from issues of race; therefore, it also will be of great importance to consider here the ways in which the Southern setting informs each text’s treatment of “vampiric” sexuality.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that each of the above texts uses strategically an imagined version of Louisiana’s “creole” culture to convey the risks and/or promises of “vampire” and human contact—in other words the meetings between sexual/racial Otherness and white heteronormativity. For Faulkner, whose writing addresses attitudes about miscegenation contemporary to the 1930s, the “creole” is synonymous with vampire—an individual who is construed as monstrous for feeding off of and risking

contamination of the predominantly white Southern culture while passing unnoticed. Rice, too, links these terms during the height of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s; however, she (somewhat problematically) uses the creole, like the vampire, as a metaphor for sexual entrapment—a trope meant to elicit the reader’s sympathy for those individuals cast as (racial/sexual) outsiders. For Harris and Ball, on the other hand, the link between “creole” and vampire is more complicated. Writing during the early twenty-first century, a period that is often too-hastily described as “post-racial” and “LGBT friendly,” the *True Blood* novels and television series employ the “creole” figure and a highly stereotyped Louisiana setting to suggest that contemporary society (both within and outside of the South) may not be as inclusive and accepting of racial and sexual “difference” as it often claims to be.

*Absalom, Absalom!*

Admittedly, the incorporation of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* in a study of the evolving Southern/Louisiana vampire must seem unconventional given that the term “vampire” appears only once in the novel: when Mr. Compson uses it to describe Miss Rosa as “living on the actual blood [of the slaves at Sutpen’s Hundred] like a vampire” (87). And yet, Michelle Moore notes, Faulkner gained significant experience writing about vampires beyond the limits of metaphor when he was commissioned to adapt Irina Karlova’s novel, *Dreadful Hollow*, as a screenplay. In both Karlova’s text and Faulkner’s, a young girl takes a position as a paid companion to a Countess, only to

discover that her employer (who seems to become younger by the day) is actually a vampire.<sup>54</sup> According to Lee Caplin, the executor of Faulkner's estate, Faulkner simply wrote the screenplay "as a 'lark'" for his friend, the film's would-be producer. To Michelle Moore, however, the document provides clear evidence that not only was Faulkner well-acquainted with the history and conventions of the vampire, particularly Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but vampirism was also integral to his writing about the South—especially the Gothic *Absalom, Absalom!*

In her article "'The Unsleeping Cabal,'" Moore explains that folklore's earliest vampires were imagined as a way to account for the source of bodily disease.<sup>55</sup> This folkloric exercise, Moore points out, is not unlike the process that college roommates, Quentin and Shreve, undertake in *Absalom, Absalom!* to discover the origin of the former's apparent infection—an illness that causes his body to jerk "violently and uncontrollably" at the novel's end (376). According to Moore, there are several possible "sites of infection" to which Quentin is exposed throughout the novel. Perhaps most obvious is the "vampiric" Miss Rosa who, like Stoker's *Dracula*, enlists the aid of younger Quentin, like Jonathan Harker, to break into the decaying Sutpen mansion and subsequently exposes him to an infectious and corpse-like Henry Sutpen.

As it is a convention of vampire narratives, however, to seek out the *original* source of vampiric infection, it is important to note that for both Rosa and Mr. Compson,

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<sup>54</sup> Faulkner completed this script in 1946; however, the film never went into production, and, as it was held privately by the rights-owner, the screenplay remained inaccessible until recently—when Jill Faulkner Summers discovered an additional copy among her father's papers.

<sup>55</sup> Some scholars even suggest that the word *Nosferatu* originates from a Greek term, *nosophoros*, meaning "disease-bearing."



Henry's father, Thomas Sutpen, is "vampire ground zero." Thomas Sutpen, or "the demon," as the novel refers to him almost twenty times, is indeed linked to the conventions of vampirism on a variety of fronts. Moore notes that his most distinguishing characteristic is, by far, his teeth, a feature that is repeatedly associated with his appetite for violence. Sutpen's appearance is tied even more closely to the vampire by Mr. Compson who details Sutpen's pallid appearance in much the same way he describes the "vampiric" Miss Rosa. To Mr. Compson, Sutpen appears to be "a man who had been sick...who had been through some solitary furnace experience which was more than just fever" (24). Miss Rosa, too, labels Sutpen with common vampire terminology—both when she imagines him as a light-blinded bat and when she refuses to acknowledge that he could have died since "heaven [could not], and hell dare not" have him (153). Even the narrative seems to confirm Miss Rosa's theory about Sutpen's immortality when Quentin and his father notice during a visit to Sutpen's grave that it is open and empty (153)—a common clue in vampire texts that the corpse has been reanimated.

These many aspects of Sutpen's (dis)appearance clearly link him to the vampire figure; however, for Moore, the most convincing evidence of Sutpen's vampirism is his (metonymical) responsibility for bringing from Haiti to Mississippi a plantation system that, in its abusive slave labor, effectively saps the lifeblood of another culture, reducing Haitian and other West Indian people to property and "infecting" the American South with its evil. The "vampiric" Sutpen is held up by the Jefferson townspeople as "Other" for his monstrous treatment of and engagement with the Haitians; however, the novel

also suggests—as the vampire genre so frequently does—that Sutpen has much more in common with the Mississippians than they care to admit, specifically a history of brutalizing enslaved peoples. It is highly ironic, then, that at the same time that Sutpen dehumanizes and “vampirizes” the Haitians and their culture, he also becomes responsible for “infecting” members of the white, heteronormative South with the “taint” of black blood that he so despises—blood connections that are established through his marriage to a Haitian woman, Eulalia Bon, and their “mixed-race” offspring, Charles. Charles Bon, as Moore rightly notes, is also said to exhibit many of his father’s vampiric characteristics such as the ominous set of “glinting” teeth that become visible in his mouth as he speaks French. The connection between Bon’s foreignness and vampirism is even further strengthened by Mr. Compson’s claim that Bon arrives in Mississippi “surrounded by a sort of Scythian glitter” (94), a significant detail given that—according to legend—Scythia was a region roamed by a nomadic, cannibalistic group that included Dracula duke of Transylvania (Moore 71).

For Moore and several other critics writing in recent years,<sup>56</sup> both Sutpen’s and Bon’s “foreignness” is established primarily through their ties to Haiti. They have argued convincingly that Faulkner weaves that nation’s history into Sutpen’s and Bon’s not only to criticize “the designs of early twentieth-century American empire toward Haiti” (Gerend 18) but also to underscore the “continuous potential for revolution” against American slavery that Haiti, as the only nation to host a successful slave

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<sup>56</sup> For more information, see Maritza Stanchich’s “The Hidden Caribbean ‘Other’ in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*: An Ideological Ancestry of U.S. Imperialism” (1996), Richard King’s “From Haiti to Mississippi: Faulkner and the Making of the Southern Master-Class” (2011), and Sara Gerend’s “‘My Son, My Son!’: Paternalism, Haiti, and Early Twentieth-Century American Imperialism in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” (2009).

revolution, came to symbolize (Stanchich). Significantly less attention, however, has been devoted to Louisiana's function in the novel—particularly, the ways in which the region highlights the (related) “creole” and “vampiric” aspects of Bon's character. Though, for example, Moore notes briefly that Bon's childhood in New Orleans puts him “at a middle point, halfway between the North and the South” and seems to accentuate both his racial and sexual/gender “ambiguity” (72), she does not consider fully the relationship of Bon's “mixed-race” heritage (and passing) to the conventions of vampirism; nor does she comment on the ways in which New Orleans' culture may contribute to the blurring of gender and sexuality that defines Bon and is so common within the vampire genre.

When Miss Rosa first describes Charles, she notes that he hails from New Orleans—a “worldly and even foreign city” so far-removed from Mississippi that he “appeared almost phoenix-like” to her and the other Jeffersonians (74). For Rosa, it is as though the New Orleanian simply appeared “fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time,” and she speculates that when he vanished, he would leave “no bones or dust anywhere” (74). Certainly, Rosa's conception of Bon's unconventional, mythical birth and apparent imperviousness to both time and death calls to mind a supernatural figure like the vampire; yet, her description also speaks to the special role that New Orleans will play in the novel as an imagined space: one that, like vampires, seems dangerous because of its tendency to blur the conventional (racial, sexual, and gender) boundaries of Southern society. With this statement, Rosa criticizes Bon's vague origins, hinting that his mysterious lineage not only skirts a well-

established patriarchal system but also prevents a confirmation or denial of his racial “pedigree.” Indeed, Faulkner implies it is quite possible that Bon’s mother, Eulalia, selected the “creolized, transnational port city” of New Orleans when she emigrated with her son, as it was the one urban American location where it would be easy for free, light-skinned people of color (like Eulalia and Bon) to take advantage of the city’s more “elastic conceptualizations of race” (Campbell 47). This is, of course, a fear that haunts all the narrators who contribute to *Absalom, Absalom!*: that their white community could be invaded by a “masquerading Other” and that, ultimately, that Other could taint or “infect” their carefully policed family trees with even the slightest drop of “vampiric,” black blood.

For these narrators, particularly Quentin and Shreve, the likelihood that Bon could perpetrate such racial “infection” throughout Mississippi is increased significantly as a result of his ties to New Orleans, a city renowned for its use of *plaçage*. This system, as Mr. Compson explains to Quentin, was one in which interracial liaisons were established between white New Orleanian men and quadroon or octoroon women and subsequently “contracted and solemnized” through the rituals of special balls (Campbell). Mr. Compson can only imagine what Henry experienced following his friend, Charles, to that “foreign and paradoxical” city of New Orleans and after discovering Charles’ legal and openly acknowledged marriage to an octoroon woman—one Henry would almost certainly call a whore (118). However, Mr. Compson also imagines Bon’s likely retort: “Not whore. Don’t say that. In fact, never refer to one of them by that name in New Orleans: otherwise you may be forced to purchase that

privilege with some of your blood from probably a thousand men” (118). For Henry and Mr. Compson, Charles Bon’s recognition of this “mixed” relationship and his willingness to draw blood in its defense is patently horror-inducing; for Faulkner, however, Charles’ affair with the octoroon woman in New Orleans is no more disturbing than the many interracial couplings that were already occurring with great frequency in Mississippi. It is white masters like Sutpen, he suggests, who come off as the true “vampiric” monsters given their history of raping slaves and enchaining their own “mixed-blood” offspring.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond disrupting the white patriarchal establishment with the taint of black blood, however, the narrators also attempt to configure Bon as threatening because he, like the vampire, does not appear to observe the dictates of heterosexuality that are crucial to the upkeep of that system. Somewhat like Bela Lugosi, Bon is described “lounging in one of the silk robes the like of which the youth had never seen before and believed only women wore” (253)—exuding a feminine persona that, according to Erin Campbell, reflects *Absalom, Absalom’s!* description of New Orleans itself: “a little femininely flamboyant...opulent, sensuous, [and] sinful” (87). Faulkner had indeed spent a significant amount of time visiting New Orleans, and in a series of sketches he published in 1925, describes the city as a “courtesan”—one “whose hold is strong upon the mature, [and] to whose charm the young must respond” (49). For Campbell, Faulkner’s writings on New Orleans are a clear precursor to his portrayal of the

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<sup>57</sup> Consider Clytie, for example. Though, biologically, she is the daughter of the plantation owner, Sutpen, she is nonetheless made to work as a slave to her father and siblings because of her mother’s skin color and station.

seductive Bon, a character who easily lures in generations of the Sutpen family—male and female alike—and brings with him to Mississippi a sense of “the theatricality of gender” that is celebrated in the masking and cross-dressing of many New Orleans festivals (Steeby 156). Indeed, *Absalom*’s narrators perceive Bon’s “disguise” as functioning within a number of interconnected realms: he masks his blackness to pass for white, his lineage to pass for a lawful fiancé to Judith, and perhaps even his sexuality when he pursues both Judith and the octoroon woman in lieu of declaring openly his affection for men, specifically his brother Henry. Thus, as a man “whose racial status potentially defies strict black/white binaries and who can be read as queer,” Bon clearly “poses the ultimate threat to the reproduction of a “white” Sutpen line, the “white family writ large” (Steeby 153).

In order to convey more fully that (perceived) threat to the white, Southern family, Faulkner and the novel’s narrators again rely on vampiric conventions, portraying the racial and sexual threat that Bon poses as a form of disease, specifically yellow fever. As Moore notes, yellow fever has often been associated with vampirism in folklore, history and literature (65), and the coughing up of black blood in the final stages of the disease supposedly “provided the key evidence that he who had yellow fever must be a vampire because of his ingestion of blood” (66). It is important to note, then, that both Charles Etienne (Bon’s son with the octoroon woman) and Judith—who attempts to take Charles Etienne into Sutpen’s Hundred and raise him as white—succumb to yellow fever by novel’s end, suggesting that neither is able to uphold the ruse of whiteness after being “infected” by Bon’s partial blackness. The dying Henry,

too, is described in such a way that suggests he perishes from the fever: his face, wasted and “yellow,” providing bodily evidence that he has forsaken his birthright after following Bon to the imagined source of the disease, New Orleans. Unable to produce his own white heir to the Sutpen line, Henry reluctantly comes home to die, knowing that Clytie and Jim Bond, his father’s only remaining descendants, are—like Bon—a product of “mixed-blood” relationships.

To read Quentin and Shreve’s account of the Sutpens’ tale, it certainly seems that Bon is responsible for vampirizing both the family and the surrounding Jefferson community, especially given their comments about the last of his (and Sutpen’s) remaining heirs: Jim Bond. Quentin explains that as he first enters Sutpen’s Hundred with Miss Rosa, he observes standing in the hall a “hulking young light-colored negro man...his arms dangling...[with] nothing in [his] saddle-colored and slack-mouthed idiot face” (386-7). When Rosa sees this man, Quentin notes that her already tallow-hued countenance suddenly possessed “some still profounder, some almost unbearable quality of bloodlessness” (387): in other words, it is as though this “idiot negro” is responsible for having drained her. The ailing Quentin, too, seems deeply affected by Bond’s appearance, and when Shreve points out—“You’ve got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you can’t catch him and you don’t even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you’ve got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes” (395)—the shaking Quentin must confirm this is the case, unconvincingly asserting from the confines of his “tomblake” dorm room that he does not hate the South (395).

It is not merely the bellowing “creature” Jim Bond, however, that frightens Quentin so: it is that he has become “the scion, the heir, the apparent (though not obvious)” (387) to the Sutpen family. It is the possible fruition of Shreve’s prediction: that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won’t show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (395)

For Quentin and the novel’s narrators, this is a terrifying thought: even though he may have fled Sutpen’s Hundred, the “howling” Jim Bond will “not diminish nor even seem to get any further away” (392). It is also important to note, however, that neither does the description of Jim Bond and his flight foretell of a bright future for those “mixed-blood” individuals who have begun to populate the South. Reduced to “idiocy,” Jim no longer enjoys the “good” life that his grandfather’s last name implied—he has, it is implied, been returned to a sort of “bond”-age.

I do not mean to suggest that Charles Bon (or his descendants and “victims”) is for Faulkner the same vampiric individual that he is for the novel’s narrators, and this distinction becomes more apparent in the treatment of Bon’s headstone. When visiting Bon’s gravesite with his father, Quentin notes the inscription: “Charles Bon. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Age 33” (198). If this note is accurate, as Noel Polk observes, Bon “cannot possibly be Sutpen’s part-black son from the Haitian marriage” (99). Polk



theorizes that Judith, who put the stone in place and wrote the epitaph, may simply assume that Bon is from New Orleans. On the other hand, she may wish to continue hiding Bon's Haitian origins from posterity—a possibility that seems even more likely given that her family and community think him a “vampire.” But in noting that Charles Bon was thirty-three at the time of his murder, the reader is encouraged to look for a certain sense of possibility in the plight that Charles Bon has undertaken. Though crucified as a monster for his attempts, Bon is—for a time—able to gain mobility across imagined Southern boundaries of family, race, and gender; and the promise of this achievement, Faulkner suggests, is one that could quite possibly be the South's salvation.

### *Interview with the Vampire*

With the publication of Anne Rice's hugely popular *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976, the vampire became firmly established as a fixture of New Orleans. When asked in an interview why she decided to place her vampires there, Rice explained that it was not only because she grew up in New Orleans. Rather, she felt this “grim, beautiful, sensuous, crowded, dirty, squalid, atmospheric, [and] charming” city would be the ideal location for her protagonist, Louis, to remember his Gothic childhood since, she contends, it is “really haunted.” Rice speaks of a “melancholy” and “lassitude” to New Orleans that is unique and notes that it seems more like a Caribbean or “third world city” than one that is actually American (Mulvey 180). Rice—like Faulkner—is interested in

New Orleans as a city whose mixture of cultures and ethnicities can accommodate the similarly “hybrid” vampire. And yet, the vampire protagonist of Rice’s novel differs significantly from Faulkner’s Bon in that while he identifies as creole, his “otherness” is initially perceived as a source of empowerment rather than shame.

It is possible to register Louis’ pride in his heritage, in part, because Rice’s novel is told from his perspective. Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel in which the protagonist is construed by the narrators as vampiric *because* of his suspected foreignness, *Interview* allows the reader to access the vampire’s feelings about his origins directly, without outside commentary. However, it is important to note that Louis is also significantly less susceptible to prejudice because he is a white man who hails from France, and his ethnicity does not link him immediately to a race of people that, in 1791, were already firmly entrenched in the American system of slavery.<sup>58</sup> This is, perhaps, why critics have failed to address the importance of race to *Interview with the Vampire*—because Louis, though a self-proclaimed “Louisiana creole,” primarily identifies as white. As I will argue, however, Rice attempts to establish connections

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<sup>58</sup> As Robin Cohen explains,

The US South, and more particularly New Orleans, provides a rich array of contrasting experiences of creolization. There, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people of mixed ethnic backgrounds maintained a precarious intermediate status, distancing themselves from the black parts of their origins but not being accepted by polite white society. In fact, the social struggle for status revolved precisely around the expression “Creole.” A section of whites determinedly continued to describe themselves exclusively as “Creole” and authenticated this claim by referring to the original sense of the word, i.e. that they were proud descendants of French and Spanish settlers, but born in the New World. . . . The “white Creoles” sent their children to Paris to study if they could afford it, continued to speak a version of French and lionized French culture. However, their snobbery did not extend to their sexual practices where many males found black or so-called “light” or “yellow” mistresses, setting them up in the French quarter of New Orleans in bijou houses of their own. Descendants of such liaisons were Creoles, or “black Creoles,” who were augmented by people of purer black origin, who had nonetheless made a cultural shift into French New Orleans society. (11-12)

between Louis and the novel's Afro-Caribbean slaves, both in order to elicit sympathy for the limitations that Louis's vampirism imposes upon him *and* to emphasize the great danger that this vampirism (in this case, a metaphor for his status as white plantation owner and a queer man) poses to the larger Southern community.

From the novel's beginning, the vampiric aspects of Louis's identity are tied to his role as a slave master. The owner of an indigo plantation just outside of New Orleans, Louis reveals that he was intimidated by his slaves' "very black" African appearance and "foreign manner," and he "thought of them as childlike savages barely domesticated by slavery" (28). It seems little coincidence, then, that Louis's first victim is a slave at his most vulnerable: a runaway, naked and urinating, who is utterly unequipped to ward off his vampire attacker/master. Even Louis's vampire daughter, Claudia, enjoys her first meal as a vampire from the neck of a young slave boy, draining him until just before the point of death (93). And yet, Louis is also very frightened by his slaves: their "African songs...made the fields exotic and strange" (49); they could speak both in "African tongues" and French patois; and they held many superstitions, traditions, and secrets. Most terrifying of all is Louis's suspicion that his slaves are more intelligent and aggressive than he first believed—a theory that proves true when, after they detect Louis' secret identity, the slaves resolve to destroy him and his creator, the vampire Lestat.

Under Lestat's lacking tutelage, Louis is led to believe that vampirism provides access to great power with unmatched physical strength and heightened senses. However, Louis begins to sense almost immediately that his new, monstrous condition

exposes him to persecution and oppression in ways that, before, were totally foreign to him. When, for example, a slave catches a glimpse of Lestat's glinting fangs, Louis is able to kill him before he can report the sight to the others; this murder puts Louis at risk, however, and he must burn his plantation to the ground in order to prevent a mass slave revolt. Given that he is already so sensitive about losing his position of power as master of Pointe du Lac, it is doubly disturbing for Louis to discover that his own maker, Lestat, understands vampirism itself as a system of slavery. As he tells Louis on one occasion, vampires are "jealous of their secret and of their territory; and if you find one or more of them together it will be for safety only, and one will be the slave of the other, the way you are of me" (83). Horrified by Lestat's claim that vampires can increase only through slavery, Louis attempts to deny his subservience, "but even as [Lestat] spoke, [Louis] realized [he'd] been his slave all along" (84). Goaded by his vampire "daughter," Claudia's, similar claim about his slave status, Louis resolves to flee New Orleans and seek out other vampires—more "civilized" beings who live by codes of freedom, community and ethics.

Just as Shreve and Quentin look to Bon's cultural roots in an attempt to pinpoint the first "vampire" and, thereby, account for Quentin's illness, Louis hopes to find answers about his own vampirism by traveling to his birthplace. But whereas Shreve and Quentin view Haiti as the source of the vampire's threat, Louis presumes Europe, and specifically France, will be the true site of vampire knowledge—the origin of his kind's "civilization." While Louis cannot remember France from his childhood, he notes that "it had a hold over [him] which was as powerful as the hold France can have

on a colonial” (141). He speaks and reads French and recalls feeling a great sense of anger when Napoleon sold the colony of Louisiana to the United States. In sum, he feels he has “been shaped by Europe more deeply and keenly than the rest of Americans” (148) and anticipates that he will only come to understand the true nature of the vampire by visiting Paris: the “mother of New Orleans” (203). In New Orleans, conversely, Louis notes that something “savage and primitive” always seemed to threaten his “sophisticated” life from within and without (203), and—as if to confirm the fears of *Dracula*’s Victorian readers about the “savage” Eastern Other—he reports that his quick trip through Transylvania uncovers only mindless and savage vampire-like creatures with “wagging, bovine heads” and “rotted, ragged clothing” (195). Paris, however, is a very different story. The city of his birth brings Louis a “rush of pleasure...that was extraordinary, a relief so near to well-being that [he is] amazed” (203). Here, he is almost able to forget the savageries of vampirism, “the damned and questing preternatural thing that doted on mortal skin,” and enjoy this city “as vast and indestructible as nature itself” with its galleries, theatres, cafes giving birth to “genius and sanctity,” philosophy and the finest art. “Darkness” does not exist here, according to Louis (205)—this is a universe of “light,” “whole and entire unto itself” (204).

After such a white-washed initiation into Paris life, it comes as little surprise that when he *does* finally meet a group of French-European vampires, Louis’s initial impression of them is tinged by his appreciation for the city in which they live. He marvels especially at their power—bodily and otherwise—(237), their intelligence (235), their riches and resources, and—most of all—the startling whiteness that makes them,

like Louis himself,<sup>59</sup> seem to be statues chiseled from marble (237). It is only a matter of time until Louis has fallen in love with the leader of these vampires, Armand. In doing so, however, he ignores those “darker,” vampiric aspects of Armand’s character about which others, especially his vampire daughter Claudia, attempt to warn him.

It is telling, for example, that Louis’s first leisurely observation of Armand and his community takes place at the Theatre de Vampires, a space where vampires make a show of murdering a civilian for the viewing pleasure of an oblivious Parisian audience. This scene is almost overwhelmed with images of whiteness. The young female victim is “enshrined by a voluminous mane of golden blond hair” and has a countenance as “finely chiseled as the face of a marble Virgin” (219). When she is disrobed before the kill, Louis and the audience are in thrall to her “petal-pink shoulders” and “pale, flawless skin” (222), and—even after her death—Louis cannot stop remarking on the girl’s “very white” appearance (225). Armand, the vampire who orchestrates this killing, is described as similarly remarkable for his whiteness—his white hand shining against the victim’s naked body and her throat gleaming against his own luminous white cheek (224). As Doane and Hodges have argued, Louis experiences “intense pleasurable feelings” in response to this show of “sadistic power” (427), and even though he has travelled to Paris in an attempt to escape the master/slave dynamic that Lestat insists defines vampirism, the headiness of this theater performance—much like headiness of Louis’s role as plantation master—leads him to identify with the victimizer, Armand. The act of killing here is quite real; however, staging this power-play within the context

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<sup>59</sup> When the interviewer first meets Louis, he exclaims “dear god!” upon glimpsing the utter whiteness of his skin—skin so white that he appears to be sculpted from “bleached bone” (6).

of the theater allows Louis to understand it from a sort of remove, and his repeated observations about the matched whiteness of the vampire and girl seem, strangely, to reassure him of her ability to consent to such an act. Initially, Louis describes the scene with a sense of anger that the girl has been rendered helpless in the grip of the vampires (222); however, his impassioned response to Armand's feeding gradually inflects his perception of the scene, and Louis begins to speak in terms suggesting the girl has assented to and even yearns for Armand's embrace. As the performance draws to a close, for example, Louis implies that the girl's body inclines toward Armand as she gives over to him: arching her back, enfolding his neck, and even allowing her hair to stroke Armand's white hand (224). Ultimately, instead of reacting with horror, this murder in the Theater of Vampires "impels Louis toward a homoerotic relationship with Armand" (Doane and Hodges 427) that is based in an admiration of his (white) beauty and (sadistic) power.

It is important to note, however, that Rice portrays this beautiful young woman, the unwitting star of the vampires' show, in a manner that immediately invites comparison between her character and Claudia's, implying to the reader what the victimizer and victims' shared whiteness otherwise prevents Louis from acknowledging: that vampirism, almost without exception, involves abuses of power and, often, results in victims' enslavement. The most obvious similarity between the two characters is, of course, their physical beauty and stunning blonde hair. Just as Santiago, one of the vampires starring in the show, tells the young girl that her beauty is a gift to him and the other vampires, Louis and Lestat regard Claudia as their personal toy and as a means to

salvage their broken relationship; they refer to her as a doll on countless occasions and take great pleasure in dressing and playing with her. It is also little coincidence that when Louis later decides to leave Claudia for Armand, he entrusts her care to Madeleine, a woman who works as a doll-maker.

Similarities between Claudia and the girl are also evident in that both are perceived by their victimizers as childlike in appearance/demeanor. Although it is apparent that the nameless girl has already developed a woman's body (with breasts and pubic hair), Louis insists on two occasions that her appearance is very much like a child, and also notes repeatedly the childlike quality of her speech; her soft whispers—fragile, light, and lilting—suggest to him that she is afraid even to raise her voice. In much the same way, Louis is surprised to learn after many years of living with the often “mute” Claudia that, since he and Lestat turned her into a vampire at the age of five, she has matured into an adult both mentally and emotionally and has come to resent her creators for determining her fate.<sup>60</sup> Lorna Jowett argues that Claudia, utterly reliant upon her father and “husband,” for support, permanently trapped by her “stunted” body, and ultimately rendered physically impotent, becomes a metaphor for all women within systems of patriarchy who are treated as children by the world around them. Given these parallels, it is little surprise, then, that Claudia will ultimately meet the same fate as the victimized woman in the theater: violent death as an object of exchange between male vampires.

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<sup>60</sup> After killing Claudia's biological mother, Louis and Lestat turn Claudia into a vampire by feeding upon her—effectively condemning her to eternal life in the body of a five-year old child.



Because Claudia can identify so closely with the victim in the theater production, she is also more attuned to the ways in which the French vampires, led by Armand, are propagating the same kinds of abuse and enslavement that Louis fled in New Orleans—a truth that she attempts to impart to Louis as his relationship with Armand develops. She insists to Louis that Armand treats as a slave the boy from whom he feeds, and she anticipates that he wants to fill the role of “master vampire” for her (and perhaps even Louis) as well; yet, Louis will not hear Claudia’s criticism, insisting that she simply cannot understand his relationship with Armand (250). An important incident occurs shortly afterward, however, that begins to alter Louis’s point of view: a meeting with Armand in which he warns Louis not to reveal his Louisiana origins to any of the other vampires in the Theatre. This statement is important because, until this point, Louis has insisted to himself and the reader that Paris, with all of its culture and beauty, is his true home. After speaking with Armand, however, Louis notices that he begins to let the darker paths swallow him, “as so often the streets of New Orleans had done” (256), until they become “amorphous.” Soon after, Louis encounters in the fog a drunk and adoring man who insists on painting Louis’s portrait. Though Louis tells the painter to beware, the drunken man will not hear it, uttering a litany of words meant to retain Louis and give the illusion of understanding Louis’s English. Tellingly, one of the man’s words, “bones,” causes Louis to think of the shallow graves in New Orleans where bones are “put in chambers behind the sepulcher so that another [body] can be laid in that narrow plot” (256). It seems Louis realizes at this moment the relationship between this New

Orleans burial ritual and Armand's two-fold intention: to replace Claudia as Louis's lover and to use Louis in the place of his current slave boy.

This new understanding makes Louis cry out in anger at the painter, and he gashes the latter's throat; before he can retreat from the scene, however, Louis notices on the canvas the painter's still-unfinished sketch: "a series of bold black lines" that in spite of their simplicity seem to "perfectly" make up his face (258). In this painted expression "there is nothing of horror"; instead, Louis's eyes gaze out from the canvas with "a mindless innocence" and "expressionless wonder," that represents the "overpowering craving which [the painter] had not understood" (258). There can be no coincidence, of course, that the language Louis uses here to describe his portrait bears great resemblance to the terms he (mistakenly) uses to describe both his slaves and Claudia as innocent and child-like. This moment in the novel is an epiphany to Louis, suggesting not only that a life of vampirism within the Theatres de Vampires threatens to subjugate Claudia (and, in ways, Louis) as slavery once did the Africans condemned to work on Pointe du Lac but also that Louis, like his slaves, is—to a certain extent—capable of resisting established power structures.

When Louis first sees the sketch, he fears that what remains unexpressed is his self-serving, bloodthirsty and controlling vampire nature; indeed, several key events following the painting incident seem to affirm his theory, including Claudia's request for a new vampire "mother." She is furious that Louis—"idle, blind" parent that he is—begrudges her a caretaker in the face of their impending separation and resents that, having snatched her from mortal hands "like a monster," Louis still understands nothing

of her suffering (261). Claudia's tirade finally makes clear to the now-remorseful Louis that he has essentially enslaved his daughter for the past seventy years, and his self-loathing is only deepened when Claudia's theories about Armand's possessive nature prove true and she is murdered at Armand's hands. But Rice further connects Louis's plight as a vampire to those of his former slaves when he returns to the Theater of Vampires following Claudia's death and burns it. This act, I wish to suggest, indicates that the imperceptible quality Louis shares with the Afro-Caribbean slaves surpasses bondage and oppression; he shares also a sense of resilience or fortitude drawn from his experiences as a transnational.

The burning of the theater is significant to Louis's budding sense of transnationalism in various ways. In one, it destroys with the Parisian vampires the notion that Louis could live a "pure" or "cultured" life in France, exonerating him from the evils of vampirism. In another, this incineration of the Theater of Vampires is a counterpoint to the burning of Pointe du Lac, or Louis's Louisiana origins (as both vampire and slave master), and, in this sense, represents his rejection of a binary understanding of good or evil, superior or inferior, and "light" or "dark." It is fitting, then, that Louis does not continue living in Paris or return to plantation life in the Louisiana countryside; rather, he travels back to the "sweet" yet "sad" city of New Orleans. Early in the novel, Louis describes New Orleans as a city unlike any other in America. He remarks that it is "filled not only with the French and Spanish of all classes...but [also] with immigrants of all kinds" (39) as well as the "Indians," Americans, and other planters. Louis observes that there weren't only "the black

slaves...but the great growing class of the free people of color, those marvelous people of our mixed blood and that of the islands, who produced a magnificent caste of craftsmen, artists, [and] poets” (40). And “drifting through all, through this medley of language and colors, were the people of the port”—sailors bringing in and exporting goods, their ships drifting like ghosts along the waters of the Mississippi (40). It is this mixture or “creolization” of cultures and people to which Louis returns to achieve balance—a space that Rice uses to complement the complexity of Louis’s identity as human and vampire, good and evil, enslaver and slave.<sup>61</sup>

Through the figure of the creole, Rice clearly attempts to explore aspects of the vampire as a racial “Other”; however, she seems even more interested in using both creolization and slavery as metaphors to discuss the effect of the vampire’s sexual Otherness on the traditional patriarchal family. Since the novel’s publication, many critics have responded positively to Rice’s adaptation of the pansexual vampire trope. While, for example, both Stoker’s *Dracula* and Faulkner’s *Absalom* are narrated from the perspective of individuals who abhor the vampire’s sexual Otherness, *Interview* is told by Louis himself, seemingly enabling the reader to empathize with his “vampiric” desires. While these include hunger-based and sexual attraction to both male and female figures, vampire and non-vampire, Rice’s novel is also remarkable for its attention to Louis’ desires to establish and participate in a nontraditional family unit. The loss of his biological brother is, after all, a primary reason that Louis decides to become a vampire,

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<sup>61</sup> Louis also welcomes a return to New Orleans because of the unique relationship that many of its citizens have with the afterlife. Louis once notes, for example, that tourists might misconstrue New Orleans’s Feast of All Saints as a celebration of death. However, he insists that the cleaning and whitewashing of graves is quite the opposite: “a celebration of the life after” (108).

and, for a time, Lestat manages to salvage their fraught relationship by “birthing” Claudia as a vampire child for himself and Louis. Even Louis’s later abandonment of Lestat for the Paris vampires seems motivated by a desire to procure for himself and Claudia a more suitable family unit.

This vampire family is, of course, very different from the traditional patriarchal household. As I have indicated, the vampire’s bite (penetration) and suck(l)ing of blood suggests that he fulfills both paternal and maternal roles in producing offspring. Furthermore, vampire children are not reproduced biologically, and, oftentimes, they are turned after participating in a sexual or erotic relationship with the vampire (or, as is the case for Claudia and Louis, the vampire child later becomes a romantic partner for her vampire creator). As a result, roles within the vampire family are frequently blurred or “incestuous.” To Candace Benefiel, the vampire’s family is promising as a “subversive alternative model to the nuclear family” (263). She points out that, for example, the parental relationship Lestat and Louis form with Claudia is “so close to the norm as to constitute a parody,” noting that even without a marriage license, “this ménage exists with apparent happiness and harmony for some sixty-five years, far beyond the length of most mortal marriages” (264).

The similarities between this nontraditional family and the metaphor of “creolization” that Rice employs throughout cannot be ignored. If, as Cohen suggests, creolization occurs when “participants select particular elements from...inherited cultures, endow these with meaning different from those they possess in the original cultures and then creatively merge these to create new varieties that supersede the prior

forms” (370), it seems that Lestat and Louis are doing something similar in terms of the way that they borrow structural and functional elements of traditional human families (e.g. “adopting” and raising a child) and adapt them to the lifestyle of a vampire (e.g. spoiling Claudia not only with toys and dresses but also a bevy of humans from whom to feed). But while Rice seems to endorse for Louis the “creolization” of cultures (and the compendium of his experiences in Louisiana and Paris) as a means of reassessing his white privilege/vampiric power, his experiences also seem to suggest (both to him and the reader) that forming a family and producing children is, for the sexually and racially “queer” vampire, a dangerous and often oppressive venture.

In Faulkner’s *Absalom*, Quentin and Shreve speculate that the “creole” Bon threatens his father’s white family with incest/the “taint” of black blood out of a desperate desire to be acknowledged.<sup>62</sup> Rice’s *Interview*, on the other hand, suggests (though perhaps inadvertently) that the “creole” Louis poses a threat to the white nuclear family because the “taint” of vampire blood he uses to turn his “daughter,” Claudia, is, in effect, responsible for her enslavement to vampirism, a fact supported by the final description of her murdered body as a “blackened burned thing” whose only remaining claims to white “purity” are the strands of yellow hair that continue to float on the pavement (304-5). It seems, then, that just as Faulkner relied on the metaphor of vampirism to discuss contemporary issues of miscegenation, Rice uses the vampire as a

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<sup>62</sup> According to Noel Polk, Faulkner took the novel’s title from 2 Samuel 18:33, “which records King David’s reaction to the death of his rebellious son: ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!’” (3). Polk notes that “while the biblical reference affirms the son, it is not apparent in Faulkner’s title alone who that son is—Henry, Bon, Quentin, or Sutpen himself” (3).

metaphor to address 1970's concerns regarding the long-term effects of "queer" parenting on the nuclear family.<sup>63</sup>

These concerns are registered most visibly in the novel's reactions to the absent mother figure.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note, for example, that the first question Claudia asks her new adoptive vampire parents is "where is momma?" And even though Claudia comes to regard Lestat and Louis as "fathers," she nonetheless continues to refer to herself as an orphan on several occasions. Rice also includes further evidence that the child is unable to recover from/adjust to the loss of her biological mother in those scenes where she kills and keeps the bodies of a mother and daughter (posed in death as Claudia and her mother were when Louis discovered them) and when she insists that, before his departure, Louis provide her with a woman to serve as a replacement mother and not a lover or companion (Jowett 4).

Clearly, Louis's bringing Claudia to Paris, the "mother" of New Orleans, is not enough to help her come to terms with her identity as a vampire. Her relationship with Louis/her vampire fathers fails, Rice, suggests, because Claudia needs a biological mother. That the "queer" vampire parents have failed to raise Claudia is reiterated in Rice's description of Louis's final return to New Orleans. When he arrives, he finds Lestat, about to feed from a small infant, and, in attempt to soothe it, he picks up the child that was "crying desperately now from fear as well as hunger" (327). Louis thinks for a moment that he has never brought death (or, in turn, vampire life) to anything so

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<sup>63</sup> See George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* for more information.

<sup>64</sup> It is important to acknowledge here that "the character of Claudia is commonly held to derive from Rice's experience of the death of her own daughter, aged five, from leukemia" (Jowett 2).

young and innocent, and holds it with an “odd feeling of sorrow” (328). But as much as he is in wonder of this baby who smiles up at him, he is unable keep the flies off the child’s face, insects that are swarming around the corpses of Lestat’s latest kills. As Louis’s own tears take the place of the flies on the baby’s face (332), he immediately decides to return the child to the house from which it was taken, leaving it unattended in its crib.

This melodramatic scene culminating Louis’s interview represents on many levels the failure of the queer vampire to parent: the failure of Lestat as father to Louis, the failure of Louis and Lestat as fathers to Claudia, and the nameless child a final reminder to Louis that he should not attempt ‘child’-rearing in the future. Somewhat paradoxically, the novel implies that while the “creolized” aspects of Louis’s identity are beneficial in undermining his outdated notions of racial (including both white and vampire) supremacy and making him more attuned to the wrongs of oppressive power structures, they also seem to equate Louis’s role as (queer) vampiric “enslaver” with his role as (queer) vampiric father. Though he feels compassion for children and wants desperately to atone for his mistreatment of Claudia, Louis’s decision to return the nameless child at the novel’s end implies that he, and perhaps Rice, feels the best way for the vampire do so is to forego parenting altogether, finding comfort instead in wandering New Orleans’ more forgiving streets.



*Dead Until Dark* and *True Blood* (Season One)

As in Faulkner's and Rice's earlier texts, New Orleans—a city that, thanks to the “whole Anne Rice thing” has become a “mecca” for the vampire (Harris 1)—functions as an imagined space, and less often as a primary setting, in Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. In fact, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*' protagonist and narrator, Sookie Stackhouse, notes that “if you threw a rock on a street corner [in New Orleans] you'd hit one” and remarks that the first hotel in the world to cater exclusively to vampires (with their special daytime needs) is conveniently located in the French Quarter. As is also case in *Absalom* and *Interview*, Harris's vampires are directly connected to New Orleans' role as a port city, and Sookie suggests it is no coincidence that the vampire version of AIDS runs rampant in Louisiana “with sailors and other travelers from many countries passing through” (19). In this way, New Orleans symbolizes for the characters in the novel both a site of promise (in that vampires are, for the first time, able to interact with the human public and consume goods and services that cater to them) and a site of fear (in which disease runs rampant as a result of sexual and racial intermingling).

Even though it is “not that long a drive,” Harris's characters tend to think of New Orleans as very distinct space from their tiny fictional city of Bon Temps where, until the beginning of the series, vampires have yet to self-identify. Indeed, both Harris and Alan Ball, who began adapting the novels as a television series for HBO in 2008, imagine Bon Temps in stark contrast to New Orleans: a stereotypical “backwoods” (and

backward) Southern town where the reactions of community members to the recently un-closeted, or “un-coffined,” vampire are meant to speak to related forms of oppression that minority groups such as African Americans and gay people continue to encounter today.<sup>65</sup> As critic David Kimmel has noted, *True Blood*’s effort to connect the types of oppression that various minority groups experience in the South becomes particularly obvious in the opening montage for Ball’s show. Here, several images establishing the Louisiana setting (e.g. a swampy bayou and an alligator) are interspersed with those that remind the viewer of the South’s history of civil rights struggles. Some of these, of course, pertain to race and racism: an “archival” shot of police carrying away a black protestor from a sea of apparently apathetic white onlookers, a burning cross, and even a little boy adorned in Ku Klux Klan regalia. Others allude to Bible Belt homophobia including a sign that reads “God Hates Fangs,” a variation of the Westboro Baptist Church’s famous slogan “God Hates Fags.” With this montage, *True Blood* plays up the “salient history of...racism....homophobia and xenophobia” that is specific to both Louisiana and the South more generally, redefining such “markers of difference” as vampiric in order to criticize ongoing social, political, and regional “antipathy towards the Other” (Rothermel 90).

Of course, questions about race are also raised by the title of Ball’s show, *True Blood*, which takes its name from the synthetic blood that vampires have recently begun to drink in Harris’s novels. True Blood is an alternative form of sustenance that many hope will not only allow vampires to come out of the coffin but that will also ensure that

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<sup>65</sup> Jackie Snow argues in a short piece for *The Atlantic* that the South is the most important character on *True Blood*, its antebellum mythology easily accommodating the supernatural vampire.

human and vampire species can coexist peacefully. As Nicole Rabin rightly notes, however, the very term “true blood” suggests that only a certain type of blood is “true” or “pure,” thereby establishing blood purity and miscegenation as some of the show’s primary concerns. Echoing other scholars, Rabin contends that vampires are the perfect metaphor for miscegenation since they “are literally mixing blood within their bodies like multiracials” (6). Furthermore, with the production/consumption of the synthetic True Blood, they are making even less clear the boundary between human and non-human since they are able to pass, or “mainstream,” enjoying many of the same rights and freedoms as their human counterparts.

Like Faulkner’s Bon and Rice’s Louis, the vampire—though a “racial” Other—is able to mainstream because, for the most part, he can pass as a human, revealing his vampirism only when he chooses to do so. The notion that it is possible to “perform” race is one that Ball memorably addresses in the show’s first scene as a pair of Louisiana natives excitedly pull off the road after noticing the local Grabbit Kwik’s sign, “We Have Tru Blood.” Inside, a shot of the convenience store’s television set shows an articulate and well-mannered woman, who is identified in the caption below as Nan Flanagan of the American Vampire League, engaged in passionate conversation with Bill Maher. “We’re citizens,” she exclaims. “We pay taxes. We deserve basic civil rights just like everyone else.” Flanagan’s statement might easily lead viewers to mistake her for a modern-day proponent of gay rights. It is only when Maher questions, “Yeah, but doesn’t your race have a rather sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people...for centuries?” that it becomes clear Flanagan self-identifies as

vampire. This moment of surprise is important in that it indicates that while “vampirism” is considered a racial category, its members cannot be distinguished from other mortals based on appearance alone.

As Maher and Flanagan continue to debate, the camera pans down to reveal a store clerk watching the program intently. A series of jump cuts linger on his thick-soled boots, the skull and bullet jewelry adorning his hand, the gaudy cross necklace atop his exposed and heavily tattooed chest, and the greasy black hair that frames the blood-shot eyes in his pale, grizzled face. After taking in this striking set of images, the viewer is *encouraged* to expect the worst as the couple enters the store to ask whether the clerk can hook them up with some “V,” or illegally obtained vampire blood, expressing surprise that the Grabbit Kwik counts “vamps” among its patrons. Indeed, the angry glare and Bela Lugosi accent tinting the clerk’s response suggests that the couple has made a dire mistake. But when the clerk suddenly erupts into laughter, falling back into his native Louisiana dialect, they are so relieved that they rudely dismiss the objections of a camo-clad “hillbilly” who claims to be offended by their comments. His language, clothing and voice all suggest that he is an “average” (human) citizen, but when the couple tells him to “fuck off,” “Billy Bob” responds by baring a set of fangs and threatening to eat both them and the vampire-impersonating clerk (Figure 4). The interaction, therefore, both confirms and complicates the understanding of vampires that the viewer has already formed in observing Nan Flanagan. While vampires may have some capabilities that distinguish them from humans, their appearance makes it effortless for them to blend into “mainstream society.” And though



Figure 4. A Bon Temps vampire “passes” as human. This scene from Alan Ball’s *True Blood* (2008) illustrates the performativity of vampirism and race, more generally.

their fangs might be considered a marker of “racial difference,” they have the power to expose and retract them at will—ensuring their immunity from identification as a racial Other as long as they so choose.<sup>66</sup>

What makes *True Blood* unique from other texts in the genre is that the vampire’s sexual partners, on the other hand, *do* exhibit tell-tale signs of participation in “mixed-race” relationships, their visible bite marks providing bodily evidence that often leads to their branding as “fang bangers” and their exclusion from the (primarily human) Bon Temps community. As is the case in much Louisiana Gothic, and Faulkner’s *Absalom*, “vampire”-human sexual interaction is considered dangerous in that it compromises the boundaries between established racial categories. Just as Quentin and Shreve imagine the horror that Henry must have experienced in learning of Bon’s “black blood” and cringe at his attempt to compromise Judith’s white purity, many of the citizens of Bon Temps frown upon the romantic relationship that protagonist Sookie develops with the town’s first “out” vampire. When she is introduced, Sookie is a virgin who won’t listen to any “dirty” sex talk at work; she is blonde, white, and perpetually outfitted in white clothing. Furthermore, she is a “descendant of the glorious dead,” a group of white Americans who trace their lineage back to white men who fought for the Confederates in the Civil War. Clearly a symbol of both racial and sexual purity, it is little surprise that many members of Sookie’s community want to protect her from the “contamination” that the vampire represents.

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<sup>66</sup> Alan Ball explains in the special commentary on the DVD of Season One that he wanted the fangs to look like “natural” physiology, suggesting that the “supernatural” is simply a deeper, more primal manifestation of nature.

Among the most vocal objectors to Sookie's vampire relationship is her brother, Jason Stackhouse, a character who—in the style of Faulkner's Henry—is both repulsed by the possibility of the vampire “sully[ing]” his sister/family lineage at the same time he is oddly attracted to the alternative sexuality that the vampire figure represents. The vampire race, as Kirsty Walker notes, is particularly threatening to human men “by virtue of their raw and often violent sexuality,<sup>67</sup> and *True Blood* offers the viewer a window into this threat, primarily through Jason” (112). Before vampires make their presence known, Jason is a veritable template for stereotypical Southern white machismo. An avid hunter and a regular road crew employee, Jason commands attention in Bon Temps in a giant black truck enhanced with decorative flames and extra-large tires. According to Sookie, Jason leads what many would call a sexual “dream life”; though he has had “countless” romances (so many that Sookie quips his bed has had as many occupants as a public toilet), there is nonetheless a “flutter of female hands to hair, blouses [and] lips” (Harris 30) anytime this self-assured womanizer begins to glance around. A highly sexualized man, Jason thus serves as “the perfect yardstick by which to measure the impact of vampires ‘coming out’ on human males” (Walker 115). Unfortunately for Jason, however, he finds that in his most recent sexual encounters, he seems to come up short.

In one scene closely following the Grabbit Kwik episode, for example, Ball shows a naked Jason positioned between the legs of a woman whose apparent interest in the dating game on the TV makes suspect her occasional sighs of pleasure. She is

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<sup>67</sup> Walker also connects the threat of the vampire to myths about black men's sexuality virility.

startled out of her stupor when Jason stops abruptly to point out two small puncture marks on her inner thigh, demanding “What the fuck is this?” At first the woman, Maudette, seems mildly embarrassed at his discovery, insisting, “It’s just a mosquito bite,” but when Jason openly accuses her of having sex with a vampire, she reveals that she was broke and agreed to it for a significant fee. Jason reacts with anger to this information and accuses Maudette of being a hooker, but his curiosity ultimately gets the best of him, and he asks her with interest what the experience was like. She concedes the sex frightened her because although she “likes it rough,” this sex was too rough for her. Jason is mildly shocked to learn about Maudette’s preferences—especially considering the “tame” approach he had been taking only moments before—but when she begins to elaborate that rough sex “won’t kill me, and even if it does, I won’t care, will I?” Jason seems so appalled by her newfound sexual daring (a common trope of the vampire genre) that he hastily slips into his pants to leave. Jason soon finds, however, that things are not much better with his next sexual partner, Dawn, whose neck also reveals the signs of intercourse with a vampire. This time, though, when he asks Dawn “How did you let something as nasty as that touch you?” she counters with the claim that it is the best sex she’s ever had. To make matters worse, Jason’s critical remarks (when coupled with his failure to maintain an erection) cause Dawn to kick him out of her house, declaring to the entire neighborhood that he has a “limp dick” before firing a few shots in his direction.

Jason attempts to respond to his lovers’ criticism by *emulating* the vampire’s sexual behavior—even though he initially finds it repulsive. Unfortunately, he models



the technique he observes from only one source—the vampire Maudette has videotaped. In the tape, Jason observes Maudette bound and dangling from an industrial hook in the ceiling as a vampire growls animalistically, thrusting behind her with such speed and violence that his vampiric “Otherness” is apparent to Jason, in spite of his otherwise human appearance. Though he would usually be uncomfortable with this style of sex, the tape presents a sort of challenge to Jason, and he recreates the scene with himself in the vampire’s place. Clearly mimicking the vampire’s technique, Jason nevertheless attempts to distinguish himself from the figure with the cruel tirade he directs at Maudette, calling her a “disgusting” and “sick little vampire hooker” before threatening to rip her throat out. This hyper-violent approach is one that he later repeats with Dawn, posing as a cloaked intruder in her home and calling her an “idiot slut” who puts out for vampires before implying that he plans to rape her. Although he identifies himself soon after, brushing off this charade as foreplay, it is apparent that Jason’s obsession with (and stereotyping of) the vampire’s “superior” sexuality makes him greedy to harness the figure’s power at the same time that he actively repudiates it.

While both Harris’s novels and Ball’s series are clearly interested in the sexual threat that the vampire poses to humans, Ball does much to emphasize how notions about the vampire’s deviant sexuality are connected to issues of race. In the novel, Harris notes that Jason never drank or did drugs; in Ball’s series, however, Jason experiments with V, or illegally obtained vampire blood, in an attempt to edge out his vampiric sexual competition. The local drug dealer informs Jason that ingesting only one tiny drop of “V” will enhance his sexual energy and stamina, a proposition that

Jason readily accepts. Admittedly, Jason's consumption of V does, in a way, accomplish the very thing that he most wishes to avoid: the "mixing" of human and vampire blood. However, Jason ingests vampire blood with the intent to dominate the vampire species and reclaim power, a goal that, as Joseph McCabe rightly notes, readily calls to mind the methods used to victimize, dehumanize and commodify African Americans in the antebellum South. It seems almost fitting, then, that Jason, in his greed to maintain social/racial/sexual supremacy, overdoses on the drug—a mistake resulting in a case of priapism so extreme that he must be hospitalized and drained of blood, a perpetual victim of "vampirism."

Ball incorporates this lighthearted scene as a somewhat gentle criticism of Jason's attempted appropriation and commodification of the already-marginalized vampire community. However, both Harris and Ball note that such ideology can have significantly more negative consequences than "gout of the dick." As Jason becomes more addicted to "V," for example, he also becomes less lucid; and when all of the "bitten" women Jason has slept with (including both Maudette and Dawn) as well as Jason's own vampire-friendly grandmother begin to turn up dead, Jason cannot be sure that he was not responsible for their murders, a common "flipping of the vampire figure as Other, whereby humans have the potential to be as vampiric as their vampire peers" (Elliott-Smith 147). Though Jason is ultimately cleared of these crimes, Sookie notes that it was "fascinating" to see the shame he experienced in the meantime and suggests that it would be "a long while before Jason's assurance, that golden certainty that had

made him irresistible, returned to his posture and face and his speech.” In fact, “maybe it never would” (219).

With the unbridled hatred that Jason exhibits for vampires at the novel’s/season’s beginning as well as his insecurities about the risk vampires pose to white patriarchy, Jason certainly seems a likely murder suspect; however, it is important to explore further why the novel and show identify Jason’s Cajun friend, Rene Lenier, as the killer, since he—a “multicultural” and “multiracial” figure like the vampire—is almost *assumed* to represent a harmonious blending of peoples and cultures. The term “Cajun,” as Irene Alonso explains, is one that actually predates “Louisiana Creole” and was used historically to describe “a group of French Canadians expelled from Acadia by the British in the mid-eighteenth century” (3). This group then settled in the area of Louisiana known as bayou country, and when King Louis XIV gave New Orleans to Spain in 1762, they contributed to the development of a “Creole” culture consisting of “French and Spanish families born in the New World” (Alonso 3). Both terms thus refer to a person with “foreign” origins who, in addition to becoming localized, has begun to take on what Robin Cohen calls “local color”—that is, “a figurative and emotional relationship with the local landscape in addition to a social and sometimes sexual relationship with the local people” (Cohen 5).

Rene personally embodies such a relationship as a new citizen in Bon Temps whose heavy Cajun dialect marks him as (a former) outsider; however, he also begins to promote a similar assimilation between humans and vampires. Though he initially expresses some skepticism about vampires, by season’s end Ball shows him encouraging

Sookie to date her vampire boyfriend and reassuring his girlfriend that it will be fine to leave her children in the care of said vampire; he even goes so far as to shake the vampire's hand. As the viewer and Sookie will soon learn, however, these gestures of friendship are a mask meant to cover Rene's slew of prejudices.<sup>68</sup> To be certain, in both the novel and television program, Rene is portrayed as a duplicitous individual, yet Ball takes additional steps to suggest that Rene's Cajun heritage is, in part, what enables him to maintain as a secret his murderous bigotry. For example, Ball establishes an alter ego for Rene, revealing that his real name is Drew Marshall and that he actually hails from "Bunkie," Louisiana. As the name of his hometown suggests, Drew Marshall is not really Cajun at all and has acquired the thick accent he uses throughout the majority of the season by listening to an instructional tape: "Cajun Dialect for Actors." As a self-proclaimed "coonass," Rene seems to express pride in his Cajun ethnicity, but the many possible etymologies of the word—including one that links it to a racial slur for African American—seem to reflect the similarly contradictory opinions that the character holds about vampires. A character like Jason has become a recognizable stereotype of Southern bigotry; however, Ball seems to warn viewers that in a society that is often described as post-racial and increasingly post-homophobic, a figure like the (ostensibly) antinormative, multicultural, and multiracial Rene may still pursue a sexually/racially normative agency. In other words, the mere existence of multiracials like Rene does not guarantee "racial justice, equality, or harmony" (Rabin).

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<sup>68</sup> It is perhaps important to note that Harris emphasizes Rene's (and not the novel's "actual" vampires') incestuous behavior when he kills and then has sex with the body of his "fangbanging" sister. As I have mentioned, this trend associating the vampire figure with incest is one that applies not only to Faulkner's male characters (including Bon, Henry and Quentin) but also Rice's Louis as well.

In the novel, Rene's life is spared by a forgiving Sookie who makes clear that she wants no more bloodshed. In the television series, however, Drew Marshall meets a very untimely end via beheading—a method of execution that, as Ruddell and Cherry note, happens to be a traditional form of slaying vampires (45). The true monster, Ball suggests, is not the figure that blurs cultures or race or who destabilizes sexual norms; rather, he is that individual who impedes such a process of “creolization.” It seems fitting, then, that while Faulkner's and Rice's narratives express concern about later generations of “vampire” children “enslaved” by their parents' mixed race or gender/sexual deviance, *True Blood* is most concerned that Rene, though human, will nonetheless produce an “evil” baby—a product of its father's unacceptable hatred.

As this sampling of texts demonstrates, there is a trend in Southern Gothic literature wherein tropes of vampirism are used to describe the supposed threat that Creole or Cajun figures pose to the established system of white patriarchy in the South. The vampire, these authors suggest, is a figure that itself embodies a sort of blurring of racial, gender and sexual identities and is therefore particularly well-suited to life in the port city of New Orleans where multiculturalism—and racial “passing”—thrives. However, it is important to note that the role of the “creolized” vampire undergoes significant changes throughout the years, reflecting social concerns unique to the time period in which each author is writing. For Faulkner, the vampire figure works primarily to comment on 1930s fears regarding miscegenation; Quentin and Shreve imagine Bon as a host for the “disease” of blackness, infecting the Sutpen family with his racial impurity and forewarning of a future in which mixed race individuals will only

be made miserable by their uncertain racial identities. Rice, on the other hand, writes with empathy about the experiences of the “creole” vampire, promoting as the key to his self-acceptance a greater immersion into the dual aspects of his cultural makeup. But where Rice’s 1970s text somewhat paradoxically conveys resistance to the vampire’s blurring of sexual roles, suggesting that such a trend imperils the children who are products of such “queer” relationships, Charlaine Harris’s *Southern Vampire Mysteries* and Alan Ball’s *True Blood* take quite a different approach. These contemporary texts acknowledge that race and sexuality are becoming less and less stable categories, a development making it possible for the vampire to “come out of the closet.” With the increasing visibility of multiracial and multicultural figures, however, Harris—and especially Ball—warn readers/viewers not to assume that acceptance has become the norm. One must beware of a new “vampire” figure—those “monstrous” humans who continue to impose with violence the boundaries between the racial/sexual/gendered self and the Other.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This project responds to a resistance among certain authors and scholars to the use of the term “Southern Gothic” as a descriptor for literature, television, and film about the American South. Although the “Southern Gothic” has long enjoyed popularity among more “mainstream” audiences, I have argued that an academic abandonment of the term is inadvisable as scholarship has not fully theorized the significance and usefulness of linking studies of the regional South to the Gothic as a genre. By highlighting the recurrence of specific Gothic themes in a variety of Southern texts published within the last eighty-five years, I have attempted to create a working re-definition of the term “Southern Gothic,” to demonstrate its applicability to a wide body of work, and to illustrate how the genre’s primary concerns have continued to evolve over time, often producing timely commentary on social and cultural issues pertaining to the intersections of gender, racial, and regional identity formation.

I do not mean to dismiss outright the various criticisms that have been levelled against both the genre itself and the use of the “Southern Gothic” label. Indeed, Patricia Yeager is right to suggest that Southern Gothic texts are often concerned (and perhaps even “obsessed”) with the past, as made clear by the host of decaying plantation homes and brutalized slaves that recur throughout the pages and scenes of later-twentieth century texts. In many instances, too, these texts include imagery and characters—e.g. ghosts, vampires, and other “freakish” monstrosities— that, as Eudora Welty points out, initially seem to have little bearing on real life. And, undoubtedly, the deliberate

placement and identification of these Southern relics and monsters within the context of the fictionalized South may run the risk of solidifying what Leigh Anne Duck identifies as the region's troubling reputation as America's "dark" and backward "Other."

Southern Gothic texts are also sometimes problematic in their representation of African American characters as marginalized figures whose primary and limited function is, as Toni Morrison suggests, allegories and metaphors for white American authors to talk about themselves and promote the "neutrality" of whiteness.

And yet, the Southern Gothic nevertheless has been consistent in providing timely and much-needed critiques of the brutal processes—enfreakment, entrapment, erasure, and demonization—used to marginalize gender, sexual and racial "deviants." It is a literary and filmic mode emphasizing how individuals are "Othered" and mistreated as supposed threats to the stability of the South's white patriarchal order (and, indeed, the nation more generally), and it strategically employs Gothic tropes to imagine pathways toward increased awareness, sensitivity, and revolution—especially for gender and racial minorities.

Admittedly, in their quest to promote social change, the texts participating in the Southern Gothic mode have made a habit of evoking the antebellum horrors of the region's past, even those with contemporary settings. I have argued that it is possible to account for the Southern Gothic's insistent revisiting of the past, in part, because the issues of racism and gender oppression that existed in the antebellum South have, to an extent, remained problems throughout the later twentieth-century and the present. And while many readers and critics do not want to entertain connections between prejudices



of the contemporary and antebellum South, others such as Theresa Goddu have embraced the Southern Gothic as a lens for helping to disclose the instability of the nation and region's self-representations, "resurrecting" what predominant cultural images would repress.

This does not mean, necessarily, that Southern Gothic texts are simply recycling the worn images of a slave-owning South and its decaying systems. In fact, I have argued that it is imperative to register the way that Southern Gothic tropes such as the "haunted" plantation have changed with time. The disintegrating former estates that appear in texts like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Kazan's *Baby Doll*, for example, are markedly different from the renovated (and later detonated) tourist destination in Percy's *Lancelot* or the string of ramshackle houses in Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*. Though all of these works use the defunct "plantation" as a metaphor for an outdated cultural system that bullies and entraps (white) women into limiting maternal roles, each takes a very different approach and tone in depicting this "Gothic" structure. Whereas Faulkner exhibits a sort of dismay for the downfall of the Compson home, mournfully attributing the lost and much-needed opportunities for maternal care to the Compson sons' obsolete expectations of "virtuous" women, the patch-worked and artificial buildings of Kazan's and Percy's later works take a more mocking approach to the Southern white patriarchy's desperate and often violent efforts to police white women's sexuality/maternity. And though no traditional plantation structure materializes in Allison's more recent text, Daddy Glen's obsession with recreating such a space in *Bastard out of Carolina* emphasizes that a dangerous sort of "property-owner

mentality” continues to hold sway in present-day expectations about women’s roles as unflinchingly devoted wives and mothers.

Even when Gothic tropes do not undergo any major outward transformation in Southern literature and film, they have been successfully revisited as a means of addressing changing social and cultural issues specific to both the regional South and the nation more generally. I note, for example, that the “vampire” has been a recurring figure in Louisiana-based Southern Gothic works from the 1930s, 1970s and 2010s, and while both the vampire’s concerns with the consumption of blood (as a metaphor for an “untainted” lineage or pedigree) and the Louisiana setting’s potential destabilizing of racial/gender boundaries have remained fairly constant themes in all three decades, Faulkner, Rice, and Harris have employed this regional/modal pairing in timely ways to address contemporary concerns including racial desegregation, the spread of the AIDS virus, and civil rights (including marriage) for gay individuals.

It may seem tempting to dismiss these super-/unnatural characters as irrelevant to significant or “real life” social concerns; however, this project demonstrates that recurring Gothic figures such as the vampire, ghost, and sideshow freak can be powerful metaphors for actual cultural issues, functioning as sites for authors and filmmakers to explore social anxieties about sexual, racial and regional “impurity” in an increasingly desegregated and increasingly “unexceptionalized” South. The ghosts in texts like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, for example, call attention to important “real-life” issues of race and gender identity construction, illustrating how enslaved African Americans and their descendants historically have been denied gender

and sexual subjectivity. And the host of grotesque figures in Southern Gothic texts, including the “man-woman” of Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* and the “woman child” of Truman Capote’s *Other Voices Other Rooms*, warn of the “freakish”—though very real—fate of individuals who deviate from the region’s gender and sexual norms, suggesting that the gender policing white Southern tomboys and sissies experience echoes the more extreme forms of prejudice, violence, and bodily disfigurement endured by their African American caretakers in the Jim Crow South.

In certain respects, the dilemmas of gender/sexual policing central to the texts I identify here as “Southern Gothic” are well-represented in the Gothic as a broader genre, especially their portrayals of young women facing the threat of confinement or violation within spaces ostensibly meant for their safety/protection (a theme that Ellen Moers has dubbed the “Female Gothic”). And yet, the Southern Gothic is identifiable as a distinct literary/filmic subgenre not only via its specific regional setting but also in terms of the way that this setting and its unique history of slavery and segregation makes gender and sexual oppressions inextricable from the region’s history of racial brutalities. I have already addressed here the work of authors like Ellison, Morrison, and Butler whose African American characters, (descendants of) slaves in the American South denied gender/sexual autonomy on the basis of their racial “Otherness,” find productive ways to “haunt back” from positions of invisibility. There is also a host of novels and films within this tradition that work simultaneously to destabilize the fixity of the region’s forcefully-entrenched racial categories and to highlight the constructedness of heteronormative gender roles—among them William Faulkner’s *Light in August*,

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*.

However, it is important to note, as well, a problematic strain within the Southern Gothic mode: the often-marginalized presence of African American characters.

African American characters are frequently made to assume “surrogate” roles in Southern Gothic texts as marginal presences that—while perhaps beloved by the author (see, e.g. Faulkner's Dilsey) or white protagonists (e.g. Harper Lee's Calpurnia)—are included primarily to speak to issues of white identity. Toni Morrison rightly argues that the fabrication of such “Africanist personas” often represents in white authors' fiction “the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (*Playing in the Dark* 21). This trend is especially evident in texts like Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll*, and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* where lesser-developed (often faceless/nameless) black characters only obliquely participate in or comment on the plot's main events. But while such characters do almost always serve as an allegory or metaphor allowing white authors to talk about themselves (or other white people) (Morrison 21), such discussions are not always in the interest of *maintaining* white neutrality. Indeed, the black characters in the three aforementioned texts tend to work as a sort of Southern Gothic “Greek chorus,” contradicting, warning against, or even openly mocking the oppressive intentions of the white patriarchy by calling attention to the violent processes used to maintain white patriarchal power.

I do not mean to imply that the subversiveness of African Americans in Southern Gothic texts should excuse the genre's tendency to marginalize them; indeed, the overrepresentation of white peoples in these works is highly problematic and does not

reflect the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of the regional South. And yet, as part of a genre concerned primarily with the toppling of oppressive power structures, it is oftentimes possible to read this racial imbalance as both a deliberate critique of hegemonic white patriarchy and a means of highlighting how white superiority has historically (and continually) been “narrativized” as a defining characteristic of the region. Southern Gothic novels like Donna Tartt’s *The Little Friend*, in particular, offer crucial insights into the way that stories about the region and its inhabitants are strategically shaped to make white power (much like heteronormative gender/sexual roles) seem invisible and “natural”—not an acquired position.

I would like to further suggest that ongoing studies of the genre would benefit from more extensive examination of how Southern Gothic texts work to destabilize notions about the American South as a discrete and stable geographical/cultural entity. As Scott Romine notes, there is no “real South”—only a “real”/South” comprised of transient and artificial terms that are themselves provisional and defined by specific cultural projects. And while, initially, it may seem that the aim of many Southern Gothic texts is to mobilize the South as a uniquely “Gothic” space in the interest of parsing out its racial and cultural issues from the rest of a more tolerant or civilized nation, it is also plausible to read many Southern Gothic texts as suggesting quite the opposite: that the boundaries delimiting the South as a discrete regional space are mythical, flexible, and narrative-based.

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