

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **THE BLACK INTERIOR: REPRESENTATIONS OF WORK AND FEELING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

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This dissertation traces tropes of black workers in order to recuperate the category of labor for literary studies. Following these tropes as they reappear suggests that representations of African American workers have not only had something to say about the stakes of labor as it pertains to social uplift and mobility but also the role of feeling and desire. We might think of these tropes as unveiling dialectics of "push and pull" forces that reside between the confines of the outside world and the soul. By examining tropes of black work in this way, *The Black Interior* expands materialist readings of labor to include the role of feeling and desire as first elaborated by W. E. B. Du Bois. George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss* (1935), William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949), and Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) use tropes of black work to reorient American consciousness toward the soul as the common root in the human rights pursuits that marked the twentieth century.

THE BLACK INTERIOR:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF WORK AND FEELING IN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

By

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*to my parents, their parents, and their gardens*

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## Black Work and Black Feeling: An Introduction

Yet the soul-hunger is there, the restlessness of the savage, the wail of the wanderer, and the plaint is put in one little phrase: "My soul wants something that's new, that's new." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Representations of sharecroppers have been powerful signs in the American literary imagination. Sharecroppers appear as "black reapers...sharpening scythes" in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). In "Reapers," Toomer fastens the imagery of production to a metaphor of morbid harvest.

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones  
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones  
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,  
And start their silent swinging, one by one.  
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,  
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,  
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,  
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

The richness of the poem rests in its tension. "Reapers" situates the mechanics of work—the alliterative sights and sounds of sharpening steel scythes on stones and "silent swinging"—alongside a peculiar mood. All is cloaked in an eerie calm as droning monotony meets the sudden shock of death. "Reaping" as a murder of sorts strangely disrupts the work of "reaping." The speaker concludes with a pair of images: a belly and a blood-stained blade. The casualties of reaping are a part of a casual "thing that's

done"—a dark, continuous process (3). The sharecropper figure operates in a space that is ambiguous and in-between.

"Reapers" raises questions about the constraints of work with natural resources, the costs of work on the land and on other animal bodies, and the uncertain question of what the worker becomes when folded into a mechanism that "comes to collect." Race is a lingering imprint among other physical and emotive registers that cast industrialization as "black" reaping in Toomer's poem. Black reaping not only speaks to the tax of such work upon the worker but also articulates other expenses. While the costs of black work are ambiguous in "Reapers," its power to injure the spirit is made more explicit in Arna Bontemps's "A Black Man Talks of Reaping" (1926). As the title suggests, "a black man talks."

I have sown beside all waters in my day.

I planted deep, within my heart the fear

that wind or fowl would take the grain away.

I planted safe against this stark, lean year.

I scattered seed enough to plant the land

in rows from Canada to Mexico

but for my reaping only what the hand

can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields  
 my brother's sons are gathering stalk and root;  
 small wonder then my children glean in fields  
 they have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit.

As one on the literary Left, Arna Bontemps's portrayal of sharecropping presents reaping as labor with no material return. The product of the speaker's work is neither a future nor an inheritance that his children might claim. The children, like seed spread across the Americas "from Canada to Mexico," are bound across borders by a shared, inherited condition. As a result of the inheritances of corrupt labor relations, they are left to merely "glean," or to pick up the residual pieces. While the speaker meditates upon his and the future generation's condition—a situation in which matters of color and oppressive labor are inextricably linked to poverty and resource isolation—he also makes a subtle claim for the need for a better feeling.

In the first stanza, the speaker's feeling appears as a deeply planted fear. By the final couplet, there is little resolution. The "children" of the younger generation are left to process the unresolved feelings that had plagued an older guard.

*The Black Interior: Representations of Work and Feeling in African American Experience* traces tropes of black workers in order to recuperate the category of labor for literary studies. I examine a previously overlooked constellation of literature that relies on tropes of black workers. I use tropes of black workers because they have functioned in literature as a placeholder and as a site of contest for social and political thought about a range of "Negro Questions" pertaining to the "problem" of an impoverished, throbbing

black mass. Following these tropes as they reappear suggests that representations of African American workers have not only had something to say about the stakes of labor as it pertains to social uplift and mobility but also the role of feeling and desire. We might think of these tropes as unveiling dialectics of "push and pull" forces that reside between the confines of the outside world and the souls of Americans throughout the twentieth century. By examining tropes of black work in this way, *The Black Interior* expands materialist readings of labor to include the role of feeling and desire as first elaborated by W. E. B. Du Bois.

*The Souls of Black Folk and the Common Ground of Feeling*

W. E. B. Du Bois opens *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) with a forethought: "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (xi). Here Du Bois addresses the "gentle" (and Gentile) reader by first gesturing toward the presence of "many things" that "lie buried."

For Du Bois, these buried "things" are entombed within laboring Black Belt bodies. He sketches these bodies in "Of the Black Belt." The vignettes figuratively draw individuals out of a black mass and out of the Black Belt landscape—the many "pieces of newly cleared ground" (157). Du Bois suspends each body before the reader. And these bodies have names. For example, "Here and there are black free-holders: there is the guant dull-black Jackson, with his hundred acres." Jackson says, "Look up! If you don't look up you can't get up" (154). And there is "that Luke Black, slow, dull, and

discouraged." Luke Black "shuffles" and "talks hopelessly. Why should he strive?" (155). There is Sam, one of the Bolton convicts "hopelessly in debt, disappointed, and embittered" (155). And finally, "Sears, whom we met next lolling under the chubby oak-trees" (157).

Happy?—Well, yes; he laughed and flipped pebbles, and thought the world was as it was. He had worked here twelve years and has nothing but a mortgaged mule. Children? Yes, seven; but they hadn't been to school this year,—couldn't afford books and clothes, and couldn't spare their work. *There go part of them to the fields now*—three big boys astride mules, and a strapping girl with bare brown legs. Careless ignorance and laziness here, fierce hate and vindictiveness there; these are extremes of the Negro problem which we met that day, and we scarce knew which we preferred (157 emphasis added).

Du Bois's portrayal of "these extremes of the Negro problem" speaks to the ways in which material black bodies are entrapped in material conditions (157). According Du Bois, these bodies become a spectrum of brown colors that comprise the Black Belt mass. These figures gesture toward different archetypes that reflect tropes of black workers—from the Booker T. Washington-esque Jackson, to the always already laboring Sam, to the deferent and shuffling Luke Black. These physical nature of these tropes even manifests in boys with mule-ish bigness and girls with naked legs. But the material body is only "part of them" (157).

The spectrum of Black Belt bodies contains feelings that are harder to name. Feeling, though "vague" and "uncertain," pertains to the "spiritual world" of the so-called black masses. They are key to liberating souls.

The exigencies of the spiritual world are introduced in the first chapter "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." Spiritual strivings hinge on an unasked question: "*How does it feel to be a problem?*" (43 emphasis added). Du Bois engaged the problem of the color line as a problem of feeling. For him, the poverties of material life bankrupt the richness of the soul. Double-consciousness is about the affect of race and its disastrous effects.

The feeling of double-consciousness plays out in "The Coming of John." It simmers throughout the story and comes to a fever pitch near the end. The black John swings and strikes the white John dead. As black John awaits his inevitable fate, he turns his "closed eyes toward the Sea" while the world whistles in his ears (203). We might think of "The Coming of John" as a prime example of Du Bois's attempt to reconcile the feelings of "suppressed artisans," or members of the so-called talented tenth, with the realities of material oppression. Du Bois would eventually disavow *Souls*, expressing regret for lifting the veil on black inner life for so little return. He would go on to espouse Communism and a more explicit materialist aesthetic, which are evidenced in *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

Since the veil premiered in *Souls*, tropes of black workers have continued do a lot of heavy lifting. As they uplift the social and political agendas that impact a wider community, they use the tensions between inner and outer turmoil that stir within the individual black bodies that Du Bois had introduced.

*The New Negro and the New Worker*

The trope of the black worker became increasingly prominent during the New Negro Movement of the 1920s. This era ushered in a wave of writing and thinking about how to best use representations of black life. In many respects the sensational dramas that played out between writers of the younger generation, including Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, and the older generation, figure headed by Du Bois, has obscured the common question of feeling that turns on the black-working folk.

This question of feeling was revisited in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," the Communist Party's Black Belt Nation Thesis, and Richard Wright's "Blue Print for Negro Writing."

Langston Hughes outlined the usefulness of literary representations of the "low down folk" in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). Hughes believed in the power of black folk representation. He felt it could inspire individual creative pursuits (1313). Hughes had claimed, "Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout." Folk provide, according to Hughes, "a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of standardizations" (1313). For Hughes, the power of black folk representation comes through an "ironic laughter mixed with tears" (1314). And Hughes celebrated writers like Jean Toomer for producing literature that "holds the heart" of black folk and the Black Belt within its pages (1314).

The idea of holding a "heart" speaks to the ability of the black working folk to strike the cords of feeling. Hughes further insisted that art utilize representations of them

to strike at the heart. It does so by dealing with "the life I know." "The life I know" is the life of black work.

Just two years after "Mountain," the Communist Party's Black Belt Nation Thesis (1928) appeared. It was "a body of knowledge and strategy struggling to politicize interest" in the Black Belt (Maxwell 161). As William Maxwell has shown, writers on the literary Left were confident that an engagement with the feeling of black workers within the Black Belt would inspire and reenergize labor struggles on both a local and global level.

On a local level, the Black Belt Nation Thesis sought to better incorporate members of the rural South into its labor struggle. On a global level it hoped to connect the political struggle of African Americans to an international working class (Maxwell 9, 165). These strivings manifest in Arna Bontemps's poem "A Black Man Talks of Reaping" and other works on the Left.

Richard Wright is a noted standard bearer. To be sure, during the Depression and through the WWII-eras Richard Wright's fiction became the hallmark of African American writing about black labor. His fiction has come to dominate the ways that we think about black labor representation. As Wright gazes upon his father in *Black Boy* (1945), black work and black feeling appear as warring forces.

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained

were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body . . .

From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him as was despair. As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope (34-5 ellipses in original).

Here, elevated feeling is curiously disembodied from the sharecropping father. Wright, alone, owns a free soul. Aroused by feeling, he stands erect and forever set against a much weaker version of himself.

Yet, Wright experiments with the location of the soul in ways that register with the considerations Du Bois and others found so urgently central to any true emancipation. Wright had suggested a way of reviving feeling in his seminal article "Blue Print for Negro Writing" (1937). As Wright suggests, "For the Negro writer Marxism is but a starting point" (1407). We see materialism as a starting point for additional interrogations in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). "Fire and Cloud" is a ripe example. Dan Taylor laments, "Seems like the white folks jus erbout owns this whole worl! Looks like that done conquered *everything*. We black folks is jus los in one big white fog" (160 emphasis in original). As Taylor mourns the impossibilities of material security and the difficulties of interracial labor cooperation in "Fire and Cloud," there is a momentary gesture toward feeling. "Yes, there had been something in those good old days when he had walked behind his plow, between the broad green earth and a blue sweep of sunlit sky; there had been in it all a surge of will, clean, full, joyful" (160). Moments of feeling that are

unveiled through Dan Taylor's reflections only appear in brief snatches; however, they speak volumes about the ways leftist writers have kept their sights on souls.

Like *Souls*, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," and the Black Belt Nation Thesis, Wright's essay called for art that would *move* its audience. The idea of moving audiences by unveiling feeling is key. A fuller appreciation for the role of black labor representation in the twentieth century literary imagination therefore requires careful attention to the "heart"—desires and feelings contained within the "souls" of black folk that had been so important to Du Bois.

Yet, Du Bois's spiritual strivings had been limited to the offices of men. While Du Bois interrogated feeling as men's business, the literary imagination has attempted to further disentangle feeling from relations of production and its many fetishized commodities. As the fetish of feeling is increasingly located within and without the titillations of bodies in the material realm, a fuller picture of the problems of women's work comes into view.

As I trace tropes of black workers, I owe a debt to seminal studies of labor representation and the literary Left. William Maxwell's *Old Negro, New Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (1999) and Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics And Form In U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929– 1941* (1993) locate the influences of the Communist Party's program for Black Nationalism and black labor representation on African American writers. *The Black Interior: Representations of Work and Feeling* looks toward what we might think of as a legacy of

leftist aesthetics that impresses itself upon the imaginations of black and white writers alike, some of whom were not decidedly on the Left.

This study also owes a debt to Paul Outka's *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008), which explores the making and remaking of race through and against the material realities of the Antebellum and Reconstruction-eras. William Conlogue's *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (2001) and Christopher Rieger's *Clear-cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (2009) also inform this study.

*The Black Interior: Representations of Work and Feeling* uses the novels and short stories that have not been previously placed in conversation. These works provide a more adaptive vision of the "first fruits" of black labor. This set does so by delving into matters of the psyche and the spirit. As a result, this body of fiction reveals that labor representation has not only responded to oppressive forces that come from without, but also has looked into the importance of forces that reside within.

Each chapter follows a chronological arc that begins with the Depression and continues through the end of the modern Civil Rights Movement. I use a different theoretical paradigm in each to explore the ways George Wylie Henderson, William Attaway, Eudora Welty, and Sarah E. Wright have used the intimacy of fiction to deploy the trope of the black worker. The paradigm in each chapter provides a frame that engages the ways tropes of black workers have become a vehicle that responds to the pressing social concerns of the twentieth century not only to uplift the social conditions

of poor workers but also to interrogate matters of the spirit, a predicament in which the reading audience is caught up as well.

### *Chapter Outlines*

#### *Chapter One – Cultivating Desire: Black Women's Work in George Wylie Henderson's Ollie Miss*

George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss* was published in 1935. In "Cultivating Desire: Black Women's Work," I focus "cultivated desire." The novel uses "cultivated desire" to address what it sees as a pertinent issue in its day: where poor black women might fit in following the New Deal Farm Security Act (1934), which largely marginalized black sharecroppers from work and resources. The trope of the black worker appears as a woman sharecropper named Ollie Miss. Using Ollie as a device, Henderson blends the methods of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and George Washington Carver to imagine an adaptive mode of labor that places agriculture for the soul, rather than for profits, at the center of the plantation space.

#### *Chapter Two – The Fire This Time: Affect and Pressure in William Attaway's Blood on the Forge*

As the US was gearing up to join World War II in 1941, William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* appeared on the literary scene. The novel uses tropes of black workers to consider questions of interracial class solidarity alongside an affect of pressure that I call "steel feeling." The characters Big Mat, Chinatown, and Melody Moss are black migrant steel men who trouble masculine working-class ideals. Attaway uses these tropes of black

workers to interrogate the military-industrial complex. By looking at its impact on masculine feeling, Attaway engages questions of agency and labor that reveal the ways in which workers become folded into a larger military industrial machine that feeds on a soul killing "hardening" of men.

*Chapter Three – The Boogie in the Bush: Jim Crow Hedge-emony in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples*

Eudora Welty's short story collection engages the dynamics of race and space on the cusp of the modern Civil Rights Movement. While black workers appear marginal in *The Golden Apples*, I argue that they "hold the heart" of it. Welty uses tropes of black workers in characters Plez Morgan, Twosie and Exum MacLain, and Juba to look at Jim Crow segregation through an allegory of the "hedge." Through workers movements and insights into the "hedge," a space in which the marginal becomes central, Welty reveals the intermingling of fear and desire. By giving such workers pride of place, Welty exposes the workings of a white double-consciousness that assigns its own inward jungle onto the "black" outside.

*Chapter Four—A Mess to Witness: Scenes of Abjection in Sarah E. Wright's This Child's Gonna Live.*

Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* appeared in 1969 at a moment when public policy had begun to marginalize black mothers. *This Child's Gonna Live* intercepts the exclusionary legacies of the New Deal's Aid to Families with Dependent Children program and the Moynihan Report. The trope of the black worker appears as Mariah

Upshur, an oyster shucker and mother. This trope is part of Wright's experiment with free-indirect discourse and the abject that comes as an allegory of "mess." "Mess" encapsulates a range of confining environments and gruesome imagery, including worms and human waste. The "mess" bears witness to the abjection of responsibility and kin across distancing lines that would separate them.

By using fiction to hold interiority in tension with the external world, George Wylie Henderson, William Attaway, Eudora Welty, and Sarah E. Wright reorient attention to the immaterial feeling of the material body. In so doing, they offer us a "second sight" into the depth and richness of black work in the American experience.

## Chapter One

### Cultivating Desire: Black Women's Work in George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss*

"What was work and sweat when . . . your  
soul, your very being, ceased to live and  
began to soar?"

George Wylie Henderson, *Ollie Miss*

During the Depression-era, many leftist African American writers used social realism to represent what they imagined as black work on the land. These materialist depictions were intended to illuminate the realities of sharecropping, including poverty, class struggle, racism, and hunger. Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* (1945) is a case in point. In one of its most poignant scenes, Wright remembers returning South after a long absence and gazing upon his father. Wright recalls discovering his father

standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands. . . . though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly different planes of reality. That day a quarter of a century later when I visited him on the plantation—he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection, his fearsome aspect of twenty-five years ago gone forever from him—I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me or the scalding experiences that had swept me beyond his life and into an area of living

that he could never know. I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body . . .

From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him as was despair. As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope (34-5 ellipses in original).

Wright's father appears assimilated into a barren landscape. The natural world, including seasonal changes, sun, wind, and rain, hold his body captive. The muddied overalls and hoe further amplify the social and material circumstances that suffocate his father's being and chain his body to the land. The phrasing "from the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him" underscores the paternal conditions of racialized capitalism. What's more, his father's life as a sharecropper is like an alternate universe, seemingly unconscionable to Wright. The father appears soulless—living in an existence without knowledge, consciousness, subjectivity, or desire. The poverty of desire in this passage is as striking as the material poverty. Wright only feels pity.

Depictions of oppressed labor like this have often dominated readings of black labor. I turn instead toward an African American writer's imagined possibilities. This chapter reads George Wyle Henderson's Depression-era novel *Ollie Miss* (1935) as part

of a larger literary labor story. The novel goes beyond a preoccupation with men's struggles for racial justice, class solidarity, and material security to delve into considerations of the soul. The novel's heroine is a black migrant woman worker named Ollie Miss. Her story comes as a solution for what Henderson suggests as a central dilemma of his day: environmental injustices that oppress black women workers' desire. Through a focus on black women's work and their deepest yearnings, which the narrator describes as "a curious ache" (110), Henderson rethinks dominant labor narratives. By the end of the novel, Ollie cultivates her desire as she forfeits marriage to try her hand at work on a small patch of Tuskegee ground.

Ollie enters the novel as a 19-year-old woman from the bottom swamplands, and she comes seeking food in exchange for work. She wanders onto the Tuskegee farm of an elderly black landowner named Alex.<sup>1</sup> Alex takes Ollie under his wing, and she meets her survival needs through her work on his plantation. She remains ambivalent about the prospect of staying because she is concentrated on rejoining her lover Jule.

This plot is not without the complications of a love triangle. Ollie initially left Jule because he allowed a woman named Della to "keep" him; Ollie's fellow worker named Slaughter hopes to marry her, and Ollie attempts to fulfill her longings through other means. She abandons the plantation, returns to the swamp, and eventually reunites with Jule. This reunion is cut short when Jule's new lover Lena comes to retrieve him. Lena almost kills Ollie, nearly cutting her into halves with a razor. As Ollie recovers from her injuries, the reader learns she is pregnant. Jule proposes marriage at the dénouement, and Ollie declines his offer, deciding true contentment rests in raising her child alone and tending a "farm of her own" (276).

Though the narrative's end highlights work, *Ollie Miss* has been read as an idyllic folk pastoral that ignores the political concerns of its day.<sup>ii</sup> Since *Ollie Miss* does not fit the mold of explicit narratives of oppression, its consciousness about labor and the environment has been overlooked. However, Henderson's representation of work on the land is especially rich because of its subtlety.

Beneath the folk romance, the novel uses the trope of the migrant black woman to capture the politics of black women's work and the transformative potential that adaptive labor might have on their deepest longings. The narrative follows Ollie's transformation from a transient, vulnerable laborer to an empowered worker through the course of a single agricultural season, spring to early fall, a cycle of literal and figurative cultivation.

As I will show, the novel's labor philosophy emerges out of a subtext primarily driven by setting and narrative discourse. There are two key settings in the novel—a turn-of-the-twentieth-century plantation and its foil, a swamp. These sites evoke late-nineteenth and early twentieth century histories of domestic limitation and resistance to signify upon the context of black women's labor and desire during the Depression. As Ollie oscillates between the plantation and the swamp, the narrative follows her journey as reminiscent of proletarian novels in which a protagonist (and by extension the reader) arrives at heightened awareness with the help of an older guide.<sup>iii</sup>

#### *Henderson, Tuskegee, Alabama and the Literary Left*

Henderson was born in 1904 during the age of Booker T. Washington. In fact, he grew up in Tuskegee and described his upbringing as married to cotton, the literary epitome of black southern existence and a reality for so many in his day. However,

Henderson was the progeny of a landholding grandfather and a father with deep roots in Tuskegee Institute.

Henderson's paternal grandfather Alex inspired the guide figure in the novel. Alex Henderson and his wife Caroline had been sharecroppers in Warrior Stand, a small town in Macon, Alabama. By 1910, Alex and his wife Caroline owned the land that they farmed in the Stand.

His father George Sr. had graduated from Tuskegee in 1899. The son would follow the father. Henderson graduated from Tuskegee in 1922. As a result, much of Henderson's imagination was made possible through seeing and living the possibility of access to resources. The portrayal of black land ownership becomes a distinct centerpiece that distinguishes Henderson's meditation on sharecropping from his contemporaries like Richard Wright (whose father died a sharecropper).

Though Henderson was removed from literal farming by the time he began his writing career, questions of work clearly remained at the forefront of his consciousness, especially because he was surrounded by leftist literary and political contexts. Henderson migrated to New York to pursue a writing career in 1931. He began working as a unionized printer for the Big Six Typographers Union at the *New York Daily News* and eventually began publishing short fiction professionally. While Henderson did not self-identify as a decidedly leftist writer, his membership in the Big Six Union, his artistic and collegial relationships with Langston Hughes and Zell Ingram, the reviews of his short stories in the leftist *Amsterdam News*, and his focus on the experience of a lone black woman worker suggest the influences of the Left.<sup>iv</sup>

His short stories were published in the *New York Daily News* series "The Daily Story from Real Life." Like a hybrid between a newspaper article and a comic strip, the stories covered a single page. As a result, Henderson's fiction was accessible to audiences with limited literacy and gained popular appeal. The short story "Thy Name is Woman" became the foundation for *Ollie Miss*, and its characters are elaborated in the novel (Nichols "Introduction" 5).

*Ollie Miss* was published in 1935, a moment when work was central in the consciousness of Americans. Since 1920, nearly eighty percent of Alabama residents lived and labored on farms. Alabama had seen particularly charged labor movements that ranged from the subversive engagements of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute to the Communist led Alabama Sharecroppers Union. By 1930 there were 27,500 black sharecroppers in the state, and the average cropper yielded 150 pounds of cotton per day (Phillips). By the time of the novel's publication, this yield was slowing because of the New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Act.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act, passed in 1933, was largely a manipulation of the relations of production and consumption. Those who agreed to reduce plantation acreage were paid larger sums for smaller yields of crops (Folsom 62). This solution had a twofold benefit. It increased profits for large-scale farmers and revitalized soils that had been depleted as a result of continuous crop monoculture. The New Deal, however, was no deal for black sharecroppers. Reductions in land usage resulted in job losses, and black sharecroppers were the first to find themselves among the unemployed. We might think of this very tangible problem of work and resource isolation as a question of environmental justice that lingers at the backdrop of Henderson's imaginative return to

Tuskegee. Henderson imagines environmental justice by mediating between a Carverian idea of agricultural labor and a Du Boisian insistence upon the importance of the longings of the soul. Ollie's real work—transcending confining labor circumstances by cultivating desire—is the real work of the novel.

On one level desire appears in the novel as the primal urges of the body—cravings for sex and companionship. By the end of the novel, Ollie moves from carnal desire to what I term "cultivated desire." Cultivated desire channels individual creative yearning in order to alter one's relationship to oppressive environments. Thinking in terms of socialist eco-feminism is especially fruitful for an understanding of Henderson's achievement. Viewing gender and sexuality, environments and constructs of nature, and race and class as mutually reinforcing concepts, this lens recognizes conditions of oppression as a matrix of interrelatedness. Examining a matrix of interrelated oppressive forces allows a multifaceted engagement with the meaning and value of Henderson's representation of an indigent black woman's plantation work.

In understanding desire, a feminist conception of the erotic is particularly useful because it moves beyond sex to the yearnings of a creative soul. My understanding of cultivated desire is firmly rooted in socialist eco-feminism and in Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic. The erotic uses sexual feeling to facilitate personal and social transformations by transcending the confines of physical surroundings and the physical body. Cultivated desire is therefore a form of sublimation and self-actualization that harnesses the erotic by "feeling in the doing," to borrow from Lorde (105). Feeling through doing is at the center of *Ollie Miss*, a novel intent on reconciling the realities of black women's work and their suppressed desires.

By reading cultivated desire in *Ollie Miss*, I hope to move Henderson's novel from the margins of folk literature to the center of rethinking the form and function of representations of black work. Cultivated desire affords a vision of labor representation that imagines black women's self-determination in spaces that have historically determined them. *Ollie Miss* offers a philosophy of cultivation that uses agricultural work to channel inner yearnings away from capitalistic conscription and domestic confinement toward self-affirmation, a provocative recommendation for Henderson's day.

*Black Women's Work and Domestic Control*

As a reader encounters Ollie for the first time, the opening landscape scene allegorizes the tensions between work and the pull of latent desire.

Dusk. . . .

The girl stood in the cabin door. Deep shadows hovered over thickets, over the low, wet bottom along the swamp's edge. The air was cool. Bright patches of purple still showed along the hillsides, and dead pine snags in Alex's new ground reared their chalk-white bodies fiercely against the settling dusk. The swamp was silent and still, like a sleeping child. . . . The girl remained silent where she stood, her eyes sweeping out over the freshly plowed fields to watch the wings of a late crow, low and swift in their homeward flight. Then she turned, picked up a wooden water bucket, and hung it over the back of her head and stepped out into the yard. To-morrow was Saturday, and she was going to [her lover] Jule's. She hadn't seen Jule for eight weeks! (1-2).

Ollie's narrative begins with "Dusk." Not only signaling a setting sun, dusk is among the most powerful images in modernist agrarian prose. In Jean Toomer's *Cane*, dusk's thinly veiled hues capture the blurred lines between race, lust, sex, and competition—forces that often collide at a worksite. *Ollie Miss* returns to the agrarian setting and recalls these complexities through the evocation of this intermediate time of day. In this opening, dusk obscures the border between two key environmental locations: a plantation and a swamp. Dead white snags signal the force of domestication as they mark the residue of a slash and burn method on the land. The scene is at once still and stirring, at rest and resistant, and it focuses on a single black woman worker.

Henderson's focus on a single black migrant woman shifts literary attention away from black men's labor oppression toward the ways in which the lives of black women workers were shaped by domestic control. Mid-narrative in Chapter Ten, a flashback gestures toward domestic networks that had regulated young single women's behavior. Ollie had rejected the rules of chastity by snatching intimate moments with Jule in a corncrib. Her guardian Old Duck uses corrective punishment, and the "rawhide left welts on Ollie's back" (137). This flashback of abuse gives voice to instances of violence against women that went largely unrecognized by Henderson's leftist contemporaries. Because domestic violence and the suppression of her longings cause her to flee to other farms, the novel provides another way to think about the meaning of forced migration for black women workers. Though Ollie escapes this form of social conscription—Old Duck fails to keep her in a row—she encounters other insidious obstacles when she arrives on Alex's farm.

A plantation space is the novel's dominant setting. The novel's setting evokes histories of black women workers' poverty and sexual exploitation at domestic worksites. The entrapments of race, sex, class, and labor are stationed within the plantation locale, including Ollie's shack.

Ollie's shack suggests a lingering threat of assault. It has "no ceiling; only the joists," and "cinches!" (28). Ollie shouts, "Lawd, I sho don't laks for nuthin' to be crawling ovah me when I is sleepin'!" (28). The cinches are perhaps a pun on plantation control as both parasitic and restrictive. This last exclamation, "crawling ovah me," reiterates that the shack is an insecure four-walled bedroom, a space that would ordinarily exacerbate a poor woman's exposure. The description of the shack mirrors the social situation for the women workers Ollie represents in that threats saturate their surroundings.

With a symbolic gesture—the passing of a key, the narrator signals Ollie's story as a prescriptive solution for the problems black women workers faced on plantations. As the old man takes Ollie to her quarters on her first night on the farm

Alex inserted the key in the lock, slipped the chain from the hole, then pushed the door open and lit a match. . . . Alex handed her the key now. . . . paused and stood there a moment, as though there was something else he wanted to say, but wasn't quite sure how to say it now. So he merely said, 'Well, good night,' and stepped into the yard. 'Good night,' Ollie said, and closed the door, looping the chain through the hole (23-24, 28).

The pause is pronounced as Alex hands Ollie the key. The moment of silence between them captures a myriad of unspoken tensions wrapped up in plantation sites. The sketch

most accurately depicts this environment because it does not illustrate the desires for sex or the dangers of rape explicitly. Still, the flame and the motion of inserting, slipping, pushing, and opening carry a sexual charge and the language of force that belie the superficiality of the episode as a simple assignment of living quarters. The scene creates an uncanny backdrop of sexual tension and vulnerability for black women farm workers.

Although this key scene presents Alex's relationship to Ollie as ambiguous, even creating a momentary sexual tension between them, such a presentation highlights the power dynamics that existed between men and women, worker and landowner. Alex's unspoken message could be anything: a repressed sexual advance, a chiding instruction ("no late night visitors"), or even a warning ("lock the door"). One might infer his message was "lock the door" when Alex acknowledges Ollie's insecurity during a later scene of work. "'They's treatin' you alright, ain't they.' Alex said, and glanced at Slaughter," another hired worker. "Sho, dey is treatin' me alright, Uncle Alex," Ollie responds (52). It becomes more apparent that Alex functions as a supporting guide for Ollie, whom she comes to call "Uncle," though she has been used to tending to herself.

The narrator underscores attitudes about migrant women who tended to themselves as the narrator divulges rumors about Ollie. The novel demonstrates the ways black migrant women's quest for alternatives becomes constructed as deviance. Gossip originates with women workers who interpret her as hot, too desirous, and out-of-control. To them Ollie reflects the degeneracy of black migrant women as the antithesis to domestic propriety.<sup>v</sup> In many respects, the rumors that surround Ollie operate as a part of the regulatory forces that kept poor, homeless women at the margins. Because these women assume her lack of a domestic place makes her unfit, they denounce her to Alex.

"They told Alex she was just one of them swamp women, that she wasn't fit to stay around decent people" (11). Through the label of "swamp woman," the narrator brings attention to the ways migrant women's movement and poverty becomes criminalized. Other workers claim Ollie "had worked her way by easy stages, from Cotton Valley to Little Texas, and then back up the swamp to the Stand" (12). They additionally claim she had solicited for food, had taken rest "in barns and hay lofts" and "begged rides with accommodating male creatures" rather than gentlemen (11). Others describe Ollie's lifestyle and travels as "easy," characterizing her poverty and her ways as deviant.

Those who fail to recognize Ollie's tenuous social situation wish to dismiss her from the farm. Nan, a woman long bitter because her husband abandoned her early in their marriage, exclaims, "Dat heifer ain't gwine stay on dis place" (116). On more than one occasion Alex replies, "Let me tend to this" (16). Alex's language of tending recurs as part of a larger cultivation motif. Alex's "tending" eventually helps facilitate Ollie's transformation. The narrator makes clear that while black migrant women's movement along the margins of domestic spheres might make them suspect, such movement places them at the mercy of those who might capitalize on their vulnerability. As women in the narrative build a case against Ollie founded on prejudices about her social standing, Henderson prompts the reader to imagine otherwise.

The narrative puts the social conditions faced by migrant black women workers at the forefront by setting Ollie's poverty in striking relief against opinions about her. The narrator shows that Ollie's way of living is hardly easy or corrupt. On her first night on Alex's farm she searches her small bundle of belongings for a nightgown. Finding none, she "peeled off the single garment that she wore, and crawled in under the quilt" (29).

The lack of a gown signifies a lack of domestic protections, not a lack of proper domestic decorum, as other characters might believe. Furthermore, this scene signals the ways poverty leaves black women stripped before the historic systematic sexual assault suffered on plantations.

Beyond the shack, Henderson sets his scope on social surveillance as another part of plantation networks of restraint aimed at black women workers. Women's bodies have long been caught up in sites of domestication, including the competing lusts and stares of men who seek to subdue them and the land. Modernist agrarian prose has represented this entrapment. For example, male desire pervades the gaze in Jean Toomer's "Karintha." The narrator describes her in relation to the landscape. "Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon, *O cant you see it cant you see it*" (Toomer 3 emphasis added). He surveys Carma. "I leave the men around the stove to follow her with my eyes. . . . Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it" (Toomer 14). The male gaze in *Cane* becomes a way of knowing women as "a growing thing ripened too soon" (Toomer 5). This quality of desirous watching is central to *Ollie Miss* as Henderson revisits women suspended in the gaze.

The narrator's gaze contains longing for her elusiveness. The narrator describes her gait as "the ease and grace of a cat, her arms and legs swinging to a kind of music. She was slim and straight, her skin smooth and dark, like firmly pressed soot. Looking at her face and arms, one was filled with a curious feeling that, to touch them, they would peel off on one's finger like soot, too" (2). Her catlike persona speaks to an aloof, personal rhythm and freeness. Peeling soot marks impermanence and even the remnants of spent passion, like a quenched flame. And the narrator's remark "to touch" signifies the

way her body ignites the sexual desire of others and their longing to make that desire known to the touch.

The language of watching is repeated throughout the narrative, and all eyes are on Ollie. Other hired workers "watched Ollie intently" (58), "and they continued to watch her now" (18), while some "walked behind this girl and watched her" (53-4). The pattern of watching highlights a network of suspicion that attempts to keep women workers fixed in a particular space. While many watch Ollie, Alex understands her differently. The narrator notes, "Alex was the first to see this girl" (14). Because Alex aligns with the narrative's consciousness, Henderson prompts the reader to see Ollie as Alex sees her.

Ollie represents the suppressed reality of workers' desires. For another worker named Slaughter, "It was as if some part of her had touched a secret depth within him, opened it up and laid it bare, exposing it to the sensitive elements of her own being. To him, the girl might have been a drug—a kind of obsession, cruel and consuming" (42).<sup>vi</sup> Since her first night, the intensity of Slaughter's feeling leads him to want to possess Ollie.

Henderson uses Ollie's example to illuminate the ways black women workers' only protections were instruments of domestication. For black women of her time, a marriage would have meant greater security in an atmosphere in which they were laid open to harm. On one hand, Ollie has fended for herself because she has had little material support. On the other hand, because Ollie has cared for herself, she has largely eluded certain channels of control. In a cyclical paradox, her elusiveness reinforces the oppression of poverty even as it carves out a small space of movement for her.

Narrative discourse troubles the ostensible protections of marriage by aligning it with the language of commodification. For example, Slaughter becomes enamored with Ollie. He begins watching her with "consuming interest" and resolves to marry her (19). His *consuming* interest divulges the intensity of his wish as well as the ways that wish implies the use of goods, a claim on property, and revenue from an investment.

"Hand" operates as a synecdoche that foreshadows Slaughter's intention. When Ollie retrieves her bundle just before receiving her "key," Slaughter comes to assist her, but Ollie wards him off. She explains, "I guess I is used to pickin' up my own bundles an' things" (24). Puzzled, Slaughter replies, "Didn't mean no harm, miss. Jes sort of wanted to give you a hand" (24). Slaughter attempts to process his desire through traditional arrangements—making the "Miss" a "Mrs." and offering his hand in marriage. Ollie declares her position toward this brand of help. "I ain't sich a hand fer comp'ny lak dat," she claims (45). And in a further rejection of domestic order, she declares men "don't owns nuthin' fer as I was concerned" (86). Ollie's disregard for Slaughter's hankering becomes a rejection of marriage, the only hand she might have at (and with) material security.

Through Ollie's breach of this social contract, Henderson raises several questions that went unasked by other writers of his time: What is an indigent woman like Ollie to do for personal security if she does not marry? Better put, how might an impoverished single woman survive in an atmosphere of domestic domination if she refuses to yield to it? Though Henderson uses the plantation setting to call upon the realities of black women's sexual exploitation and social confinement, work on Alex's plantation is markedly different, and it makes Ollie's eventual transformation possible.

*A Shift from Domestication to Cultivation*

*Ollie Miss* alludes to Tuskegee, Alabama. Allusions to Tuskegee have been based on Henderson's biography. David G. Nichols has called the novel "a female bildungsroman in which Ollie achieves Booker T. Washington's ethic of the love of labor" ("Introduction" 6). The novel is certainly *roman à these* in which Alex facilitates Ollie's coming of consciousness.<sup>vii</sup> However, this new consciousness is not a romanticized Washingtonian "love of labor" but a practical insistence upon resource redistribution and provision. While Washington's program often has been read as merely accommodating to a white power structure, it equipped a black working class to subvert existing labor arrangements by slightly altering them.<sup>viii</sup> His was what David Wyatt has called a unique kind of "strategic" radicalism (25).

The novel's Tuskegee plantation setting aligns work with socio-political desire. Unlike most leftist literary portrayals, the plantation is not a space of labor oppression and profiteering, but one of adaptive labor relations. Alex would have been among nearly 200,000 black Americans who owned land throughout the United States during the early 1900s (United States Department of Agriculture). As a landowner, his job is "to simply see how the plows were progressing" (51). While early twentieth-century black landownership has been discussed as a means of individual upward mobility, "Uncle" Alex is a departure from what had been the primary motivation of small farmers.

While it is generally held that small farmers would possibly hire a few workers to maintain profit and to sustain themselves through the lean months, Alex appears uninterested in this sort of yeoman stewardship. In the novel, good stewardship

encompasses the survey and cultivation of the ground as well as resource redistribution. Therefore, Alex's farm is not driven toward individual accumulation. Instead, the novel invokes an agricultural model that adapts capitalistic models, rings of socialism, and alludes to George Washington Carver's environmentally centered best-use practices—farm methods that forfeited individual wealth in favor of sustaining a larger group of impoverished people.

George Washington Carver, always seen wearing a gentle flower in his lapel, was Tuskegee's lead agricultural scientist from 1896 until well into the 1940s. Often read as "accommodating" like Booker T. Washington, Carver did not desire individual wealth or material accumulation. Carver chose to work without pay for the US Agricultural Extension Agency instead of accepting a \$125,000 annual salary from Thomas Edison, who insisted that together they could "remake the world" (*Rural Missouri*). He was often seen carrying lowly materials like "sticks, wildflowers, especially swamp roses" back to his laboratory for experimentation (Childers 24). He encouraged best-use practices that only required affordable, readily available materials to help free poor farmers, both black and white, from the choking grip of poverty.

The novel reflects Carver's advocacy for best-use practices. This best-use cultivation encouraged small-scale crop diversification over crop monoculture. For many struggling farmers (both black and white), this shift meant a farm's labor power could drive the production of its own products, partially maneuvering around a commodity system—a domestic mechanism of control that kept so many poor workers oppressed. Alex's farm reflects Carver's adaptive method of cultivation. Note how the narrative deliberately describes the variety of provisions on the fictive farm.

There was the smokehouse, with its dry, salty smell; with hams and middling meat suspended from rafters by tiny rings of hemp; with sorghum and meal and lard in barrels and pot-bellied little kegs. There, too, was the garden; and there, near the well, stood the pear tree . . . . [The farm] throbs anew with the life of cackling fowl and squealing pigs, with the bray of mare mules and the rattle of trace chains, making ready for the field (4-5, 7).

Henderson uses parataxis to put forth an image of simple abundance, suggesting the fruitfulness of uncomplicated relations of production. All goes toward sustaining the workers. Ollie too enjoys the benefits of the products of her labor, including a dish that is "always full, piled to a level heap" (33). These images of uniform provision sharply contrast materialist narratives of hard labor where starvation is a byproduct of sharecropping.

Like Carver's Tuskegee practices, Alex's farm helps the poorest agricultural workers—workers Ollie represents—transform their material reality by slightly altering their labor relations. As the narrator notes, "Alex was philosophical" (3). His philosophy turns on the adaptive agricultural work engendered by Carver and endorsed by his colleague Booker T. Washington. Washington asked Carver to come to Tuskegee to "let down his bucket" (Childers 24). Throughout his career, Carver refused to patent his agricultural discoveries and inventions. He gave away his innovations to all who could use them. Countless memos between President and scientist contain directions and requests to give a mule or a cow to a neighbor in need. And he left his \$33,000 savings to Tuskegee for "seed money" when he died (Childers 24). In a Carverian sense, "bucket,"

functions as a storehouse for accumulation and as a mechanism for passing provisions (and seed) along.

The novel's gesture toward the benefits of cultivation comes by way of Booker T. Washington's "bucket" metaphor. "Cast down your bucket where you are" was Washington's call upon black Americans to use what they had and what they knew, including largely agricultural skills they had been refining for centuries (595). The bucket metaphor did not solely mean a bootstraps model of individual hard work and individual social mobility. In *Ollie Miss*, the bucket emboldens an image of resource redistribution that echoes Carver.

Alex's farm becomes a metaphorical bucket and a vehicle that empowers the black working class to fulfill socio-political desires by passing provisions along. At the novel's opening, Ollie "turned, picked up a wooden bucket, and hung it over the back of her head" (2); other hired hands remain close to "a bucket of water they were carrying home for the night" (13), and Ollie "pulled the bucket up; then lifted it, wet and dripping, to her head" (7); "night after night [Ollie] came and let her bucket down" (3). The upward motion of the bucket and its dripping contents evoke Tuskegee's program of social uplift not as a mode of vertical movement along a social ladder, but as movement away from the burdens of capitalistic conscription. The dripping bucket carries an undertone of anointing, and Ollie is a chosen one.

The anointing bucket foreshadows Ollie's ascendance from the bottom—and the bottoms—to a place where she might find fulfillment. However, the opportunity to cast down her bucket is new for Ollie. She arrives at Alex's "a lil hongry," explaining that she "ain't et since day befo'e yestiddy" (16). Though Ollie finds provision on the farm, the

narrative establishes a gap between Alex's adaptive model and Ollie's understanding of it. As the narrator notes, "The girl never questioned the source of its fullness" (4). While this statement highlights Ollie's initial disregard of the means of production on the farm, fullness is an expansive term. Fullness encompasses the satisfaction of yearnings that exceed material sources. Narrative discourse and an authorial intrusion establish a coming into consciousness, as the placement of "source" in relation to "fullness" raises the questions that Ollie does not. While this farm's fullness might appear as a romantic escapist fantasy, the farm's work—like Ollie's work—is hardly easy.

The novel calls upon the ways black women workers' labor left their passions unrequited. Ollie says of her labor, "Evahbody sey dat I is de best hand dey evah had" (21). Here Henderson's use of "hand" articulates the problem and the potential of sharecropping through synecdoche. "Hand" signals the ways oppressive labor like sharecropping reduces a person to parts. "Hand" additionally gestures toward Washington's adaptive use.

Ollie's affirmation of her utility as "eva'body's" hand underscores her previous existence as one who has labored on many farms. Before arriving on Alex's plantation, her work was not connected to her own products and had been widely used instead. Given her labor context as a migrant woman worker, her hand, her efforts, and her body had been exploited for some other male body's passions, profits, and purposes.

While this scene seemingly betrays Henderson's willful ignorance of the realities of black labor, especially because Ollie boasts about her "hand" at sharecropping, it tells of a writer working toward transformative possibilities. "Hand" recalls Washington's speech that infamously supported segregation through the use of "hand" as a metonym

for power. "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers," wrote Washington, "and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (596). In the novel, the "hand" challenges the structures that would confine Ollie as a black worker and as a black woman.

Henderson's subversive narrative taps into histories of black women's toil as asexual work that exploded gender roles traditionally reproduced by capitalistic labor models. Patricia Kane notes that farm work as an especially "asexual occupation for [African Americans] in the agrarian Southern tradition" (103). Scenes of work have operated against gendered and sexualized tropes. According to David Wyatt, work has been "based on a traditional division of labor" (131). When the mixing of labor divisions collapses, it "exposes the roles assigned to men and to women as the artificial things that they really are" (Wyatt 131). We see this exposure in the description of Ollie's routine.

Ollie performs the rigorous manual tasks of plowing and hoeing, and she can outwork any man, like Toomer's Carma "in overalls, and strong as any man" (14). In a revision of materialist representations of the grind, "Neither the heat of the sun, nor the force of it against her back, appeared to disturb her" (111). In fact, Ollie "was born to work" (111). The notion of one "born to work" might appear as an alarming desecration of the social uplift platforms of Du Bois and others who argued African Americans should have aspirations other than manual labor. Yet, Henderson ennoble the agricultural toil that was a reality for so many. Henderson's homage to work and to the worker is a decidedly class-conscious move that does not depend upon a reductive portrayal of the dispossessed. Work is *good* for Henderson. Like Washington and Carver's view, it is not an intrinsically alienating activity; the dignity of labor is key.

While the literary materialists painted manual effort as drudgery, Henderson represents agricultural work like Ollie's as a creative process. The alliterative parataxis of "cotton and corn—green, growing, living things" conveys the poetics of the fruit of labor (96). Further, alliteration conjures agricultural work as a rhythmic craft: "[Ollie] found little difficulty in brushing the right swing of her sweep against the tender stalks, without plowing into their roots" (41). As Ollie becomes increasingly engrossed in the rhythm of her work, "listening to the song of her sweep beneath the soil" (43) and to "snatches of corn songs, drift[ing]" (41), the narrative provides a level of intimacy that expresses the care required for cultivation. Henderson portrays agriculture as an art form; it becomes a lyrical crop for the readership to gather.

Still, Henderson will not allow this imaginative reaping to be romanticized. Farming is hard. "Field hands had to work cotton fast"; "from dawn to dusk, man and beast had to sweat, plowing and hoeing" (109). Unlike his leftist contemporaries, the difficulty of the grind and its effects are not the crux of his aesthetic. And at the same time, the novel does not evoke a prelapsarian folk existence. Remarkably, these workers are not subsumed or consumed by the ramifications of the fall.

Redeeming the synecdoche of an oppressed hand, the narrator acknowledges sharecroppers' depth by likening them to artists. "Field hands were people," the narrator explains, "they breathed, had longings and went about with a curious ache, that was a kind of poetry, locked within the confines of their souls" (110). Henderson portrays sharecroppers as stifled poets, an idea that had appeared in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as the struggle of "suppressed artisans" (46) to speak the "strivings in [their] souls" (53). In a striking authorial intrusion, the narrator suggests agricultural

handiwork as a fertile avenue for a transformative sublime that echoes Du Bois. The narrator asks in a direct address, "What was work and sweat when . . . your soul, your very being, ceased to live and began to soar?" (111). For Henderson, this soaring soul not only turns on the cultivation of land, but also on the cultivation of desire. While Henderson sees agricultural work as an avenue for freeing the soul, and he imagines what Du Bois could not: work as a locus of feminine desire and as the harvest of the female self.

### *The Problem of Desire*

Though the narrative presents Henderson's philosophy of cultivation, Ollie's work and her erotic yearnings remain compartmentalized. This compartmentalization and Ollie's ambivalence to the farm are marked by her placement in doorframes. Ollie often "appear[s] in the doorway" as other characters debate about what to do with her or as they discuss rumors about other seemingly unruly women (118). And while adaptive farming meets her immediate survival needs, a scene of eating in the doorway captures her quandary and the full dimensions of the human appetite. "Caroline would hand her the dish gingerly through the doorway... Each morning she sat on those steps and ate her food from a dish in her lap before she went to the field... She accepted it, braced her knees together, and devoured in silence" (4).

The juxtaposition of a plate atop braced knees illustrates a paradox. On one hand, Ollie's basic cravings are supported. On the other hand, Ollie's ravenous eating set alongside the image of closed legs underscores an inability to honor other erotic yearnings.<sup>ix</sup> Though Ollie's work fulfills her survival needs—the needs the social realists

were focused on demanding—"existence for this girl didn't end there" (111). At first, Ollie seems driven by a fervor that is largely sexual in nature. "The heat of night was a transitory, inanimate thing. She could escape that. She could even endure it. But the still, fierce warmth of flaming passion! That was a part of her—a part of her youth, her being. A part of her body. It was her body, the thing that gave her flesh, her youth, its significance." And here the narrator poses the crucial question: "Could she escape that?" (63-4). At first she cannot.

The beauty of Henderson's depiction is that it neither condemns nor condones the reality of giving oneself over to sexual desire. The novel longing as innate to the human condition and as expected as seasonal changes. The narrator explains desire in relation to the heat of July when "plowing and hoeing ceased. Crops were laid by and field hands took their ease. Watermelons were ripe; late July days were long and lazy; and sin became a thriving, living thing. It was so easy to sin and eat watermelons and pray for forgiveness. There was nothing else to do" (111). Far from condescension, the narrator states a simple fact of life.

The narrator describes the ways workers might engage desire outside of work. Ollie's desire comes with mobility. She uses her non-working hours "to frolic at Roba and the Crossroads, to inhale the smell of corn whiskey on hot breaths, to dance to a nervous, half-crazed rhythm, strummed hot, like a blue flame, under a burning Alabama moon, but she'd come back" (7). Henderson's prose again recalls Toomer's "Blood Burning Moon" and the tensions between race, work, and sex that converge at peak heat. The narrator explains, "when it couldn't give any longer, she'd seek out another. Or, if she tired of what it had to offer, she'd hit the trail for that which seemed the more appealing. Inside of

her, she was simple enough. An impulse seized her and she moved. The mere knowledge of a picnic or a camp meeting or some 'doings' at Roba or the Crossroads, could set her blood pitching to a boiling heat" (3). However, boiling heat surrounds all.

Sexually charged undertones mingle work and desire. The narrator signifies, "From dawn to dusk, man and beast had to sweat, plowing and hoeing. When the plowing was caught up...man and woman had to sweat alone" (109). As workers sweat alone together, the narrator gestures toward other generative engagements. Elaborating the connections between labor and desire, the narrator projects the language of orgasm onto cultivated products.

A subtext uses cultivated nature as a metaphor that articulates the realities of desire. "Green things [that] fought to live and grow" exude "the spent warmth of its own passion" (110). These "green growing things" are not just any vegetation; they are crops—the fruit of labor. Desire resides in them. While Ollie imagines her absent lover Jule, "the fodder began to sing;" "something within her was trembling and crying," and "something deep within her began to ache" (136, 96). It might seem Henderson merely articulates sexual urges through nature, but his treatment becomes more complicated. Erotic feeling might be tended. As with nature, desire is a seed best used when nurtured and cultivated.

The narrative underscores desire as feeling. Another worker named Little Willie points out the way water "make you feel, when you hear de sound hit makes an' you can't see hit wid yo' eyes," as they hear "running branch water, like soft music, in their ears," and Ollie "timidly caught his arm" (99). Although one might surmise that an intimate scene follows, the details are not given over. Through the silence, Henderson again

refuses the trope of a robust and hypersexual woman; vulnerability resides in her desire as she "timidly" pulls him toward her. The novel captures this simultaneous ferocity and delicacy through metaphors of plant growth. As a plant must burst forth from the boundaries of the soil, so it is with desire.

The narrative further suggests desire exceeds the capacities of the flesh. For this reason, Ollie leaves the farm. Finally (and not coincidentally) at the peak of the agricultural season, the narrative approaches a key moment that reveals the muse of desire is not merely a sexual one. "Ollie left Alex's place for the first time on a Friday night. It was the middle of July and crops were laid by" (131). A little Willie only temporarily satisfied her; the old craving returns for Jule. Yet, Ollie leaves not because of a burning for sex (especially because she resolves sexual feeling with Willie), but because the domestic realm is inefficient for fulfilling her deepest desires. Ollie says, "Dis is de only home I got, an' hit ain't enough" (9). Though it appears she aches for Jule and for a romantic relationship, he is simply a substitute for her ardor. The narrator provides the impetus driving Ollie; the idea of Jule "made Ollie want to live. It gave her something to live for" (153). Henderson presents passion as a kernel of inspiration and erotic possibility. Finding her possibilities limited by the domestic sphere, Ollie strikes out for the swamp.

Henderson uses the swamp to demonstrate the ways erotic desire resides at the boundaries of domestic control. Geographically, swamps exist outside of domesticated landscapes—ordered and owned spaces most often marked by plantations. The swamp has carried a few counter meanings to plantations' impact on the land and the living, operating as a literary trope and *topos* for alternatives to social limitation. The swamp has

been a marker of the undomesticated, and its connotation of unruliness has meant resistance to control. Historically, bondspeople resisted the plantation and fled to freedom through marronage, or escapes to the swamp. "Hope and the future for me," wrote Thoreau during the age of abolition, "[are] in the impervious and quaking swamps" ("Walking" 2005). The swamp is the "border life on the confines of a world" (Thoreau 2013). Fiction has suggested the same.

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936), Janie's grandmother Leafy found freedom through the swamp, and the swamp has been figured as a gateway to dreams. In Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), Bess asks the mysterious Zora, "What's beyond the swamp?" and she replies, "Dreams" (10). Similarly, when Ollie Miss takes an occasional break from her domestic toil on Alex's plantation, "she went down the trail and through the swamp, as though she walked in a dream" (133). Through an affinity for the swamp and its dreams, Ollie represents ambivalence toward, and at times a rejection of, domestication and domestic order. As Henderson suggests, the quaking dreams of desire offer alternatives to constrained living.

The association of Ollie with the swamp recalls Henderson's previously published short story, "Thy Name Is Woman" (1932). In the story, Ollie's "face held the enigmatic simplicity of the swamp, and there was something of the swamp's slow, savage grace in the tilt of her body, too" (*Harlem Calling* 32).<sup>x</sup> The oxymora "enigmatic simplicity" and "savage grace" capture the tension that resides between opposite forces. As Ollie's characterization elicits these opposites, it underscores the complexity of desire as a feeling at once known and unknown, distinct and elusive, free and controlled.

As a woman of the swamp, Ollie embodies the intricacies of desire. On one hand her characterization could be seen as a reiteration of the trope of black women as somehow closer to nature and resultantly hypersexual. On the other hand, the narrator resists tropes of primitivism through coupling "savage" and "grace." "Savage grace" captures the eloquence of a border life that will not relinquish its deepest desires. Perhaps because of her elusiveness, other women on the farm view Ollie's "swampy" heritage negatively.

Swamp imagery offers a foil to the plantation's signs of domestication. Ollie's desires are initially projected onto and engaged through metaphors of the swamp. The swamp first appears "silent and still, like a sleeping child" at the novel's opening (1). Ollie's laughter is "primitive and unpretentious as a child's" much like the language used to describe the swamp (2). Though this imagery appears as another repetition of primitivism that casts women of color as something less than mature or civilized, the narrative resists reducing Ollie to a primitive by the end. This "childishness" might be understood instead as undeveloped potential and uncultivated creativity. The parallelism between Ollie's lifestyle and the symbolism of the swamp repeats throughout the novel.

Henderson affiliates Ollie with the swamp to demonstrate black women workers' longing for options. She arrives on the farm as a swamp woman, "one of them backwater women" from "down on the swamp" (11, 12). This metaphor is furthered as Ollie treks in search of Jule, the seeming object of her desire. She "skirted the edge of a cotton field and entered the swamp" (153). "Skirt" signifies upon her border lifestyle and her aversion for domestic limitations. And, "turning into the swamp," Ollie's "clothes got wetter and the trail grew sloppy," as she morphs into the marshy wetness of the swamp.

While it seems Henderson reproduces a troubling conflation of women and nature, the association is challenged through dialogue between characters. Alex's wife Caroline asks Ollie about her occasional forays in the swamp. "Ain't you scared to be trampin' up an' down dese swamps," she asks (155). Henderson plays on the connotations of "tramping" as perceived promiscuity and as vagrancy. These meanings encompass Ollie's plight and her flight to the swamp. Caroline speaks to another plight as she continues, "You mought—mought be comin' up here wid," and Ollie interrupts (155). Ollie insists, "People don't hab babies less'n dey want 'em, Miss Ca'line," much to Caroline's surprise (156). According to Caroline, the danger of "trampin'" in the swamp of desire is not the risk of attack, but the risk of pregnancy. Ollie suggests pregnancy as a matter of choice, and Caroline sees it as the ultimate complication of giving into desire. This subtext about the problem of desire builds as it leads up to the novel's climax.

A few vignettes demonstrate the difficulty of committing one's desire to a domestic arrangement. Though Ollie does not know how to process these examples at first, the narrator relays their meaning. According to Caroline, Nan's misery stems from the fact that she "ain't knowed whut to hab a husband was lak" (120). While the narrative suggests Nan's sorrow results from resting her hopes on someone other than herself, the dangers of placing one's desire in a another person hangs suspended in Ollie's consciousness "like a refrain" (120). A vignette about another woman named Cora captures the conundrum of misguided passion. Though Cora is wildly enamored with her man, Ollie learns he "would beat that whip to a frazzle on Cora's back at the moment he got mad" (172). Cora's rapture keeps her trapped in an abusive relationship. Here, misdirected desire becomes an instrument of domestic oppression.

Finally, there is Della, who is in love with Jule. Ollie tours through the swamp to find Jule. She does not meet him at first and encounters Della instead. Della appears "fixed and dead, lifeless. . . . It seemed like a riddle" (154). Again the narrator directs attention to the entrapment and to the loss that accompanies black working-class women's concentrated focus on channeling craving through domestic coupling. But for Ollie these struggles remain a puzzle. Though Ollie has yet to reach a new consciousness, these examples operate alongside subtext and narrative discourse to prepare the ground for a climax—the boiling over point of the problem of desire—and its resolution.

Because the narrative builds a representation of confined and ill-used desire, it reaches its climax when Ollie finally reunites with Jule. Ollie begs him to stay with her in an attempt to possess happiness by possessing him. In a revision of Toomer's "Blood Burning Moon" and other fiction in which men clash over the rights to black women at the worksite, a woman fights another woman for a man. Ollie finds herself in a love-triangle-narrative of competing desire with Jule at the apex.

Jule's new lover Lena comes to reclaim him. Lena confronts Ollie, and though Ollie does not fight, she does not renege. Lena slices her down the middle with a razor, and Ollie crumples to the ground nearly dead, echoing the "green, growing, living things" that had "fought to live and grow" (96, 110).<sup>xi</sup> Lena's sexually suggestive violation of Ollie's body becomes the turning point that allows Ollie's coming of consciousness at the conclusion.

*Cultivating Desire: Conclusions*

Henderson's subtext and narrative propositions are overtly stated at the novel's end. As Ollie recovers from her wounds, she reflects, "hit jes feels like somethin' inside of me...is 'bout dead now, 'cept dat part dat ain't got no feelings" (245). Her caretaker sympathizes, "Honey, dat's jes yo' 'magination!" (245). While the woman claims that Ollie is simply talking "out of her head," she articulates Ollie's dilemma through a pun—Ollie's lost feeling is lost imagination, a paralyzed erotic curiosity.

The conclusion continues explicating what had been the narrative subtext. During Ollie's bed-rest, the narrator reveals she is two-months pregnant, and Jule returns with a proposal of marriage. Seemingly rejecting the very object of her heart, Ollie turns him down. She explains, "Mebbe us could hab been married an' still be wrong. . . . Seem lak us was jes livin' because us *wanted* somethin'—jes because us *craved* somethin'—an' us jes went on livin' jes fer dat" (273 emphasis added). Living for wanting and craving speaks to the ways desire becomes a mechanism of domestic control, a mechanism that the narrative has been steering Ollie away from since her arrival on Alex's adaptive farm. This conclusion realizes the ways cultivated desire might circumvent limiting relationships in order to fulfill yearnings that exceed the material realm.

Ollie elaborates this resolution. She claims their situation might have been different been if "dere had been somethin' us could want an' not hab—somethin' us could work fer an' still want" (273). Ollie continues, "When you kin work fer somethin', you kin love hit' an' . . . you is full right on!" (273). Ollie's newfound enlightenment may appear as an idyllic folk portrayal of redirected love and a rushed conclusion. Yet, Ollie discovers the source of "fullness," which she did not see at the beginning, here at the end

of the narrative. The bulk of the narrative has been about agricultural work, human passion, and quenching what Du Bois had described as the "restlessness" of "soul-hunger" (Du Bois 271). "To want an' not hab" is Ollie's transition toward living for self-production—the narrative's generative crop. (273).

The earlier scenes of agricultural work tended the foundation for the sudden sprouting of Ollie's new consciousness. At the end of the novel, the narrative comes full circle to realize, along with Ollie, what had been at her fingertips all along. The possibility of cultivating desire is solidified when Alex informs Ollie she may work her own patch of land and keep its products as long as she chooses to do so. The prospect "made her feel happy in a way she had never felt before" because "green things would live and grow that had been nurtured by the strength of her hands alone" (276).

Property ownership, "a farm of her own," might seem to enable Ollie's escape, in a georgic version of Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, "A Room of One's Own," or a revision of Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1923).<sup>xii</sup> However, Ollie lives without "things" or accumulated wealth. She turns to the land and lives off of it through an adaptive response to traditional domestic arrangements. While she does not have individual accumulation or property, cultivation does bring ascension of sorts—a gathering of her inner being that is in essence her bucket moment.

Resolving to cultivate the land, "her body felt free and light and strangely at peace, and something within her soul seemed to sing to the rhythm that floated out from the mill" (276). This soaring soul reveals itself through a philosophy of nurture that turns the sublime inward. Though desire is directed away from the drive of domestic consumption, it is ironically engaged on a plantation site. Transcendence is made possible

not through a constructed ideal of a free and untended wilderness, such as a swamp, but through cultivating "nature." It is a kind of transcendence downward. Because Ollie chooses the farm, Henderson brings her and the associated signs of the swamp to the center.

Cultivated desire allows Ollie to thrive within a traditionally oppressive space, and *Ollie Miss* concludes on an elevated sort of living. The novel ends on the possibility of sublimation through work at the forfeiture of romantic love. Yet, this transcendence leaves behind the confines of domesticated space.

Reading cultivated desire in *Ollie Miss* makes it clear that the novel is a subtle literary experiment with a working-class sublime. At the conclusion, Ollie becomes a transformed woman worker. While she does not have individual wealth or accumulated property, her newfound philosophy of cultivation does bring achievement. Cultivated desire becomes the provocative gem of the novel. The other innovation centers on Henderson's use of a black heroine as his worker figure because such a character represents those who would have been most vulnerable.

What better protagonist to inspire adaptations to racialized and gendered capitalistic structures than a single, pregnant, propertyless black woman sharecropper? Henderson imagines empowering possibilities for black women workers at a moment when few thought of them, although the question of labor was on the minds of so many. The looming question of domestication reveals a writer working through the murky territories of color, work, and sex. Ollie's cultivation allegorizes a purposeful channeling of desire—the poetics of work on the land elevate a life of toil from mediocrity to philosophy.

*Ollie Miss*—the story of a black woman worker who followed her passions and found herself through agrarian practice—prompts a second look at non-canonical literature. Redescribing Southern folk literature that has resided at the margins of proletarian fiction and social realism might enable a more complete conversation about the form and function of Depression-era portrayals of black work.

*Ollie Miss* begs comparison with canonical Depression-era fiction such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936) and understudied works, including Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929) and Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* (1931). While Henderson used desire to consider the pressing labor concerns of the Depression-era as a matter of environmental justice, William Attaway engaged the pressure of masculine feeling as the nation entered World War II.

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 Notes

<sup>i</sup> One might suggest an undertone of paternalism because Henderson chooses an older male for Ollie's guide. However, Alex is one of the few "feminist" characters in the novel.

<sup>ii</sup> Much like Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936), *Ollie Miss* has been called a folk-romance. Henderson's work has been aligned with what we might think of as the Hurston school—"folk" literature of the non-protest tradition. To be sure, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begs comparison to *Ollie Miss*, a novel centered on an independent black woman. Before Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright famously disputed the function of literary representations of the Black Belt as folk or protest literature, *Ollie Miss* is published in 1935. In some respects, we might think of *Ollie Miss* as a precursor to Janie Starks in Hurston's *Eyes*. *Eyes* appeared a year later in 1936. *Ollie Miss* and *Eyes* have a few things in common as well as some significant differences. These differences mainly relate to the novels' underlying politics (Henderson was clearly influenced by the Left whereas Hurston flatly rejected what she called the "sobbing school of Negrohood") and to the privileges of color and class represented in each work.

Ollie and Janie are both young women, experimenting with their sexuality. Ollie experiences her sensuality in nature, much like Janie's attempt in Hurston's well-known pear-tree scene. Janie's relationship with her grandmother is vividly painted in the novel. On the other hand, there is only a passing mention of Ollie's history or lineage. Her aunt cares for her. Where Janie's grandmother has her married off to a successful man after catching her stealing a kiss with a young beau, Ollie's aunt, Old Duck, whips her for exploring her sexuality. As a result, Ollie runs off. Here's the first major contrast—Janie is folded into the confines of the domesticated sphere early on, where Ollie largely evades them. Janie finds love in Tea Cake as they plunge into the muck. Ollie heads headlong into the swamp in search of Jule. In the end, they both forfeit a man.

Ollie and Janie also navigate within the culture of rumor about their salaciousness. However Janie's social position protects her in ways that Ollie's does not. The most striking difference is the matter of privilege. Janie is characterized as a lighter-skinned long-haired woman, where Ollie is described as the color of "soot." We might say these distinctions in pigment lead Janie to become a woman of the house and Ollie a woman of the field. Much of Janie's self discovery, in fact, is possible because she happened to marry rich and because her husband happened to die. In a sense, monetary wealth gives her the power to choose—to choose Teacake, to choose the muck, to choose to return home and to her house, and to choose to not marry again. In a lot of ways, what Hurston' imagined as black women's freedom and power to choose the self, left a lot of women out of the formula.

Ollie couldn't be more different. She is an indigent migrant. She is set up as one that does not participate in a capitalistic set up. Yet, she harnesses the power to choose herself even though she does not have the social privilege that might allow her to do so—this is the great accomplishment of the novel.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Paula Rabinowitz, by the 1930s, "even writers who were not committed to working-class movements were influenced by the form and content of the proletarian novel" (23). In her discussion of women's proletarian fiction, Rabinowitz notes the incorporation of the *roman à these*, or a bildungsroman in which an older guide (usually male) facilitates a young woman protagonist's coming of age and consciousness (76).

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<sup>iv</sup> Charting the political aesthetics of many black writers during the late 20s and early 30s, in fact, William Maxwell has observed, "Especially during the Great Depression, it was not always easy to distinguish Communist party rolls from lists of prominent Harlem artists, the recurring names on the cultural pages of *The Daily Worker* from those in the black-owned *Amsterdam News*" (1). We might add Henderson to this list.

<sup>v</sup> Hazel Carby has identified the ways the migrant black woman's existence was perceived as a social threat in urban centers in "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context."

<sup>vi</sup> In some ways anticipating Toni Morrison's character Beloved, Ollie exposes this or lays it bare for other characters. This image of Slaughter anticipates the moment in *Beloved* where Paul D's experiences the prying open of the rusted tobacco tin can of his heart (137).

<sup>vii</sup> In her discussion of women's proletarian fiction, Rabinowitz notes Susan Rubin Suleiman's exploration of the *roman à these*, a bildungsroman in which a protagonist's coming of age and consciousness is facilitated by an older guide (76).

<sup>viii</sup> See K. Ian Grandison's "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Post Bellum America" (1999).

<sup>ix</sup> This scene connects Ollie to Suggie in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. (1959). Suggie, a prostitute, sits in the doorway eating a Barbadian meal and sits with her legs open. Her openness is a fascination and a haven for Selina Boyce.

<sup>x</sup> "Thy Name is Woman" is a template for *Ollie Miss*. In the story the "swamp woman" remains unnamed.

<sup>xi</sup> Ollie is cut horizontally. This cut down the middle resonates with Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949). David Wyatt has discussed these vertical lines as a way to leave "two whole halves" (197). In this way a seemingly divided self has a way to "keep company with itself," according to Wyatt (197). The razor cut Ollie receives catalyzes her own ability to find contentment within herself.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ollie Miss* resonates with Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1923); they depict pregnant young women who lose a man. Ollie's "farm of her own," could be viewed as a revision of Glasgow's focus on women's liberation through farm work. Dorinda fully participates in a capitalistic commodity system by selling the best butter in town, and perhaps as a result, the narrative points to the anti-eroticism that can follow—a "barren" ground. Yet, *Ollie Miss* asserts a leftist disavowal of commodification, and perhaps as a result, the narrative points to the generative possibilities of engagements with eroticism.

## Chapter Two

### The Fire This Time: Pressure and Affect in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*  
Langston Hughes, "Harlem"

Now these monsters that made metal were  
dependent upon the strength of Big Mat. It  
moved him to rush madly about the yards,  
knowing that only his will would keep a  
fatal crack from their big, brittle insides.  
William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*

George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss* ends on a black woman worker's realized desire and elevated feeling. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941) uses the worker to paint a different picture of the lives of black folk, one of unrealized desire and irreconcilable feelings. Set at the end of World War I, the novel centers on the Moss brothers: Melody, Chinatown, and Big Mat, migrant workers who move from sharecropping in the red hills of Kentucky to working steel in the mills of Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Their northern trek had been forced.

The brothers' migration begins after Big Mat had gone "hog wild," killing the family's only mule for killing their mother in a plowing accident. Mat goes to retrieve a new mule promised to him by the landowner. The riding boss denies him, citing his senselessness for slaughtering "a animal worth forty dollars, 'cause a nigger woman got dragged over the rocks" (28). Mat blacks out and awakens to realize he has nearly killed the riding boss.

As Mat's emotions blow at the worksite, a jackleg recruiter tries to convince Melody and China to head north for wage work. When Mat returns with news of his fight, they all decide to flee an inevitable mob. They board a dark train and embark upon a sightless journey north in a boxcar.

In Allegheny the brothers work as "hot-metal men," forging iron into steel in the hottest temperatures at the mill. They also encounter people in heat—from the flaming red-light district to the fire of union workers on strike. While Melody falls for a 15-year-old Mexican prostitute named Anna, Chinatown falls for gambling and drink. Anna considers Melody a "sissy fellow" because he refuses to sleep with her, playing his "guitar instead of making love." She sets her sights on Mat after his show of strength at a dogfight. All the while the old mill veteran "crazy" Smothers, who lost both legs in a prior mill explosion, warns them about the dangers of steel. "Steel gonna git everybody," he predicts (121).

Big Mat gains a reputation as "Black Irish" among Irish, Italian, and Polish workers for his stamina and strength on the job and for the respect his commanding presence demands. While Mat works in the fires of the mill, things heat up between Melody and Anna. Melody's "love craving" for Anna and his jealousy of Mat become a "twisted feeling" he cannot resolve. Though Melody's feelings overwhelm him, Mat begins feeling like a lesser man when Anna stops responding to his lovemaking.

As the pressure of feeling mounts among men, pressure builds at the mill. Smothers' predictions come true. Mat sets out to kill a worker named Dusty because he suspects him of sleeping with Anna. A blast furnace blows. It kills fourteen workers, literally incorporating Smothers' body into liquid steel and leaving Chinatown blind.

After the blast, union pressure heightens with the heat of summer. Those who once admired Mat no longer acknowledge him as Black Irish. When a strike ensues, Mat is deputized as a strikebreaker. Seeing himself as the new riding boss, Mat stalks the streets drunk on power, wielding his club with reckless abandon. A frightened Slav suddenly bludgeons and kills him. Melody and blind China leave Allegheny behind as they head toward another mill in Pittsburgh.

Rage and nothingness, lust and hate, pride and disappointment: these are among the many feelings that create an atmosphere of pressure throughout the novel. The pressures of masculine feeling build in the foreground of the narrative as the pressures of working conditions—racial and labor strife and the dehumanizing processes of steel manufacture—mount in the background.

A pivotal speech by Smothers, the pseudo-clairvoyant old worker long crippled by a blast, encapsulates Attaway's analogy between human emotion and steel manufacture. Gifted with a second sight of sorts, Smothers predicts early on the dangers of steel: "It's wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace. Ground don't like it," he warns. Smothers continues:

It's the hell-and-devil kind of work. Guy ain't satisfied with usin' the stuff that was put here for him to use—stuff of top of the earth. Now he got to git busy and melt up the ground itself. Ground don't like it, I tells you. Now they'll be fools laugh when I say the ground got feelin'. But I knows what it is I'm talkin' about. All the time I listen real hard and git scared when the iron blast holler to git loose, an' them big redhead blooms screamin' like the very heart o' the earth. . . It jest ain't right. . . Any time

you foolin' round fast metal it liable to blow up. It always blow for no reason at all, 'ceptin' it want to...

. . . Steel want to git you. . . . Guys wants to fight each other—callin' folks scabs and wants to knock somebody in the head. Don't nobody know why. I knows why. It's 'cause steel got to git more men than it been gittin' (53).

Smothers' insistence on the appetites of steel becomes part of the novel's representation of the steel industry's unyielding need for more and more men. Attaway's depiction of steel production provides a deeply felt history of the years during and after WWI, an atmosphere permeated with uncertainty about the immediate future, a frenzied military-industrial rush for men, metal, and many heated feelings.

*Steel Feeling: Inevitable Setting, Historic Precedent*

Attaway situates his novel in the Red Summer of 1919 when union members, scabs, and the general public felt and saw red. Their angry fear ranged from a global panic about Bolshevism to local racial hatred. The fears often turned on the labor question. By the end, the Moss brothers find themselves immersed in the labor tensions of the Great Steel Strike that began on September 22 in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Attaway uses the tensions of 1919 to draw a rough parallel to the 1940s. By 1941 African American workers in many facets of steel work from mines to mills had been absorbed into unions, so there had been a sense of advance. On the other hand, black and white workers still found themselves pitted against one another.

In 1941 Franklin Roosevelt had issued a no-strike order and a closed-shop policy in support of his preparations for war. This meant that while corporate giants like US Steel agreed to only employ union members, these union workers were prohibited from exercising their right to strike. Despite this order, union men in Pennsylvania decided to strike. The controversy over strikes garnered public attention in November of 1941 just outside of Star Junction.

Dude McClendon, an African American miner at Red Lion mine, owned by US Steel, raised a bit of a stir when he went to work. Another black worker observed, "We cannot afford to become conspicuous in this dispute and we must not permit the union nor the operators to use us as a tool." Yet another commented, "It appears that the operators, with the support of the press, are trying to split the union by trying to make this strike a racial issue. They can't do it, however, because the unions have been too fair for us to desert them at a time like this" (*Pittsburgh Courier*). A reporter for the *Courier* observed that most black workers felt similarly. While the men wished to support their country, according to the reporter, the strikers felt they "still had to consider their positions" as workers (*Pittsburgh Courier*). Workers found themselves in a predicament where they might become "tools."

While these are the facts of history, Attaway engages that which escapes public record about men becoming tools by asking a vital question for his day: what happens when men become steel? For Attaway, masculine feeling is a lot like making steel. If heat and pressure are not properly quenched, the feelings of men, much like steel and the vessels that contain them, become brittle. Or they explode.

*Blood on the Forge* captures the dilemma of masculine agency as the novel portrays the tension between worker as a subject and worker as an objectified element of a military-industrial complex. A motif of pressure and scenes of penetration create what I call "steel feeling." The affect of "steel feeling" invites a reader to reflect upon the tension between masculine fantasies of becoming a class-conscious worker on one hand and the environmentally degrading and alienating labor required by the military-industrial complex on the other.

*Steel Feeling: William Attaway, the Man and the Machines*

Attaway's focus on steel men might obscure the fact that he was born into privilege. His physician father moved the family from Mississippi to Chicago when he was still a young boy in order to distance them from racism. Attaway's father had hoped he would join the ranks of the Chicago black elite as an adult. Pressed by his father, Attaway attended the University of Illinois. But after his father died, Attaway left the university and chose homelessness instead (Yarborough 32).

Attaway gambled away his money and worked as a migrant laborer in the Midwest and into Mexico before returning to Chicago to complete his college degree in 1936. After graduating college he worked as a stevedore, on a ship, as a union organizer, and as a writer for the Illinois Federal Writer's Project where he first met Richard Wright. By the time Attaway completed *Blood on the Forge* in 1941, he was well situated on the literary Left and in a close New York-based artists' circle called the "306 Group" that included Langston Hughes and Romare Bearden.<sup>1</sup>

After the publication of *Blood on the Forge* in 1941, Attaway enlisted in the Army. Critics expected him to continue writing while he served. "We should soon be hearing from this fine young author," editors at *Negro Story* excitedly observed in 1944. They insisted he was as an artist "who, like Chesnutt, is a writer first and then a Negro" (*NS* qtd in Tracey 43). While Attaway was enthusiastically received as a writer who placed his craft before his ethnicity, critics on the Left were troubled by what they saw as a shortcoming in *Blood on the Forge*.

As a part of the literary Left, Attaway was expected to use his fiction to forward a certain agenda. This agenda included the legacy of the Black Belt Nation Thesis—the use of black working-class characters to push reading audiences toward an elevated class-consciousness, interracial cooperation, and labor solidarity. Despite the novel's portrayal of interracial working-class subjects, *Blood on the Forge* does not end with the triumph of labor over capital. As a result, the question of whether Attaway met the call of the Left has been a matter of critical debate.

Leftists like Ralph Ellison felt the novel fell short of its duty to move beyond a romanticized depiction of black peasants (Jackson 273). Ellison criticized Attaway "for not doing more with the folk feeling he drew on" and for a "failure to show the transcendence of his characters" (qtd in "Introduction" xvii). According to Ellison, the novel's lack of transformed consciousness at its end "confined [Attaway's] work to the most limited naturalism" (xvii). Contemporary critics have debated the limitations and successes of the novel.

For some *Blood on the Forge* successfully presents a materialist interracial labor stance—one that foregrounds race and class. John Oliver Killens has called it a "literary

trailblazer" and "one of the first novels about black Americans that was imbued with a working-class consciousness" (7). As Barbara Foley has observed, Attaway "explored the Communist position on race and class in considerable depth" (206). Foley suggests that Attaway's use of the Moss brothers' point of view as black men limited the novel's class analysis. According to Foley, the novel's "nationalist consciousness remains as a fact to be contended with—at once an inadequate and a historically inevitable response of the black worker to his experience of oppression" (205). On the other hand, Daryl Pickney looks at the novel's focus on a black perspective as especially rich. While Ellison had complained about a lack of "folk feeling," in the novel, Pickney argues for "blues feeling" in *Big Mat* as part of a blues-folk tradition. (xvii). However, the black characters' "feeling" is not limited to African American traumas that might spur on the blues.

I would like to suggest Attaway is up to something even bigger than the standing debates over race and labor representation. Race, class-consciousness, and feeling are all paramount in the novel. However, Attaway's working-class representation is neither about forwarding interracial labor solidarity nor about exposing its failures. Attaway, as a writer close to the Left, understood the ways the working class was being absorbed into the military-industrial complex via two world wars. The novel reveals the way that the working class masculine ideal is itself problematic. The wealth of *Blood on the Forge* is its exploration of the complexities of feeling like a man among men within structures of limitation. As the pressures of masculine feeling build up and release throughout the novel, explosion seems inevitable.

*Steel Feeling: Definitions*

What I see as "steel feeling" encompasses emotional and physical pressures. These include human passions, such as lust and anger, as well as physical sensations, such as the experience of temperature or pain. The physical and emotional converge. As steel feeling plays out, it provides a way to think about power in relation to pressure.

The fluid nature of power in an apparatus is well known. Power forms subjects and objects based on hierarchies—with workers and resources—including animal and animate and inanimate matter as the supporting base. However, the apparatus is not just about subjects, objects, and power. The apparatus contains pressure. Pressure moves as power moves, and pressure builds at the base.

The idea of pressure led Raymond Williams to suggest the usefulness of examining what he called the "structures of feeling" at the base.<sup>ii</sup> According to Williams, to understand relations of production one must cease looking toward a powerful head (superstructure) and look instead at workers (base). He further suggested the importance of understanding workers in that base as a dynamic, animate entity rather than a static or stable unit.

For Williams, workers are determined as much by dynamics of power as they are by forces of pressure:

In practice determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures. Society is never only the 'dead husk' which limits social and individual fulfillment. It is always also a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations, and to make the full weight of 'constitutive', are internalized and become 'individual wills'. Determination

of this whole kind—a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures—is in the whole social process itself and nowhere else (87).

Limits and pressures: these could be said to be Attaway's subjects. The evidence of human agency lies in the pressures that build up in individual subjects as they come up against various limits. Attaway's great skill is in seeing pressure everywhere—even in animating the inanimate. Attaway steepens his depiction of workers and work in the processes of chemical breakdown that transform iron ore into steel. Steel manufacturing is itself a process of animation—of bringing a new substance to life. Attaway's ability to animate objects ranging from metals to men complicates our view of where agency resides.

When steel (a seeming object and not a subject) "gets" someone in the novel (and it does get many men), Attaway's aesthetic moves beyond personification. When steel "gets" someone, the novel connects the mill to a war machine and men to its metallurgy. As a material like steel becomes animated, masculinity and masculine agency are shaken. Attaway troubles the American masculine ideal through the pressures of steel feeling, which cause men to "crack up."

*Steel Feeling: Penetrating Knives*

A character sketch of Melody opens the novel and introduces masculine feeling. Melody is a sharecropper and a blues player who "never had a craving in him that he couldn't slick away on his guitar" (1). Though his work as a sharecropper might seem to make him a black object in an environment that would liken him to other animals, Melody's name marks his humanity. He is named for his propensity for feeling. "Guitar

players don't bother with any fingering," the narrator says. "Most of the good slickers down where he was born would say that a thin blade made the most music. But he liked the heft of a good, heavy hog sticker" (1). The narrator continues, "And maybe that's why his mother changed his name to Melody when he got old enough for a name to mean something besides 'Come and get it'" (1). Melody's name converts him from a nameless object to a distinct individual. His individuality is connected to the heft of a blade.

This opening portrait of Melody establishes his dual nature through two images: a thin knife blade and a hog sticker. In terms of actual use, the thin blade is much lighter and easiest to handle and to maneuver. The hog sticker is a cumbersome blade commonly used for deep penetration. While the sticker does not have ease of use, its form allows one to feel and sense the heft of his action. Melody uses the hog slicker to make music and to keep the pressure of feeling—those many cravings he slicks away—from penetrating him. The phallic overtones are clear, and they move from considerations of human agency in general to questions of male power. Here Attaway presents the paradox of penetration: to be an individual subject, one must control feelings and perhaps act as a penetrating agent.

The hog sticker becomes an autoerotic mechanism for subject formation; it allows Melody to feel most like himself. Though the themes of masculine feeling and penetration first appear with Melody, the effects of pressure on feeling are more fully elaborated with Big Mat, who cannot "slick" away feeling.

Melody can ease his feelings by channeling the vibrations of metal along a string. Such is not the case for Mat. His feelings smolder below his surface.

Because he was blacker than his half brothers the white sharecroppers' kids. . . . said Big Mat's father must have been a lump of charcoal. And Big Mat had learned to draw a safe distance within himself everything that could be hurt. The years had given him a shell. But within that *casure* his emotions were under great pressure. Sometimes they broke through, and he filled with red madness—like a boar at mating—hog wild. Few folks had seen him that way. To almost everybody except close kin he was a stupid, unfeeling giant, a good man to butcher hogs and veal cattle. Melody alone knew him completely, Melody, from his dream world, could read the wounds in Big Mat's eyes (11-12 emphasis in original).

Big Mat's name imitates his object status. He appears to be a piece of big matter. Mat is not only like a piece of big matter, but also a piece of black matter. His father, his tormenters had claimed, "must have been a lump of charcoal" (11). While charcoal characterizes Mat's inherited social status as a black object, it also complicates the idea of objects as inanimate and unfeeling. Charcoal is produced out of an organic object like wood. Its birth requires heat and pressure. Wood set aflame but kept pressurized under the earth transforms into charcoal. The same could be said of Mat's existence as one living under and containing hot pressure.

Mat's feeling resides below a superficial shell.<sup>iii</sup> The narrator describes this shell as a "*casure*." On one hand, "*casure*" is reminiscent of the noun "case." The meaning of "case" ranges from the state of things, to a plight, to an outer sheath or covering for something like a knife. These all apply to Mat—his feelings are under cover and under

the pressure of his current state. On the other hand, "*casure*" is the masculine singular form of the Latin noun *cāsūrus*, which means "fall" or "overthrow." Here, *casure* operates like charcoal—it is seemingly fixed matter that contains the potential for change. Like a sheath, it hides a ready blade. Only Melody can feel the depth of Mat's stirrings that reside underneath.

While feelings are understood among the brothers, Mat's feelings are not limited to mere blackness. His emotion comes as "red" feeling. Charcoal, in fact, moves from black to red to white. By using matter that shifts in color, Attaway suggests the pressure of emotion is about the weight of male emotion and about identity as comprised along a spectrum of colors.

The weight of feeling is emphasized throughout the novel. For example, when Mat ponders heavy subjects, he carries a huge boulder in one hand (one too heavy for Melody to lift) to facilitate his meditation. This boulder mirrors his outward self as well as his emotional weight. Mat's gargantuan size and his stony exterior eventually come to make him a masculine ideal of sorts as the narrative progresses, for he is a big man who does not cry.

Though solid matter, including rocks and minerals, may seem inanimate, there are constant mini-collisions occurring below their dark surfaces. In other words, rocks and other objects can be animated. Their animacy is most evident in moments of transformation when, under duress of pressure, they are forced give up oxygen or to blow up as a result of heat. So it is with Mat. Attaway connects Mat's seeming inanimacy to a latent stirring within the core. In this way, Mat is again like a stone, superficially inanimate and unmoved, yet constantly aroused deep within.

Attaway explores the paradox of a self through Mat. Big Mat is most animated and most recognizably a human subject in the moments when he appears the most inhumane. The first example is the event of the mother's death, and it catalyzes events that follow. The narrator offers the scene through flashback:

She had dropped dead between the gaping handles of the plow. The lines had been double looped under her arms, so she dragged through the damp, rocky clay by a mule trained never to balk in the middle of a row. The mule dragged her in. The rocks in the red hills are sharp. She didn't look like their maw any more. . . . Chinatown and Melody sat against the house and cried. Big Mat went away for a long time. He came back hog wild and he took a piece of that flint rock and tore the life out of that mule, so that even the hide wasn't fit to sell (7).

The mother is pierced by rock and by the conditions of her race and her work. The Moss's mother "didn't look like their maw" after the accident. She becomes the ultimate object in death, like a breathless lump of charcoal or a carcass shredded by a weapon. And so Mat takes his revenge on the mule with a piece of rock, avenging himself on a helpless animal with the same material that killed his mother.

This penetration scene moves from considerations of power and its corollary, subjects versus objects, to considerations of feeling and pressure. The mother had dropped of exhaustion. According to laws of physics, that pressure had to transfer. Her release of pressure created a new pressure and a new feeling. As a result, this scene is as much about what had happened to her as it is about Mat's response. While Chinatown and Melody react through tears and vomiting, Big Mat had gone "hog-wild" (7). The pressure

of emotion propels him into a fit of enraged penetration. Mat kills the mule—the proxy for his pressure and oppression.

Here Attaway highlights the way pressure transfers and moves from one source to another. Mat's act is not just any slaying, but a slaughter with a flint rock, a weapon with more heft than a hog sticker. This rock might seem inanimate, but set in motion, it is a great force. The force of penetrating weapons becomes naturalized throughout the narrative, especially after the brothers move from the farm site to the mill site. In fact, Mat's retaliation against the mule (with a material not yet transformed into something like steel) foreshadows later scenes of penetration that steel feeling will cause.

Attaway provides one more penetration scene to create a build-up of pressure in the narrative before moving the brothers into the world of steel. While the pressure of the mother's death might have been temporarily released for Mat, his release creates a new pressure. The Moss brothers have no maw, and now they have no mule. Without a mule they are unable to work the land. And this pressure has to go somewhere.

Attaway's experiment with pressure is evident in a hog-slaughtering scene. The pressure of Mat and his family's dire situation rests at the backdrop. Mat has finished killing a group of ailing hogs. Only the brood sow remains. He plays a knife on the landowner Johnston's sow as he attempts to request food and another mule from him. As the scene unfolds, pressure mounts underneath a tense conversation.

Mr Johnston stood watching while Big Mat wiped the knife across the hog's teats. The animal had grown quiet. Its little eyes sucked back out of sight. The snout dripped a rope of saliva halfway to the ground. Big Mat touched the hog's neck tentatively with the point of the knife. The

animal quivered. The shining rope broke and made a bubble on the ground.

"Mr Johnston."

"What is it Mat?"

Mat continues:

"My folks is waitin'—"

"For what?"

"For me, Mr Johnston. They hungry. . . ."

"Go on."

"If I could jest scald this one and leave the butcherin' until tomorrow—

take somethin' home to my folks. . . ." (14).

Like the scene of the mother's death, there are two arguments occurring in this penetration scene. On one hand the scene is about black experiences of labor oppression. The animal imagery creates a parallelism that elaborates subordination and a subject-object dynamic.

The hanging animal calls upon past histories of slaughter like lynching, creating a sense of continuity between past exploitation and the present. The hog's trail of saliva, described as a "rope," echoes the earlier mention of mother's death. Like the scene of the mother's death, the hog slaughter demonstrates the ways the circumstances of black labor were shaped against a social structure that cast them as mere animals. And Johnston has Mat and his family by the neck. Johnston does eventually agree to give Mat something to

take home to his family, a bag of hog guts. After giving Mat the bag, he tells Mat to throw the remainder to the "other" hogs.

On the other hand, the scene raises the question of masculine agency. Attaway creates an affect of pressure through imagery and dialogue. The hog's suspension at the backdrop of a slow, terse conversation contributes to a sense of suspense. The slow dialogue between Mat and Johnston adds to the slow building pressure. The saliva hangs there, ready to drop. Mat is like the brood-sow because of his slow, brooding emotion. He too is full of breath and about to burst like the bubble on the ground.

Mat's feeling out of the hog's throat with a blade mimics his feeling out of Johnston. The exchange between them is less a two-person dialogue and more single speech and a reply through action. For each of Johnston's dehumanizing comments, Mat plays his knife on the hog, imaging the pressure of his feeling. The knife is key as the scene continues:

Mr Johnston spat his quid into the box of entrails.

"Well, that there's a good idée, Mat. What you figger on takin' home?"

"Why anything you gives me, suh." Mat played the knife over the sow's throat. The animal held its breath then gagged. Saliva ran like unraveling silk.

Their exchange continues:

Mr Johnston said, "It ain't my fault your folks ain't got nothin' to eat."

The knifepoint found a spot on the hog's neck.

"I figure this here labor can jest go on what you owe me for my mule." The blade slid out of sight. The haft socked against the bristled neck. A quick wiggle of the knife found the great blood vessel. Big Mat drew the blade. Dark blood gushed in its wake. Mr Johnston looked on admiringly.

"You know the needs of a knife, Mat" (14).

As the scene plays out it could be called a battle of the groins or of knives in need. Johnston discharges while Mat penetrates. They do not force themselves upon each other and deflect their feelings onto another creature instead. While Johnston's hauteur lands in the guts, Mat's unidentified feeling slices into flesh.

Mat continues explaining the pressure of his situation, including the impossibility of farming the land without a new mule. When Johnston asks, "'You ain't kickin', are you, Mat?' Big Mat's eyes dropped to the bloody entrails. He presented a dull, stupid exterior" (14). Though Mat presents Johnston with his shell—a seemingly inanimate mask—the narrator knows the brooding pressure within his *casure*. As the hog makes its final thrust in its "death struggle," Mat replies to Johnston, "they don't kick 'til they most dead" (14). Here Mat aligns his potential resistance with the inevitable kick of the seemingly powerless.

Johnston seems to miss Mat's meaning. But the potential pushback had unfolded through Mat's manipulation of the hog and the ready knife, amplifying the stakes. The slaughter of the hog reflects the potential reaction from pressure, including the possibility of a "kick." And as Johnston observes, Mat knows "the needs of a knife." As Johnston

acknowledges Mat's great skill with hard metal, Attaway suggests the "needs of a knife" and the needs of a man are sometimes one in the same.

Johnston must feel a bit of pressure here too. On one hand, he must maintain his show of dominance as the white landowner. At the same time, he must sense the threat of Mat's kick. Johnston temporarily alleviates Mat's potential force by promising him another mule, effectively staving off "the kick" or the stick (14). This scene reflects a pattern that will occur in other penetration scenes: the slow build-up of pressure and its eventual release.

Attaway is up to something else that becomes increasingly evident as the novel progresses. The dynamic between Mat and Johnston subtly troubles the meaning of manhood—from the pathos of penis envy to an illusion of patriarchy as uniform, stable control. While Mat slaughters the hogs, Johnston stands in very close proximity. Mat becomes a proxy of sorts. Johnston admires him and his actions, shoring up his own masculinity through an intimate experience of Mat's use of the blade. Johnston reabsorbs Mat's penetration by promising him a mule—by preventing the kick. In other words, Johnston's power comes through a vicarious enjoyment of Mat's. To absorb Mat's power, Johnston has to keep him working, and he must keep him close. On this day, Mat and the landowner "get off."

Though both men leave temporarily satisfied and unscathed (Mat gets a mule and Johnston keeps his worker), Mat's emotion remains. With the promise of a mule, the seemingly static, unfeeling Big Mat's "heart skipped a little, though his exterior self did not change" (15). Mat, as it turns out, has a "heart." He is not the unfeeling giant the outer

world sees. Though the pressure of feeling (in the narrative and for Mat) has lifted temporarily through the promise of a mule, this release is short lived.

Pressure mounts again when the riding boss denies Mat a mule. Pressure moves when Mat strikes, but does not kill, the riding boss for a denial that was packaged with an insult to Mat's mother. And pressure mounts again when the brothers must flee the eruption of an inevitable mob.

Before the brothers arrive at the mill, Attaway provides a brief boxcar scene where pressure continues to build. The brothers' positioning in the car conjures an object status as they are "bunched up like hogs headed for market." While the animal imagery speaks to questions of materiality that are at the backdrop, the foreground centers on the senses. The boxcar places the senses in overdrive: "The air, fetid with man smell and nervous sweat, the pounding of the wheels shaking the car and its prisoners like a gourd full of peas, the piercing scream of the wheels" (39). Mat's "misery was a part of everything else" (39). Attaway not only represents mass black trauma but also the problem that "Big Mat could not defend his identity against the pack" (39). His feelings and sense of self become melded into everything around him, a sort of forging process that anticipates being melted down in the mills.

Like Mat, Chinatown struggles to hold his identity and his subject status. China's name and his characterization as a man with "slant" eyes that seem fixed in a permanent smile make his "race" more ambiguous than that of his half-brothers. He holds fast to an identity defined by a gold tooth, and he is afraid to sleep for fear the bumping boxcar will knock it out. "Never was nothin'—still ain't nothin'. But nobody treat a nigger like he got to git tired sometime," he explains to Melody. China continues, "All that make a man feel

like he ain't nothin', and a man got to have somethin' he kin grin a little to hisself about. . . . So all the time I dream 'bout a gold tooth, shinin' an' makin' everybody look when Chinatown smile" (40-41). This metal incisor comes as a sign of male subjectivity and a key to admiration and respect. China wants to be hard and even precious, like gold tooth. But of course gold, like steel, can be melted down.

The metal of the train, which is a kind of shaft in its own right, pierces the men's senses, breaking them down. The notion of "holding out identity against a pack" recalls the narrator's earlier reference to Melody's name, which distinguished him from a pack and as more than "come and get it." And now that "melody" is in question, as Attaway foreshadows the effects of steel: "Riding with the rattle of wheels in their ears when they were in the dark...It was enough to make them brittle" (41). Here we have the paradox of steel (and men): the hardest man-made substances only exist because they were once melted down from something else. Masculine feeling will transform into steel feeling at the mill site, and men will eventually break.

#### *Steel Feeling: Men, Metal, and Mills*

Attaway's focus on the hard thing that is inherently weak advances writings about work that have centered on the mill site. From Rebecca Harding Davis's "The Korf Woman" (1861) to Charles Chesnutt's "Po Sandy" (1899) to Jean Toomer's "Blood Burning Moon" (1923) to Zora Neale Hurston's "Spunk" (1925) to Tillie Olsen's *Yonnonadio* (1974), men are seen as daring to go up against something monstrous that they cannot defeat.<sup>iv</sup> "Steel feeling" provides another way to think about these instances of competition.

Attaway draws a parallel between processes of steel production and the making of new men. At the mill, new men—black, white, and European immigrant—become "green men." Their greenness seemingly erases race and nationality as all men labor as a clan of workers, but this romance does not last long. While "green" speaks to their newness to the area and inexperience with the work, it presents an irony. Their work could not be less green.

In Attaway's narrative, steel manufacturing is depicted as an environmentally damaging process—what Smothers' had called "a sin to melt up the ground"<sup>v</sup> (53). The recurring motif of pressure mimics the denaturalizing process of creating steel. Steel is forged when iron and carbon are fused. Raw iron ore is an iron oxide that is smelted in a blast furnace. In the furnace, a temperature of 3000 degrees Fahrenheit forces the iron to relinquish its oxygen and to liquefy. This initial liquid iron is called "pig iron," a name that rings of farm and industrial commodities. Without further treatment it remains unusable. The product moves from pig iron to liquid iron through purification processes in a Bessemer furnace. This furnace made the mass production of steel cheap during the early-twentieth century and was later accompanied by an open-hearth furnace method. Without a proper balance of pressure, temperature, and handling, steel becomes brittle and non-malleable. So it is with men.

Attaway portrays the job of making steel not only to show how grueling are its tasks but also to reveal the sensory and emotional experience of the atmosphere surrounding those tasks. The hot metal work leaves the men feeling penetrated. For Melody, "In his body played the noiseless rhythms of the mill. Before morning he was so worked up that his voice was high and thin, like a knife running over an E string in his

throat" (83). Melody's new experience presents an irony; he previously controlled his feeling and kept himself a subject by ordering feeling on an instrument. Now his new labor context converts him into a steely tool.

Attaway takes great pains to describe the workday in great detail. Its pressures heighten in a mechanism that has a similar impact on the workers:

This Monday had done something to every man in the mills. There was trouble starting. Men were strung high, like the strings on Melody's music box. These Monday mills hit bad chords, and every man was ready to lay his buddy out at the wink of an eye. One of the Slavs let a hot test block fall. It crushed the toe of the Italian working next to him. The Italian was screaming as they took him away to the hospital. He was screaming that the Slav had done it purposefully.

The accident cleared the tension for a while. (88)

As the penetration scene continues, Attaway presents a passive rhythmic, repetitive description of work.

There was rebuilding of the furnaces—back wall and front wall, Test the metal and get a jigger of steel to thin it out. There was tapping all along the hearth and remudding of burned spouts. There was fine hard coal in bags to be flung to the full ladles—also magnesium. There was the fearful heat and men with quivering muscles, trying to live through another Monday on the hearth (89-90).

The repetition of "there was" removes human agency from the job. There are no subjects, only a process that appears always already inscribed. The worker becomes part of a

seemingly agentless machine. The "fearful heat" is about the threat of literal fire and about emotions that run high in dangerous combination—anger and fear. The men trade places with the previously brittle furnaces. As the mechanics of metal and the muscles of men fight for air, the job brings workers on the brink of life and death.

With the hearth in repair the men are in disarray. The foreman O'Casey "came within a hairsbreadth of not living through this Monday. The men were brittle again, and O'Casey slapped one of the hayseeds in the face. . . . the hayseed grabbed a shovel and tried to use it on O'Casey. Big Mat saved O'Casey's life. . . . he had laid out the young hayseed" (90). Here the narrator uses the word "brittle." Brittle repeats throughout the novel; it becomes a kind of refrain.

"Brittle" captures the effects of steel feeling and the fragility that results from an inability to cope with incredible stress. The men's brittleness is sometimes softened. Mat resets the pressure by saving the foreman in this instance, and Smothers articulates the flow of pressure from the processes of steel manufacture onto men. "Steel do seem like it tired, of a Monday," he says. "Tired of yowling. Guess men got to yowl then, got to run right at each other's throats." Chinatown calls upon a cycle of pressure: "Whisky, whores and wheelbarrows," an alliterative echo (91).

### *Steel Feeling: Pressure and Release*

"Whiskey" and "whores" become repetitive avenues through which lifeless men attempt to rejuvenate after pushing "wheelbarrows" in the mill. The Moss brothers and other steel men let off their steam along an avenue like Sixth Street in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Before the steel industry fell in the late-twentieth century, Homestead had

a block of prostitution houses and its Sixth Street became a red-light district comprised of black and Mexican sex workers. In the novel, Anna is a Mexican sex worker operating in this district. Women like Anna, gambling, and alcohol re-animate the men's brittleness. Attaway highlights these mechanisms not to comment upon vice but to underscore the great need for a release. After all, as another worker named Dusty observes, "A hot metal man ain't due to be sober" (87). Gambling becomes Chinatown's drug. He loses a thousand dollars as quickly as he has earned it in a craps game. Others wage bets on dogfights.

A dogfight unfolds as another penetration scene. This fight operates as a surrogate for the tensions in the town and at the worksite. Melody, Mat, and China attend the fight after the hellish process of rebuilding the furnaces. Even Mat has absorbed the hell, for he "was full of savage pressure" and "the thought of dogs tearing at each other was pleasant" (92). The notion of savagery begins to trouble the representation of men under pressure.

The fight allegorizes the ways pressure moves. In essence, recreation becomes about re-creation. The brittle self reconstitutes through a release of pressure. For example, the spectators are aroused and full of energy: "The barn was full of people in a sweat to smell hot blood. . . . When the fight started that crowd would go into a solid, quivering mass of hard faces, mouths slobbering in eagerness for a kill" (93-4). Most workers come to "get off." The same environment has an opposite effect on Melody. He hides the fact that "when the people got like that and an animal was dying he had to turn away or vomit" (94). The narrator reveals Melody's reasons for attending the fight are different. "He came again and again to feel the lives of these people burning together in a single white flame. The flame acted on him like whiskey, and he burned with it" (94).

Intoxicated and animated by the pulse of humanity, Melody attends the fight to get back to life after feeling dead from work. The crowd at the fight has no color line—all are white with heat. Yet, Attaway presents an irony: this most unifying human moment is penetratingly inhumane.

True to form, Attaway first creates a build-up of pressure in the scene. Melody joins the excited crowd, and Bob Dank begins arousing his dog Son, "feeding that rage by slapping a peppered and raw-meat-scented glove across the dog's nose" (94). The image of Dank and his dog mirrors the crowd—he builds the dog's heat as the crowd's temperature rises. While everyone expects a victory from Son before the start of the fight, once it begins

the men who knew dogs saw that Son did not have a chance [ . . . ] The terrier whirled and dived at his throat. Son was too tired to spring away. He crumpled under the weight, and his throat was hidden between grinding red jaws [ . . . ] The crowd was silent, so that the sobbing breaths of the women became a roar. The fight was over, and a lot of men had lost money, but there was no thought of money at the kill. Nobody expected old Bob Dank to step in and save his dog [ . . . ] Bob Dank's cry rang out: "Haul him off! Haul him off! [ . . . ] Bob Dank lifted a heavy stick in his hands. "I want to kill this no good sonofabitch myself," he cried. Every eye was on the club waving high in the air (96).

Attaway uses the dogfight to underscore the fine line between humans and other animals, and the reality that at such moments perhaps there is no line at all.

At first, all participants are excited about the fight. They wage their bets and collectively build up to the climax and release of their own pressure from an intense workday. With the exception of Melody, there is little concern for the dogs. In a sense, separation between man and beast—subject and object—is maintained as long as the dogs fight each other. Yet, the release of pressure goes wrong. Dank's attempted action against Son comes as a violation that breaches order. The moment Dank steps in, the afterglow of the fight is disrupted. Dank's disruption leads to another eruption of pressure.

Anna runs to the dog's defense, and another violation of order occurs as Dank hits her. Mat steps in to save the woman and to re-equilibrate the pressures of the day. He knocks out Dank with one blow. Through this scene, Attaway shows the tenuous nature of power and how it depends on a process of cooling and re-setting. The dogfight functions as a metaphor for the madness of the mill site and all of its destruction and disorder. The scene engages a deeper question about violence, force, and where feeling resides. Mat's performance of powerful masculinity seems to restore a balance as he saves Anna and takes out Dank. While Anna admires him for his heroism, she is not Mat's only admirer. He captures the imaginations of other men.

*Steel Feeling: Fantasies of Masculinity*

Attaway uses Big Mat's characterization to represent an ideal masculinity. Anna, the young Mexican sex worker, articulates this ideal. She sees black Mat as the epitome of an American, one who can pull her out of poverty. Anna had dreamed of an ideal American man. "He will be a big man with muscles like a bear on the mountain . . . . He

will have a pine tree on his belly, hard like rock all the night" (103). In this fantasy, masculinity has the power to protect women and to fill them with hardness. There are other fantasies of masculinity that resonate with industry and steel.

In popular culture, Superman is the "man of steel" with only one (unearthly) weakness. Before Superman, manhood and steel were fused in the legends of Joe Magarac and John Henry Brown. John Henry Brown is an American folk hero. He was a Reconstruction-era African American convict-laborer and steel driver. Legend has it that his strength and speed enabled him to beat out a steam-powered machine. It is said that he died with the hammer in his hand (Nelson 2). Here, masculinity and steel fuse into an unyielding super man. There is similar legend in Joe.

Joe Magarac, a folk hero of European immigrant origin, presents another fantasy. Lore has it he was made of steel.<sup>vi</sup> He hailed from the steel mills of Pittsburgh and became the folk-patron saint of steel workers. Some say he was born out of iron ore and would appear suddenly like a super man to protect workers from accidents. Others say he later melted himself in a Bessemer to make new materials during a metal shortage, and some say he still lives, a spectre in the mill waiting to light the furnaces once more (Patrick 53). Both legends of steel men ennoble the hazards of steelwork—forging a connection between masculinity and industrial labor—even as the stories figure them heroes, the men also appear as "tools."

Attaway positions Big Mat as a black Joe to trouble this forge. Mat as black Joe is at once an African American echo and a fatal revision. After rescuing O'Casey on that hellish Monday in the hearth, and just before saving Anna at the dogfight, Mat had gained the nickname "Black Irish." The name says it all. O'Casey claims, "Never had a

colored helper work better on the hearth. He's strong as an ox—do everythin' the melter tell him to do and take care of the work of a whole crew if he ain't held back" (92).

O'Casey continues, "He's got some Irish in him somewhere. . . Lots of black fellas have got Irish guts" "Black Irish—that's what he is" (92). His name becomes a sign of solidarity, acceptance and cooperation that contributes to the fantasy of an American working class that bridges the color line. This bridge is about melting individuals into new (and super) men.

After the dogfight, Black Irish has a pressure buildup of his own. Other men admire a naked, sleeping Mat. "Gawd wot a whopper," they remark (102). Mat becomes a phallic emblem of manly steel work—his erection like one of many smoke stacks in the iron-monster mill. But as men stand looking upon Mat and the fantasy of the potency he represents, Attaway suggests this ideal is unstable.

In Homestead, workers are stacked on top of each other in bunkhouses, in the red-light district, and in the mill. This concentrated setting brings attention to energies and pressures that would normally go unnoticed because they would seem dispersed. Attaway creates a sense of hyper-masculinity by concentrating so many men together. Concentrating the men into one hyper-masculine unit underscores their volatility.<sup>vii</sup>

Women, especially those like Anna in the red-light district, become the receptacles for the weight of their pressure. While many visit the brothels for release, Big Mat refuses. Chinatown comments, "I feels sorry for the first gal he grabs" (98). Mat eventually chooses Anna. When his brothers see Mat again, "his hair was matted, and matted in it were white threads of cotton—threads from a torn mattress." While Anna is

enamored with Mat's masculinity, it comes with certain costs. Attaway begins to present Mat's masculinity as overcharged, and Melody operates as a foil.

Melody too has a relationship with Anna. She initially casts his sensitivity as a "sissy" sensibility. "You are a sissy fellow," she had said to him when he had refused her body at a brothel days before she met Big Mat (75). "You play music instead of making love," she claims (75). In a sense Melody had been "making love" to his guitar, strumming its cords to relieve his feeling. Part of this feeling had been the pressure Anna had placed on him. She insists he lay with her so that she might make money. But when Melody looks at her, "this girl had more than one woman shackled in her eyes. All the women he had seen were there" (74). The compression of women who have absorbed the pressures of men in the steel environment fills her eyes and overwhelms him. It seems the women's pressure has little place to go. Anna could force herself onto him.

After their initial exchange and after Anna takes up with Mat, Melody and Anna have another close encounter. This time Melody applies the pressure, perhaps because Anna, now provided for by Mat, seems to have none. Melody threatens her with a letter from Mat's wife Hattie in Kentucky, and they eventually have sex. Agency remains ambiguous because it is unclear whether Anna exchanges her body for Melody's silence and for her security or whether she acts on her desire for Melody. Perhaps it is both. Still the pressure of feeling is clear. Fighting over the letter

close to each other, they strained until he could feel his muscles trembling.

He was getting weak and must give up . . . . He did not know what he was trying to do but he felt her body quivering under him. He felt the arm she

clamped around his neck. He saw her free hand reach and turn out the kerosene lamp (112)

Afterwards, "He was resting for the first time in a long while. . . .He lay stretched like a satisfied animal, a long, lean dog that this day has killed a deer" (113). In this scene, pressure is quenched as quickly as it builds. Melody's dog-like rest underscores his recreation, and his animal likeness makes his agency questionable. Here Attaway suggests at some point we are all folded in under pressure. After sex with Anna, Melody's feelings change. He begins to feel "jealous hatred" for Mat.

*Steel Feeling: Brittle Insides*

Melody's mounting emotion for Anna and his hatred of Mat build as the atmospheric pressure gathers at the mill. Smothers, the one-legged seer, predicts something is amiss at the mill. His predictions are not only about the pressure furnace, but also foreshadow the costs of untended emotions among men.

Melody moves to a new work group in an attempt to ease the pressures of his jealousy. "Unconsciously he had acted to keep that hatred from growing. Now he would not have to see Big Mat go home to Anna" (125). After he moves, the pressure of his craving is not quenched, but a release comes by way of an ambiguous penetration of his body. On his first day in the new unit, Melody smashes his hand. "Melody smashed his right hand, his 'picking' hand. He had been thinking of the guitar, knowing it could never plunk away the craving that was in him" (127). The narrator continues, "He would always wonder if he had done it purposely. That was how it seemed at the time" as his flesh quivers with shock. (127-28). Agency remains unclear, as a "smash" can apply or result

from pressure. As Melody's pressure shifts, it literally shifts the men. China takes over Melody's work hours because he is too injured to work.

Attaway increases the parallels between the hazards of the job and the hazards of untended feeling. After Melody's questionable accident, the atmosphere in the mill seems high strung. The corollary and blurred lines continue as the all "seeing" Smothers predicts steel will "get" a fellow worker named Dusty. At the same time, the plot thickens. Melody returns from the hospital and learns Mat has been arrested. China forces Melody to get Mat out of jail.

It was not the steel in the mill that was going to "get" Dusty, but Mat's steely feelings. Mat had suspected Anna of cheating, and Dusty stood accused. Mat explains to Melody, "I'll kill anybody I catches creepin'," as he tells him about his feelings (152). His conversation shifts to Anna. "It seem like bein' on top a piece of ice...jest like I doin' somethin' to a dead body. But I do it. And then I feels bad. So I starts in hittin' her. And I feels badder. It make me crazy" (154). Here Anna's lack of animation presents another hard thing. Her icy frigidity comes as a response to male pressure; and Anna refuses to melt with Mat. They are locked in a vicious struggle for agency.

The narrative increases the pressure between Mat and Melody as it simultaneously rises (unbeknownst to them) at the mill. As the men drive toward the mill, Mat continues discussing his feeling. Melody looks at him thinking, "always before [Mat] had had a resentment in him that kept him still a man. Now he was a paper sack, full of nothing—like an empty paper sack" (153). The repetition of "paper sack" emphasizes a process beyond the reach of Mat's will. Mat becomes like an inanimate object, and an unfilled one at that.

Mat presses Melody for advice. Melody had been the only one to intimately know his feelings, the one with whom Mat found release. In fact, the pressure is so intense, Melody feels Mat's pain in his own groin as they talk. "Melody was sensitive enough to feel the pain in Big Mat's loins" (183). Feeling becomes an intimate understanding between men. Both long for Anna. "'Tell me somethin'!" cried Big Mat." When Melody does not respond, Mat applies more pressure. "He gripped the bandaged hand with a force that paralyzed Melody's right side" (155). Here at the moment when it seems pressure is temporarily relaxed and as they near home, they "sense" something is wrong. "Suddenly Melody was aware of the warning. . . . His whole being was gripped by that knowledge. A steel man would understand. . . . Then down there came a blinding flash" (156). Here feeling becomes a kind of gripping knowledge as tight as the hold Mat had on Melody's hand. It is a grip that is particular to steel men and a feeling that only "a steel man would understand."

*Steel Feeling: Chauvinism and Strikes*

The mill blast changes everything. The blow leaves Chinatown blind. He had been constituted through the visual, and now his lack of sight takes away his sense of a masculine self. "He had been a man who lived through outward symbols. Now those symbols were gone, and he was lost" (161). The after effects of the blast weigh upon Mat. "Big Mat was caught in emptiness. The trouble with Anna had broken his confidence. Chinatown's mishap had struck its blow, so Mat had been split like a bag of wind between two heavy palms" (169). During his continued period of emptiness, in fact,

Attaway introduces two other forms of pressure—the heat of summer and a strike. One will fill Big Mat.

Attaway draws a parallel between a seasonal climate and the temperature of workers. A strike starts in July. As tensions rise, "it was hard to walk through town" (170). Then "during the dog days, hot July up into August...snakes shed their winter skins and dogs and men went mad" (171). Mat no longer has the respect as Black Irish, and he "could not understand this sudden reversal" (171). The fantasy of a male fusion is no more, as Attaway begins chipping away at an interracial working-class masculine ideal.

The end of the narrative underscores the problem of the fantasy of interracial workers as masculine agents. Because of his size and staggering presence, Mat is deputized as a strikebreaker. After being deputized, Mat "gets off" on his new position. "He had drunk out of the deputies bottles until he was blind with whisky and power. Like the deputies and troopers, he no longer needed reasons for aggression. Cruelty was a thing desirable in itself" (216). Half man, half mechanism, steel feeling electrifies the flesh. "The muscles under his touch were electric" (216). Attacking the strikers, Mat and the troopers "were like men regretful at the finish of an orgasm" (215). Attaway sexualizes masculine force and makes it an occasion for nostalgia (the orgasm always ends).

In the concluding scenes, Attaway conflates seemingly different activities into one. "The mounted troopers wielded the clubs like men with scythes" (214). For Attaway, the northern agent resembles a field worker. These agents also look a lot like "the posses [Mat] had seen in the south—they were struck with blood lust" (189). In another

association, the troopers tell the strikers "go to the mill or go to jail" (215). Both locales equal prison for the resisters. The narrator reveals Mat's thoughts about Johnston and about the riding boss. Mat realizes he "would not run in fear this time. But there was no Mr Johnston and the riding boss was far away. He felt a keen regret" (217). The narrative presents a repetition of "regret," but here "regret" is ambiguous. Mat's sense of regret presents a certain ambiguity. On one hand, his regret could stem from an inability to confront the riding boss again, to kill rather than simply injure. On the other hand, the regret could come as a result of the piercing realization that there is no longer an object for his rage, a matter against which he might shape himself.

Attaway further troubles masculine agency when Mat attempts to make Anna an object. He heads home to prove his manhood and himself. He walks in on a conversation between Anna and Melody instead. Melody had been pressing her to run away with him, and Mat overhears that Anna has been prostituting herself. Animated by rage, "Big Mat was unbuckling the heavy leather around his waist. That belt was two inches wide. His name was fixed with brass studs in the leather. . . . 'You ain't gonna look good to the next guy.' The heavy leather was running through his fingers" (222). As Mat prepares to "punish" Anna, the leather belt reinforces the ambiguity between his subject and object position: his name is held by metal on the belt. Anna screams, "Kill me! It is the only way I stay here...I do it for money to go from peon like you! . . . In Mexico peon on ground, here peon work in mill" (222). Again, the various locales of work are conflated: men with scythes, millworkers, riding bosses, "peon on ground," and deputies are one in the same.

Though Mat penetrates Anna with his studded belt, Anna pierces him with her words. Despite his crazed tirade she does not renege. "'You are a peon' she kept on. 'I will not lie with peon.' Her body shook as the belt dragged across it. She was out of her senses, the way she kept talking. 'You are not *Americano*' (222). Anna emasculates Mat by denying him the masculine construction of "American man" in Spanish. Anna's words construct him as less than an animal or a material object. She calls him waste. "You are dirt—goat dropping—not Black Irish—black peon" (223). Without a riding boss to resent, "Big Mat went hog wild and laid the belt across her face" (223). She continues talking through "blood bubbles" and her breath operates as a sign of her animation and of a life that will not relinquish itself to Mat (222).

Mat's attempt to re-claim the self fails. The narrative does not allow him the release of the spoils of carnage. Anna gets the last word. By representing Mat as a brutal agent, Attaway pushes against the grain of the expected formula for black working-class representation. In so doing, the novel moves beyond race and class to consider masculinity as an equally confining performance.

Without release and containing even more pressure, Mat returns to the strike. He poses as a union signer to break up a secret meeting. While "busting" the meeting and the backs of men, Mat thinks to himself

Peon...peon...he was no peon. There was no riding boss over him now [ . . . ] A bitterness toward all things white hit him like hot iron. Then he knew. There was a riding boss—Big Mat [ . . . ] For the first time in his life he laughed aloud. Laughing crazily, he held the man by the neck.

Big Mat looked at the mills, and the big feelings were lifting him high in the air. . . . Smothers had been a liar. Steel couldn't curse a man. Steel couldn't hurt him. He was the riding boss. [ . . . . ] With his strength he could relight their fires or he could let them lie cold. Without Black Irish they were dead.

This was the only place for a big black man to be (233).

Here Mat sees himself as Joe Magarac—a man with the power to "relight their fires." Big Mat is full of "big feelings." Just as Mat seems to expand beyond control, the pressure released in an instant:

The blow on the back of his head took him without warning [ . . . . ] His big eyes could not have seen the young Slav and the pickax handle. He did not fall. He staggered about like his blind brother. . . The blows fell again and again. Still he did not fall [ . . . . ] He had all the objectivity of a man who is closer to death than life. [ . . . . ] He, Mat, was the riding boss, and hate would give this club hand the strength it needed [ . . . . ] It seemed to him he had been through all of this once before. Only at that far time he had been the arm strong with hate. [ . . . ] Big Mat went farther and farther away and no longer could he distinguish himself from these other figures. They were all one and all the same. In that confusion he sensed something true. Maybe in these mills a new Mr Johnston was creating riding bosses, making a difference where none existed (233).

This penetration scene elaborates the ways subjects and objects are forged out of pressure as it moves: tools—seemingly agentless "club hands"—are animated and made "strong"

by hate. Mat's realization about the creation of "difference where none existed" comes as insightful definition of "race." And by comparison, Attaway finds similarities where none had been acknowledged.

The final scene presents "brittle" men. As China and Melody board the train, they come to face a blind soldier. China sits across from him and learns the soldier had worked steel in the mills before heading to war. China asks the man why he left the mills. His answer centers on feeling. "One day I was standin' outside the mill to git the cool river air, and the feelin' come on me . . . The feelin' was sorta like that river air, I guess. Ain't no sense tellin' it to quit blowin.' It don't care if you want to git cool or not" (236). The soldier goes on to explain one thing remained with him that he " couldn't shut out" (236). "'Boom!. . . Boom!. . . Boom!. . . ' . . . The sound was real to the soldier" (236). "'Guns,' he said. 'Its guns . . . . Them is cannon guns, bigger 'n a smokestack. . . Sound like somethin' big an' important that a fella's missin', don't it? asked the soldier. Chinatown nodded" (237). Melody "looked at the two blind men closely. Their heads cocked to one side, listening for sounds that didn't exist. They were twins" (237). While much of the narrative has been about heating up, the soldier's comments are about cooling off. Attaway connects the mill to the machines of war, articulating the problem of a mid-century military industrial complex that troubles the masculine ideal embodied in steel.

### *Steel Feeling: Conclusions*

In *Blood on the Forge*, the inevitable accidents of work in a pressure furnace happen alongside the freak actions of men under all sorts of other pressures: the pressures

to be black, to be American, to be free, to be male. *Blood on the Forge* represents the pressures of a military industrial complex that makes something new and sinister—a Frankenstein of sorts—by forging men and metal. This steel feeling reveals the relationship between workers, industry, and war.

The achievement of *Blood on the Forge* is to align proletarian and historical realism, capturing the political stakes of the moment in which it was published alongside timeless questions about human agency. Attaway does this by way of the profound eloquence of steel. Reading "steel feeling" in the novel provides another way to engage questions of US imperialism that were central to writers of the WWII-era. We might use *Blood on the Forge* to look again at other novels of the period, such as Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), to gain a broader picture of masculinity and the complexities of military industry. Steel feeling is both a legacy and a looming future: the fire *this* time—in the hearts of men in 1941—heralds the fire *next* time, wherever the pressure will once again blow.

While William Attaway focused on the politics of masculine feeling as the US entered World War II, Eudora Welty engaged the interplay between desire, race, and space as the nation marched toward civil rights.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> Attaway later became the first black professional movie screenplay writer. Additionally, he explored an interest in folk music. He and friend Harry Belafonte composed "The Banana Boat" song together, and Attaway compiled a series of Calypso songs and documentaries about folk songs in the 1960s

<sup>ii</sup> Scholars of affect theory have pointed to Williams as the first to attempt to locate feeling in relation to materialist readings of literature.

<sup>iii</sup> It could be said Mat's characterization reflects a form of masking. If we think in terms of the mask, then his feeling under cover evokes Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" (1896) in which an unmoving facade belies the reality of "bleeding hearts" (4) and "tears and sighs" (7). While Dunbar's poem suggests the pretense of a happy emotion—a grin—in exchange for feelings of pain and sadness, Attaway represents inanimacy and a state of seeming unfeeling.

<sup>iv</sup> *Yonnonidio* was composed in the early 1930s before Olsen married and published nearly a half-century later.

<sup>v</sup> See John Claborn's "From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem: Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*." Claborn offers a close reading of the character Smothers alongside an ecological motif in the novel and the context of pollution in Pittsburgh in 1919. He suggests Attaway anticipates Aldo Leopold's notion of the "land ethic" that emerged in the 1930s.

<sup>vi</sup> There is controversy over whether Joe was originally a joke, or even satire, and there are variants to his story.

<sup>vii</sup> For example, Tillie Olsen's *Yonnonidio* represents an angry and abusive father. However, the portrayal does not connect the pressures of the work environment to a question of masculine feeling because his violence is compartmentalized and directed at his family.

## Chapter Three

### The Boogie in the Bush: Jim Crow *Hedge*-emony in Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*

"Some is given to see, some try but is not given."  
Eudora Welty, *The Golden Apples*

In William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941) black workers peer into the depths of masculine feeling during World War II. Eudora Welty's short story collection *The Golden Apples* (1949) utilizes tropes of black workers in order to see into desire at the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In the fictional early-twentieth century town of Morgana, Mississippi, legend has it that "a crazy nigger had jumped out of the school hedge and got Miss Eckhart, had pulled her down and threatened to kill her" (365). Welty drops this brief rumor of rape in the midst of "June Recital" and says nothing more of it. This strange slippage between race, terror, and domesticated nature pervades Welty's *The Golden Apples*. Upon first glance, Welty's weird handling of racial tropes and her outright use of racial slurs might appear to reinforce Jim Crow. Yet, Welty's black workers signify upon segregation through an allegory of the "hedge."

It is easy to picture Eudora Welty coming of age in a pretty white house bordered by a manicured hedge. She was born into privilege in Jackson, Mississippi in 1909, and she described her childhood as one filled with books, music, and love. In *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), she portrayed herself as "a writer who came of a sheltered life," and she noted, "A sheltered life can be daring as well. For all serious daring starts from within" (948). Welty attended the Mississippi State College for Women and the

University of Wisconsin before endeavoring in graduate study at the Columbia University School of Business. In 1935 she began working as a publicity agent for the WPA. While she worked for the WPA, she began snapping amateur photographs. It was then that she noticed what she called "the nature of the place."

Welty's deployment of the hedge emerges out of what she had described as "the nature of the place." Reflecting upon the experience of seeing her home state of Mississippi with fresh eyes, she candidly admitted in 1971, "the WPA gave me the chance to see widely and at close hand and really for the first time *the nature of the place* I'd been born into" (*One Time One Place* 7, emphasis added). We might say Welty's term "nature" is ambiguous here; it captures the dynamics of space and of human feeling. The "nature of the place" becomes a nuanced interplay between Welty's literary and socio-political landscapes.

There has been renewed interest of late in the political landscapes of Welty's fiction. Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs argue that stories, such as "The Demonstrators" (1966) and "Where is the Voice Coming From?" (1963), reveal that Welty was keenly focused on the social and racial climate in Mississippi while working for the Works Projects Administration during the Depression (224). Geoffrey Wright has built upon this foundation to suggest Welty's Depression-era photographs and major characters in the *Golden Apples* reveal a writerly gaze that self-consciously attempts to know and portray an other (57). Betina Entzminger has explored the African American characters in Welty's *Delta Wedding* as guides to understanding white identity (52-6). Welty's experiments with identity have been approached through an analysis of nature. Kelly Sultzbach has examined *Delta Wedding* (1946) with close attention to the major

protagonists' "sensory contact with the natural world" and how this contact addresses loss and hierarchy from those characters' white southern point of view (88). Meanwhile, *The Golden Apples* gives close attention to black characters in outdoor natural space so as to better understand racial anxieties and desires on the eve of modern civil rights.

*The Golden Apples*, published in 1949, marks a key moment in Welty's meditations on race. The collection follows her work with the WPA during the Depression and intersects with the beginnings of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The collection fully elaborates Welty's engagement with desire, race, and space that began in earlier works. Her interrogation of Jim Crow is fully realized in *The Golden Apples* because the work gives pride of place to the perspective of black working-folk characters. The black figures in three stories in *The Golden Apples*: "Shower of Gold," "Moon Lake," and "The Wanderers," build upon each other to guide a reading of Morgana's tightly woven social fabric by inviting a reader to see "the nature of the place" through second sight.

#### *The Nature of the Place: Jim Crow Racial Tropes*

Set in the 1900s through the 1940s, *The Golden Apples* roughly traces the beginnings through the coming end of Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a glaring form of environmental injustice, for it carved out explicit exclusions and limitations within domestic space. The failures of the First Reconstruction (1865-1877) resulted in the institution of a set of laws and social practices legally marked by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision. In addition to explicit laws like *Plessy* and practices like segregation, whiteness was remade through Jim Crow's implicit cultural representations

that symbolically collapsed race and space. African American presences in the literature of the period were used to reinforce old conceptions of whiteness.

This very dominance depended for its existence on the "dominated." According to Patricia Yeager, figures of blackness have often operated in Southern literature as an "unthought known," a "residue," and a "set of formulae that exist automatically, unthinkingly, outside white consciousness" (97, 101). Toni Morrison has discussed this literary unconscious as "the private imagination interacting with the external world" (6). According to Morrison such exchanges are apparent in "the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of [the African Americanist] presence" (6, 65-66). In sum, whiteness was maintained as a badge of ownership and freedom through a sometimes pronounced and sometimes subconscious foil of blackness.

The maintenance of the New South, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues, relied upon this foil as "a representation of continuity between old and new" in literature and other cultural forms. This continuity was necessary because "race had become curiously disembodied as segregation left [white southerners] with little contact with southern blacks outside the increasingly sentimentalized rituals of domestic service" (243). As race was disembodied, it was projected onto the domestic realm in theory and in practice. On one hand, some "well to do" white women were situated as ladies of the house. Their governance over monuments of domestication like white houses became a marker of the New South in literature and film. As Hale argues, whiteness was often predicated on bourgeois women's performances of gender, and "women of a rising white southern middle class were key creators of the new racial order, segregation as culture" (93). On the other hand, whiteness relied on representations of control over black labor.

Representations of African American domestic laborers in these homes—nursemaids, cooks, chauffeurs, and butlers—reinforced the emblem of whiteness.

While we most often associate the domestic realm with work that takes place inside the home, cultural representations of workers in the domesticated outdoors made an argument about space, belonging, and exclusiveness. Literary and cultural representations of African Americans in gardens, lawns, city streets, and backyards reinforced racial difference and segregation and reproduced the seeming logic of whiteness during the Jim Crow-era.

Late nineteenth-and-early-twentieth century plantation fiction mimicked lost agricultural systems in which black laborers, cast as chattel, were akin to livestock and bound to a surrounding countryside under white ownership and control. According to Paul Outka, textual representations of African Americans in such spaces emerged out of white imaginations as an intense sign of white freedom (33). Literary representations of blackness "produced whiteness as an exteriority" to black work and workers in spaces of cultivated nature like plantations (137, 139). At the same time, the racial anxieties over difference that accompanied changes in legal labor arrangements were as much about interracial intercourse in domestic space as they were about actual interracial sexual intercourse.

*The Nature of the Place: Boogies in the Bush*

Tropes of blackness in outdoor space have therefore often turned upon a paradox. The paradox reveals a myth of blackness that was both "naturally" docile and "naturally" threatening. Blackness was represented as domesticated and as terrifyingly uncontrolled.

According to Outka, this paradox emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a "black beast rapist" myth. The "black beast rapist" myth became "naturalized as the image of a beast running rampant over the landscape" (138).

Early twentieth century popular discourse and popular culture reinforced this myth. Politician George Winston insisted, "the Southern woman in [the] solitary farm house no longer sleeps secure in absence of her husband with doors unlocked. . . . The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. . . a mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal" (qtd in Outka 138). David Pilgrim has pointed to Thomas Nelson Page's character Moses in *Red Rock* as an early twentieth century brute ("The Brute"). Page represents Moses as a beast; "He gave a snarl of rage and sprang at her like a wild beast" (Page qtd in "The Brute"). Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), which became the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), portray a black rapist attacking a virginal white woman (Pilgrim "The Brute").

As Outka has shown, the conflation of African Americans and other nature therefore manifested as the representation of horrific beast, external and threatening to white civility and especially to white women (139). The fear of black attack, Outka claims, revealed an "unhappy tangle of anti-black racism, violently insecure white male sexuality, and gendered and racialized pastoralism" (139). While this propaganda paraded as a concern for white women's safety and as an argument for the separation of people according to race, it preserved white masculinity as a spatial control of sex, land, and labor. Eudora Welty plays upon this nineteenth-and-early-twentieth century "beast" in her mid-twentieth century short fiction.

We see this "black beast rapist" image refigured in *The Golden Apples*. The paradox of racial representation plays out through what we might think of as a "boogie in the bush" metaphor. The "boogie in the bush" comes as Welty's mid-twentieth century version of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century "black beast rapist" images. The boogie appears in *The Golden Apples* as a black "boogie monster," an attacker acting out an imagined African American fantasy of revenge, rape, and murder. However, this imagined boogie monster presents more subtle possibilities.

The advent of racial mixing was certainly intensifying when Welty published *The Golden Apples* and as history approached the Second Reconstruction. The mid-twentieth century saw increasing momentum towards the modern Civil Rights Movement, and like the First Reconstruction, this period marked a moment of racial instability. The fall of segregation would mean the destruction of a legal border of separation. This fall would threaten the dissolution of sexual boundaries.

Welty deals with this unstable boundary in *The Golden Apples*. The fear of black attack—essentially the threat of intercourse between black men and white women—becomes less about a widespread terrorism over the entirety of a landscape, as it had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, the anxiety over racial mixing focalizes within a border-symbol in that landscape. This sign manifests in Welty's fiction as the "hedge."

The hedge engages the contest over domestic order and white racial meaning in the mid-twentieth century when Welty was writing. The hedge is an in-between space that marks the threshold separating indoor and outdoor space—domestic order and other possibilities. Because the hedge is located outside the home, we might think of it as a

boundary maker and useful placeholder for emergent notions of how an interior (domestic) whiteness might interact with an exterior (untamed) blackness. The hedge captures the "nature of the place" as anxiety over the ever-shrinking space of racially determined social and sexual control.

*The Nature of the Place: Welty Hedging the Hedge*

Welty had been making arguments about the hedge since the early 1940s, following her stint with the WPA. We see domestic boundaries tested by "outside forces" in "A Sketching Trip" published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1945). Wild flowers become an extension of African American masculinity, which comes up to the very boundary that encases the white feminine. The story opens, "Violence! Violence!" and Delia Farrar experiences a flashback to the moment when

Little black ragamuffins had once run out holding fists of wild violets at the carriage window, and what they were crying was "Violence! Violence!" Those calls were as urgent as bird cries, and passing by she was almost listening for them now, as if those little boys, like some midsummer creatures, always came assaulting here (*Occasions* 263).

Like wild violets, the racial boogie sprouts in the outdoors of Delia's imagination. Delia reads the boys, who appear to emerge suddenly, as frighteningly feral. They come up to the threshold of domestic control—in this case, a carriage window. Welty illustrates the interchangeability between African American bodies, over-flowing plants, and pervasive outside terrorism through a certain phonetic slippage between "violets" and "violence." She hears what she wants—or needs—to hear.

A reader might infer the youths are likely announcing their wares—Violets! Violets! We may therefore surmise something subconscious leads Delia to misinterpret the enthusiasm of the moment as black aggression. Even though they are children as innocent and delicate as the violets, Delia associates the blackness of the boys' presence with a wild, fisted assault from outside. Her response is pre-scripted. To her their words carry an urgent, shrill terror. The slippage between "violets" and "violence" deconstructs racialized fear as perceived domestic boogies stalking in the "bush." The "boogie in the bush" underscores what Toni Morrison has called the "jungle" within.

The idea of an interior jungle appears in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). It comes as Stamp Paid's reflections about the concept of race.

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared they were of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own (198).

Here, the "jungle" is figured as a projection of race that comes out of white imaginations.

Yet, this projection is actually a reflection of the madness within.

The "jungle" had played out earlier in Welty's "A Curtain of Green" (1941) where the language of the hedge is explicit. Mrs. Larkin's understanding of self as a proper white woman unravels within a "border of hedge, high like a wall" (130). Larkin feels her increasing instability pointed out by an "outside force whose finger parted the hedge" (133). Welty's argument about the racial boogie in "A Curtain of Green" (1938) becomes clearer when considered in light of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

Wright had powerfully evoked the trope of the urban black boogie with the character Bigger Thomas. As an African American male writer, it is perhaps easier to recognize Wright's "protest" against what he called the "Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937). Wright and other writers on the Left were not only invested in their observations of peasant laborers' experiences of Jim Crow throughout the Black Belt; they were increasingly interested in the impact of the environment on individual development (Lacy). Wright's *Native Son* is a perfect example of this interplay. Wright wrote *Native Son* and Bigger as responses to Jim Crow law and culture; many understand his novel as a "bellwether for the American social climate," including the impact of Bigger's surroundings on his consciousness (Ward 40). But of course these surroundings are entirely urban.

Welty shifts the discourse back to a seemingly domesticated southern landscape. "A Curtain of Green" is the story of Mrs. Larkin, a young widow with an overzealous passion for gardening following the untimely death of her husband. When considered in conversation with Wright, one realizes that the urban black boogie that supposedly slips into untended households to rape and murder white women in *Native Son* is instead a southern white boogie that lurks in an untended garden.

In "A Curtain of Green," Mrs. Larkin herself becomes the "boogie in the bush," or the beast in the garden. Larkin begins by performing the role of a propertied white woman on "Larkin Hill," named after her father-in-law. Following her husband's death, Larkin leaves her house and turns to the outdoors. Her yard becomes increasingly undomesticated, less cultivated, and more akin to a "jungle." She propagates a wild garden. Larkin

submerged all day among the thick, irregular, sloping beds of plants . . . .  
 Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of this soil. Only by cutting, separating, thinning and tying back in the clumps of flowers and bushes and vines could she have kept them from overreaching their boundaries and multiplying out of all reason . . . . And yet, Mrs. Larkin rarely cut, separated, tied back . . . . To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow an over-flowering, as if she consciously ventured forever a little farther, a little deeper, into her life in the garden (131).

Larkin does not separate her plants. Her neighbors consider this mixed garden unsightly because she lets species run amuck. Hardly could she "cope" with the garden's "blackness" or its "spread." Though she remains entrenched in the chaos of irregularity, she ironically dives deeper into its depths. As her garden overflows, she appears to lose contact with signs of proper feminine whiteness.

Larkin does not create boundaries between types and instead blurs the lines "without any regard for the ideas that her neighbors might elect in their club as to what constituted an appropriate vista...or even harmony of color" (131). This "harmony of

color" in floral arrangements parallels the arrangement of people in her neighborhood and anxiety about the fall of Jim Crow.

Welty employs the sign of the "jungle" to underscore this anxiety. To those "gazing down from their upstairs windows," Larkin's garden "had the appearance of a sort of jungle" (131-2). The neighbors' nervousness about Larkin's refusal to cut, to separate, and to thin is about a fear of acquiescence to a changing racial composition in the segregated South. Her neighbors' reaction to the lack of separation emerges as what Patricia Yeager describes as "white panic" or "a moment of spectacular terror when racial boundaries that had seemed impermeable become unexpectedly porous" (Yeager 89). Welty's evocation of the jungle speaks to anxieties about the plants and people "run amuck" as it captures the wildness within Larkin.

Here the idea of the garden-bush reflects a white invention that affects the inventor. Larkin seems possessed by her jungle, increasingly desirous for something in proportion to the spread of her private green. This private green is about the racial imagination; as Larkin traverses her own man-made bush, the space becomes Welty's discursive tool. Larkin's unruly garden hardly advocates desegregation. "Even Jamey," a black day worker, "Mrs. Larkin would tolerate only now and then" (132).

Racial boundaries become particularly permeable for Mrs. Larkin. After her husband's death, her position as a widow—and by extension as the "new" bearer of old order—begins to wear on her. So she turns her unacknowledged hostility—and it is a "jungle" that has been *planted* in her by Jim Crow—onto her black garden helper.

She looks at Jamey "lost in some impossible dream of his own," his "bowed head holding so obviously and so deafly its ridiculous dream" (133-4). Readers never learn the

details of Jamey's dream, but we might infer a reference to his napping. At the same time, "dream" reverberates as the hopes and aspirations of African Americans during the Jim Crow-era. Staring at Jamey, Larkin seems provoked by "his aroused, stretching body" (134). Arousal is at once waking, sexual stimulation, and political awakening. While these tensions were certainly stirring during the final decades of segregation, Jamey is not the threat.

Standing over Jamey, Larkin asks, "Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest?" (134). By focusing on Larkin's mad desire to kill, Welty inverts the boogie—Larkin becomes the wild assailant lurking in the jungle, or rather "within the border of a hedge" (130). Although social discourse constructed terror as black and outside, as Larkin stations herself inside her garden, readers may realize the terror is actually she.

[T]he look of docility in the Negro's back as he knelt in the plants began to infuriate her. . . . She walked nearer to him. . . .when she was directly behind him she stood a moment. . . . Then she raised the hoe above her head; the clumsy sleeves both fell back, exposing the thin, unburned whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of her youth. She gripped the handle tightly, tightly, as though convinced that the wood of the handle could feel, and that all her strength could indent its surface with pain. The head of Jamey, bent there below, seemed witless, terrifying, wonderful, almost inaccessible to her, and yet in its explicit nearness meant surely for destruction, with its clustered hot woolly hair" (133-4).

Here a white woman almost brutally murders an African American man. His "nearness" brings out her inner beast, pushing her shocking and shocked sense of whiteness to the edge.

Welty points to the possibility of a desirous will to revenge and kill that comes out of the white domestic realm. Like the decapitation scene in Wright's *Native Son*, Larkin imagines Jamey's head as "a head she could strike off, intentionally" (134). Standing over Jamey with a garden tool, her impulsiveness arises out of a white feminine longing for choice—for what is not entirely clear. But it has something to do with what Welty here calls "nearness," with impulses arising out of the ever decreasing distance between white and black. As David Wyatt has claimed, nearness between seeming opposites is one of Welty's greatest subjects (198). As Larkin is pulled closer to Jamey, he is perhaps a reflection of what she does not want to closely see about herself.

Larkin's madness results from her clamor to break free from her socially and environmentally determined nature. Bigger Thomas experiences his surroundings as an antagonistic force; yet, a change in weather saves Larkin and she faints. "Then Larkin sank in one motion down into the flowers and lay there, fainting and streaked with rain" (135). Her feminine nature seems to save her, as Welty parodies yet another trope—the southern belle as a delicate and sentimental flower. Yet, Larkin does not faint as a performance of her gender expectations; she faints because of overwhelming want to break out of a woman's place, even as it signals to her. Larkin "could sense behind her, as if a lamp were lighted in the night, the signal-like whiteness of the house" (135). Larkin's awareness of her house demonstrates an understanding of her expected gender role, and Larkin attempts to resist—to "protest"—her involvement in the maintenance of racial

order. However, she fails to fully displace her yearnings to rid herself of the house and Jamey's presence while remaining deep in "nature." There is little resolution in the story. "The light from the rain...*unreflecting* from within itself in its quite arcade of identity" conjures up a self that barely knows itself, one now open to terrors and desires (135 emphasis added).

*The Nature of the Place: Hedging Black Characters in The Golden Apples*

*The Golden Apples* fully develops Welty's earlier experiments with the boogie and the hedge. The collection is set in the first forty years of the twentieth century, and it unfolds as a series of interrelated stories. The major protagonists represent two generations of southern white society and a figurative changing of the guard. Characters include Katie Rainey and her daughter Virgie, Snowdie MacLain and her sons Ran and Eugene, and Mrs. Lizzie Stark and her young ward Jinny Love and her friends. There is also Snowdie's mythical husband King MacLain, who only occasionally appears in the narrative as more legend than man. Many children in Morgana are rumored to be his: "children of his growing up in the County Orphan's, so say several, and children known and unknown, scattered like" (320). These protagonists face common questions related to coming of age, love, and loss that span the generations.

And yet, the characters live within the hedge of whiteness. Women and children in Morgana fear the ever-present danger of "hideous things like the black nigger jumping out of the hedge at nine o'clock" (365). Within the narrative it is widely held that "It was the nigger in the hedge, the terrible fate... that people could not forgive" (365). Through

these rumors Welty reveals white racial consciousness as dependent upon myths of black terror.

Unlike Welty's earlier experiments with the hedge, however, *The Golden Apples* expands and elaborates Welty's romance with race by allowing the reader to see through the perspective of seemingly marginal black domestic workers. Welty was very frank about her presentations of black subjects and explained their centrality to her work following the Depression. "Had I no shame as a white person for what message might lie in my pictures of black persons?" Welty writes, "No, I was too busy imagining myself into their lives" (10). Far from invasion or impersonation, Welty's deeply empathetic imagination has been her political footing. As Suzanne Marrs has observed, "for Eudora Welty, an act of understanding—political, social, or personal—was typically an act of the imagination" (5). Welty had elaborated the primacy of imagining a black perspective in *One Time One Place* in 1971.

When a heroic face. . . . *who I think must come first*. . . . looks back at me from her picture, what I respond to now, just as I did the first time, is not the Depression, not the Black, not the South, not even the perennially sorry state of the whole world, but the story of her life in her face. . . . Her face to me is full of meaning more truthful and more terrible and, I think, more noble than any generalization about people could have prepared me for or could describe for me now. . . . we are the breakers of our own hearts (11 emphasis added).

In *The Golden Apples*, Plez, Twosie, Exum, and Juba revise tropes of black work to invert or double impose the racial boogie to challenge and even to uproot a carefully domesticated Jim Crow racial order.

*Plez and "Shower of Gold"*

*The Golden Apples* begins with "Shower of Gold." Told by Katie Rainey, the story is about Snowdie MacLain, her sons, and her disappeared husband King, but it hinges on Plez Morgan and his sighting of King MacLain. Plez Morgan is an African American handy man seemingly as old as time. He seems like a black character from of the Reconstruction-era. Plez is the first black character we encounter in the narrative. This first encounter was quite literal at one point, in fact. Plez's image appeared as cover art for an early edition of the collection. This cover image of Plez was adapted from one of Welty's Depression era photographs titled "Yard Man." The photograph, the cover art, and the character appear in a hat decorated with large roses, but their facial expressions vary in each portrayal.

A cursory reading of the cover art and Plez's characterization could appear to replicate the black uncle trope of plantation fiction, the Uncle Remuses of the American literary imagination. On the surface, Plez reproduces black servitude and deference. Katie Rainey, the narrator of "Shower of Gold," explains, Plez is a "real trustworthy nigger," and "if you saw Plez, you'd know it was him." About thirteen pages into the story as we near its climax, Katie recalls Plez as follows:

But happening along our road—like he does every day—was a real trustworthy nigger. He's one of Mrs. Stark's mother's niggers, Old Plez

Morgan everybody calls him. . . . The real old kind, that knows everybody since time was. . . . If you wanted anybody in Morgana that wouldn't be likely to make a mistake who a person is, you would ask for Old Plez.

So he was making his way down the road, by stages. He still has to do a few people's yards won't let him go, like Mrs. Stark, because he don't pull up things (327).

Plez is generally available for odd jobs and is a familiar fixture in the Morgana setting.

Plez has no real ownership of property, but he belongs to the landscape, signaled by Katie Rainey's description "happening along *our* road" and by his surname. "Morgan" suggests he is of "Morgana." Plez moves along the street, and he "happens" in the yard—he walks a line, but Welty imagines him crossing it.

On another level, Plez's character evokes Welty's photograph "Yard Man" taken in Clinton, Mississippi in the mid-1930s. Unlike Plez's cover-art image, the man featured in "Yard Man" wears a tired, less than amicable visage. Like Plez, the band of his hat is decorated with roses, but its brim shades his eyes. As title and subject, "Yard Man" becomes an implicit argument about African American laborers' relationship to domesticated land. People in Morgana understand Plez as a yardman and their "yards won't let him go." He is like a lawn ornament of sorts, a sign of black servitude meant to stand there eternally marking our way.

Plez's name and characterization provide a picture of his labor circumstances. Plez's name recalls the legal installation of the very institution that would station him within the landscape and at the margins of white space in Morgana. Plez evokes the name Homer Plessy of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The confines of *Plessy* haunt Plez's condition. The

ambiguous syntax of "people's yards won't let him go," allows a reader to recall the association between African American laboring bodies and domestic outdoor space as controlled white space.

But Welty does not leave off with an image of Plez relegated to that yard. As a yardman Plez recalls resistance to Jim Crow and *Plessy*. The later years of the Jim Crow-era would see labor revolutions—the gatherings of sharecroppers, handy men, and farm hands like Plez—as part of an early interracial momentum in the drive toward the modern Civil Rights Movement. The notion of Plez as "the real old kind" who does not "pull up things" is as much about the socio-political landscape as it is about physical landscaping. Contrary to Katie's claim though, Plez does in fact "pull up things," or hedges them instead.

Katie's description of Plez complicates his seeming familiarity and amicability as a "yard man." When Katie recalls him standing outside, she says, "the oak leaves are scuttling and scattering, blowing against old Plez and brushing on him, the old man" (331). The stirring leaves signal disorder, the absence of landscaped containment, and change, perhaps the impending shifts in domestic order related to race and labor. The romanticized leaves circling Plez prime a reader to associate a mythic pastoral with him, even as his description encompasses the tensions of the black masculine as docile and horrific.

Flowers are associated with Plez's presence; they signify upon notions of race and domestication. The flowered hat connects Plez's image to the cover art and to the photograph. We might think of Plez's image as oscillating between them as he moves between a sign of amicability and something else that is harder to register. Katie Rainey

describes Plez's flowers as follows: "He had some roses stuck in his hat that day. . . . Some of Miss Lizzie's fall roses, big as a man's fist and red as blood—they were nodding side-to-side out of the band of his old black hat, and some other little scraps out of the garden laid around the brim, thrown away by Mrs. Stark" (327-8). Blooms like roses are generally signs of love and respect. But, the love, respect, and deference for white employers that would define whiteness rests in tension with the fistful contours of Plez's flowers. The roses contain a cord of violence and a trace of terror that Katie perceives as an extension of Plez.

The "fists...red as blood" closely followed by "black" conveys an image of latent aggression brimming just below the black surface not only of the hatband but also of Plez. At the same time the roses operate on the level of terror and on the plane of resistance. Plez's use of discarded scraps speaks to his symbolic transformation of his social circumstance by repurposing "throwaway" items. "Fists" echo the kinesthetic dimension of resistance—a strike—or the pushback of laborers like Plez who would help to uproot the society in which they were held.

Plez's seemingly amicable, uncle-esque persona, then, is complicated by the narrator's discernment of a will to power. Welty engages power as perceived racialized threat, perhaps from dead and dying traditions, along a hedge. In this case leaves, flowers, and a flowerbed mark the domesticated border.<sup>1</sup> Here Plez's flowers contain a subtle suggestion about interracial intermingling. As Rainey notes, the roses "laid" about the brim of Plez's hat were Lizzie's; after all, he had been "cleaning out her beds that day" (328). The use of "beds" reveals the ambiguity of borders that surround the domestic realm and the interactions that might take place within them. Finally, Plez further "stir[s]"

up things" when he is the only character to actually *see* King MacLain in "Shower of Gold." Plez has the enhanced vision of second sight.

Katie Rainey has earlier presented herself as a diviner. "Like something was put into my eye," she says. But Katie wrongly believes King MacLain is far away "in the West." Her vision of King is not as omniscient as she might think. "Everybody to their own visioning," she even says (326). Yet, the reader is not left to his or her own vision. Our vision comes through Plez, and it is one afforded him by his unique cultural position.

Plez has the double vision of one on the outside looking in. This piercing ability echoes the experience Du Bois had described as double consciousness, the sort of vision that came out of the experience of living with Jim Crow. Du Bois wrote of such consciousness as a gift of "second-sight in this American world" (45). Second sight is a possession of those who know the culture in ways only those who live on its margins can know it. It is like the reward of living within the veil of blackness itself. Plez loans the reader his gift that is more accurately a "second-sight" *into* the American world of Welty's day. Guided by his perspective, a reader begins to associate racial terror with the white interior instead.

Plez is the only character to lay eyes of recognition on King MacLain, the near-mythical and haunting trace of white patriarchy in the narrative, a force that routinely takes up white women like Snowdie and others unnamed. It is King who is the rapist: he is the *white* beast. But he is a kind of god, the god of the white western tradition who strikes at will. The reader is guided by Plez's double exposure involving an episode between Eugene, Ran and their parents King and Snowdie MacLain. At first, Eugene and Lucius Randall (Ran) MacLain deploy and redeploy the boogie as a racialized, othered

figure in sport. Ran and Eugene construct the "beast" and vulnerable women by acting them out.

Here the learned, performative aspects of white masculinity are shaped against assumed racial and gender difference. Ran and Eugene "were dressing up playing ghosts and boogers"; accordingly, "They had on their masks. . . . One was the Chinese kind, all yellow and mean with slant eyes and a dreadful thin mustache of black horsy hair" (311). As Erica Childs has shown, Chinese men were perpetuated as rapists in cultural lore. They appeared as "heathen[s], morally inferior, childlike, savage, and lustful" (23). As Eugene performs this myth of racialized terror, his childhood regalia reveal nostalgia for and a reproduction of Southern white masculinity rooted in the repetition of the beast.

This racial beast is married to its other half—white femininity—in the Southern imagination. Ran's costume, "a lady, with an almost scary-sweet smile on her lips" and "the big white cotton gloves falling off is fingers" (326, 329) reflects this pairing of a rapacious beast and the white feminine. The twin boys in costumes further underscore a pair. By showing the performative aspects of white masculinity through double boys, Welty begins to dislodge racial boogies from the seemingly black, natural outside periphery. She re-locates them on the other side of the hedge.

While Ran and Eugene play "ghosts and boogers" (326), Plez Morgan's commentary on their looks locates terrorism within the white domestic realm. He remarks Ran and Eugene's costumes are "But monkeys—! . . . . Plez said if those children had been black, he wouldn't hesitate to say they would remind a soul of little nigger cannibals in the jungle" (330). Again Welty invokes the "jungle" along with "nigger cannibals," which would have been the penultimate sign of "wild" nature and ridiculously ironic

coming from Plez (330). Plez's irony does the serious work of exposing fear and difference as racial constructs. Readers will find it is not a so-called "nigger cannibal" or other racial boogie, but Eugene and Ran, who anxiously await an opportunity to frighten others. African Americans in Morgana are their targets: "they'd had nobody to scare all day for Hallowe'en, except one or two niggers" (330). Further, readers may begin to suspect King McLain as the real "booger," to borrow Katie Rainey's term. On this fright night in Morgana, King actually "had come up to the front porch" haunting Snowdie's property as a patriarch and as a spook only seen by Plez (330-32).

Plez is therefore the first of a set of black characters to share second sight about the haunt of race. Plez's sight comes as a literal sighting:

But yonder ahead of him was walking a man. Plez said it was a white man's walk and a walk he knew—but it struck him it was from away in another year, another time. It wasn't just the walk of anybody to be going along the road to MacLain right at that *time*—and yet it was too—and if it was, he still couldn't think what business that somebody would be up to. That was the careful way Plez was putting it to his mind (327 emphasis added).

From his outsider status as a black yardman living Jim Crow, Plez "said it was a white man's walk and a walk he knew—but it struck him it was *from away in another year, another time*" (327 emphasis added). Plez's description casts King as part of an old order, a figural presence somehow out of time. Katie continues, "So Plez says presently the familiar stranger paused. . . . Next thing, the stranger—oh, it was King!" (328). The form has what Plez sees as a "white man's walk" "from another time." This perspective comes

from Plez's double consciousness about race, and it helps a reader understand King as belonging to the past. And as a body both familiar and strange, King embodies the uncanniness of Jim Crow whiteness as a spectre on southern ground, one doomed to haunt.

And King's uncanniness actually stalks the grounds, comically reminding a reader of the familiar myth of black terror. According to Plez, "First [King] looked around....and skimmed from cedar to cedar along the edge of where he lived...and come close to the front again, sniffy like" (328). Plez's characterization of King's movements seems to mimic the "black beast rapist" images of the nineteenth century, and in an even more comical turn, King actually enters Snowdie's house undetected. Plez "knows good as seeing it that he looked through the blinds" (328). King's unseen presence infiltrates the house. Snowdie and Katie's failure to see or hear King's presence demonstrates the unacknowledged force of male dominance. And yet, Plez's knowledge becomes filtered through Katie.

While many had claimed to see King MacLain, including Katie's husband, characters consider Plez's sighting the only credible vision. The women trust what he tells them of King. We learn through Katie that Mrs. Starks had remarked, "I, for one, trust the Negro. I trust him the way you trust me...I trust his story implicitly" (332). Katie and Snowdie never see or hear King: "We never heard the step creak or the porch give at all," Katie Rainey explains (327). "And if it wasn't for *something that come from outside us to tell us* about it," she continues, "I wouldn't have the faith I have that it come about" (327 emphasis added). Plez is the "something that come from outside us to tell us" in the story.

Here Welty uses a white woman to channel the second sight of a black man; in turn, the narrative comes to know the haunt of whiteness through them.

To elaborate the hidden dynamics of white paternalism further, "It was the twins seen him" (329). Although the twins lay eyes upon King, they do not know him as their father because he "disappeared" before their birth. Still, they unknowingly comment on what he represents. "How do you do, Mister Booger?" they ask King (329). The twins later report their chance encounter to their mother Snowdie. "And they told her a booger had come up on the front porch... 'But he looked back like this!' Lucius Randall said, lifting off his mask and showing us on his little naked face with the round blue eyes" (330). Here Lucius describes the booger as a sort of double in his own image—not as a black cannibal—not the "Chinese kind"—but a stripped, blue-eyed replica of himself. While the twins do not know the man they saw or the gravity of the association they draw between his fright and their own, Plez holds full knowledge of the ordeal and drives the conclusion that King is the true booger.

In another comical signification, "'Course, could have been a ghost,' Plez told Mrs. Stark, 'but a ghost—I believe—if he had come to see the lady of the house, would have waited to have a word with her,'" Plez reflects (332). Plez underscores King's disregard for the very femininity he is supposed to uphold, manners even a "ghost" would perform. Or perhaps it is the ghost of white masculinity that buttresses social interactions in Morgana—an ever-present haunt in the forefront of white consciousnesses, yet hardly understood. Katie Rainey later explains, "But of course [Plez] wasn't going to let Miss Snowdie MacLain get hurt now, we'd all watched her so long. So he fabricated" (331).

While Morgana society would spin yarns about the imminent danger of black attack, Plez fabricates a tale to protect Snowdie from knowledge of the true booger and perhaps of herself.

*Exum and Twosie: "Moon Lake"*

A reader is invited to look through second sight again when the boogie myth resurfaces in "Moon Lake." Jinny Love, Easter, and Nina, repeat the boogie in the great outdoors at a girl's camp. The camp is yet another domesticated outdoor space, although one constructed as free and uncontrolled. The girls at summer camp giggle in the outdoors and "hope [they] don't meet any nigger men" (424). Their giddiness betrays the subtle interplay between fear and merriment at the thought of a racialized and sexualized encounter. The black presence becomes something lurking in an "out there," seemingly at the fringe and yet, within the boundaries of the pre-pubescent girls' imagination. The possibilities beyond the border of the domestic realm appear as a dangerous edge in the minds of white Morganians and at the same time as thrilling to young girls at camp.

Welty's most explicit signification upon the sexual charge of racialized tropes is the most ambiguous in "Moon Lake." Nina's desire and her camp-induced fantasies deconstruct racial myths. The girls' youthful desires are articulated through a metaphor of a bordering black night. Lost in the lust of her youth, "Nina sat up on the cot and stared passionately before her at the night—the pale dark roaring night with its secret step, the Indian night" (435). Here the pervasive and far-reaching darkness of night is racialized as the "Indian." The night, according to Michael Kreyling, represents "the intrusion of the foreign male" (132) and "the agent of the other way to be" (131). The night is both

foreign and racially terrific. According to Childs, "The big dark Indian was pictured simultaneously as a thrill and as a sexual threat to white women" in cultural representations born out of the colonial period and codified in the imagination during the early twentieth century (17). In Nina's imagination "The pondering night stood rude at the tent door, the opening fold would let it stoop in—it, him—he had risen up inside. Long-armed, or long winged, he stood in the center there where the pole went up" (435). Undoubtedly carrying a sexual charge, the night erectly enters the superficial barrier of the tent.

As Nina envisions the night entering the tent she

lay back, drawn quietly from him. . . . Her hand too opened, of itself. She lay there a long time motionless, under the night's gaze, its black cheek. Looking immovably at her hand, the only part of her now which was not asleep. . . . In the cup of her hand, in her filling skin, in the fingers' bursting weight and stillness, Nina felt it: compassion and a kind of competing that were all one, a single ecstasy, a single longing. For the night was not impartial. No, the night loved some more than others, served some more than others. Nina's hand lay open there for a long time, as if its fingers would be its eyes. Then it too slept. She dreamed her hand was helpless to the tearing teeth of wild beasts (435-6).

Body imagery, blackness, ecstasy, longing, the heat of night, tearing beasts teeth, and competition reveal the complex inner workings of her desire. And the tearing teeth are the "jungle" within. Welty presents white women as terribly "open" to and desiring sexual penetration from the dark outside. Nina's imaginative jungle is Welty's attempt to

deconstruct the fantasy of Southern white women as virginal and to show their desire to be sexually chosen. Lest Nina's fantasies become too sensational, however, the narrator abruptly ends the narrative of Nina's desire and moves onto another racialized "black brute" trope.

Exum McLane is a likely son of King MacLain, as his surname suggests. The name Exum slips with "exhume." Exum exhumes the superficial guise of social separateness and the reality of interracial parlays as he signifies upon the trope of the brute. Like Plez, Exum is a part of and apart from the domesticated Morgana setting. And like Plez, he stirs up that landscape. Exum is described as "apart too, boy and nigger to boot; he constantly moved along an even further fringe of the landscape" (438). Exum's status along a further fringe comes in part from his status as one marginalized by Jim Crow and in part from his half-white, half-black parentage as "boy and nigger," according to the narrator. As the son of King MacLain (or some other MacLain), Exum exists as a product of intercourse between white men and the black women they would "take up" in the night. And through Exum's example, we see Welty further deconstructing myths of black violence that were believed to seek such a union.

Exum is at first described in terms of an ape-like "black brute" trope. In fact, the "black brute" was perpetuated in cultural myths as "nearly always a mulatto," a seemingly unnatural spawn of miscegenation (Fredrickson 277). Welty positions Exum's character as an animalistic body staged within the hedge-like border of the trees. He catalyzes the ordeal of Easter's near drowning. Leading up to his alleged attack on Easter, "They had seen, without any idea of what he would do—and yet it was just like

him—little old Exum toiling up the rough barky ladder and dreaming it up, clinging there monkeylike among the leaves, all eyes and wrinkled forehead" (436).

Beyond him on the diving-board, Easter was standing—high above the others at their swimming lesson. . . .

Exum's little wilted black fingers struck at his lips as if playing a tune on them. He put out a foolishly long arm. He held a green willow switch. Later they every one said they saw him—but too late. He gave Easter's heel the tenderest, obscurest little brush, with something of nigger persuasion about it (437).

The switch becomes an extension of Exum's "wilted" finger. His plant-like finger images the perceived treat of black male intercourse with white women, which might emerge from the borders of domesticated "nature." The event quickly turns to reinforce the "boogie in the bush" myth in the minds of white observers. They claim his "one little touch could smirch her, make her fall so far, so deep.—Except that by that time they were all saying the nigger deliberately poked her off in the water, meant her to drown" (444). Yet, the narrative reveals Easter's drowning was not due to intentional malice on Exum's part.

Easter's fall becomes less about her fall as a near drowning and more about the social fall that would come from a close encounter with one like Exum, a symbolic encounter with "the nigger in the hedge... that people could not forgive" (365). Exum's "brush" as both physical touch and as other organic matter obscures anxieties and taboos about meeting the black masculine at the hedge. Ironically, the suggestion of Exum's touch threatens Easter's literal fall as it leads to her resurrection. To this point, Easter was

symbolically a throw away child among many town orphans. Her racial status was in question with her coppery hair and her coin-colored eyes. Yet, Exum exhumes age-old concerns for her life and for her social status.

As a reader witnesses the ordeal, she finds Exum is "too little to count as looking—too everything-he-was to count as anything" (439). Exum's status as one "too little to count as looking" is about his size and his standing. His social standing is "too everything" in Morgana. Here, Exum exposes a fundamental truth about inner workings of "the nature of the place." His presence gives new life to Easter whose namesake rings of rebirth. The myth of his threat becomes her protection as he rebirths her into (white feminine) sexual maturity.

Like Plez and Exum's exposure of "the nature of the place," Twosie's characterization pushes a reader to consider the politics of space. Twosie borders two worlds, and true to the "twoness" that rings of double consciousness in her name, she dispels any illusion of separation. In "Moon Lake" "there was nothing but light out there. True, the black Negroes inhabited it. . . . far, far down a vista of intolerable light...a tiny daub of black cotton, Twosie had stationed herself at the edge of things" (421). As one purposefully situated along the "edge of things," Twosie represents existence along physical and material boundaries and border crossings as deliberate. Like Exum, Twosie has a seemingly marginal existence on the outskirts of southern white society. And, as Exum's sister and as a probable child of King, Twosie MacLain embodies a double or binary existence.

Similar to Plez's seeing, Twosie's social station provides insider insight. Her knowledge is as illuminating as the "vista of intolerable light" and becomes an expanse of

intolerable knowledge for the girls at camp. Twosie's knowledge comes from her place at the margins. The narrator likens Twosie to domesticated nature as "a tiny daub of black cotton." Like pruned shrubbery, cotton symbolizes bending space to the will of social order and control. Twosie as a "daub" resonates with seemingly inferior organic materials and markers of cheap (black) labor as well as the remnants of their toil—a disadvantageous and marginalized marriage to a cotton economy. And as "daub," Twosie doubly smears an otherwise perfect pastoral landscape. Welty's description of Twosie collapses her into cotton and its laws, which speaks to the circumstances of confining labor relationships during Jim Crow.

In a deconstruction that is perhaps more explicit than Exum's ordeal, Twosie encourages the girls to really hear and see their world as it is. In so doing, Twosie dissociates fear from bodies of color by linking racial terror with white Southern men instead. Twosie questions the young white girls Jinny Love and Nina. "'Hear him?' One of the niggers said, fishing on the bank; it was Elberta's sister, Twosie... 'Know why? Know why, in de sky, he say 'Spirit Spirit' And den he dive *boom* and say 'GHOST?'" (420). When questioned by Jinny, "Why does he?" Twosie does not make a direct claim. Like Plez's "careful way of putting things," Twosie feigns a lack of knowledge. Yet, her silence and eventual response are provoking. Twosie replies, "Yawl knows. *I don't know*" in a "little high, helpless voice. . . . *I don't know what he say dat for*' Twosie spoke pitifully, as though accused" (420 emphasis in original). Twosie's denial emphasizes the reality of her knowledge.

She eventually claims the girls fail to grasp the full reality of their surroundings, an uncanny sense of southern ground, the truth about social intercourse, and its associated

racial policing. Finally Twosie "sighed. 'Yawl sho ain't got yo' eyes opem good, yawl. Yawl don't know what's out here in woods wid you...Yawl walk right by mans wid great big gun, could jump out at yawl. Yawl don't eem smellim'" (419-20). In an inversion of racial terror, Twosie links boogies (ghosts) with white southern men ("mans wid great big gun"). Jenny replies, "I know who you mean. I hear those boys. Just some big boys, like the MacLain twins or somebody, and who cares about them?" (420). Yet the MacLain twins would be the next generation of white southern patriarchy. And although Nina previously believed one "couldn't learn anything through the head" (431), the girls seek Twosie's perspective. "Jinny Love, with her switch indented the thick mat of hair on Twosie's head and prodded and stirred it gently. She pretended to fish in Twosie's woolly head" (420). Jinny's pretense of fishing in the pond of Twosie's crown enacts her quest for a deeper understanding of the true nature of her Jim Crow environment. "Why ain't *you* scared, then?" Jinny asks. "I is." Twosie replies (420). As Twosie becomes a conduit of knowledge about social relationships that hinge on her location along the fringe, her clarity is extended to the reader who, like the girls, momentarily sees through her eyes.

Twosie becomes a pseudo-clairvoyant. Her "eyelids fluttered. Already she seemed to be fishing in her nights sleep" (420). Her fishing form suspends them in a moment of temporary rapture. Following this narrative suspension, the girls' desire for Twosie's knowledge is displaced onto her as "all their passions flew home again and went huddled and soft to roost" (420). Their girlhood dreams are projected onto Twosie's body. Nina wishes she could "slip into them all—to change. To change for a moment" (435) as their desires return "home again...softly to roost."

*"The Wanderers": A Boogie Book-end*

The uncanny haunt or "maybe ghost" that Plez describes in "Shower of Gold" and that Twosie calls upon in "Moon Lake" resurfaces in "The Wanderers," the concluding story in *The Golden Apples*. Katie Rainey believes she had real vision at the opening of "Shower of Gold." Nearing her death in "The Wanderers" Katie "could still feel one thing if she could feel little else coming to her from the outside world: lack of chivalry" (517). It seems what Katie had hoped for was the comforting assurance of the domestic realm, a social fabric she had known, a fabric like her daughter Virgie's plaid. Katie's "last clear feeling as she stood there, holding herself up, was that she wanted to be down and covered up, in, of all things, Virgie's hard-to-match-up plaid" (519). The plaid comforter is perhaps the ultimate marker of an indoor domestic space and an antithesis to uncultivated nature. As both cover and crest, a plaid makes further use of a domesticated landscape by taking the cottony products of plantation order a degree further, transforming them into the "stuff" for ladies and the "fabric of our lives". The plaid would not only be a comfort to Katie, its pattern mirrors a complex, overlapping, continuous, tightly woven grid. Yet, this grid is her vision of the new line drawn after Virgie (who has hardly been "virginal") revises the plaid.

More than any other story in the collection, "The Wanderers" presents African Americans as a staple presence in the social grid. They reshape the pattern of domestic order after Katie's passing—the symbolic passing of an era. The narrator explains Katie was one seen "in your vision if not in your sight. . . . like the lady on the Old Dutch Cleanser can" (517). This Dutch bonneted lady, too, is a racial trope. On product labels from the early twentieth century, image of the white feminine "chases dirt" and says, "I

am coming to clean up your town." Upon her death, the symbolism of Katie's figure is all that remains. It is not the death of chivalry, then, but the death of a particular type of white femininity that most troubles Katie.

In this last story, more than any other story, black workers emerge seemingly out of nowhere to clean up the town and to roost "home again." Virgie is overwhelmed by the "feeling of the double coming-back" following her mother's death and the changing of the guard in this final story (545). Her sense comes in tandem with the return of superficial tropes of blackness that re-fabricate white domestic space much like the fabricated tale Plez had told Snowdie.

Mrs. Stark sends Juba to assist Virgie and Snowdie with preparations for Katie's funeral service. Her connections to her community come through her black workers. Mrs. Stark admits to Juba "The only thing I can do for people any more, in joy or sorrow, is send 'em you" (515). While working Juba tells Virgie, "I seen your mama's ghost already...I seen more ghosts than live peoples, round here. Black and white. I seen plenty both. Miss Virgie, some is given to see, some try but is not given" (549). Seeing becomes underscored here at the end.

Virgie's seeing is in tandem with King McLain's unexpected return and persistent presence following Katie's funeral. To Virgie he appears "screenlike...hideous and delectable" (555). Virgie has a mystified, grotesque desire for King, who is an emblem and the joke of their society: "they all knew he was next [to pass]—even he" (555). Her longing is especially surprising in light of her symbolic recognition of the fall of the old Southern system. This system appears to her like the distant statue of a Confederate soldier that "looked like a chewed-on candle, as if old gnashing teeth had made him...no

longer the defacing but the defaced" (552). Faced with the reality of her desire to consume the very social structure that would control her, she turns to the outdoors. As a yard woman, she becomes a grounds stalker, a boogie.

Virgie "would hunt, hunt, hunt daily for the blindness that lay inside the beast, inside where she could have a real and living wall for beating on, a solid prison to get out of, the most real stupidity of flesh, a mindless and careless and calling body. . . . it was by her own desire." (546). Through Virgie, Welty reveals the agency of the new generation of the white feminine as a conscious revision of old social designations, borders that would provide a reason to break free. The end is really getting a readership, as the generation in the midst of the beginnings of the civil rights movement, to see through the double consciousness of the "beast."

Should the gift of second sight be lost upon readers, Welty leaves us with a final concluding image that is the summation of the narrative. Thinking of all the seeming opposing forces (and perhaps people) in life, Virgie "never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together" (546). At the close of *The Golden Apples* we find Virgie is hardly alone. Sitting within the order of the town square—itsself a cross-section that is like a plaid—Virgie is met by "An old wrapped-up Negro woman with a red hen under her arm" (555). This woman—a revised trope of blackness—"came and sat down on the step below Virgie. . . . Then she and the old beggar woman, the old black thief, were there *alone and together* in the shelter of the big public tree. . . . the world beating in their ears" (556 emphasis added). Welty closes the narrative with an image of two women who are bound to "roost" together and apart. The question of the freedom of the next

generation of white women becomes bound up in a social fabric that is never far from its doubled back and double black image.

*The Golden Apples* unfolds as argument about enviro-spatial arrangements, racial consciousness, and social freedom. Vignettes in "Shower of Gold," "Moon Lake," and "The Wanderers" illustrate Welty's meditation on race and desire—a meditation ambiguously located in the environmental positioning of seemingly marginal worker figures existing within the boundaries of domesticated outdoor space. These workers are much more than pastoral tropes or objects in the natural setting when they do appear. They reveal the fears and desires that reside in the hedge of the white imagination.

It is not the boogie in the bush, or a perceived threat of an outside black attack, but the oppressive (and oppressed) white interior that becomes Welty's deepest subject. Through characters like Twosie and Plez, Welty evokes a subtle consciousness about it. This consciousness is not an understanding of how the white world would see blackness, or something akin to Du Boisian double consciousness. Welty instead unearths a picture of the white world unable to see itself—and as in desperate need of black workers' second-sight. As Welty had observed, "freedom ahead is what each story promises" and a chance to "begin anew" (943). Reading the figural presence of blackness in Welty's *The Golden Apples* begs a fuller reconsideration of the corpus of her work and of other Southern writers of the Civil Rights-era, such as Ellen Douglass, for what they might reveal about "freedom ahead."

Eudora Welty imagined a way to freedom by seeing into the dynamics of race and space on the eve of the modern Civil Right's Movement. Sarah E. Wright sets her sights on a common future in *This Child's Gonna Live* after the movement made waves of change.

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#### Note

<sup>i</sup> Jeffrey Folks has discussed power as "terror" *The Golden Apples*. According to Folks, "terror" is Welty's great subject. In *The Golden Apples*, terror reflects a fear of "primal violence" and even the haunting of the dead—"governs the psychological existence" of Morganians and "Welty's central concern in the novel is the difficulty of comprehending its causes and dealing with its effects" (16).

## Chapter Four

### A Mess to Witness: Scenes of Abjection in Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live*

It is necessary to expose that which is life-  
denying, life-threatening, to strip that which  
is negative in life from its frequently  
seductive wrapping, to lay bare the ugliness.  
...And the *seemingly* ugly, the *seemingly*  
distasteful, and the *seemingly* common,  
when developed in artistic truth  
becomes beautiful.  
~Sarah E. Wright, "The Artist's Responsibility"

*Who'll be my witness, Lord? Who'll stand  
with me when they haul me up there to the  
County Court House? Who'll tend  
my children?*  
~Sarah E. Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*

In *The Golden Apples* Eudora Welty deploys black worker figures to consider the interplay between space, desire, and the dark inside on the eve of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) uses black workers to look again in the movement's wake. Set during the Great Depression, the novel centers on Mariah Upshur, her husband Jacob, and their four children. They live in Tangierneck, a fictional black fishing community on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Though the young family resides along a coast, life is anything but a beach. Life is a mess.

Like other texts in this study, *This Child's Gonna Live* portrays black folks at work, harvesting and processing natural resources. The characters labor in some of the most hostile cultivated environments—from farming worm infested land, to sharecropping under a blazing sun, to fishing for oysters in rocky waters, to canning

vegetables in sweltering factories. Beyond the portrayal of manual labor, however, the novel focuses on what some might call the hardest job of all.

*This Child* is primarily about Mariah Upshur's attempts to be a good mother. And the truth is, she really isn't that good at it. She is twenty-three years old and pregnant with her fifth child Bardetta for much of the novel. The narrative lags on a single day while Mariah tries to maintain a functional household and prepare for the birth.

Bardetta's birth seems especially important to Mariah; tetanus from a "germy naval bandage" had claimed her daughter Mary in infancy. Despite her family's perpetual parasites, phlegmy coughs, and even her own physical abuse against them, Mariah refuses to lose another child. "I wants my children to live," she insists. Though she tries to save her children, she appears to only succeed in speeding their demise.

All the while, free-indirect discourse reveals that a voice prompts Mariah toward murder and suicide, brings ugly flashbacks from her past, and intimates taboo. Though Mariah appears determined that "this child's gonna live" throughout the narrative, it becomes less clear which child or whose child will live. The child could even be her.

In Wright's novel, overt environmental limitations, including matters of poverty, hard labor, and location unfold alongside an insidious atmosphere of secrecy and blame. Wright uses free-indirect discourse to blend these surroundings into an unhappy tangle of destitution and denial. We might say *This Child* is Wright's experiment with the abject.

A flashback that appears early on demonstrates the ways folks in Tangierneck tend to blame Mariah for her family's abjection. The scene of baby Mary's death encapsulates their will to blame.

People said Mariah had her children too close together. People said she never should have had William in the first place until Jacob came home from the Western Shore in '23 and married her. But they didn't talk about that anymore. Instead they just remarked about Horace popping up like a rabbit just fourteen months behind William, and then Jesus. But they stopped talking for a few days when Mary came. Just came over to the house to say how sorry they were that the child couldn't open its mouth to suck. Offering this kind of remedy and that to unlock its jaws.

The scene begins with the presence of popular opinion. The narrator recounts what others think about Mariah and her failures through the repetition of "people said." Wright uses this repetition to mimic the ways public discourse has cast black women like Mariah as reckless and irresponsible mothers. The public's offering of "this kind of remedy and that" signifies upon the targeted solutions that placed a figurative band-aid on the symptoms of poverty while obscuring a much larger problem.

In the early-to-mid-1960s there was a bit of clamor to resolve what we might think of as a "poor-black-family" question. Much of the focus rested on black mothers and their children. On one hand, there was a civil rights push to include impoverished black women under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC). In fact, Wright places her novel in the midst of the Great Depression and just before the AFDC was established as part of the New Deal in 1935. This program was solely available to white women; poor black women had been largely written out due to the ways in which "family" was defined. "Family" included persons wed under a legal marriage, mothers who functioned as a stay-at-home parents, and so-called "legible"

children—those in a single household who shared the same father. As a result, many black mothers who needed aid were left without assistance. The exclusionary policies of the AFDC remained relevant in the 1960s when Wright was working on *This Child*. Many looked at the AFDC as a tangible remedy for poverty. AFDC policies were reformed to include black mothers (1968) one year before the novel's publication.

By 1965, public policy makers and government officials had become increasingly interested in poverty in African American communities. They saw family reform as a remedy. The Moynihan Report, formally titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), outlined what Moynihan saw as cycles of black poverty and pathology:

At the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

As the report described the ways in which children became victims of broken homes and damaged families, Moynihan projected much of the blame onto black mothers as the primary agents of destruction.

Moynihan criticized black women for pregnancy out of wedlock, for an overabundance of children, and for absent fathers driven away and emasculated by those women. While the report intended to present the ills affecting impoverished African American communities, and even as it took into account histories of slavery, racism, and labor oppression, it inevitably blamed those on the short side of an inherited national past.

And as the report pointed its finger at black mothers, it looked away from a shared tomorrow.

Moynihan had washed the nation's hands of any future connection to poor black families. Concluding that national energies should focus on strengthening African American households in the present, Moynihan wrote that thereafter "how this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so, is none of the nation's business" (Ch. 5). In other words, those that Mariah Upshur and her family represent were cast as a separate group in spite of the seeming advances of civil rights. If given the proper tools, Moynihan argued, African American families could be equal to other American families. While the language of this policy suggests poor black families as a separate, but eventually equal, American group, *This Child's Gonna Live* imagines otherwise.

Wright boldly takes as her protagonist a woman who is in some ways pathological, although the sources of her condition may have gone unobserved by Moynihan. As Wright places Mariah and her family in the laps of readers, the novel poses crucial questions for her time: How responsible are we for inherited dysfunction, and can we handle the mess?

In the pages that follow, I elaborate my claim that Wright's novel challenges the socio-political discourse of her day. *This Child's Gonna Live* is a mess to witness—an allegory of abjection that tests our ability to withstand the worst of what we might imagine. And it is through the act of bearing witness to the abject that *This Child's Gonna Live* finds an artistic truth about the slipperiness of responsibility and the reality of kin, a "history worth telling," along Maryland's Eastern Shore.

*Sarah E. Wright and Maryland's Eastern Shore*

The Eastern Shore of Maryland presents an ideal setting for Sarah E. Wright's novel. Wright was born in 1928 in an unincorporated Eastern Shore community called Wetipquin near Tangier Sound. The shore has been and continues to be one of the poorest regions in the country. Its ills result in part from its geographic location; the area is wedged between the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. For many, a wage labor job in the oyster industry was the only option. Like the novel's characters Jacob and Mariah, Wright's parents were among these oyster workers. And like Mariah and Jacob, her parents survived several of their young children who were lost to the plague of poverty. Perhaps inspired by the tragedy around her, Sarah E. Wright began writing poetry at the tender age of eight. When the young poet grew up she joined the literary and political Left.

Wright trained under leftist Harlem Renaissance and Depression-era writers Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes while she attended college at Howard University. She later joined the Harlem Writer's Guild, which was founded in 1950 by Rosa Guy, John Oliver Killens, and others. Wright expressed a great admiration of Killens for his dedication to "the liberation of his people—and all of humanity" (xi). She eventually became vice president of the Harlem Writer's Guild and helped establish the National Writers Union in 1981.

*This Child's Gonna Live* was well received on the literary scene when it was published in 1969. The novel made the New York Times "Best Book" list and won an award for readability that year.<sup>i</sup> The Feminist Press re-introduced *This Child* in 1980, and it was championed as a literary gem by the likes of Rosa Guy and Tillie Olsen. Tillie

Olsen claimed, "saturated in harsh beauty, this book has been and still is for me one of the most important and indispensable books in my lifetime. We have nothing else quite like it." Rosa Guy similarly declared Wright's novel was "the greatest of American novels" because of its focus on "the Black woman, forced to survive at the bottom rung of American society...who is compelled to survey, by the very extremity of her existence, the depths of the American soul." Despite Guy and Olsen's insistence on *This Child's* piercing poignancy and its penetrating look into the "American soul," discussions of the novel and of Wright have been limited.

A few scant readings of *This Child's Gonna Live* place Wright's work in a succession of black women writers' novels. *This Child* has been compared to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936) because Wright's depiction of a "high-minded" black woman's solitary struggle in the face of an atmosphere of condemnation resonates with Janie's quest for self. While *This Child* lends itself to a comparison with Hurston's *Eyes*, Wright's novel is committed to questions of poverty as it represents Mariah's struggle for independence. The matter of poverty was less pressing for Hurston. In fact, *Eyes* opens with possibility: "ships at a distance have every man's wish on board" (1). Fishermen in *This Child's Gonna Live* are similarly situated on "ships at a distance." Unlike the self-determination signaled by ships in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, these fishermen labor on "oyster boats tossing helplessly" (14). Wright represents people at the mercy of their environments, whereas Hurston would claim power in the midst of limitation. In "How It Feels to be Colored Me" (1923), Hurston famously claimed

I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that *nature* somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—*I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife* (1031 emphasis added).

Hurston imagined female awakening and self-determination as akin to "survival of the fittest," a survival in which race and social circumstances were not defining. We might say Wright revises Hurston's oyster-knife metaphor with realism true to the style of Ann Petry and Richard Wright. For Sarah E. Wright, the environment is a forceful antagonist.

Mariah holds an oyster-knife in hand as she labors in an oyster factory. Exhausted and unsteady, she "said 'Lord' every time she'd try to force open a hard oyster and the knife would slip and jab her hand" (208). She was "shucking them oysters till the water in her oyster buckets turned bloody from the stabs in her hands" (253). Clearly the world is not Mariah's oyster. The image of water mixing with blood is a realist depiction of hard labor that signals Wright's overarching portrait of interrelatedness and murderous limitation.

For her raw portrayal of a black woman's life, Wright has been rightly called a pioneer in the Black Women Writer's Renaissance of the 1980s. However, her position as a liberal black woman and her association with the Black Arts Movement has steered readings of *This Child* to a focus on race and to the centrality of black women in "closing ranks." Jennifer Campbell has described the novel as "a woman-centered vision of an impoverished, besieged black community finally 'closing ranks' in order to combat the

systemic and individualized racism that seeks to destroy whatever community it cannot control" (211).

I would like to suggest that *This Child* is not about neatly closing ranks at all. Even as Wright is poised between predecessors like Hurston and those who would follow in her path like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, she embarked upon a profound literary experiment that has been greatly overlooked. *This Child* is about opening ranks through free-indirect discourse that challenges the liberal imagination to face an awful American mess.

Wright had articulated the artistic and political urgency of confronting life's messes when she reflected upon the importance of seeing through rhetoric's pretty dressing. Wright described exposing the façade of language as a battle—one fought for "a future truly worthy of human beings" (xii). To move toward a worthy future, Wright had insisted, "My commitment is to truth. And the *seemingly* ugly, the *seemingly* distasteful, and the *seemingly* common, when developed in artistic truth becomes beautiful" (xii emphasis in original). The seemingly ugly, common, and distasteful are plentiful in *This Child*. They bear witness to the abject.

#### *Free-Indirect Discourse and the Abject*

Wright's novel is a narrative experiment that turns on free-indirect discourse and an allegory of abjection. The first seven of fifteen chapters stall on a single day. They show Mariah's attempts to simply get through it. As the plot superficially idles, the third-person omniscient narrator berates the reader with dense, disturbing images that include a

desolate landscape, unsavory food, indigestion, spasms, vomit, parasites, feces, death, and corpses.

Mariah's natural world is an expanse full of "dry field[s] and the dead vines" (50). The wind seems to "hawk and spit" at her (11). Along the shore, "the hottest of sand" contains worms that are "fat and green and horny—cool to the blistered fingers" but full of "green ooze" (48). She and her husband have colds and coughs with "bloody phlegm" (11), and the children are plagued with worms. Her youngest son Gezee has a "long one in his diaper. . . . Big white head on him. Tail part didn't come out. Inside...making more worms." (94). Wright's gruesome imagery contributes to her allegory of abjection.

The "abject" has been used to describe conditions of poverty. While the conditions of poverty are of great concern in the novel, Sarah E. Wright's preoccupation with the putrid, nauseating, and vile seems to anticipate other theories of abjection that appeared decades after the novel's publication.

In "Approaching Abjection" (1982), Julia Kristeva wrote:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. . . . . Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. . . . What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing

me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. . . .from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. . . .Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. . . . . On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture (1).

Abjection is at once an immersion in disturbing realities or truths that rest too close for comfort and the desire to push them away.

In a sense, abjection stands as an anti-desire. If desire is the want to consume, abjection is the need to expel. For some, Kristeva claims, life is "not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*" (6). Thrusting ugly realities into an endless darkness that resides on the other side of a seemingly impermeable line bestows a certain degree of power, culture, and self-hood upon the abjector.

Kristeva further suggests we might find protection in abjection by loathing that which we consider disgusting. For example, we might loathe what we perceive as inedible or rotten food. As a result, we do not ingest it, and we do not fall ill. "Spasms and vomiting" literally and figuratively protect us by separating us from that which sickens us (2). At other times, abjection repels threats to our sense of life, civilization, and culture. We might hate dirtiness, "filth, waste, or dung," decomposing matter, or any other repugnant "thing" that we feel compelled to keep at a distance.

Within "civilization" then, abjection brings with it a "failure to recognize its kin" (5). Abjection abhors the otherness of taboo: incest, infanticide, and even the nakedness of our fathers and mothers, for we must look away from the orifices that pressed us into being and pushed us out so that we might independently exist. *This Child* sits with taboo—the "not me"—that we long to reject. The narrative does not allow abjection, for someone must claim the abject.

A claim on the abject might seem unlikely given Wright's sickening portrayal of a poor black mother's experiences, especially for those who do not share a similar background. However, Wright attempts to diminish narrative distance with free-indirect discourse that delves into the contours of Mariah's psychic space. Wright begs her audience to withstand the abject because the narrative is paradoxically repulsive and intimate. Intimacy comes through free-indirect discourse.

Henry Louis Gates has defined free-indirect discourse in relation to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. According to Gates, a distinct third person omniscient narrator's Standard American English gradually blends into the lyricism of Southern black vernacular. Eventually the two voices become less distinguishable. These moments of free-indirect discourse are said to represent Janie's evolution, coming-of-consciousness, and the coming of her own distinct free-speaking self. Wright's free-indirect discourse operates differently.

In *This Child's Gonna Live*, free-indirect discourse occurs on the plane of the protagonists' most intimate thoughts and secrets. From the outset, the third-person omniscient narrator's Standard American English voice falls into the vernacular voice of the characters. The narrator constantly weaves in and out of Mariah's diction, but always

shares her tone and texture. At times, Mariah's thoughts are indistinguishable from the narrator's. At other times, the source is less clear. Her thoughts come as italicized prayers, as the intrusion of negative beliefs and sinister intentions, and even as voices the narrator calls the "grim reaper" (128) and "Old Messenger" (234). For its sinister and troubling nature, free-indirect discourse does not contribute to mere representation. Wright's free-indirect discourse prompts a quest for meaning.

Free-indirect discourse in *This Child's Gonna Live* is not about a protagonist's growth or personal journey. Rather, free-indirect discourse contributes to a state of immobility, as the narrative peers into what Mariah thinks of as "such a sickness in my soul" (191). As the narrative moves through scenes of literal and figurative sickness, it results in what David Wyatt has suggested about Eudora Welty's form. We get "a prose that so fends off reduction to the 'what happened'" because it "has something profound to tell us about the search for meaning itself" (Wyatt 191). Wright's use of free-indirect discourse beseeches us to seek meaning within her great experiment.

No single passage can capture the full picture of free-indirect discourse in *This Child*. A brief passage demonstrates Wright's handling of tone, diction, secrets, and shame. As the novel opens, Mariah wakes and her thoughts turn to her unborn child and to her secrets about it. "Oh my God, my God, I done killed it! It can't be dead!" Mariah thinks. "A stillness came over her. Jaws became solid frozen"; "she opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came" (11, 12). Here Mariah suffers a symbolic lockjaw, lacking even the power to voice her fears. She can only articulate her fears in thought. Her fears come through free-indirect discourse:

*Humble yourself to the Lord, Mariah. Apologize one more time.* If she could only speak. If she could only run. Get on that speeding-up Route 391 and run. Wished she'd kept on running when she went to see that Dr. Grene. Run right past him. Gone on to the Calverton Hospital clinic.

"Didn't believe they'd treat me right though, Lord. Thought it'd be easier to talk to that new colored doctor about my headache—tell him about the screaming that backed up in my head when Mary died . . . Jesus!" The woman cringed in a startled panic. She fixed her eyes on the little white lambs flocking around the white robed-figure on the Jamison Funeral Home calendar.

"You know that's over with, Jesus. You ain't gonna punish me no more. You ain't let me kill this young'un, has you?" (12-13 ellipses in original).

Here, the narrative briefly insinuates that Mariah had gone for medical help after baby Mary's death. This information comes in an instant and is gone as quickly as it appears. Only later does it become clear that Mariah wishes she had run past Dr. Grene because the child she presently carries is his. What's more, Mariah's question, "you ain't let me," foreshadows the slipperiness of her agency over herself and her children. The intimacy of the scene—the entry into Mariah's interiority and into the privacy of her prayers and her hope for humility in the face of shame—gives precedence to her consciousness. This passage is one of many instances in which Wright's free-indirect discourse draws its audience in as it inhibits voyeurism.

While other narrative representations of experience can certainly attempt to transform public consciousness, a distance between the reading public and the events—essentially the "not me" in the text—might remain intact. Free-indirect discourse breaks down the barrier; Mariah's consciousness becomes part of the narrative consciousness. *Native Son* (1940) provides a useful contrast.

While it has been suggested that Richard Wright's presentation of Bigger enables the audience to walk away with an understanding that there is a little bit of him in us all, the extreme pathology of Bigger, including his blackness and the narrator's control of the plot, leaves a space within which an audience might abject the Bigger in himself by maintaining a sterile distance. Perhaps Richard Wright's realism pulls one into the dark scenes with Bigger and his murderous actions. Yet it is possible to remain a distant onlooker because moments of free-indirect discourse are not in Bigger's diction. Therefore, a space remains between his interiority and the narrator's sense of "what happened" as the plot unfolds. This sort of space is more difficult to maintain in *This Child's Gonna Live* because Sarah E. Wright's free-indirect discourse muddles definite lines between consciousness and intention and action and events. Though Wright's audience might not have a sense of shared experience with Mariah, free-indirect discourse troubles the distance.

Wright's experimental form does the important work of searching for meaning through intimate free-indirect discourse and the abject. As Kristeva had claimed, "discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confront that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the

abject" (6). With Wright's method in mind, I now turn to an analysis of scenes of the abject.

*A Mess to Witness: Confining Environments*

The novel opens with a picture of Mariah waking before dawn.

Sometimes the sun will come in making a bright yellow day. But then again, sometimes it won't. Mariah Upshur couldn't see herself waiting to know which way it was coming as she fretted to see through the sagging windows squeezed between her upstairs roofs. The bed with Jacob's legs sprawled all over her was a hard thing to stay put in (1).

Wright personifies the environment, using active verbs to assign it the control that Mariah does not possess. The personification of environmental forces continues throughout the narrative. Even the wind has voice that Mariah does not have, for it "growled and hawked and spit the same as if it had a throat" (11). Mariah remains in tension with its confining agency, for she is a woman with a fantasy of escape. Mariah's wish to run away from Tangierneck appears as her ultimate goal and driving desire. She prays, "If you'll spare me, me and my children getting out of this Neck" (2). Yet, Mariah's desire to "get out"—to expel herself and her children from the "Neck"—strains against the reality of her immobility.

The opening imagery establishes the context of Mariah's environmental immobility as it calls upon narratives of women's entrapment. Mariah's windows are "squeezed" and narrowed by a "sagging" and collapsing roof. The drooping roof and associated attic references evoke a powerful sign of women's nineteenth-century limitations. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs hid in an attic

crawl space for seven years to escape slavery and to save her children.<sup>ii</sup> And a seemingly mad woman remains in *Jane Eyre's* attic unable to tell her story.<sup>iii</sup> While Mariah looks about in the dim early-morning light, the "little attic type of a room took shape" (11). Wright's use of attic imagery connects Mariah's environment to earlier contexts of restriction and narratives that must break out of them.

Part of this story is about the force of isolating conditions. These conditions unfold as Mariah continues to take in her home environment. The narrator explains, "Little by little the chest of drawers with the blue paint peeling off it, and the wallpaper gone limp and nippley from the damp and the winds easing their ways in between the boards of her upstairs roof sank into her head" (11). The collapsing roof and morphing wallpaper whisper remnants of women's intimate testimonies of the insidiousness of isolation. The wallpaper and attic imagery sink into Mariah's mind as they creep into the narrative consciousness.

The opening image of the home space includes a marriage bed. The "bed with Jacob's legs" is a difficult place for Mariah to "stay put." Here the husband's limbs stifle Mariah's movement; Jacob's "legs were such heavy weights on her" (11). The reader eventually finds Mariah unable to meaningfully move forward as the novel dawdles through the morning.

Though she appears determined to move before sunrise, Mariah "couldn't wake her children" (2). It turns out that she had been giving them an old-fashioned cough syrup throughout the night to soothe them and then finds them immobilized by her attempt at care. Her attempts at control will repeat and misfire throughout the novel.

When Mariah falls back into slumber, a dream sequence ensues. This dream elaborates her hopes and her limitations, including family and secrets that are a burden to bear. In her dream, Mariah tries to run northward with her children in order to save their lives. "I wants my children to live," she dreams of herself saying (7). The narrator corroborates her intention. "She was running, honies, running...Just run now, that's all she was gonna do" (7). "Gonna," the narrator states. This continued use of the future tense becomes an ironic force as Mariah displaces doing onto a fantasy and onto a time that will never arrive.

Though Mariah desires to save her children, her agency will not arrive in part because of them. In the dream her children are a weight. "It's a long stretch of road when you're running with such a weight bearing down on you," the narrator says (7-8). "Littlest one of her children, Gezee, weighed heavy in her arms...his sleepy weight just caused her to ache so much" (7). Their weight impedes her movement, and the way they were "linking themselves around Mariah's arms and legs felt just like chains in the running" (8). Even in her dreaming subconscious, Mariah's family is a labor sentence from which there is no escape.

As Mariah dreams of running with heavy children fastened to her, her father suddenly appears. He holds her back, disrobes, and shouts, "'See my scars! See my scars!' 'Colored woman's always been more privileged than the man!' Naked, he continues, "'You ain't got no hard time in this community'...he roared against her terrible screaming of 'Papa, let me go!'" (9).<sup>iv</sup> Mariah runs, and her mother "tore after her, hollering, 'Come back here, slut! Look a-here, here comes Jacob bringing that little near-white affliction you done bore to him. If you gonna leave, take 'em all. The thing ain't Jacob's. Why you

leave that burden on him?" (9). The father's "scars" represent a paternal narrative of racism that attempts to obscure Mariah's future and her dreams. At the same time, the dream of a naked father and an accusing mother, who points to an afflicted "thing," brings a hint of incest and a lingering odor of shame that will persist throughout the novel. Mariah dreams of breaking free through a "violent wrenching of herself" (9). Here it seems she dreams of abjection as "wrenching" captures a state of wretchedness and a forceful action at once.

Though the narrative presents Jacob as an impediment to Mariah's movement, the narrator reveals he too struggles for control. He understands himself in relation to property ownership and often tells Mariah, "A man is his land. In other words, what he owns that he paid for outright. A man is his land" (7). Jacob connects a sense of worth and manhood to the possession of space. Mariah does not share his belief, and the narrator relays her disdain: "then he'd quote some old simple-assed poem he'd learned from his father" when speaking on the subject of land. The simple-assed poem is this:

I am master over all I survey  
 My rights there are none to dispute  
 From the land all around to the sea  
 I am Lord o'er fowl and brute (7).

The notion of "master over all I survey" has become a commonly used colloquial saying. The poem originates in William Cowper's "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" (1782) which imagines the experience of a marooned Irish sailor who would inspire Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The evocation of the poem connects Jacob's paternal

narrative of property ownership to Selkirk's. Shawn Thomson has described Cowper's poem as an "amalgam of sorrow" (18) because Selkirk's experience demonstrates the problem of "property ownership" and gaining "a foothold in the middle class" (209). In many respects, Jacob's story is an amalgam of sorrow; like Selkirk, Jacob has no property to show.

The novel connects water and access to it to Mariah and Jacob's propertyless existence. According to Mariah, Tangierneck, (called the Neck for short), is the "Lowest place on the whole Eastern Shore of Maryland, she did believe" (14). And if the fictional Tangierneck looks anything like Wright's Wetipquin, it would be located just up the shore, much like the Upshur's name suggests, from a legal water border. This border separates Maryland and Virginia waters: the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. The stretch of sea between states actually resembles a neck. In the novel, the "Nighaskin" refers to the Potomac River, and the "Deep Gut" is the Chesapeake Bay.

Wright connects the determining force of the bay to determining matters of law. The Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River separate the shorelines of Maryland and Virginia. Jacob signifies on the laws that divide the two when he refers to "that Virginia line that wasn't never drawn fair in the first place" (113). The "Virginia Line" harkens back to disputes over rights and ownership that began with George Washington, the Virginia colony, and kings. When Maryland finally split off from Virginia in 1863, the Chesapeake Bay was the main area Virginia demanded (Grymes). When the new maps were drawn, Thomas Jefferson drew the line.

Law and space collide to form a perfect storm that damns those on the wrong side. While the entirety of the Potomac up to the Virginia shoreline is the property of

Maryland, the majority of the Chesapeake belongs to Virginia. The Chesapeake provides access to the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, Virginia oystermen have historically shored-up better resources. In the novel, Jacob Upshur's complaint about the Virginia line speaks to an inherited short-end of the stick.

Mariah imbues the Potomac and Chesapeake with far-reaching agency. The narrator relays Mariah's surprise that Tangierneck "hadn't been washed away, the way that big, wide, bossy, ocean-going Nighaskin River keeps pouring water down into the mouth of the Neck until Deep Gut swallows all it can hold" (14). The Potomac and the Chesapeake are "bossy," ordering the lives of Mariah and Jacob's family and forcing them to swallow its excess. In fact, Mariah concludes, "It was water that cut Tangierneck off, left it all to itself" (34). The water's act of pouring and severing contributes to the novel's allegory of the abject.

While *This Child* represents layers of environmental forces that work against Mariah and her family, Wright does not stop here. She delves into the psychological effects of denial as part of an insidious environment. Troubling the waters of family and responsibility, the novel dips into the characters' interiority and into flashbacks. Abjection becomes a mess to bear.

#### *A Mess to Witness: Scenes of Abjection*

In the early pages of the novel, Mariah attempts to carry out the duties of a mother. Readyng herself and her children for the day ahead Mariah "tried to fling her whole self into the chores of the morning" (22). She "had to wash up, put on her everyday clothes. Had to mix a pan of bread, sift a-many maggot out of the flour first. Had to find

an onion. . . . Had to get those washtubs down from the house. . . . Had to feed those two or three Bantam hens she was saving. . . . Had to look over Skeeter and Rabbit's homework. . . . Had to pack some molasses sandwiches" (22). The narrative describes her work in a manner reminiscent of William Attaway's portrayal of manual toil as an agentless repetition in *Blood on the Forge* (1941). "Had to" captures past action of Mariah's efforts—her responsibilities seem unending. Though Mariah tries to "fling" herself into the repetition of the past, a flashback interrupts her efforts in the present. It is here that the narrator tells of baby Mary's death:

And on the fourth day, when the baby lay limp and starving, Mariah tried to pry its jaws open—squeezed some milk down into the tiny slit from which death sounds came. But the milk ran all back up out of the baby's mouth and out of its nose and Mariah said to it, "Oh baby, blow your nose. Baby, baby, blow your little nose." And the child went limp in Mariah's arms and she buried its face in her long bush of sweaty hair and sucked its nose. Sucked the last shuddering breath and the milk ran all down Mariah's chin and out of her mouth and she hollered up to the Lord, "Had to be anybody, Jesus, Jesus, why'n't you let it be me?" Shaking the baby and crying. Thing was dead to the world, but "Mary child, baby, blow your little nose." Shaking the baby and hollering, "Jacob, Jacob, come here. See what God done done." But Jacob was away on the rocks (29).

The flashback of Mary's lockjaw interrupts the ways we might think about "what happened," responsibility, and blame.

For example, tetanus infection requires two events—contact with a pathogen and transference to an open wound. For an infant, the umbilical stump would be the most vulnerable site. Infection at the umbilical stump figuratively raises questions about what is passed between mother and child. Though Mariah blames a "germy navel bandage" for Mary's death, her final decision to give milk suffocates the child. An attempt at mothering paradoxically speeds Mary's end. Further, Mariah's act of sucking is an infantile act and the very thing the baby's condition would not allow it to do. Mariah herself has clearly been unmothered as she unmothers her child.

The mothering-unmothering dynamic in Wright's lockjaw scene connects to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In *Beloved*, School Teacher's nephew steals Sethe's breast milk. Sethe eventually attempts to claim agency through an act of infanticide: she kills her daughter to save the child. In *This Child's Gonna Live* the separate scenes from *Beloved* and all that they signify about power and the self are collapsed. Mariah essentially drowns Mary in her own breast milk. Whether Mariah's act is infanticide, an accident, or some other insidious "thing" that resides in between remains unclear. Still, the narrative leaves off with the image of an infantile Mariah "shaking the baby," an act that is paradoxically reviving and killing.

The flashback of Mary's death is immediately followed by another scene of abjection that occurs in the midst of Mariah's work. It comes as a breakfast table scene. Mariah's son Rabbit overhears her talking to herself about Mary's passing and about future escape. "What you say, Mamma? You leaving us, Mamma?" Rabbit asks (30). Mariah responds: "'Stop looking down my gullet.' And she scooped up a spoonful of potatoes from the iron frying pan sizzling on the stove and slammed them on Rabbit's

plate. 'Eat, eat, eat! Get this shit down your gut,'" Mariah yells (30). Here, Mariah's agency comes as a damaging form of control. The hard "iron" of the pan and her manner of placement—"slamming" the "sizzling" potatoes—paint the picture of a mother who is anything but gentle. The consonance of "sizzling" and "slamming" creates a scorching sound similar to Mariah's searing affect. Mariah fails to take the sting out of her family's experience, perhaps because she still feels the burn of her own.

The breakfast table scene parallels the lockjaw scene as it reflects the transmission of a hard to name "thing" between mother and child. Mariah's command, "get this shit down your gut," captures the family's predicament of force-fed conditions and their re-ingestion of the abject. In a sense, Mariah force-feeds the effects of her abjection just as she had force-fed Mary in the lockjaw scene. These children too become unmothered. Mariah's lack of agency and sense of shame seem to lead to more abuse. We see the shame-rejection scenario play out through free-indirect discourse that reveals further abjection.

Rabbit's big eyes welled up. Maybe it was her he was about to bawl his guts out over. *Little-son-of-a-bitch don't be crying over me, a no good whore!* Thought flew through her head the same time as her hands went a-flying, and Skeeter jumped up from the table hollering at Rabbit, "Boy, you done broke my plate. You ain't had no business taking my pretty plate, and Gezee bawled at the top of his lungs, scurrying across the floor to get out of her way. Her hands flew before she got the chance to hold them back, into Rabbit's little face and his head and his little body cringing on the Goddamned floor. *Meant to hold her hands back, but Jesus,*

*Jesus. My hands is killing them. . . Cut off my hands, Jesus. The woman wept. I ain't meant to hurt up his face like I did. I ain't meant to do it.*

She grabbed that little old body quivering same as it did when he was first born. . . . and she sucked her knuckles where she cut them on Rabbit's teeth. Licked the slobber and the snot and the blood from his face. "Go anywhere, Rabbit, I'm gonna take you."

Silence reigned over the chilly air, and the cleaning up of the mess from the floor (31 emphasis in original).

Gezee's cry for prettiness underscores the ugliness of the morning. Mariah's thoughts and hands fly at the same time and land on her children. The disarray of the scene, with noise and scurrying children, stands in stark contrast to the after-silence surrounding the "mess."

The narrative depicts Mariah's abuse against her children alongside a presentation of her interiority. Her thoughts and feelings of shame beget her abuse which we might think of as a cycle of abjection. As a result, the messiness of the scene and free-indirect discourse complicate sterile rhetoric that often rigidly describes abusive people as objects or "products" of pathological environments. Again Mariah becomes figured as a child—cutting (against) teeth as she cuts through her son. In the end, she sucks on her own knuckles as abuse redounds. Narrative flashbacks present more glimpses into the full picture of Mariah's past, a past that is difficult to digest.

Mariah continues through the motions of her morning work (or the lack thereof) and finally makes it outside after the breakfast table ordeal. As she applies pressure to a water pump, an old man named Buzzard heads toward her. The narrative collapses

Mariah and the narrator's perspectives: "Dirty bugger used to go around patting on little girls too, Mariah shuddered. Always spinning yarns about the community and its history" (34). This "community" history focuses on racism and land theft, including the Native American Nanticoke's encounters with colonial plundering and the lynching of Jacob's grandparents.<sup>v</sup> Minor characters repeat this history of trauma throughout the novel, giving it pride of place.

Still, the novel does not bear down on these traumas, for they do not comprise the history that haunts Mariah. Mariah "Didn't want to hear about the time when and the time telling" (35), especially because Buzzard "might even pat her again like he did when she was a little girl, bringing disgrace on her" (36). In effect, Old Buzzard Jefferson's "yarns" about the community mark a tightly woven thread of black history that Wright sets tension in with Mariah's chaotic truth.

A tightly woven narrative of racial oppression is at the backdrop of Jacob's truth as well. "A hot tear crept down his face" as he talks to himself on the way work (48). The narrator brings a hint of taboo as she reveals Jacob had an affair with his adopted sister Vyella. "I ain't sinned no worser than nobody else! Ain't sinned as bad as most. Whole lot of men just go on and get themselves next to a nice hot piece every now and then, whether the one they got has turned cold or not" (44). It is the denial of the intimacy with his sister and its shame that plagues him. The narrator describes the problem as one of the mind. "He was clutching on his tongs and wishing he could slide like Easy-Greasy on down to the Gut without having to put up with the consciousness of things that he wasn't even mixed up with anymore" (44). He is plagued by "the consciousness" of other

"things," such as his promises to Mariah. "*Realized I promised Mariah a few things so we wouldn't end up in this condition, but you ain't gonna let it come here dead. I'm gonna cross that Virginia line. I mean, I would go across it if the law allowed.*" (44 emphasis in original). Instead of facing the full "consciousness of things," he blames a wealthy white woman named Bannie Upshire Dudley for his present state the threats against the unborn child.

Jacob blames Bannie for his family's dejection. One might notice that the surnames of Bannie *Upshire* and Jacob *Upshur* are close. In the novel, it is no secret that Bannie and Jacob's father Percy are second cousins; their grandparents were siblings split by matters of race. Jacob and Bannie are second cousins once removed, and Jacob and Mariah believe Bannie has stolen her cousin Percy's land.

Free-indirect discourse divulges Jacob's perspective on the matter. "Miss Bannie was at it again. Rooting up his family's trees. *I am master over all I survey* What kind of lying poem was that his father taught him to say? Ain't master over nothing!" (47 emphasis in original). Here free-indirect discourse offers foreshadow. "*Don't see how Papa got himself all mixed up with Bannie in the first place. But I'm gonna find out. Gonna find out how Miss-white-money-grabbing Bannie got her hands stuck down in my pockets squeezing my manhood*" (47 emphasis in original). And then "evil thoughts of doing something to get the whole mess over with wouldn't haul themselves off" (47). Perhaps Jacob's desire for property or perhaps his desire to regain his sense of self as a man leads him to determine to kill Bannie. "*GET BANNIE LIKE YOU STARTED TO. GET HER!*" he thinks (51 emphasis in original). The narrator describes his new goal as a "thing": "thing took charge of his feet and his mind and his soul just a-throbbing. Gonna

get that Miss Bannie" (51) Jacob's preoccupation with land theft is part of what the novel represents as an accepted history of racial oppression that obscures his other truths. A secret that Jacob does not know becomes part of what the narrative represents as history that has been denied. This secret will tie everyone together once it is revealed.

The narrative shifts back to Mariah attempting to busy herself at home. "'Time I got through, time I got through.' Mariah talked to the housework" (74). But Buzzard's morning appearance brings back another memory that overtakes her. The narrative reveals the community had castigated Mariah and her friend Rosey. While Mariah survived their rejection, Rosey was not so lucky. The memory stops her work and forces her into "the leather chair" where she "sank down. . . . Mariah gasped, seeing. 'Let me get up, Lord. Get back to work!' But she sat. . . . seeing" (74).<sup>vi</sup>

They all came to stare at little Rosey, gone out of her mind with pain, pulling at the great strips of muslin she'd tied all around her stomach to hide her secret. . . . to turn away all stunned-eyed from the gray infant, still connected to Rosey's body with the cord of the mother's life knotted around its throat.

What happens next is revealing:

*Deacon* Georgie Long . . . mumbled with his eyes cast down, but slipping and sliding from *his* dead infant to his wife. Mumbled, 'These young gals is just living too fast, that's all,' as he stumbled into the prayer the people called on him to lead. "Must've been that hot dog she ate." . . . "Thing must have give her the indigestion."

Seemed like he went into the stiffest kind of trance, locking his sights on the nubble of a hot dog Rosey had flung into the darkening sand (74-6 emphasis in original).

The flashback of Rosey's abuse is a history long unacknowledged by Mariah's community. While Rosey lay dying and denied by the church, the women of the congregation begin telling of "community history" instead (77). Using Rosey as an example, they claim, "Children need to know how they did us. Need to know about them Paddy Rollers ripping through this very church . . . . You gotta live clean, children. Got to Live clean!" (77). The churchwomen revert to a narrative of cause and effect predicated on race and individual responsibility. Yet, the flashback has revealed a narrative that the church has refused to claim.

Rosey is cast out and set apart from the church culture though the dead infant is a very product of that institution. The hotdog functions as a placeholder for the deacon and by extension the community institution's intrusion upon Rosie. As such, the hotdog points to the question of control: what one takes in—from the force of other people to the stories they tell about the past—and what becomes of it. As the narrative bears witness to Rosey's ordeal through Mariah's memory of it, the abject stillbirth comes as a hard to name "thing"—a fatal revolt against what Rosey had been forced to swallow.

As the scene unfolds, the churchwomen demand any other underage "sinners" repent. Mariah, certain her friends will join her on the mourner's bench, heads forward. But others do not come. As Mariah walks toward Rosey who is "*Stiff. Dead.*" Old Buzzard testifies to her character, while admitting that he just "patt[ed] her on the head" (82). The extreme ridiculousness of the events brings humor amid the chaos.

Wright had described humor as a "very serious tool" (xii). The many moments of humor in the novel contribute to her allegory of abjection. Humor, according to Kristeva, becomes part of the catharsis of abjection (27). We might think of Wright's humor as necessary to the narrative catharsis as it moves through scenes that are so overwhelmingly abject.

The novel shifts perspectives again to present another view of Jacob walking to work, this time along the shore. As he makes his way to the Chesapeake, a memory of baby Mary washes over him. The narrator explains, "He would've tried to straiten out its little face. Didn't want to put it in the ground with such a look of discontentment on its mouth" (104-5). It is not only the discontented face of the baby, but conditions that the baby's face contains that Jacob wants to put away. It has been hard for Jacob to bury such a thing.

While Jacob begins blaming Bannie again, his uncle informs him of a different past. According to this uncle, Jacob's father Percy and his second cousin Bannie were more to each other than kin separated by the color. Percy had a romantic affair with Bannie, and he willingly sold his land to her to help support her. With this new news of cousins kissing across the color line, the narrative brings more layers of taboo.

When Jacob confronts his father with this revised narrative, the narrator reveals his experience of family to be not unlike Mariah's. Like Mariah's sense of familial entrapment, Jacob "wanted them to leg go of him, to stop needing him!" (117). All that he has internalized forces itself free as he attempts to speak to Percy. "He started in coughing and swallowing hard to keep from vomiting. And he choked up so, he couldn't

say a word... all he could do was swallow. . . . The tired and mad-all-day man just spewed. He was too full to suck it down and the rotten mess just ran all over the floor" (117). As with Rosey and Mariah's imposed conditions, what goes in must come out. In this scene Wright appears to predict Kristeva's words on the abject. For Kristeva imagines "a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon...to save himself, he throws up everything that is given to him" (6). Here Jacob gives up the burden of family and secrets. The "mess" expels itself, pooling on the floor and oozing to rest at the feet of many.

Jacob returns home and tells Mariah he must do his "business." "My bowels don't feel so good, 'Rah. I'm going out in the field," he says. The narrative associates Jacob with defecation and matters of the bowel underscore his abjection. In fact, Mariah regards him as a "bony shitty-assed man!" (30). And his mess is hers. She says, "Man, why you don't change your drawers a little more often and wipe yourself good? Any dog gets tired sometimes of scrubbing out somebody else's shit from their drawers" (15). Beyond the comic relief of a homemaker's daily grind, Mariah's comment suggests inherited abjection. The mess becomes the "shit" that everyone must bear.

Jacob had engaged in the "mess" of business before. He had pretended to head to the woods to "do his business" but had slipped off to kill Bannie instead. Though his children previously interrupted him, the second time around "the word business was all he said [to Mariah] before he took off into the night to get himself together to do something" (121). Whether Jacob delivers on his promise of action is never fully revealed.

The ambiguity of messy business surfaces when Percy comes looking for Jacob after their fight. Mariah explains that he has been "out in the field to do his business" for at least an hour. Percy imparts some terrible news. A community member named Cora, who had agreed to help Mariah get Welfare assistance, had been attacked and killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Mariah immediately thinks of her children's many needs and heads towards Bannie's house to ask her for help.

Walking toward Bannie's house Mariah senses an obstruction. At first she thinks it is the recently murdered woman, and "she clamped her hand over her mouth to still the scream rushing up in her. But she had to look! If it was a vision, she had to look. Had to listen" (131). Here Wright's project folds back upon itself. As Mariah forces herself to look, the narrative implores the reader to do the same. Looking on, Mariah hears "'Wah-dah" and sees a woman crying by the Chesapeake (129). The woman clamoring for water is none other than Bannie. She claims Percy has attacked her. "'Nig-ag beat me . . . tried to kill me," she insists (131). Mariah finds Bannie trying to pull her down and then finds herself trying to kill her.

"Leave me go, Miss Bannie! Leave me go! If you don't leave go me, I'm lief to..." Mariah grabbed her head, her belly. *My baby, my baby.* Trembled and almost went down. Almost went down in the slushy sands where the woman collapsed, clinging to Mariah's legs, slobbering hot all up against her legs. Feeble hands stroked Mariah's ankles. "Take me home, hon. I can't see. Take me home."

"I ain't a-gonna do it. . . You ain't gonna take advantage of no more people."

And then:

All around Mariah were the voices of the Neck, swelling in her ears, skeeing in and away. Roaring in the waters swirling up to the shore. Gulping waters. Coughing voices. Consumption hoarse voices. Especially Skeeter's. . . been coughing for going on two years now. . . .

*Who'll be my witness, Lord? Who'll stand with me when they haul me up there to the County Court House? Who'll tend my children?* (136-7 emphasis in original).

In this polyvocal scene, a voice tells Mariah to kill Bannie by letting the tide drag her in. While contemplating murder she thinks, "*Never thought death would be this full of doing something*" (134). Here the narrative presents taking life as a kind of fullness; agency resides in an act of abjection. This scene presents a revision of the abjection in Ellen Douglas's short story "On The Lake" (1961).

In "On the Lake" a white woman named Anna and her pregnant black maid Estella struggle in the water. It seems Anna will surely drown Estella. "*She's going to drown me. I've got to let her drown, or she will drown me,*" Anna thinks (Douglas qtd in Yeager 391 emphasis in original). Patricia Yeager has described this moment as Douglas's attempt to "push her readers under the water to catch sight of a white woman kicking a black woman to her probable death" (54). Yeager claims the effect is Douglas's effort to "investigate white women's complicity in jettisoning African Americans" (54). Where we might say Anna potentially "discards" or abjects Estrella in "On the Lake," in *This Child's Gonna Live*, Mariah just might become complicit in Bannie's abjection. The voices of the dead seem to overwhelm Mariah and to push her to commit the act. Yet,

Mariah learns she shares a common struggle with Bannie. Both are mothers in a place that does not want to allow them to exist.

The exchange between Bannie and Mariah brings denials to the surface as it brings them together. Bannie tells Mariah that she and Percy have a child. This child is none other than Dr. Grene—the father of Mariah's unborn baby. Essentially, Mariah is pregnant with the child of her husband's half-brother and third cousin. Here, layers of taboo and secrecy bind Bannie and Mariah together across the distancing lines of race.

There is one other ambiguity remaining. Jacob, not Percy, had planned to kill Bannie. Who attacked her? Was it Percy or Jacob? The narrative leaves responsibility and the facts of "what happened" unknown. Yet, as Mariah considers killing Bannie herself, she pleads for a witness: "*Who'll be my witness, Lord? Who'll stand with me when they haul me up there to the County Court House? Who'll tend my children?*" (137). Because Mariah's consciousness collapses with the narrative consciousness, the novel also begs for a witness, who after approaching a fuller meaning of Mariah's story might help to save *this* child.

Mariah decides to take Bannie home and leaves her with a box of pills. Bannie promises Mariah milk for her children, a sign of the help she has needed desperately. The first twenty-four hours of an exhausting day finally draw to a close well into the middle of the novel.

#### *The Abject Comes to Collect*

The next day Mariah sends her son Rabbit to retrieve their milk. Rabbit returns with news that Bannie too is dead. True to form, the facts—the causes of her death—

remain unknown. Mariah blames herself, and the shock of Bannie's death—or rather the abjection of a mother wedged in a mess—brings new life into the narrative. The birth scene is a mess to behold. Bardetta's arrival into the world is described as thus: "Thing slid out of her" (162). As the child slides out of Mariah, she seemingly delivers herself in a continued confusion of mother and child. Next, "Mariah just hugged the new little thing" (164). Where "thing" can operate as term of endearment, it additionally emphasizes the difficulty of placing *this* child. "Thing" highlights the tension between child as object and as subject, as well as the hard to name matter of the abject. On one hand the child claims agency by bringing herself into the world. On the other hand, the child will become the object of much debate in the novel. Whose child is she, and who will claim responsibility for her?

The birth scene shows Mariah's attempt to claim the baby's life. This claim turns on the umbilical stump. One might recall a "germy navel bandage" had quickened baby Mary's death. This time Mariah stakes her claim on the baby girl. She says, "I'm burning this bandage my ownself. Promise the Lord if anybody takes my daughter's life, it's gonna have to be me. . . . And' I'm gonna see to it, Sisters," she tells the women around her, "this young'un's gonna live" (163). Again we have a hint of taboo—a mother who might kill—illustrating the slippery insidiousness of Mariah's agency.

The narrative switches to Jacob standing outside with his sons after baby Bardetta's birth. As the sons play in the snow, "a whole lot of it flew into Jacob's face. And for a split second, visions of that white-looking, oh my babe, girl child, oh Mariah, son-of-a-bitch Mariah, just worked through him like a dose of salts. And he hollered at the boys, "shit, shit, shit! Cut it out! Don't want that white shit in my face" (172). Here

the term "shit" returns to Jacob's abjection. Bardetta's arrival confronts him with a narrative he cannot control, including the realities of crossed racial lines and kin he would rather deny.<sup>vii</sup>

Mariah awakens after an unspecified time of semi-unconsciousness, which follows the birth of her fifth child. Mariah's sleeping, waking, and unconsciousness brings Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) to mind. *Quicksand* concluded as Helga was about to deliver her fifth child. We might say *This Child's Gonna Live* picks up where *Quicksand* left off: with the coming of another child and a mother who struggles to exist.

The pace of the novel increases as Mariah becomes more desperate for help. She begins collecting pills for her suicide. Rabbit attempts to thwart her morbid fantasy of control. He throws the pills away and suffers a brutal beating for his act. "Well, she beat him up beside the house and all around it. Saying all the time, 'Rabbit, give me back my blue pills.' 'I throwed them away, Mamma,' he kept bawling" (211). As Mariah beats the life out of him to claim the power to take her own, the narrative spirals into a vortex that seems increasingly out of control.

Mariah realizes the unyielding loop of no control and the futility of her attempted agency. The narrator says, "That Gezee was never gonna stop getting the loose bowels from the worm medicine she gave him. And that Bardetta was never gonna stop wheezing. Skeeter and that Rabbit was never gonna stop running off to get into things they had no business in" (240). "Gonna"—Mariah's previous projection for future agency—becomes "never gonna" near the novel's end. The lack of punctuation and run-on sentences underscores the perpetual run-on that has been her experience. "Never gonna" is amplified as an unclaimed future amplifies when Rabbit falls ill.

The layers of abjection that Rabbit has had to manage appear to pour out of him. A neighbor informs Mariah of his illness while she is at work, "Worm crawled right out of his behind this morning. Think he choking on the rest" (253). When Mariah leaves the job and heads home the verb tense shifts again. "It wasn't nothing for Mariah to do but drop that oyster knife right in the bucket. Run 'cross that gangplank from the oyster shucking factory, past the few white people's shanties that was propped up nearby, past the whole mother-fucking world" (253). Mariah was previously in a past continuous act of running that was about the future—"she was running honies, running...that's what she was gonna do" (7). With the news of Rabbit's illness, the narrator places Mariah's act in participle form—run—dislodging her from a continuous past. But her action comes too late.

As it happens, Rabbit had drunk a water solution of Mariah's pills to convince his younger brothers and sister to let him put it on their sores. Still, given the many messy layers of conditions in the novel, it is again impossible to pinpoint a single cause of death. The narrative kills off the child who had suffered the brunt of Mariah's abuse as he had attempted to save her and his siblings from a cycle of the abject.

As the novel draws to a close, it brings a peculiar ending. It ends on Mariah's attempted suicide.

Didn't notice how cold the water was till her feet hit the first of the rocks. . . . said to her Lord and Master, "Let my children live, Lord. Let 'em have a pretty day."

Then Mariah:

Grabbed herself handfuls of water. Felt its iciness slipping through her fingers. Felt it soaking through her clothes clean up to her waist. Didn't know how cold death was before, "Lordy, I didn't know."

Caught herself saying that thing on the road back home. Caught herself saying it when she bumped into Jacob plowing on down that road toward her...

But she wouldn't pay him no mind when he grabbed-a-hold of her. "Mariah, is you crazy! What was you trying to do, drown your fool self? Knows you can't swim, fool woman!"

Gritted her teeth. *Kiss my ass Jacob.*

Didn't say nothing to him on the road back home. No more than, "Jacob I forgot to put the dough to bake in the oven so you and the children could have some nice hot bread for your dinner" (272).

Mariah's suicide attempt could suggest the impossibility of escape for the women Mariah represents, perhaps signifying upon the privileged feminisms of novels like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Mariah has not the power to even kill herself. As she goes deeper into the water she reflects, "I never knew death could be so cold" and finds herself back on the road and headed toward home.

Though this ending might appear to present a mother headed back to her community, Wright's conclusion ends where it began on the idea of "the Virginia line," the invisible border between the Nighaskin (Potomac) and the Gut (the Chesapeake Bay). In essence, *This Child* ends on the water boundaries between the Gut and the Nighaskin

perhaps because, as the Potomac's fictional name suggests, *nig has kin*. Mariah goes into the water to die, but her abrupt walk out worries the line.

Here the novel revises a long-standing history of familial denial. This history had been explored in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). Clotel jumped into the Potomac River after being unable to rescue her daughter—also named Mary—and after Jefferson drew a line that left her unclaimed. In a society in which there was no place for her to exist, Clotel killed herself to save herself—an ultimate display of abjection. Like the border he drew that separates the Chesapeake and the Potomac, Thomas Jefferson drew the line of kin.<sup>viii</sup> As early as William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* (1729), history and kinship, Wright reveals, is all about who gets to draw the lines. For Wright, the line is also about an uncertain future.

And here Wright's narrative—a narrative in which free-indirect discourse refused to draw any lines—ends on a scene of attempted suicide in the Chesapeake. Where Clotel chose agency in death by drowning in the Potomac because the nation rejected her, Mariah refuses to die. She comes out of the water on the other side of the line (the Chesapeake). Mariah's walk out of the "Gut"—the very bowels of the abject—and her unspoken thoughts conclude the narrative. "Kiss my ass," she thinks. This child's gonna live.

Wright's ugly beautiful truth is the reality of mess—the abjection of responsibility and of kin. Where Moynihan and others argued for the strengthening of nuclear black families, Wright implores us to blur the lines.

And for her messy allegory of abjection, Wright was ahead of her time. For her focus on the ways environments impact poor families, Wright was a pioneer for

environmental justice. And even as Wright anticipated the need for environmental justice, she exceeded it in ways that remain unrealized by its champions. For Wright, environmental *in*justice includes insidious environments—climates of pathological public discourse and clouds of denial that close the walls in on us all. Perhaps this is why the *This Child's* conclusion refuses a sense of closure and instead shows a troubled mother going back home. For Wright, the future remained unclaimed. As she noted, time was "ticking and there is so much more to do."

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> The novel won an award for readability, which is strikingly odd because the novel is an undoubtedly difficult read. In a classroom setting, in fact, students express a sense of exhaustion as they attempt to slog through the gory events while keeping track of a host of minor characters and a twisted plot.

<sup>ii</sup> Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) intimated the details of her experience to northern women readers to connect them to her seemingly disparate world. Here Wright attempts to connect her audience to Mariah's experience.

<sup>iii</sup> The same woman descended the stairs in Jane Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as the narrative gave voice to hers.

<sup>iv</sup> By the end of the narrative a reader finds her still imagining/dreaming this struggle. "When she woke to find her self out of the tombs of eternity, she was saying, "Let me go, Jacob! Let me go!" (183).

<sup>v</sup> The Nanticoke are a Algonquian speaking people from the Tidewater region; while they now reside in Delaware, they maintain the chiefdom Wicomico; Wicomico is also where Wright's Wetipquin is located. A river called Nanticoke now runs through the lower Eastern shore that ends in Tangier Sound where Tangierneck would rest.

<sup>vi</sup> This "sinking into the chair" moment connects to other instances of women "sinking into chairs" in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953).

<sup>vii</sup> A moment of irony surfaces when Jacob names the baby. He names the child Bardetta Tometta. This name aligns the daughter with the narrative of Bard Tom. Bard Tom was Jacob's paternal grandfather a free black sailor. The Bannie's forefathers did not approve of Jacob's grandmother (and their black first cousin) Margaret's marriage to Bard Tom. They lynched him and then went after her. The name "Bardetta Tometta" places a narrative of history upon her that obscures another past.

<sup>viii</sup> In addition to "Mary," there are other character names from *Clotel* that reappear in *This Child*. These names are "Horace," "William" (the formal names for her sons Rabbit and Skeeter), and "Green" (with a slightly different spelling of "Dr. Grene").

## Conclusion: Black Work and Black Feeling?

I was pretty excited to see "Beasts of the Southern Wild" (2012) when it premiered at a theater near me. "Beasts" centers on six-year-old Hushpuppy and her dad Wink. They live in a fictional community called the Bathtub, a collective of people who refused to evacuate their homes after a devastating hurricane. The Bathtub seems like a post-apocalyptic-edge-of-the-universe realm, but its domestic connections to us (as "bathtub" implies) are clear.

The film returns us to a devastated New Orleans, Louisiana and to Hurricane Katrina as it brings Hushpuppy to the center of a narrative about natural and man made disasters. While the images of dilapidated homes, mud, and trash let us know that the residents of the Bathtub are beyond "poor," they are a people rich in spirit.

This spirit seems to wane as Wink's health begins to decline.

He has a failing heart.

"Beasts" presents an awareness of ecological dominance and environmental hegemony based on matters of geography, race, and class. Yet, it is also the story of a dying father who struggles with a "broken" heart and with alcoholism after the death of his wife. In the midst of his internal turmoil, he tries to save his only child after they lose everything else in a flood. By the end of the movie, one thing is certain: "There once was a Hushpuppy who lived with her dad in the Bathtub," as Hushpuppy concludes.

Of other matters, I was less certain. Several moviegoers asked each other, "Do people really live like that?" as they exited the trendy theater. Their question left me wondering if the depiction had somehow made Hushpuppy and other members of the

Bathtub seem like "beasts" in a southern wild. I wondered what it might mean if a film that seemed to bring attention to poverty and environmental justice had done so through an age-old reliance on a romance of race, class primitivism, and "nature."

The film opens with Hushpuppy "listening" to birds, letting out shrill screams, and eating an entire cooked chicken with her hands (as opposed to those who eat their meat from "plastic wrappers," as she says). In school she learns of cave men and their drawings. She replicates these pictures at home amidst squalor and is taught in no uncertain terms to not be a "pussy." Hushpuppy's father demands she drop her dinner utensils and "beast it" by cracking open a crab with her tiny bare hands.

Of course, these are lessons in survival. Still, I wondered if we somehow require Hushpuppies in our cultural imagination—avatars of "black" nature—to impart upon us a special sort of knowing. Or do they simply strike at the heart and help us "see" something about ourselves? Perhaps they do the work of both.

Part of what I hoped to do in *The Black Interior: Representations of Work and Feeling* is to return to the ideas of "black" work and "black" nature that have captivated our American cultural imagination. I hoped to find a way to see its value without "beasting" it myself.

In the body of eclectic undertakings that comprise the field of eco-criticism, analyses of "race and nature" have largely fallen into one of two modes: representations of black traumas in the land, such as Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1938) and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" (1936), or fantasies about magical solace in the land, such as bell hooks's *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2008), which seems to imagine

something akin to "the other place" in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). This project has been an attempt to intervene in these conversations without falling into either romance. And yet, romance always gives us the best stories.

In looking for fiction that might mediate between these romances, I found that sketches of black laborers working on "nature" complicate tropes of the outer world as a hostile antagonist on one hand, and as a garden bosom upon which we might rest our heads on the other. It seems that tropes of black workers offer a way between.

Even tropes of black workers intervene, they *do* insist upon a sort of "knowing" through figures of blackness at work in all sorts of environments. In *The Golden Apples*, Twosie underscores her knowledge even as she denies it. "Yawl knows. *I* don't know," she says (420). In William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, Smothers casts himself as a diviner as he makes his way across the steel rollers. "I knows what it is I'm talkin' about," he claims (53). Knowledge emerges out of the narrative consciousness as Alex's "philosophical" seeing in George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss* (3). And the omniscient narrator of *This Child's Gonna Live* begs us to look and to hear. "If it was a vision," Wright seems to say to us, "[we] had to look. Had to listen" (131). These forms of seeing and knowing consider what happens to our feelings and to our desires when they—when we—are folded into or become complicit within our organic and man-made worlds.

It seems appropriate to have ended *The Black Interior: Representations of Work and Feeling* with a reading of Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live*. When the novel appeared, environmental justice movements and eco-feminism had begun to emerge as a new wave of civil rights activism. As these activists did the important work of demanding a range of necessities from higher wages to private (or intentionally public) places where

we might safely breastfeed our children, Wright called public attention to environmental justice of a different sort. Wright offers an intimate portrayal of a sick mother drowning her dying baby in milk. Her novel implores us to think about how our wants, our fears, and our shames might work on us, within our surroundings, and upon each other.

Texts like *This Child's Gonna Live* suggest the need to take a second look at other tropes of black work in African American literature, such as Jennie in W. E. B. Du Bois's "Of the Coming of John" (1903) for what might rest behind the veil of her quiet wonder and her silenced entrapment, Sarah in Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" (1938) for the muted desires her story might contain, or Brownfield in Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) for the complexities that his character might reveal.

"Hushpuppies" *do* reside within our aesthetic realm, but they are not the only figures upon which we rely. And so it seems necessary to continue tracing tropes of black workers in the American literary imagination. For example, we might use "black work" as a way to organize an American literature survey that loosely centers on work, feeling, and desire. It would be possible to pick from a range of fiction: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Rebecca Harding Davis's *The Kork Woman* (1861), Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1974), Helena Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and many others.

We might think of tropes of black work as augmenting the concerns that often matter most in our material world. As public consciousness continues to turn toward all kinds of environments: weather that appears increasingly beyond the scope of our understanding, political climates in which the stability and very existence of entire

nations seems to hang in the balance, and an atmosphere of doubt within which workers find themselves forever without work, there is at least one thing, perhaps, that only literature can do best. It can help us to look and to imagine so that we might see each other and see within.

For my part, I wish I had looked sooner. I wish I'd had more imagination before my grandfather's passing. To me, he was everything: a gardener, a farmer, a hunter, a mill laborer, and so much more. I am grateful to have narratives that one might call a legacy: the history I know of him as a rural black mill worker and the story I often tell of him as a nature lover who could so easily call the birds (and call them he could). But I wish I had sought out what might have rested behind or between the two. What made his "banked fires blaze" or his smoldering embers glow?

what did I know...

what did I know...

of love, of feeling, of desire?

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