Writing the Beloved Community: Integrated Narratives in Six Contemporary American Novels About the Civil Rights Movement.

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WRITING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY:
INTEGRATED NARRATIVES
IN SIX CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELS
ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of English

by
Paul Tewkesbury
B.A., University of South Carolina, 1990
May 2001
To the memory of my parents,

Paul Tewkesbury, Jr.

and

Rene Ann Young McNair Tewkesbury,

and the parents of sisters and brothers,

Craig McNair, Sr.

and

Doris Lucas Tewkesbury
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people have made this dissertation possible that I can hardly claim it as my own. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, my dissertation advisor, has demonstrated interest in and support for this project since its inception. Throughout my seemingly never-ending struggle to identify a thesis and shape an argument, Dr. Prenshaw has patiently read countless drafts of dubious quality and provided expert advice. Without her encouragement, I could not have completed this dissertation. Indeed, Dr. Prenshaw has been such a pleasure to work with that I am sorry that this project has ended.

The other members of my dissertation committee—Gaines Foster, Angeletta Gourdine, Rick Moreland, and James Stoner—have also provided invaluable comments on this project. Their probing questions have not only renewed my interest in fictional representations of the Civil Rights Movement, but also suggested promising directions for this project to take in the future.

I am also deeply indebted to Donald Devore, who, while a professor of history at Louisiana State University, agreed to direct for me an independent study on the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Devore patiently tolerated my ignorance about the Movement and gently prompted me to reconsider many of my embarrassing, preconceived notions. Dr. Devore’s guidance proved to be some of the most valuable of my graduate career, and this project would have unfolded quite differently—that is, badly—had I not studied under him.

Bebe Moore Campbell, William Cobb, Vicki Covington, William Heath, and Julius Lester all very graciously answered questions about their novels and their
connections to the Civil Rights Movement. Their contributions have greatly enhanced this dissertation and made it far more interesting than it would have been otherwise. To them I extend my heartfelt thanks.

Several employers have not only enabled me to support myself financially, but also offered me flexible work schedules while I wrote this dissertation. Lesley Baker of the Management Communication Center at Tulane University’s A. B. Freeman School of Business; Csaba Lukaec and David Lummis of the Marigny Research Group, Inc.; and Greg Rigamer and Angele Romig of g.c.r. & associates, inc., have all been extraordinarily cooperative as I tried to balance work with school. Lesley, Csaba, and David have been particularly accommodating as I completed the dissertation during spring 2001.

The friends that I have made in the English graduate program have become as important to me as the education that I initially sought. In particular, Nancy Dixon, Rob Hale, and Steve Price have made graduate school one of the most rewarding pursuits of my life. Although they all finished their dissertations and received their Ph.D.’s well before I did, they have continued to encourage me and insist that I, too, would finish my dissertation one day. Even had I not received a degree, my friendships with Tangii, Cheese, and Rock would have been reward enough for my stint in graduate school. They help me keep it real. Word.

My final and greatest debt is to my family. My grandmother Nannie instilled in me a love of reading. My mother and father taught me the importance of treating others with kindness, fairness, and compassion. Their influence is evident, I hope, in my interest in the Beloved Community. I am also profoundly grateful to my parents.
for the many happy memories that they have left with my sisters and brothers and me.

My sisters and brothers—Gumpy, Helen, Nancy, Chayne, Mary Sue, Ruth, Paulette, Wallace, and Rene Ann—and their families I thank for their love and support while I have been in graduate school. I owe all the joy in my life to them. Although geography separates us, I know that they are with me wherever I am, and vice versa. Because I have the family I do, I consider myself the happiest, luckiest person in the world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title and Author</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION: FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL'S YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE: A POST-BROWN LYNCHING IN MISSISSIPPI, 1955</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>WILLIAM COBB'S A WALK THROUGH FIRE: THE ARRIVAL OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SMALL-TOWN ALABAMA, 1961</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>VICKI COVINGTON'S THE LAST HOTEL FOR WOMEN: THE COMING OF THE FREEDOM RIDES TO BIRMINGHAM, 1961</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5</td>
<td>WILLIAM HEATH'S THE CHILDREN BOB MOSES LED: MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SUMMER AND ITS ORIGINS, 1961-1964</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7</td>
<td>JULIUS LESTER'S AND ALL OUR WOUNDS FORGIVEN: THE DEATH OF NONVIOLENCE AND INTEGRATION, 1969</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 8</td>
<td>CONCLUSION: REVIVING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, black southerners in the United States engaged in the series of nonviolent social protests known collectively as the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke often of the integrated "Beloved Community" that would result from this nonviolent direct action. This dissertation examines the ways in which six contemporary American novelists have created fictional narratives about the Civil Rights Movement, narratives that employ "integrationist" literary devices whereby form reflects the theme of the search for the Beloved Community across race, gender, and class lines. That is, each novelist chooses to tell his or her story about the Civil Rights Movement from the shifting points of view of black characters and white characters so that narrative strategy reflects the integrationist strategy of the Movement. Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine (1992), William Cobb's A Walk through Fire (1994), Vicki Covington's The Last Hotel for Women (1996), William Heath's The Children Bob Moses Led (1995), Alice Walker's Meridian (1976), and Julius Lester's And All Our Wounds Forgiven (1994) all embody literary strategies characterized by multiple perspectives and themes that express and interrogate racial integration. Just as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement forced Americans to consider the ramifications of integration, these six novels engage readers in questions about the possibility, or even desirability, of integration—an issue that seems increasingly attenuated in contemporary discussions of race relations. Implicit in each novel is the author's assessment of the likelihood that racial integration can take place in the United States. Moreover, these novels alternate the perspectives of women and men, and of the
disadvantaged and the advantaged. Reflecting the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement, these novels reveal that integration was and continues to be an elusive goal. However, these novels also affirm that individual blacks and individual whites can achieve meaningful relationships with each other. By engaging contemporary readers empathetically in the intense era of the Civil Rights Movement, these six novels revive the 1960s ideal of the Beloved Community and challenge readers to re-examine the problems and the promises of racial integration in the United States.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:
FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, black southerners in the United States engaged in the series of social protests known collectively as the Civil Rights Movement. During the Movement's heyday, black activists and their white allies used nonviolent direct action as the means to dismantle state-sanctioned white supremacy and to integrate African Americans, socially and politically, into mainstream American life. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke often of the dream of a "Beloved Community" that would result from nonviolent social protest. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on August 28, 1963, at the March on Washington, King articulated his vision of an integrated society: "I have a dream that one day . . . sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that one day . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers" (219). Yet as John H. Cartwright argues in "The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” King did not conceive of the Beloved Community simply as interracial: “Although the concept of ‘integration’ was conceived within the context of racial conflict in America, King saw in this the total interrelatedness of the whole human family. It included not only all races, but also all classes, all ethnic groups, all nations, and all regions” (163).1

1 Cartwright's concise analysis of King's notion of the Beloved Community is informative because "nowhere" in King's own writings and speeches, "[d]espite the ubiquity of the idea of the 'Beloved Community,'” does King “attempt to delineate or systematize fully his vision.” Cartwright makes two general observations about the Beloved Community as conceived by King: "1) the ‘Beloved

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This dissertation examines the ways in which six contemporary American novelists have created fictional narratives about the Civil Rights Movement, narratives that employ “integrationist” literary devices whereby form reflects the theme of the search for the Beloved Community across race, gender, and class lines. That is, each novelist chooses to tell his or her story about the Civil Rights Movement from the shifting points of view of black characters and white characters so that the narrative strategy reflects the integrationist strategy of the Movement.


2 The distinction between true integration and mere desegregation is crucial to an understanding of the Beloved Community, as Martin Luther King, Jr., suggests in “The Ethical Demands of Integration” (1962):

> The word segregation represents a system that is prohibitive; it denies the Negro equal access to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like. Desegregation is eliminative and negative, for it simply removes these legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. Desegregation then, rightly, is only a short-range goal. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. Thus, as America pursues the important task of respecting the “letter of the law,” i.e. compliance with desegregation decisions, she must be equally concerned with the “spirit of the law,” i.e. commitment to the democratic ideal of integration.

I can summarize all that I have been saying by affirming that the demands of desegregation are enforceable demands while the demands of integration fall within the scope of unenforceable demands. . . . The former are regulated by the codes of society and the vigorous implementation of law-enforcement agencies . . . But unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion . . . .

True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations. (118-24)

In other words, the Beloved Community must result from integration—not from desegregation alone.
And All Our Wounds Forgiven (1994) all embody literary strategies characterized by multiple perspectives and themes that express and interrogate racial integration. Just as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement forced Americans to consider the ramifications of integration, these six contemporary novels engage readers in questions about the possibility, or even desirability, of integration—an issue that seems increasingly attenuated in present-day discussions of race relations. Implicit in each novel is the author's assessment of the likelihood that racial integration will ever take place in the United States. Moreover, these six novels alternate the perspectives of women and men, and of the disadvantaged and the advantaged. By engaging the reader in the experiences of many diverse characters, each novelist invites the reader to participate in a fictional Beloved Community and witness the promises and problems of integration.

Thirty years of scholarship have amply documented the impact of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement on American society. Paul T. Murray has gathered and commented on much of this scholarship in his annotated bibliography, The Civil Rights Movement: References and Resources (1993). Juan Williams's Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (1987) serves as the companion volume to the critically acclaimed Public Broadcasting Service television series of the same title. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer's Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s (1990) is a second companion volume to the Eyes on the Prize television series. Taylor Branch has published the first two volumes—Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (1988) and Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65 (1998)—of
his proposed three-volume history of the Movement. Although Branch’s comprehensive texts highlight the role of Martin Luther King, Jr., each volume also provides thorough coverage of other historical figures and activists; moreover, Branch analyzes critical events not only at the national level, but also at the local level in such southern communities as Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Greenwood, St. Augustine, and Selma. The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi receives especially fine treatment in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1994) and Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (1995).

The major civil rights organizations are subjects of their own histories, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Adam Fairclough’s *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1987), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick’s *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (1973). David J. Garrow’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986) remains the most comprehensive biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., whereas other prominent civil rights activists—including SCLC’s Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Septima Clark; SNCC’s James Forman, Cleveland Sellers, and Mary King; and CORE’s James Farmer and Anne Moody—have contributed insightful first-hand
accounts of their own experiences in the Movement. In short, Civil Rights Movement scholarship is a flourishing field.

Yet even as Civil Rights Movement studies flourish, scholarly analyses of the Civil Rights Movement in American literature remain curiously few—especially when one considers that the Movement does, in fact, play a significant role in much contemporary fiction. Having compiled an annotated bibliography of select Movement fiction published between 1954 and 1994, Regina Maria Dragoin asserts that “[m]ore than a hundred novels in American literature draw on the Civil Rights Movement for material, . . . and most enjoyed a national readership. Some were selections in monthly book clubs, and nearly all of them were put out by large, established publishing houses” (2). Dragoin expresses hope that her bibliography will prove “useful as preliminary work on which to build later, more narrowly defined research” (6). Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement in contemporary American fiction appears to be a largely untapped area of scholarly inquiry in either civil rights studies or American literary studies.

Much Civil Rights Movement fiction from the 1950s and 1960s will likely seem dated to contemporary readers. In The Death of Art: Black and White in the Recent Southern Novel (1970), Floyd C. Watkins covers thirty-four novels about race relations published by white southern authors between 1954 and 1968. Watkins argues that these writers are incapable of creating complex literary portraits of race relations, resorting instead to sensationalizing white racism: “Negroes have the humane values, and whites do not. Race distinguishes the good guys and the bad almost as accurately as the white and black hats did in old Western movies” (2).
Watkins targets Jesse Hill Ford’s *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones* (1965) as “one of the most anti-white novels of all” (6), yet he also detects bias in such novels as Elizabeth Spencer’s *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956), Carson McCullers’s *Clock without Hands* (1961), and Ben Haas’s *Look Away, Look Away* (1964). Granted, Watkins tends to be racially conservative, and his tone is often that of the southern apologist. However, the widespread tendency of 1950s and 1960s writers to create saintly black characters and satanic white characters is likely to seem heavy-handed to contemporary readers. In many of these early Civil Rights Movement novels, excessive interracial conflict makes the creation of the Beloved Community unlikely.

Nor do many black novelists writing during the 1950s and 1960s attempt to capture the complexities of interracial relations during the Civil Rights Movement. During the early, promising years of the Movement, many black novelists optimistically depict black solidarity in the struggle against whites. Jerry H. Bryant argues in *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African-American Novel* (1997) that such novels as John Oliver Killens’s *Youngblood* (1954) and William Melvin Kelley’s *A Different Drummer* (1962) “tend to idealize the achievements of both the leaders and the people and to exaggerate the degree of their unity” (187). In the waning years of the Civil Rights Movement, as the rhetoric of violence and separation replaces that of nonviolence and integration, many black writers begin to create what Bryant calls “wish-fulfillment fantasies,” such novels about black retaliatory violence against the white enemy as John Oliver Killens’s *Sippi* (1967) and Julian Moreau’s *The Black Commandos* (1967). In *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), Charles Johnson writes of John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*
(1967), perhaps the best African-American novel of the 1960s, that it, "more than any other novel in memory, captures and gives dramatic form to the half-rational, half-irrational belief of black Americans that whites are programmatically committed to suppressing all people of color" (88). Indeed, images of the Beloved Community are as absent from fiction by black writers in the 1950s and 1960s as they are from fiction by white writers.

Despite the tendency of many 1950s and 1960s writers to focus on the sorry state of contemporary race relations, a few black and white writers during the Civil Rights Movement era do try to balance their portrayals. In Civil Rights in Recent Southern Fiction (1969), James McBride Dabbs argues that in the South "there is a complex network of positive white-black relationships, maybe vague, maybe tenuous, often invisible, which have bound and continue to bind Southerners together" (111). Despite Floyd Watkins's arguments to the contrary in The Death of Art, Dabbs suggests that such novels as Spencer's The Voice at the Back Door, McCullers's Clock without Hands, and Haas's Look Away, Look Away do successfully capture both the close ties and the deep divisions between blacks and whites. Dabbs also praises Ellen Douglas's Black Cloud, White Cloud: Two Novellas and Two Short Stories (1964) for presenting "most perceptively the intertwined lives of whites and Negroes" (74). Among black writers of the 1950s and 1960s, Ernest Gaines considers the intricate relationships between blacks and whites in such works as Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), and Bloodline (1968). The Beloved Community is not manifest in these works, but the potential for its creation is there.
Contemporary studies of the Civil Rights Movement in American literature are as likely to focus on the significance of gender as they are to focus on the significance of race. In “The Civil Rights Movement in American Fiction” (1990), Roberta Makashay Hendrickson clearly articulates her critical stance toward James Baldwin’s Blues for Mr. Charlie (1969), Alice Walker’s Meridian (1976), Ernest Gaines’s In My Father’s House (1978), and Rosellen Brown’s Civil Wars (1984):

My approach to the texts in this study is feminist. I will be concerned with the roles of Black and white women in the Civil Rights Movement and with issues of race and gender and their relationship. . . . I will use the insights of the Black consciousness and the feminism which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement to understand the Movement and to read the texts. . . . Issues of gender and race cannot be separated, because sex and racism are inextricably connected in American society, and these connections are reflected in the four literary texts in this study. (3-4)

To integrate her own study of the Civil Rights Movement in American literature, Hendrickson considers works by black writers and white writers, and by male writers and female writers, because they “write the missing parts to each other’s stories”:

“Taken together, their stories help to tell the whole story, to move toward the complex truth of the Civil Rights Movement” (1).

Melissa Walker’s Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women’s Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989 (1991) consists of close readings of eighteen novels written by African-American women after the Civil Rights Movement. Walker explicitly situates her study among those by such black feminist critics as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, Claudia Tate, and Mary Helen Washington, and she identifies Down from the Mountaintop as her contribution to “a many-voiced discourse in which issues of race, class, and gender are
being explored in ever-new combinations” (10). Throughout her study, Walker explores “how narratives reflect, grow out of, or examine the complex set of phenomena that make up the struggle for racial justice” (12). In particular, chapter five of Down from the Mountaintop examines four novels that “are set primarily in the peak years of the movement” (7): Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977), Kristin Hunter’s The Lakestown Rebellion (1978), and Ntozake Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo (1982) and Betsey Brown (1985). Although the other fourteen novels in Walker’s study are set during various periods within African-American history, ranging from the slavery era of the nineteenth century to the Reagan years of the 1980s, Walker insists that all the included novels “relate to the movement and to the historical contingencies that fostered it and led to its decline” (12).

Whereas Walker’s study examines black women’s relationship to the Civil Rights Movement in contemporary novels, Regina Maria Dragoin’s “Breaking the Ice: Representations of White Women in Civil Rights Movement Novels, 1954-1994” (1999) examines the characterization of white women in twenty-five novels about the Movement. Dragoin argues that white women are “central to civil rights issues and to fiction that specifically and substantially depends upon the Civil Rights Movement for material. . . . Always, the white woman, even if unwilling, is a symbol of the South and an icon for white supremacists” (4-5). Dragoin explains that her research is “not an attempt to usurp the centrality of African Americans in favor of the group furthest removed from civil rights issues,” yet she insists that literary and other scholars must pay close attention to the role of the white woman in the Movement: “That the relationship between the white woman and the Civil Rights Movement has been
neglected suggests only that the significance of this relationship has been somehow
overshadowed, not that it is insignificant” (3-4).

The Civil Rights Movement novels included in this dissertation—Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, The Last Hotel for Women, The Children Bob Moses Led, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven—all fall squarely within the tradition of literature that explores the complex interactions of blacks and whites, of women and men, and of the disadvantaged and the advantaged. To be sure, other contemporary novels address race, gender, class, and the Civil Rights Movement, but they are not included in this dissertation for various reasons.

This dissertation focuses on novels that take place primarily in the South between Emmett Till’s murder in 1955 and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in 1968, years that encompass the major events of the Civil Rights Movement. These parameters for defining the Movement are consistent with those that many historians have set. In A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till (1988), Stephen J. Whitfield argues that the lynching of Till in 1955 “deserves recognition as an overlooked and obscured factor in catalyzing resistance” (15). Similarly, Juan Williams’s Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Year, 1954-1965 and Henry Hampton and Steven Fayer’s Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s to the 1980s assign a prominent role to Till’s lynching as a catalyst for the Movement. As for designating 1968 as the end of the Movement, Paul T. Murray cites that date in The Civil Rights Movement: References and Resources because, he claims, most students of the Movement “would concur... that the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., marks the symbolic end of one era and the beginning of
another in the ongoing struggle for human rights and racial equality” (2). Ernest Gaines’s *In My Father’s House* (1978), Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Rosellen Brown’s *Civil Wars* (1984) all feature former Movement participants as main characters, and all explore the implications of Movement participation for those characters, but these three novels are set primarily in the 1970s.

In addition to focusing on narrative action set between 1955 and 1968, this dissertation emphasizes a retrospective view of the Civil Rights Movement by focusing on novels published after 1968. This perspective thus allows a special vantage gained by authors who have had the opportunity to reflect on the Movement in hindsight. In Civil Rights Movement novels of the 1950s and 1960s, the Movement is a current event. In Civil Rights Movement novels published after 1968, a retrospective analysis of the Movement is an essential component.

Most importantly, though, this dissertation discusses only narratives that portray a racially integrated cast of characters and that deal directly and centrally with the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, many other significant novels about race relations or the Movement are excluded. This dissertation excludes, for example, Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) and Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988), both of which are outstanding novels that alternate the perspectives of black characters and white characters, but do not focus on the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas *A Gathering of Old Men* and *Can’t Quit You, Baby* consist of integrated narratives that do not take place primarily during the Movement, many other novels take place primarily during the Movement but do not consist of integrated narratives. This dissertation excludes, for example, Charles Johnson’s *Dreamer* (1998), which
evocatively contrasts the success of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the misfortune of his fictional doppelganger, Chaym Smith. This dissertation also excludes several important novels that explore the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on women. For example, Ntozake Shange's *Betsey Brown* (1985), Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life* (1989) and *And Do Remember Me* (1992), and Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992) describe the Movement and its legacy from the perspectives of young black women. Similarly, Anne Rivers Siddons's *Heartbreak Hotel* (1976) and *Downtown* (1994) describe the Movement and its implications from the perspectives of young white women. Madison Jones's *A Cry of Absence* (1971) and Joan Williams's *County Woman* (1982) explore the impact of the Movement on middle-aged southern white women. Barry Hannah's *Geronimo Rex* (1972) and Mark Childress's *Crazy in Alabama* (1993) feature young white males who come of age as the Movement unfolds around them. All these novels contribute to the reader's understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, but they do not reveal, through integrated narratives, the promises or the problems of the Beloved Community.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation discusses Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, which revolves around the 1955 lynching of fifteen-year-old Armstrong Todd in Hopewell, Mississippi. The fictional lynching of Armstrong Todd closely parallels the historic lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955.³ Throughout the novel, Campbell explores the effects of the lynching on race relations in Hopewell, directly and indirectly, not only during the

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³ For a thorough account of Emmett Till's lynching, see Whitfield. See also Juan Williams 36-57. For first-hand accounts of Till's lynching, see Hampton and Fayer 1-15.
peak years of the Movement, but also through the 1970s and 1980s. *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* is particularly significant because its integrated narrative gives voice not only to the black victims of white racism, but also to the white racists themselves. In fact, Campbell evokes quite a bit of sympathy for Floyd Cox, the poor white who lYNches Armstrong, and for Lily Cox, whose honor her husband allegedly defends when he murders the teenaged black boy. Other important characters whose perspectives Campbell provides include Doreen Cox, the progressive-thinking daughter of Floyd and Lily; Stonewall Pinochet, a wealthy white racist whose fortune depends on the exploitation of black labor and the preservation of white supremacy; Clayton Pinochet, a weak-willed white liberal whose privileged socioeconomic status as Stonewall’s son contrasts sharply with his avowed commitment to black equality; Ida Long, a hard-working single black mother who is Clayton’s half-sister by Stonewall and Stonewall’s black mistress Susie; and Marguerite, Clayton’s own black mistress. In the microcosm of Hopewell, Campbell illustrates the ways in which various race-, sex-, and class-based cultural forces simultaneously bring her characters together and keep them apart.

Chapter 2 examines William Cobbs’s *A Walk through Fire*. Set in the fictional small southern town of Hammond, Alabama, during 1961, the novel illustrates the effects of the Civil Rights Movement on the complicated interracial friendship between Eldon Long, the black minister who introduces the Movement to Hammond, and O. B. Brewster, a white small-business owner who avoids taking a stand regarding the Movement. Although O. B. and Eldon grew up together as best friends on the same plantation where their parents were sharecroppers, white supremacy cannot but
affect their lives as adults. Eldon wants O. B. to run for mayor of Hammond as a racial moderate, but O. B. refuses. In response, Eldon leads a black boycott of O.B.’s and other white-owned businesses to protest segregation in Hammond. O. B.’s longstanding love for and intermittent sexual liaisons with Cora, Eldon’s wife, further complicate the two men’s friendship. Additional pressures on Eldon and O.B.’s relationship include the relentless brutality of Ku Klux Klan, the restrained but nonetheless effective racism of the White Citizens’ Council, and the inability of Hammond’s segregationist mayor, Mac McClellon, to handle racial conflict peacefully. In A Walk through Fire, Cobb depicts the ways in which the Civil Rights Movement paradoxically compels southern blacks and whites to confront the deep-rooted differences that divide them while also considering the common experiences and values that unite them.

Chapter 3 discusses Vicki Covington’s The Last Hotel for Women, which takes place in Birmingham, Alabama, during the Freedom Rides of 1961. Through shifting points of view, Covington explores the impact of the Freedom Riders on the lives of a black family, the Stampses, and a white family, the Fraleys. When the novel opens, the Fraleys and the Stampses are unsure how to respond to desegregation. In the midst of their hesitation, Angel, an appropriately named Freedom Rider, appears and forces them to consider that integration is not only inevitable, but also desirable. Covington also gives voice to a fictionalized version of Eugene “Bull” Connor,

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4 For an account of the Freedom Rides, see Branch, Parting 411-91. For first-hand accounts of the Freedom Rides, see Hampton and Fayer 73-96, and Raines 109-29. See also Farmer. In 1942, Farmer helped to found CORE, the civil rights organization that staged the Freedom Rides, and served as its national director from 1961 to 1966.
Birmingham's notorious Commissioner of Public Safety.\(^5\) Although Covington clearly intends that Connor represent the dominance of white supremacy in Birmingham in 1961, she also portrays him sympathetically as a frightened person who would rather cling to the past than consider the future. Connor's pathetic intransigence notwithstanding, Covington suggests throughout The Last Hotel for Women that the Civil Rights Movement can truly help blacks and whites achieve the Beloved Community.

Chapter 4 discusses William Heath's The Children Bob Led, which revolves around the massive Freedom Summer Project of 1964 that brings hundreds of white northern college students to Mississippi to register blacks to vote.\(^6\) Heath alternates the points of view of a fictionalized Bob Moses, the well-known black organizer in Mississippi during the first half of the 1960s,\(^7\) and Tom Morton, a privileged white student from Ohio who volunteers for Freedom Summer. By shifting between the two points of view, Heath contrasts Moses's Movement experiences and realistic attitudes toward Mississippi racism with Tom's youthful idealism and, later, his disillusionment. The Children Bob Moses Led illustrates, through Moses's and Tom's

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\(^7\) For a biography of Bob Moses, see Eric C. Burner, And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi (New York: New York UP, 1994). Although Burner draws most of his information from a handful of secondary sources, And Gently He Shall Lead Them remains the only book-length study of Moses.
differing perceptions, the numerous race- and class-based issues that thwart the formation of the Beloved Community not only within the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement, but also within American society at large.

Chapter 5 examines Alice Walker's *Meridian*, which consists of the perspectives of three civil rights activists from the mid-1960s: Meridian Hill, a native black southerner; Lynne Rabinowitz, a northern Jewish volunteer; and Truman Held, a northern black intellectual. Through the friendship of Meridian and Lynne, Walker reveals not only the gender-based experiences that unite black women and white women, but also the race-based differences that complicate their relationship. Through Lynne's marriage to Truman and her subsequent sexual liaisons with other black men, Walker explores the political ramifications of interracial sex. And through the ever-rocky interactions of Meridian and Truman, Walker illustrates the ways in which racism and sexism divide black women and black men. In addition to managing the complex relationships that they have with one another, each character reflects on the significance of the Movement in his or her life. The novel contains an implicit criticism of black militants who eventually reject the ideal of the Beloved Community and instead embrace separatism and black revolutionary violence. Moreover, Walker condemns such former activists as Truman and Anne-Marion who abandon their revolutionary ideals of restructuring the racist, classist American power structure and instead focus their creative talents and energies on accumulating wealth and status within the existing socioeconomic system. Although *Meridian* suggests that the vision of the Beloved Community fades after the mid-1960s, the novel nonetheless provides glimmers of hope for reconciliation.
Chapter 6 discusses Julius Lester’s *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, which revolves around the life and legacy of national civil rights leader John Calvin Marshall. Lester clearly bases Marshall, who is assassinated in 1969, on Martin Luther King, Jr., and through Marshall’s reflections from the grave, Lester explores the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement for contemporary Americans. To complement Marshall’s observations, Lester provides the points of view of three characters who were close to Marshall during the Movement years: Marshall’s widow Andrea, his black protégé Bobby Card, and his white mistress Lisa Adams. In the novel’s present, these three characters, like Marshall, consider the implications of the Movement for their lives, and each suspects that the Movement’s failures overshadow its successes. Andrea has forsaken her individual identity to serve as a present-day embodiment of the Movement that her late husband led. Bobby struggles to reclaim an individual identity that years of white racism and black indifference during the Movement have stripped from him. And Lisa tries to deny the significant social and political implications of her intimate relationship with a black man by insisting that it was merely a matter of personal preference. *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* suggests that attaining the Beloved Community is a daunting task, but it does not ultimately conclude that such attainment is impossible.

These six novels trace the historical process by which faith in the Beloved Community in the 1950s and early 1960s eventually disintegrates into disillusion and despair by the late 1960s. In general, the authors’ belief in the ultimate attainment of the Beloved Community is slightly stronger in *You’re Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, *A Walk through Fire*, and *The Last Hotel for Women*, which are set primarily in the early
1960s, than in *The Children Bob Moses Led*, *Meridian*, and *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, which are set primarily in the middle to late 1960s. *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* opens in 1955, one year after the United States Supreme Court declares in its landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that “separate but equal” educational facilities are “inherently unequal.” Reflecting on the significance of this decision, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958) that *Brown* “marked a joyous end to the long night of enforced segregation. . . . This decision brought hope to millions of disinherited Negroes who had formerly dared only to dream of freedom. It further enhanced the Negro’s sense of dignity and gave him even greater determination to achieve justice” (468). This confidence about the decline of state-sanctioned white supremacy and the eventual triumph of the Beloved Community characterizes the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. Both *A Walk through Fire* and *The Last Hotel for Women* take place in 1961, and thus a sense of optimism infuses them as well. By setting their novels during the promising early years of the Civil Rights Movement, Campbell, Cobb, and Covington focus on the cultural forces that can bring blacks and whites together to form the Beloved Community.

The Movement obviously has a positive impact on black characters in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, *A Walk through Fire*, and *The Last Hotel for Women*. Historian John Dittmer and sociologists Aldon Morris and Charles Payne have carefully documented the eagerness with which many ordinary black citizens in the South embraced the Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, such novels as Thulani Davis’s 1959, Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, William Melvin Kelley’s *A Different Drummer*, and John Oliver Killens’s
Youngblood dramatize the mobilization of rural southern blacks during the 1950s and 1960s. In Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, Hopewell’s black citizens so effectively boycott Floyd Cox's pool hall after he lynch Armstrong Todd that Floyd must close his business. Similarly, the black citizens of Hammond in A Walk through Fire boycott segregated facilities and other white-owned businesses. In The Last Hotel for Women, Nathan Stamps watches the Movement’s developments carefully because “he wants to be a full-class citizen, live like a white man lives” (206). All these black characters accept the tactic of nonviolent direct action and look forward to the formation of the Beloved Community.

The most interesting manifestation of blacks’ rejecting white supremacy in these novels is black women’s rejecting their white lovers. In particular, Marguerite in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine and Cora Long in A Walk through Fire each end a relationship with a white man. According to historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, interracial sex between black women and white men has historically been one of the trademarks of white supremacy in the South: “[W]hether seized through outright force or voluntarily granted within the master-slave relation, the sexual access of white men to black women was a cornerstone of patriarchal power in the South. . . . Like other forms of deference and conspicuous consumption, it buttressed planter hegemony” (“Mind” 332). In Campbell’s novel, as the Civil Rights Movement sweeps across the South, Marguerite realizes that Clayton keeps her as his mistress solely for his own pleasure, and that their relationship stems only from Clayton’s privileged status among southern white males. Similarly, Cora finally ceases her relationship with O.B. because, she explains to him, “no matter what anyone says or
what happens, you're still a white man and I'm still a nigger” (284). Although Clayton and O.B. insist that they love their black mistresses, Marguerite and Cora know all too well that their relationships with white men take place against the backdrop of southern white men's systematic exploitation of black women. By the end of Your Blues Ain't Like Mine and A Walk through Fire, Marguerite and Cora stop playing the role of the dispensable black mistress and renounce their white lovers. These black female characters intuit that any symbol of the white supremacist South, including sexual relations between white men and black women, compromises the integrity of the Beloved Community.

Campbell, Cobb, and Covington also reflect the widespread belief during the 1950s and early 1960s that the Beloved Community will embrace even the most rabid white supremacists. In “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience” (1961), Martin Luther King, Jr., boasted that proponents of nonviolence “somehow believe that even the worst segregationist can become an integrationist. Now sometimes it is hard to believe that this is what this movement says and believes it firmly, that there is something within human nature that can be changed” (48). Such racist white characters as Floyd Cox, Mac McClellon, and Bull Connor eventually evoke the reader's sympathy despite their despicable views, for Campbell, Cobb, and Covington illustrate the causes of their characters' racism and imply that the Movement can eliminate those causes.

Angela Davis argues in Women, Race, and Class (1981) that “a critical moment in the popularization of racist ideology” occurred in the late nineteenth century when elite white industrialists, “capitalists from the North,” vigorously began
to support the brutal racial suppression of black workers to defuse the hostility of similarly oppressed white workers (190). Reflecting Davis's conclusion that white workers embraced white supremacy and "necessarily assumed a posture of racial solidarity with the white men who were really their oppressors," both Campbell and Cobb create marginalized white characters whose racial identification with the white power structure and passionate support of segregation blind them to their own oppression. Neither Campbell's Floyd Cox nor Cobb's Mac McClellon has real political, economic, or social power, and each white man's assumed superiority over blacks gives him a sense of self-worth that he cannot achieve by other means. The two men not only assume that blacks are inferior, but also regard the white elite with a mixture of envy and contempt. However, Campbell and Cobb imply that the Civil Rights Movement can, by bridging divisions of race and class, bring disadvantaged whites into the Beloved Community.

More explicitly than either Campbell or Cobb, Covington suggests in The Last Hotel for Women that even the most notorious white supremacist of the Civil Rights Movement, Bull Connor, whom the Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth called "the epitome of segregation" (qtd. in Raines 155), can experience redemption within the Beloved Community. To be sure, Connor's racism repulses the reader, yet Covington

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8 For another explanation of the rise of racist ideology in the late nineteenth century, see Joel Williamson. Williamson analyzes the southern recession of the late 1880s and depression of the 1890s, paying close attention to Victorian southern gender roles. He concludes that economic instability in the late nineteenth century had a profound psychological effect on white men, who found providing for their families increasingly difficult and thus began to feel inadequate: "It seems fully possible that the rage against the black beast rapist was a kind of psychic compensation. If white men could not provide for their women materially as they had done before, they could certainly protect them from a much more awful threat—the outrage of their purity, and hence their piety, by black men" (82).
humanizes him to the extent that critic Valerie Miner compares Connor to Shakespeare’s King Lear because of his “denial of the passage of time and his ensuing loss of power” (22). At the end of the novel, Connor visits Dinah Fraley’s father Tyler, a backwoods preacher who promises both social and spiritual redemption by telling Connor “that Jesus is going to come over Red Mountain riding a donkey and that down in the valley there’ll be a big party with all the blacks and the whites dancing in the streets” (299). Like Campbell and Cobb, Covington creates a complex white racist for whom the Beloved Community offers hope.

In addition to sympathetically portraying the racist South, Campbell, Cobb, and Covington give voice to the “Silent South” by creating decent white southerners who are sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement, but who nonetheless distance themselves from it. In 1885, George Washington Cable coined the term “Silent South” to refer to white southerners who supported fair treatment for blacks, but were afraid to make their views public because of the fierceness with which white supremacists defended Jim Crow. Morton Sosna’s In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue (1977) traces the long line of southern liberals, from Cable in the late nineteenth to Lillian Smith in the mid-twentieth century, who insisted that they were not alone in their commitment to racial justice, that other decent whites existed too. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., appealed to such decent whites in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” urging them to abandon caution and take a firm stand for racial justice:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the
stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. (295)

Like King, many civil rights activists sincerely believed that many white southerners, despite their reservations about the Movement, would eventually welcome the creation of the Beloved Community.

Cobb’s O.B. Brewster and Covington’s Pete and Dinah Fraley are three such silent southerners whom the Movement forces to take a public stand on the fundamental fairness of black equality. O.B. and Dinah claim to be neutral regarding racial issues, yet Cobb and Covington imply that neutrality regarding racial equality constitutes tacit approval of the status quo. In fact, when Movement activists first encourage O.B. and Dinah to become involved, the two white characters actually defend the status quo. Unlike O.B. or Dinah, Pete wants to initiate meaningful relationships with blacks, but he has no idea how to do so in rigidly segregated Birmingham. He feels helpless and regrets that many southerners “are so steeped in segregation that they can’t escape it even if they want to” (207). In A Walk through Fire and The Last Hotel for Women, the Movement affords silent white southerners the opportunity to respond unequivocally to moral dilemmas: O.B. must ultimately decide whether to side with Hammond’s violent white supremacists or with the
mobilized black masses, whereas the Fraleys must ultimately decide whether to maintain their relationship with Bull Connor despite his segregationist views or to reject him and his racism altogether. Just as Huck Finn ultimately rejects slavery laws and casts his lot with the runaway slave Jim, O.B., Pete, and Dinah ultimately reject Jim Crow and cast their lots with the civil rights activists.

Campbell, Cobb, and Covington suggest that one reason for some whites’ eventual commitment to racial justice stems from their dissociation from white power structure. In *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (1985), Robert J. Norrell analyzes white Tuskegeeans who were sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s and detects that one of their distinguishing personality traits is their consciously choosing to remain “outside the town’s conservative establishment” (135). Reflecting Norrell’s observations, Campbell, Cobb, and Covington, like the Populists in the 1890s and such writers as Richard Wright and Erskine Caldwell in the 1930s, suggest that white southerners can begin to create the Beloved Community by rejecting the race- and class-based privileges that white supremacists represent. In *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, Doreen Cox realizes that like such black women as Ida Long, she is an uneducated, unskilled, single mother who works long, hard hours for low pay and no benefits at the Pinochet-owned catfish-processing plant. In response to the appalling conditions at the plant, Ida and Doreen plan a strike. Cobb implies in *A Walk through Fire* that O.B. eventually grasps the egalitarian goals of Movement activists because he also remains outside Hammond’s conservative establishment. Like Eldon, O.B. is the son of poor sharecroppers; he has never been a privileged white man reaping the benefits of an
economic system based on black exploitation. Similarly, Covington dramatizes in The Last Hotel for Women that disdain for the white power structure unites black workers and white workers. In particular, foundry workers Nathan Stamps, black, and Pete Fraley, white, warily plan a baseball game between their company’s segregated teams to defy Birmingham’s Jim Crow laws. In doing so, Pete and Nathan essentially plot what critic Valerie Miner calls “a revolution on the baseball field,” for the white players and black players cooperate equally as teammates, separated by neither racial nor hierarchical boundaries (22). By dissociating themselves from the white power structure and uniting with blacks against reactionary forces, white southerners in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, and The Last Hotel for Women can take a significant step toward effecting the Beloved Community.

Campbell, Cobb, and Covington also suggest that traditional Christian values unite black southerners and white southerners in the early 1960s. Of course, Christian theology dominates Civil Rights Movement ideology during its early years. In fact, as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya document in The Black Church in the African-American Experience (1990), the Black Freedom Struggle has had roots in the Black Church since slavery. After helping to form the Southern Leadership Conference in 1957 to advocate nonviolent direct action in the South, Martin Luther King, Jr., insisted on renaming it the Southern Christian Leadership Council to emphasize the organization’s commitment to Christian ideals and its ties to the Black Church; moreover, the SCLC adopted “To Redeem the Soul of America” as its slogan. SNCC, which would eventually become the most radical civil rights organization, also espoused Christian principles in its 1960 statement of purpose: “We affirm the
philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose . . . .
Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step toward such a society” (qtd. in Carson 23). In fact, as John Cartwright illustrates, the entire notion of a Beloved Community is essentially a “Christian social ideal” (162).

In A Walk through Fire and The Last Hotel for Women, the characters’ commitment to Christian ideals gives rise to their commitment to racial justice. Moreover, Cobb and Covington draw parallels between the spiritual redemption that Christianity offers and the social redemption that the Civil Rights Movement offers. In particular, Cobb’s and Covington’s white characters resemble the liberal white Tuskegeeans of the early 1960s who, according to Robert Norrell, were likely to perceive “race relations in Tuskegee in the context of Christian teachings on brotherhood” (135). Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine lacks explicit Christian imagery, yet the Christian themes of reconciliation and redemption infuse the novel. By putting their racial differences behind them and working toward unity and justice, the black characters and white characters in these novels lay the groundwork for the Beloved Community in their own communities.

By setting their novels during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, Bebe Moore Campbell, William Cobb, and Vicki Covington imply that their characters can, through hard work and much patience, create the Beloved Community. Reflecting the reformist rather than the revolutionary thrust of the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, however, the characters in these novels seem more interested in working within existing American systems than overthrowing them altogether.
Although Campbell implies that a workers' strike can successfully wring concessions from the catfish-processing plant, although Cobb demonstrates that Hammond's black citizens and their white allies can successfully oust the segregationist mayor, and although Covington creates two baseball teams who successfully defy Birmingham's segregation ordinances, these efforts all entail working within existing political, economic, and social systems instead of forging new, radically different, inclusive systems. That is, even though the strikers, voters, and athletes do, in fact, win the immediate goals of health benefits, a moderate city government, and integrated baseball games, they leave intact the white, capitalist, power structure that makes exploitation possible. Despite the somewhat promising conclusions of Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, and The Last Hotel for Women, readers cannot but recall the wide gulf that exists between the poor and the rich regardless of race.

Divisions between the disadvantaged and the advantaged, blacks and whites, and women and men become readily apparent in William Heath's The Children Bob Moses Led, Alice Walker's Meridian, and Julius Lester's And All Our Wounds Forgiven. These novels take place primarily during or after SNCC's 1964 summer project to register voters in Mississippi, a project that culminated with the unsuccessful attempt of the integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to unseat the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. SNCC activist Cleveland Sellers identifies the incident as a turning point in the Movement:

The national Democratic party's rejection of the MFDP at the 1964 convention was to the civil rights movement what the Civil War was to American history: afterward, things could never be the same. Never
again were we lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the “good” people of America could eliminate them. We left Atlantic City with the knowledge that the movement had turned into something else. After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation. (111)

In other words, as sociologist Doug McAdam explains in Freedom Summer (1988), the summer project and the convention challenge brought about the “collapse of the Beloved Community” (118).

Unlike Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, and The Last Hotel for Women, which reflect an idealistic belief in the possibility of the Beloved Community, The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven illustrate that many black activists, as a result of their participation in Freedom Summer, lose confidence in whites’ willingness to respond to the moral force of the Civil Rights Movement, pressure whites to leave the Movement, and abandon nonviolence as a tactic. By the time of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death in 1968, widespread support for the Beloved Community has died too. By setting their novels during the fragmented, later years of the Civil Rights Movement, Heath, Walker, and Lester focus on the cultural forces that increasingly thwart the creation of the Beloved Community.

The demoralization of Movement activists is a central theme in The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven. Just as such King biographies as David J. Garrow’s Bearing the Cross and such autobiographies as James Foreman’s The Making of Black Revolutionaries (1972) and Cleveland Sellers’s The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC (1973) reveal the increasing strain that the Movement places on
its participants during the 1960s, these three novels involve black characters whose faith in the Beloved Community begins to waver. Bob Moses, Meridian Hill, and Bobby Card all suffer physically and emotionally as they achieve only limited gains in the face of white resistance. Not only do the black activists in *The Children Bob Moses Led*, *Meridian*, and *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* become disillusioned, but the white activists do so as well. Tom Morton returns to college after Freedom Summer, and from the perspective of the present, he cynically remembers his naïveté during the 1960s. Lynne Rabinowitz and Lisa Adams, both white volunteers who choose to stay involved in the southern Movement after 1964, feel isolated not only from the white community as they fight for integration, but also from the black community as black separatism begins to replace interracial cooperation as the dominant Movement ideology. To emphasize further the extraordinary pressures that Movement participants face, all three novels incorporate numerous historical references to activists who were murdered during the 1960s; for example, all three novels allude to the infamous murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Neshoba County, Mississippi, in 1964. Unlike *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, *A Walk through Fire*, and *The Last Hotel for Women*, which hold out the hope that the Beloved Community will ultimately result from the Civil Rights Movement, *The Children Bob Moses Led*, *Meridian*, and *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* depict black activists and white activists who are too disillusioned by the late 1960s to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to coming together and forming the Beloved Community.
Another significant barrier between whites and blacks in these three novels is the class advantages that privileged white volunteers have over impoverished black southerners. Such studies as McAdam’s *Freedom Summer* and Mary Aicken Rothschild’s *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Freedom Summers, 1964-1965* (1982) have amply revealed the vast cultural differences between the northern white college students and the poor southern blacks in whose communities they lived during Freedom Summer:

By and large, [the northern white college students] were the sons and daughters of American privilege. They came from comfortable, often wealthy, families, some of them patrician. They applied to the project while attending the top elite colleges or universities in the country. The volunteers had known few limits in their lives, least of all those imposed by race or class. . . . [O]n the eve of the summer, they remained reformers rather than revolutionaries, liberals rather than radicals. Their narrative statements, written on the project applications, reflect a generally idealistic view of America, based on the liberal imagery characteristic of the era. The United States certainly had its imperfections, but they were less the product of flaws inherent in the system than they were remedial aberrations stemming from our failure to fully realize the humane and egalitarian values on which the nation had been founded. Neither their experiences nor their generally liberal political views prepared the volunteers for what they were to find in Mississippi. (McAdam 11-12)

Tom Morton, Lynne Rabinowitz, and Lisa Adams all lead comfortable lives before their involvement in the Movement, sheltered from the types of day-to-day struggles that face brutally oppressed and impoverished black southerners. Indeed, these white volunteers have, despite their commitment to equality for blacks, indirectly reaped the benefits of a national white power structure that oppresses African Americans.9

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9 White southerner Clayton Pinochet in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* resembles the white northern volunteers Tom Morton, Lynne Rabinowitz, and Lisa Adams in that he condemns white supremacy while reaping the benefits of an exploitive economic system. Clayton comes from a wealthy family that dominates the political, economic, and social landscape of Hopewell, Mississippi. Although Clayton
Unlike *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, *A Walk through Fire*, and *The Last Hotel for Women*, which imply that blacks and whites can forge class-based alliances and work within the existing political and economic system to achieve the Beloved Community, *The Children Bob Moses Led*, *Meridian*, and *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* critique the desirability of integration into capitalist America. As the 1960s progressed, Martin Luther King, Jr., himself became increasingly critical of capitalism. In his 1967 address to the SCLC, “Where Do We Go from Here?,” King clearly called on fellow Movement participants to join him in challenging the existing power structure:

"[T]he movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society."

(250)

As the 1960s drew to a close, King’s increasing radicalism reflected a growing awareness among Movement veterans that divisions between poor and rich were as likely to sabotage the formation of the Beloved Community as divisions between black and white.

Although Heath and Lester touch on the relationship between racism and capitalism, Walker especially critiques white capitalist America in *Meridian*. The fancies himself a southern white liberal because of his education and his enlightened attitudes regarding blacks, he nonetheless subsidizes his pastime as a would-be journalist with a trust fund derived from the historic and continued exploitation of cheap black labor. Although Clayton cherishes his self-image as

31

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novel opens with Meridian’s protesting the segregated Marilene O’Shay sideshow exhibit in Chicokema, Georgia, a scene that is, according to critic Karen Stein, “a poignantly ironic illustration of the Civil Rights dilemma: The Movement sought to break down social barriers to claim equal access for all individuals, but the society which it opened up often proved to be an ugly one” (131). Walker’s description of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s carnival-like funeral, including lively mourners and enthusiastic snack vendors, similarly illustrates the ugliness of life in the United States. Both scenes expose the clash between the lofty ideal of the Beloved Community and consumer-driven American culture. Meridian and, to a lesser extent, The Children Bob Moses Led and And All Our Wounds Forgiven all imply that creating the Beloved Community is incompatible with maintaining capitalism.

Heath, Walker, and Lester indicate that another significant threat to the Beloved Community is the politics of interracial sex. Whereas Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine and A Walk through Fire explore the historical connection between white supremacy and white men’s sexual domination of black women, The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven explore the historical connection between white supremacy and white men’s denying black men sexual access to white women. W. J. Cash observed in his classic The Mind of the South (1941) that white southern men during Reconstruction developed a “rape complex” based on their “identification” of the southern white woman “with the very notion of the South itself.” By identifying the South with the southern white woman, southern

a white southern liberal well into the 1980s, he initially refuses to redistribute the Pinochet wealth between himself and Ida Long after he discovers that she is his mulatta half-sister.

32

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white men necessarily identified an assault on the South with an assault on the southern white woman. Therefore, southern white men concluded "that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman" (118-19). After the Supreme Court made its landmark Brown ruling in 1954, such white supremacists as Mississippi circuit judge Tom P. Brady warned that the decision paved the way for miscegenation and would likely trigger a violent white response: "The supercilious, glib young negro . . . will perform an obscene act, or make an obscene remark, or a vile overture or assault upon some white girl" (72). In fact, the lynching of Armstrong Todd in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine prefigures the tensions that result in The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven from social contact between black male activists and white female activists during the 1960s.

In these three novels, Civil Rights Movement activists cannot but attack interracial sexual norms as they attack white supremacy. In fact, by the year 1964, intimate relationships between black men and white women had taken on a significant political dimension. Indeed, many activists in the 1960s believed that any interracial contact—sexual or otherwise—between men and women would, by subverting cultural taboos, expedite the formation of the Beloved Community. Doug McAdam explains that this logic affected many of the participants in Freedom Summer:

The project was held to be the living embodiment of that ideal; the "beloved community" that would serve as a model of what true egalitarian society was to be like. The members of that community were expected to be free; free from the restraints of racism and

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10 For another analysis of the "myth of the Black rapist," see Angela Davis 172-201. Davis traces the process by which white southern men developed this "myth" during the post-Reconstruction era as "a distinctly political invention" to justify suppressing African Americans (184).
consequently free to truly love one another. For many volunteers, then, interracial sex became the ultimate expression of the ideology, conclusive of their right to membership in the "beloved community." (93)

Meridian and And All Our Wounds Forgiven in particular explore the likelihood that unions between black men and white women will contribute to the destruction of white supremacy and the creation of the Beloved Community. Lynne Rabinowitz and Lisa Adams both associate freely with black men. Lynne marries Truman Held, whereas Lisa, who conducts a long-term affair with John Calvin Marshall, concludes that "[i]f keeping the races separate was the problem, mixing them had to be the solution" (24).

However, the connection between sexism and racism in the United States proves to be far more tangled than Movement activists in The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven anticipate. For example, intimacy between white women and black men actually threatens the Beloved Community in these novels because interracial contact often results in the suffering of black men. Such white women as Lynne and Lisa are accessories to this suffering because they ignore the political implications of their relationships with black men. Lynne and Lisa try to reject their special status as white women, yet as black feminist scholar Barbara Christian observes of Lynne, she "cannot escape her caste" because she is partially accountable for the harm that white men inflict on black men for the sake of white women ("Novels" 230). Lynne discovers that despite her best intentions, the black "country boys" of Mississippi perceive her as "a route to Death, pure and simple. They felt her power over them in their bones; their mother had feared her even before
they were born” (137). Just as Armstrong Todd’s merely speaking French to Lily Cox in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine results in his murder by her husband, Tommy Odds’s mere friendship with Lynne Rabinowitz in Meridian results in his being shot by white racists and subsequently losing his arm. For black men in these Civil Rights Movement novels, attempting to create the Beloved Community with white women requires taking serious risks.

Heath, Walker, and Lester suggest that another effect of intimate relationships between black men and white women is increased antagonism between black women and white women. To be sure, black women and white women have historically had problematic relationships, as Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose (1986) and Ellen Douglas’s Can’t Quit You, Baby (1988) illustrate. The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven demonstrate that black female activists and white female activists experience conflict especially during the Civil Rights Movement for several reasons. First, black women like Meridian Hill are acutely aware that white women like Lynne have the power to wreak havoc in black communities by simply talking to black men. Second, as Diane K. Lewis explains in “A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism” (1980), black women tend to distrust white women because white women have historically occupied positions of power that are unavailable to black women:

White women have not only been given deference. They have also had some access to power and authority. While they themselves lacked authority in the dominant society, they have had a route to power through their kinship and marital ties with men (e.g., fathers, husbands, and sons) who do exercise authority in the public sphere. Moreover, white women, as members of the dominant group, formerly held both considerable authority and power vis-à-vis the subordinate racial group.
The variance in deference and access to power and authority between black and white women have proven to be critical factors underlying the black woman’s perception of common group interest with black men and distrust of white women. (530)

Reflecting Lewis’s observations about black women’s distrust of white women, Andrea Marshall in And All Our Wounds Forgiven tells her husband that she hates Lisa because “it is not possible for a black woman to move through the world with such assurance, such self-confidence. . . . my god! there has not been a 19-year-old black girl in the history of western civilization who could stand on the earth as if it were her unquestioned possession” (76). Third, black women who are involved in the Civil Rights Movement especially reject black men’s establishing relationships with white women. In The Children Bob Moses Led, for example, Gayl Norris, a black female activist in McComb, Mississippi, snaps at two black males who are vying for the attentions of a blond northern volunteer: “Y’all quit now. . . . I’m tired of all you men talking black and sleeping white” (220-21). Similarly, Meridian realizes that Truman dates white girls “so obviously because their skin color made them interesting,” yet she feels embarrassed that he chooses them over her, “as if she were less” (106). Although these black female characters understand that black men’s relationships with white women have significant political ramifications within the Civil Rights Movement, that knowledge does not ease their resentment of either black men or white women. In fact, disputes between black women and white women, and

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11 Lester uses the sans-serif font to distinguish Marshall’s words from the grave from the words of the living narrators Andrea Marshall, Bobby Card, and Lisa Adams. In the passage cited, Marshall is recalling a conversation that he had with Andrea while he was alive.
between black women and black men, thwart the creation of the Beloved Community in The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven.\textsuperscript{12}

The allure of revolutionary violence for securing freedom for blacks in the United States is perhaps the most significant threat to the Beloved Community in these three novels. The writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., reveal his conviction that “[t]he aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness” (“Nonviolence” 8). Before his assassination in And All Our Wounds Forgiven, John Calvin Marshall echoes King’s warning by anticipating blacks’ rejection of nonviolence and their subsequent endorsement of retaliation against whites:

I’ve always known that to awaken the Negro to take action against the evil stifling him would also mean rousing the Negro’s own evil. . . . The stupidity of white American is terrifying. It does not require a great deal of intelligence to figure out that if you hate a people all you are doing is giving them lessons in how to hate you. And that’s what Negroes have been learning all these years. Just because they haven’t expressed it yet doesn’t mean they haven’t been taking notes and practicing in quiet. (193)

Like Guitar Baines in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, such black activists as Amontillado Poe in The Children Bob Moses Led, Anne-Marion in Meridian, and George Stone in And All Our Wounds Forgiven reject nonviolence as a tactic for achieving the Beloved Community and consider revolutionary violence as a tactic for achieving black liberation. Questions about the role of violence in the Movement thus splinter the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement toward the end of the 1960s and prevent a lasting formation of the Beloved Community.

\textsuperscript{12} For specific historical analyses of conflict between black female activists and white female activists during the Civil Rights Movement, see Evans 60-101, and Rothschild 127-54.
Heath, Walker, and Lester suggest that black revolutionary violence destroys not only the possibility of the Beloved Community, but also the well being of blacks themselves. Walker and Lester address black violence far more directly than Heath does: both Meridian Hill and Bobby Card seriously consider committing murder for the Black Freedom Struggle, and both grapple with the ideological paradox that black violence against whites can compensate for white violence against blacks. However, Walker and Lester ultimately reject black violence as a means for bringing down the barriers that divide blacks and whites and instead imply, as Morrison does in Song of Solomon, that blacks must begin the reconciliation process among themselves. Interestingly, neither Walker nor Lester seems to rule out the possibility of a Beloved Community.

Although The Children Bob Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven seem less optimistic about the possibility of interracial reconciliation than do Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, and The Last Hotel for Women, all six novels have in common one particularly striking feature: their emphasis on the humanity of their characters. Martin Luther King, Jr., stresses in “The Ethical Demands of Integration” that one of the demands of integration is the “recognition of the solidarity of the human family” (121). Bebe Moore Campbell, William Cobb, Vicki Covington, William Heath, Alice Walker, and Julius Lester establish solidarity among their characters—black and white, female and male, poor and rich—by allowing them to recognize the humanity of one another. Even though barriers of race, class, and gender divide the characters in the novels discussed in this study, all the characters have in a common a desire to create and sustain meaningful
relationships with parents, spouses, and children, and they ultimately begin to relate to
one another despite race-, class-, and gender-based differences. Moreover, the
novelists, by shifting points of view among a racially integrated cast of characters,
force the reader to confront the humanity of each character. By engaging
contemporary readers empathetically in the intense era of the Civil Rights Movement,
the six novels included in this dissertation revive the 1960s ideal of the Beloved
Community and challenge readers to re-examine the problems and the promises of
racial integration in the United States.
Chapter 2

Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine (1992) revolves around the fictional lynching of fifteen-year-old Armstrong Todd in Hopewell, Mississippi, in 1955. This fictional lynching closely parallels the historic lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955. In each case, a teenaged black boy from Chicago visits relatives in a small town in Mississippi during the summer of 1955, one year after the United States Supreme Court makes its landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision. After the northern black youth violates southern racial taboos by speaking playfully to a white woman in the business that her husband owns, the white husband and his kin seize the boy from his relatives' house and murder him. Although the white killers in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine and in the actual Till case are charged with and tried for murder, in both instances an all-white, all-male jury finds the killers not guilty. Throughout Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, which covers the period between 1955 and the late 1980s, and which unfolds against the background of the Civil Rights Movement, Campbell explores the impact of Armstrong Todd's lynching on the residents of Hopewell. By shifting points of view among black and white characters, female and male characters, and poor and rich characters, Campbell illuminates the ways in which various race-, sex-, and class-based cultural forces simultaneously bring her characters together and keep them apart. By engaging the reader of Your Blues Ain't Like Mine in the experiences of many diverse characters,
Campbell invites the reader to participate in a fictional Beloved Community and to witness the promises and problems of integration in Hopewell, Mississippi.

In an interview published in the Southwest Review in 1996, Campbell clearly articulates her own personal position on race relations: “I’m an integrationist. I am. I’m not a separatist. My ancestors have invested too much in this country, and I’m not going anywhere. And I think our strengths lie in saluting our differences and getting along” (200). Yet Campbell also recognizes that contemporary race relations are extraordinarily complex, and despite the significant changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement, she regards racial progress in the United States with ambivalence:

Some days I have a lot of hope for race relations in this country, and other days I don’t. I have to remind myself that in spite of everything, there are blacks and whites who get along and respect each other. When I see that, I have a lot of hope. But when I see the institutional racism and the cities burning, I feel pretty hopeless. (qtd. in Karkabi)

Campbell has even expressed astonishment that race relations in the United States are not worse than they already are: “Given the way this country is structured to perpetuate hatred of the races, and given the residue left from slavery both for white folks and black folks, . . . the fact that there still are a lot of us who get along is amazing” (qtd. in Miller).

Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, which is Campbell’s first novel, reflects Campbell’s interest in differences and similarities between blacks and whites, as well as between women and men. Moreover, the novel embodies the ambivalence with which Campbell regards contemporary race relations. Responding to a query about the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement as it pertains to the events in Your Blues
Ain't Like Mine, Campbell writes in a letter to the author: “The movement ultimately succeeds in securing voting rights for disenfranchised blacks but it never is able to unite poor and powerless whites with their black counterparts. In fact, the civil rights movement drives a wedge between the two groups. Also, the movement doesn’t result in economic power for blacks.” Because of its compelling portrayal of race relations between 1955 and the late 1980s, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine received a “Notable Book of the Year” designation from the New York Times, and Campbell won a 1993 Image Award for Literature for the novel from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Like Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Campbell’s next two novels, Brothers and Sisters (1994) and Singing in the Comeback Choir (1998), explore the complexities of race and gender. Aside from fiction, Campbell has written Successful Women, Angry Men: Backlash in the Two-Career Marriage (1986) and the critically acclaimed memoir Sweet Summer: Growing Up with and without My Dad (1989), both of which focus on family relationships. Campbell also contributes regularly to such magazines as Essence and Ebony, and to such newspapers as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times. In addition to her career as a writer, Campbell frequently appears as a commentator on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition.

After being asked what motivated her to base Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine on the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, Campbell, who was five years old at the time of the murder, responds in a letter to the author: “I have been haunted by Emmett Till’s death, and I believe America has too.” Commenting on his decision to begin the
Public Broadcasting Service's 1986 television series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* with a segment on Till, executive producer Henry Hampton echoes Campbell: "The first thing I remember was Emmett Till. He was my age and the fact that somebody could come and take him away and kill him. It just seared me. It was one thing my parents couldn’t protect me from" (qtd. in Whitfield 97). Campbell and Hampton both regard the Till case as an impetus to the emerging Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s. Indeed, in *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (1988), Stephen J. Whitfield asserts that Till’s lynching “deserves recognition as an overlooked and obscured factor in catalyzing resistance” (107).¹

Campbell insists, however, that *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* is not about Emmett Till: “This is not a historical novel . . . . All I got from the story of Emmett Till was the inspiration” (qtd. in Ghalwash). Nor is Campbell the first American author to find inspiration in Till’s death. *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* occupies a position among several literary works based on the lynching, including Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mothers Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” (1960), James Baldwin’s play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), Toni Morrison’s play *Dreaming Emmett* (1986), and Lewis Nordan’s novel *Wolf Whistle* (1993). In turn, these works inspired by Till occupy a position within the larger body of American literature inspired by the phenomenon of lynching. Perhaps the most

¹ For a thorough account of Emmett Till’s lynching, see Whitfield. See also Juan Williams 36-57. For first-hand accounts of Till’s lynching, see Hampton and Fayer 1-15.
famous fictional treatment of lynching is Lillian Smith’s novel *Strange Fruit* (1944),
the title of which Smith took from the Lewis Allan anti-lynching song that Billie
Holiday made famous. Similarly, such short works as Jean Toomer’s “Blood-Burning
Moon” (1923), Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1940), and James
Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” (1965) graphically depict the horrors of lynching.
During the twentieth century, lynching has clearly provided a significant number of
American writers—black and white, female and male—with the opportunity to explore
race relations in the United States.

The brief encounter between Armstrong Todd and Lily Cox at Floyd Cox’s
pool hall in the first chapter of *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* hardly seems significant
when it takes place. Floyd and Lily drive to the pool hall where Armstrong, a Chicago
native, is showing off for local blacks. Floyd tells Lily to wait in the truck while he
goes inside to check on the business. As Armstrong is speaking the few French
phrases that he knows to impress the black regulars in the pool hall, he notices that
Lily has left the truck and is peeking into the room full of young black men. Lily
clearly realizes that Armstrong’s speaking French is harmless. In fact, Campbell
describes Lily’s curiosity as “the exhilarated, frightened look of a girl sneaking her
first drink behind a barn.” Lily smiles and laughs at Armstrong’s mischief, and “[t]he
look in her eyes said that she’d done it, had the drink and not gotten caught” (19). Yet
Floyd and his entire family—his father Lester, his mother Mamie, his brother John
Earl, and his sister-in-law Louetta—angrily agree that Armstrong must be punished for
the lighthearted encounter with Lily. Even as the men drive off to seize Armstrong,
Lily knows that Armstrong has not flirted with her, much less assaulted her: “Lily wanted to call after them and say, ‘Ain’t nothing happened with that boy,’ but one look at Mamie’s stern, intractable face, at Louetta’s accusing eyes, and she shut her mouth. If Floyd and them were going to do something crazy and ruinous, she couldn’t stop them” (30). Lily incorrectly assumes that the Cox men will simply beat Armstrong for his alleged impudence: “Niggers been getting their butts whipped ever since time began; what difference will one more make?” (47). However, Floyd does more than whip Armstrong’s butt—he murders the boy.

For the remainder of Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Campbell carefully explores the causes of Armstrong’s murder and its profound effects on the citizens of Hopewell from the points of view of many diverse characters. Campbell implies in a letter to the author that creating these multiple points of view proved challenging: “I had to become each of the characters I created. I had to get inside the heads and under the skin of characters who were racist and/or weak. By pretending to be each one I began to empathize with all of them.” In particular, Campbell pays close attention to her characterization of Floyd and Lily Cox. Other important characters whose perspectives Campbell provides include Doreen Cox, the progressive-thinking daughter of Floyd and Lily; Stonewall Pinochet, a wealthy white racist whose fortune depends on the exploitation of black labor and the preservation of white supremacy; Clayton Pinochet, a weak-willed white liberal whose privileged socioeconomic status as Stonewall’s son contrasts sharply with his avowed commitment to black equality; Ida Long, a hard-working single black mother who is Clayton’s half-sister by
Stonewall and Stonewall's black mistress Susie; and Marguerite, Clayton's own black mistress.

For the most part, reviewers have praised Campbell's even-handed exploration of Armstrong Todd's lynching from multiple points of view. In his review of Your Blues Ain't Like Mine for the New York Times Book Review, Clyde Edgerton asserts: "Much of the power of this novel results from Ms. Campbell's subtle and seamless shifting of point of view. She wears the skin and holds in her chest the heart of each of her characters, one after another, regardless of the character's race or sex, response to fear and hate, or need for pity, grace, punishment or peace." Similarly, Veronica Chambers, writing for the Los Angeles Times Book Review, lauds Campbell for creating "a medley of individuals as complicated as our country's racial history."

John Katzenbach, the reviewer for Washington Post Book World, praises Campbell specifically for her sympathetic treatment of the villainous Coxes in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine: "One of the greatest strengths of the novel is that she writes as compellingly about the killers as she does the killed." Likewise, author Pearl Cleage commends Campbell for her even-handed treatment of the guilty whites:

[I]t was, in fact, this evenhandedness that so amazed me about this novel and at first made me angry at the author for making me care about these evil white folks who had murdered a young brother so viciously. But by the time Campbell has skillfully woven their stories together and made their humanity undeniable, it is impossible not to understand even if you cannot possibly forgive.

Defending her characterization of the Coxes, Campbell argues: "I am pleased with the characters I have created, and I thought I told the story well. A few people have said
that I was sympathetic to white racists, but I’m not . . . . How are we ever going to understand racism if we don’t explore it from both sides?” (qtd. in Karkabi).

Campbell explains in a letter to the author that she “view[s] race relations from a regional and historical context” in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine. Like the lynching of Emmett Till, the lynching of Armstrong Todd takes place within the specific sociohistorical context of segregated Mississippi in 1955, a context in which white southern men brutally deny black men contact with white women. In fact, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine contains the three necessary ingredients for the archetypal southern lynching: an alleged black rapist, a beautiful white woman, and a vengeful white male. Teenaged Armstrong Todd plays the unlikely part of the alleged black rapist. Lily Cox signifies the vulnerable white female, as her name, which connotes delicate whiteness, cues the reader. Floyd Cox assumes the role of the virile hero, the defender of southern womanhood; Regina Maria Dragoin even suggests that Floyd’s family name, Cox, “may be a play on phallus and patriarchal dominance” (361). Because of the specific cultural context in which their paths converge, Armstrong, Lily, and Floyd cannot but emerge in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine as southern archetypes.

According to W. J. Cash in his venerable Depression-era exploration of the “mind” of the South, white southern men developed a “rape complex” during Reconstruction as a result of their “identification” of the southern white woman “with the very notion of the South itself.” By identifying the South with the southern white woman, southern white men necessarily identified an assault on the South with an assault on the southern white woman. Therefore, southern white men concluded “that
any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman” (118-19). Like Cash, Angela Y. Davis, a generation later, traces the “myth of the Black rapist” back to the nineteenth century. Davis argues in Women, Race, and Class (1981) that during the post-Reconstruction era, southern white men developed the “myth” of black men’s preying on white women as “a distinctly political invention” to justify suppressing African Americans (184). During the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, anti-lynching activists consistently argued that white lynchers murdered black men for reasons other than to protect white women, and Robert L. Zangrando confirms their assertions in his study The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950 (1980): “Because it fit their racist beliefs and provided a convenient explanation, whites created the myth that lynching was a necessary protection for white womanhood. . . . In fact, less than 26 percent of those lynched were charged, let alone tried and convicted, of rape or attempted rape” (4).

Historian Joel Williamson puts forth a class-based rationale for lynching. In A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation (1986), Williamson argues that the southern recession of the late 1880s and the depression of the 1890s had a profound psychological effect on white men and caused them to condemn black men as rapists: “It seems fully possible that the rage against the black beast rapist was a kind of psychic compensation. If white men could not provide for their women materially as they had done before, they could certainly protect them from a much more awful threat” (82). Indeed, as Williamson observes of
poor southern whites, “[l]ynching and rioting, total disfranchisement, and blatant segregation formed satisfying displays of power in one area of their lives when they could no longer display power in another” (182). Similarly, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues in Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching (1993) that lynchers have historically acted more on their imagination than on actual facts: “Participants might see in ‘lynch law’ their ideal selves: the protectors of women, dispensers of justice, and guardians of communal values” (151). This is the historical context in which Campbell sets Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine.

Like the lynchers whom Williamson and Hall describe, Floyd tries to portray his “ideal self” by boasting that he has murdered Armstrong to “protect” Lily. However, Campbell demonstrates in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine that Floyd lynches Armstrong for reasons other than to protect white women. The primary factor behind Floyd’s lynching Armstrong is the changing legal, social, and economic landscape in Mississippi in 1955. In a letter to the author, Campbell writes that “[t]he Civil Rights Movement is actually the catalyst for the violent reaction of the Cox family. It is because they feel threatened by the 1954 Supreme Court decision that they murder Armstrong Todd.” According to the traditional tenets of white supremacy, Floyd should, as a white male, be able to dominate blacks. Yet Floyd, a poor white, possesses no practical means—such as wealth or influence—to maintain his supposed dominance. When the Supreme Court makes its Brown vs. Board of Education ruling in 1954 that “separate but equal” educational facilities are “inherently unequal,” Floyd
loses his legal entitlement to white supremacy. Physical violence remains as Floyd’s only means for asserting racial dominance after the Brown decision.

Campbell signals readers that Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine will concern itself with the Civil Rights Movement by explicitly linking Armstrong’s lynching in 1955 to the Supreme Court’s Brown decision in 1954. The Brown decision intensifies racial conflict in Hopewell, and several white characters repeatedly denounce the Supreme Court’s ruling and advocate resisting it. Like J. W. Milam, who, along with his half-brother Roy Bryant, murdered Emmett Till because he “just decided it was time a few people got put on notice” (qtd. in Juan Williams 43), John Earl Cox explains to his brother Floyd that their lynching Armstrong signifies the white South’s refusal to accept the Supreme Court’s desegregation ruling: “What we done, Floyd, what you done, well, it kind of puts the whole United States of America on notice... that the Supreme Court ain’t gon’ ram no integration down our throats... That we’re prepared to take a stand” (53). Much of Hopewell’s white community reacts to Armstrong’s murder similarly, as a conversation among three old white men in the Busy Bee Café illustrates:

Shoulda done worse. Shoulda hung his black ass right in front of that nigger church where they make all that commotion. And let the Supreme Court know that the streets is gon’ be full of dead niggers. I tell you, you let the niggers get away with one thing and, by God, the tables’ll turn and the next thing you know, they’ll be ruling us. (59)

White southerners’ use of racist violence to maintain white supremacy will remain an obstacle to the Beloved Community throughout the 1950s and 1960s.
Campbell implies that the Supreme Court’s Brown decision is particularly painful for such lower-class whites as the Coxes to accept because they suspect that blacks will begin to fare better than they. Indeed, as Richard Kluger explains in Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality (1975), the Supreme Court does eventually confirm the white South’s worst fears by following the Brown decision with other decisions outlawing racial discrimination:

Segregation was outlawed in public parks and recreation areas, on or at all interstate- and intrastate-commerce facilities (waiting rooms and lunch counters as well as the carriers themselves), in libraries and courtrooms and the facilities of all public buildings, and in hotels, restaurants, and other enterprises accommodating the public. It was declared unlawful to list on a ballot the race of a candidate for public office. Black witnesses could no longer be addressed by their first names in Southern courtrooms. Sexual relations between consenting blacks and whites were removed from the criminal decalogue, and in 1967, with barely a murmur of objection in the land, the Court ruled in Loving v. Virginia that state laws forbidding that most detestable of all rites—the joining of a white and a Negro in holy matrimony—were unconstitutional. (750-51)

Rather than promoting the formation of the Beloved Community, however, these rulings exacerbated hostilities between many whites and blacks.

In Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, the Brown ruling indicates to Floyd that economic advancement and social mobility for blacks are forthcoming. When Floyd confronts Armstrong about Armstrong’s encounter with Lily, Armstrong makes a fatal mistake not only by suggesting that Lily was interested in him, but also by offering Floyd money to leave him alone. An enraged Floyd responds: “You got money, nigger? You think that makes you good as me?” (38). In other words, extreme
jealousy of Armstrong and what he represents—black upward mobility—contributes
to Floyd’s desire for revenge. The fact that Floyd, a white man, is even tried for the
murder of an African American—a fact that Hopewell’s blacks welcome with
“jubilation” and Hopewell’s whites perceive as “a natural disaster” (113)—also
foreshadows increased equality for blacks. The reality of African-American economic
clout especially hits Floyd when Hopewell’s black citizens effectively boycott his pool
hall after he murders Armstrong. Later, as the Montgomery bus boycott gains
momentum in Alabama, Lily Cox reflects on the profound economic impact of
collective black action: “In all her life she’d never conceived of Negroes as having
any kind of power that could affect her. Now she was overwhelmed by the realization
that the niggers not only could but were going to destroy her family without so much
as raising their voices” (125). As black southerners continue to win civil rights
victories throughout the 1950s and 1960s, such poor southern whites as the Coxes fear
that black advancement will marginalize them further.

Campbell, who has commented in interviews that racism “can sometimes be
the result of family problems before societal problems,” suggests that another reason
Floyd murders Armstrong is to win the approval of his family rather than to protect
Lily from a rapist (qtd. in Ghalwash). After initially reacting with fear to Armstrong
and the other black men at the pool hall, Floyd is embarrassed that his father will hear
of his ineptitude: “I shoulda hit that boy, Floyd thought. You always gotta hit a
nigger what step outta line; keeps the other ones respectful. What was I thinking of?
Lord, I don’t want this getting back to Daddy and them” (21). Moments before Floyd
shoots him, Armstrong realizes with horror that Floyd is more afraid of disappointing his father than of killing a black teenager. Even though Floyd ultimately loses his business and experiences social ostracism because of his crime, he continues to derive comfort from the fact that his murdering Armstrong pleased his father and his brother:

Later, when Floyd would try to forget everything else about this night, he would still recall the ride home, the smoky air of the congested cab, the three of them pressed in close together, singing and laughing as their shoulders touched. What warmed him more than anything was the sure, true knowing that his father, at last, was satisfied with him. (40)

An exchange between Lily and her former sister-in-law Louetta three decades after Armstrong’s murder confirms that Floyd did not shoot Armstrong to protect Lily:

[Louetta said,] “Sometimes I sit and think about things that have happened. That night, Lily, that night when Floyd and John Earl went after that boy, we couldn’t have stopped neither one of them if we . . . I was wrong, Lily. Loving us didn’t have nothing to do with it.”

“Louetta, I been figured that out.” (292)

In other words, Floyd unquestioningly embraces white supremacy and murders Armstrong to conform to his family’s racist expectations.

Campbell shows throughout Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine that white supremacy meets not only the psychological needs of poor southern whites, but also the economic needs of the white elite. According to Angela Davis and many other commentators on southern culture, promoting white supremacy has historically allowed the white elite to drive a wedge between southern white workers and southern black workers. Davis hypothesizes that in the late nineteenth century, the white elite began to support lynching tacitly because it eased class conflict among whites as well as kept blacks in their place:
The colonization of the Southern economy by capitalists from the North gave lynching its most vigorous impulse. If Black people, by means of terror and violence, could remain the most brutally exploited group within the swelling ranks of the working class, the capitalists could enjoy a double advantage. Extra profits would result from the superexploitation of Black labor, and white workers’ hostilities toward their employers would be defused. White workers who assented to lynching necessarily assumed a posture of racial solidarity with the white men who were really their oppressors. This was a critical moment in the popularization of racist ideology. (190)

Davis’s observation illuminates Campbell’s portrayal of white solidarity in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*. On the one hand, Floyd regards the white elite with a mixture of envy and contempt because he recognizes that it holds all the real political, economic, and social power in Hopewell, whereas he does not. On the other hand, Floyd, reflecting Davis’s observation, identifies racially with the white elite and passionately supports segregation. That is, Floyd is simultaneously the victim and the oppressor. Throughout *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, Campbell hints that poor southern whites’ blindly supporting a power structure that clearly oppresses them prevents their developing potentially empowering alliances across racial lines.

The fate of Dolly Cox, Floyd’s sister, graphically illustrates the extent to which the white elite considers poor whites dispensable. When wealthy Clayton Pinochet falls in love with Dolly and offers to marry her after she becomes pregnant by him, his father Stonewall refuses to allow the wedding: “Pinochets don’t marry her kind. That’s the end of it” (50). Even Dolly’s father, Lester, and her brother, John Earl, who tote shotguns to the Pinochets’ front door to demand a wedding, cannot convince Stonewall to relent. Instead, Stonewall taunts them with his political, economic, and social clout:
You got no cause, and you got no power . . . . Go on home before you do something stupid, and the next thing you know, you ain’t got a friend, can’t get a job in this county. You boys go home now . . . .

You don’t know who the law is around here? Your granddaddy knew. In 1862 my granddaddy paid three hundred dollars and sent yours to war in his place. He couldn’t send a nigger, so he sent one of y’all . . . .

The law can’t help it if you raised a whore, Cox. (51)

The Pinochets pay for Dolly to have an abortion in Jackson, and she returns to Hopewell disgraced and depressed. Her beauty fades, and she becomes a “weather-beaten, blowsy woman.” Alcoholism eventually sends her “into an early grave” (24).

In Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, the same power mongers who marginalize such poor whites as the Cox family rely on cheap black labor to maintain their privileged position. Throughout the novel, Stonewall Pinochet personifies the southern white elite. Appropriately named after a Confederate general, Stonewall heads a small group of wealthy white planters known as the Honorable Men of Hopewell, who hold all the town’s power. Campbell reveals that these planters, “the Delta’s power brokers,” have traditionally exploited black labor in Hopewell: “The primacy they enjoyed had been historically bestowed upon them; it was their legacy. Their great-grandfathers had made the family fortunes with blacks and cotton, and both had continued to enrich them. And not by chance.” Campbell tells the reader, for example, that “[s]ince the days of the New Deal [the Honorable Men of Hopewell] had manipulated relief benefits so that poor whites were often denied payments and pushed out of the county in order to keep in blacks who would work for starvation wages” (88). Reflecting the continuity of southern racial subordination from the slavery past to the Jim Crow present, Hopewell blacks live in the area of town known as the
Quarters and provide cheap labor for the residents of the Confederacy, the aptly-named affluent white section of town.

Stonewall’s response to the Cox men’s lynching of Armstrong Todd illustrates the degree to which Hopewell’s white elite will go to protect its privileged status. After Armstrong’s murder, Stonewall calls a private trouble-shooting meeting with the Honorable Men of Hopewell to propose a plan for preventing federal intervention in the case and promoting good appearances in the national press, while maintaining the black subordination on which the Honorable Men of Hopewell’s economic success depends. Stonewall recommends that initially, Lester, John Earl, and Floyd Cox all be jailed for “appearances” because national public opinion is that Armstrong’s murderer, or murderers, be caught, tried, and punished. However, Stonewall suggests that only Floyd actually be tried because “we don’t need but one symbol for justice.” Campbell clearly links Floyd’s trial to the Honorable Men of Hopewell’s economic interests, as Stonewall explains to the group:

Now, gentlemen, I don’t have to tell you that this is a new day. . . . We can’t be perceived as a group of savages. Wealthy northern industrialists don’t invest in areas that are populated by savages. It’s men like us who have shaped this region, and by God, we’ve got to take the bull by the horns on this whole affair. Gentlemen, we got us some rednecks that need to go to jail. (89)

The Honorable Men of Hopewell realize all too well that upholding white supremacy has profound economic implications for them.

Indeed, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine reveals that the southern white elite continues to reap the economic benefits of racial subordination well after the legal end of segregation. In 1970, Stonewall Pinochet and the Honorable Men of Hopewell
erect the appropriately named New Plantation Catfish Farm and Processing Plant on 75,000 acres where they used to grow cotton. The news of the plant’s opening excites the black community because “[t]here hadn’t been prospects for employment in Hopewell since the last of the manual laborers had been run off cotton plantations by automatic pickers and chemical weed killers.” However, Clayton warns Hopewell’s blacks that the work at the plant will be “just as bad as—as sharecropping ever was” (252-53). Indeed, Campbell explicitly links the present conditions in the plant to conditions from the past: “[T]he New Plantation Workers, mostly black women, ran flat-footed to their jobs, the same way their mamas had run to the fields years before, their faces grim and set as they tried to make it inside before the whistle blew” (260).

Although Hopewell’s white elite can no longer use the law to uphold white supremacy, it nonetheless perpetuates racial subordination in the economic sphere. Just as Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine reveals that committed segregationists profit from white supremacy, it reveals that self-proclaimed white liberals profit from it too. Through Stonewall’s son Clayton, Campbell scrutinizes the problematic situation of southern white liberals who claim to support the Beloved Community, yet reap the benefits of an exploitive economic system. After Armstrong Todd’s lynching, Clayton wants to write an exposé for the local newspaper that the murder was “the result of severe hating” on the part of Hopewell’s racists, yet as the following imaginary lecture from his father reveals, Clayton realizes that his own family fortune results from the oppression of blacks:

Now, son, you have to be careful what you put in print. People might think that’s how you really feel. You know we’ve lived in this area for
generations. The Pinochet's have built something to be proud of here, a tradition that must continue unchanged. We've built relationships with people, folks who feel a certain way about the world. Those folks trust us because they believe that we think as they do; that's the basis for our friendships.

I'm talking about business boy. Money. People just don't do business with folks they don't trust, at least not around here. Maybe in New York they do. But not around here. And where will that leave you? I'll tell you where it leaves you. Nowhere, boy. Because if you weren't pulling from a healthy trust fund, you wouldn't be in any position to be a roving reporter, now would you, son. If you hadn't been drawing from a healthy trust fund, you wouldn't have been able to go gallivanting with the Yankees in New York City, Mr. Liberal. Them checks you get every month—ever stop to think where that money came from, boy? Niggers. Nigger slaves. Nigger sharecroppers who rent from us and buy from us when they need a roll of toilet paper. You think we'd have a toehold in this country without them? And here you're telling people we hate them. That's a lie. We got a code down here, a way to keep things in order. Checks and balances, just like the government of the United States. That boy that died was out of order, plain and simple. (61)

Although Clayton fancies himself a liberal because of his education and his enlightened attitudes toward blacks, he nonetheless subsidizes his pastime as a would-be journalist with a trust fund derived from the historic and continued exploitation of cheap black labor.

Clayton's negative reaction to Ida Long's announcement that she plans to sue the Pinochet estate for her share of Stonewall's wealth further illustrates Clayton's refusal to abandon his extraordinarily comfortable lifestyle for a morally satisfying one. In the late 1980s, after Stonewall dies and Ida discovers that she is his daughter by his black mistress Susie, Ida seeks economic justice: "All the years she struggled, not knowing how she was going to make it, . . . her father, Stonewall Pinochet, had been living in luxury, never acknowledging her. Where was the justice for his crime?"
However, Gayton rejects Ida’s demand that he acknowledge her as his sister and says that he will simply give her “some money”: “The Pinochets own every lawyer in this state. You don’t stand a chance” (304-05). Like Gayton’s mistress Marguerite, who tells Gayton when she leaves him that “[y]ou always do the easiest thing for you, so you can keep on living and not feel guilty” (245), Ida learns that “[a]ll that talk of [Gayton’s] about wanting to see black people take their rightful place in society was just talk. He didn’t want to share” (305). Gayton’s attitudes dramatize Campbell’s critique of white liberals for whom self-interest takes precedence over fair play: “Why was it always so shocking to white people when blacks asked them for what was rightfully theirs?” (304). Although Gayton ultimately agrees to meet Ida’s demands because he truly cares for her, Campbell deftly makes the point that living comfortably within a racist economic system is more often than not incompatible with a genuine commitment to the Beloved Community.

Yet Campbell portrays the white liberal sympathetically in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine in that she recognizes that self-interest alone does not explain reluctance to challenge white supremacy. Indeed, Campbell illustrates that fear cripples Clayton as much as it does Floyd Cox. For example, Clayton’s unwillingness to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement has its roots in an early childhood incident. When he is almost eight years old, Gayton tries to prevent one of his father’s plantation managers from whipping a black laborer. His father angrily throws Clayton aside, and thus the boy learns early that to violate the code of white supremacy by showing compassion toward blacks is to encourage violence: “The day Clayton knew he wanted to rescue
colored people was the day he became afraid of his father. And the fear never left him” (25). This fear prevents Clayton from ever intervening to protect another black from whites. After Armstrong’s murder, Clayton is too afraid of his father’s wrath to take a public stand against the lynching and against whites’ systematic oppression of blacks:

Of course, as usual, he remained silent. He could make a telephone call in the dark; he couldn’t make a public statement. Strong words could lead to repercussions. There were some battles he just couldn’t fight, at least not yet. One day he would speak out. One day he would save black people, lead them out of their misery. But not today. (78)

Fear of physical violence, social ostracism, and economic reprisals thus prevent Clayton from becoming involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Just as Campbell provides a class analysis of white supremacy in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, she also provides a feminist analysis. Indeed, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine is as much the story of Lily Cox as it is of Armstrong Todd. In fact, just as the fictional Armstrong Todd corresponds to the real Emmett Till, the fictional Lily Cox corresponds to the real Carolyn Bryant, the white woman whom Till allegedly addressed in 1955. Campbell explains that a desire to understand Bryant compelled her to write Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine in the first place. In a letter to the author, Campbell remembers that as a child, she harbored anger toward the white woman: “Growing up, I hated Carolyn Bryant . . . . I think most black people did.” Yet Campbell recalls that seeing newsreel footage of Carolyn Bryant’s elated response to her husband Roy’s acquittal of murdering Till later prompted her to wonder why such a woman would be attracted to a murderer:
I saw the trial on the PBS series, *Eyes on the Prize*, and I was struck by the woman, Carolyn Bryant . . . and how the husband—the guy who killed Emmett Till—kissed his wife when the jury found him innocent. It looked very erotic to me. She looked fearful, but at the same time she looked like, I got a man who’d kill for me! I was interested in her. I thought, “Whoa! This woman! Why would she need to feel this way?” I was going with what I saw in her face. I wanted to know what kind of life someone who needs [that] would have. Where did this woman come from? As I got interested in her, I began to get interested in the whole story. (qtd. in Burke 3-4)

Campbell elaborates that she struggled to identify with such a white woman as Carolyn Bryant:

> When I created Lily Cox, who was based on Bryant, I had to create a back story for why this character was so weak. Lily Cox was a molested child, a product of a poor white family and a sexist society in which she was powerless; she acted out those realities. They trapped her. This explains her weakness, her passivity, her insanity. She is as much a victim of the racist society she perpetuates as Armstrong Todd. The difference is in degree. (Letter)

As Campbell explores the connection between sexism and racism in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, she illuminates the ways in which southern society victimizes Lily Cox.

Campbell conveys successfully that unless Lily lies and claims that Armstrong attempted to assault her, her family and Hopewell’s white community will ostracize her. Lily’s plight parallels that of Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, the two white women who falsely accused nine young black men of rape in the 1931 Scottsboro case. According to Susan Brownmiller, Bates and Price had to testify against the alleged rapists “to save their own skins,” for the two white women, like the nine black defendants, had been bullied by angry white men who wanted to believe that rape had, indeed, taken place:
As the black defendants sat in an alien courtroom in which all the forces of the law—judge, prosecution, defense and jury—were white, so too the forces arrayed before them were all male. It was a white man’s game that was played out in the Scottsboro trials, with black men and white women as movable pawns, and white men judged interracial rape according to their own particular property code. (232-33)

In other words, Brownmiller contends, the two white women were just as much victims as the black men.²

Lily plays a similar double role of victim and oppressor in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, and she pays dearly for violating the strict southern taboo against social contact between white women and black men. After siding with Floyd during his sham of a murder trial, Lily discovers that she has become a pariah in Hopewell:

She rarely went out of the yard anymore. . . . She didn’t like the way people stared at her or turned their heads to avoid having to speak when she approached. Men’s eyes walked all over her body as though they were familiar with it. And the women, well, they might as well have spit on her. The Negroes glared whenever she passed them alone. It was as if they dared her to tell her man. They were laughing at her. (127)

Lily and her family even begin to receive hate mail from around the United States.

After a black boycott of Floyd’s pool hall ruins the Coxes financially, Floyd becomes increasingly violent toward Lily, beating her and blaming her for the family’s troubles:

“If it hadn’t been for her, he’d still have his business. He wouldn’t have to be digging ditches with niggers for two dollars a day. If she’d listened to him and stayed out of

² Although Angela Davis concedes that Ruby Bates and Victoria Price “were manipulated by Alabama racists,” she takes Brownmiller to task for sympathizing more with the white women than with the falsely accused black defendants in the Scottsboro case: “[I]t is wrong to portray the women as innocent pawns, absolved of the responsibility of having collaborated with the forces of racism. In choosing to take sides with white women, regardless of the circumstances, Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism” (198-99).
the place like he told her to, they wouldn’t be eating surplus government food like they was . . .” (139). After Floyd has to go to Louisiana to work for several months because Hopewell whites refuse to hire him, Lily runs out of money and food and has to beg from her mother-in-law and even from the black midwife who delivers her daughter Doreen. She weeps continually, having realized, “I don’t even have no white people to go to” (186). As a result of her brief interracial encounter with Armstrong Todd, Lily suffers enormous consequences.

Her sympathy toward Lily notwithstanding, Campbell still holds Lily accountable for her actions. To ensure that readers fully understand Lily’s complicity in Armstrong’s lynching, Campbell provides multiple instances of Lily’s lying to defend Floyd. To Sheriff Barnes, Lily corroborates Floyd’s allegations that Armstrong behaved inappropriately toward her: “[Y]es, he did bother me . . . . I’m ashamed to say what he done” (72). Later, Lily tacitly agrees with Mamie and Louetta when they tell the sheriff that their husbands were at home with them on the night of the murder. Ultimately, Lily succumbs totally to societal pressure and testifies at Floyd’s trial that Armstrong had assaulted her: “‘He—he started saying nasty things to me. Horrible things.’ The beating of her heart was like gunshots exploding as she closed her eyes and imagined each one of the horrible, nasty things that the boy had said to her, until they became real” (120-21). Like Campbell, readers of Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine cannot but recoil from Lily’s perjury even as they pity her and understand her motives.
Lily's willingness to lie about Armstrong's behavior especially alienates her from potential allies in the black community, particularly from her friend Ida Long. As such black feminists as Angela Davis and Paula Giddings have documented, white women have historically alienated black women by sacrificing African Americans' concerns to their own interests. On the night that Floyd murders Armstrong, Lily tells Ida: "Everything is all right. I told my husband, 'That boy didn't say not one bad thing.' Everything is all right now" (34). Because Lily insists that nothing is wrong, Ida fails to warn Armstrong's grandmother about the danger Armstrong faces. Ida realizes angrily after the lynching that "Armstrong was dead because she had trusted a white woman with his life.... Lily had gotten Armstrong killed. She was no different from any other treacherous white woman" (86-87). By aligning herself with white supremacists, Lily necessarily poses a threat to the black community in Hopewell.

Yet even as Lily is, in her role as the white racist, an oppressor of blacks, Campbell also exposes Lily as oppressed herself in her role as the southern white woman. Since the early nineteenth century, white southern society has demanded that white women submit to male authority. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, southern white men have historically ensured female subordination by concocting interracial "rape scares": "The fear of rape regulated white women's behavior and restricted their interaction with the world" (Revolt xxi). The myth of the vulnerable white woman thus developed alongside the myth of the black rapist. Hall argues that the white man's protecting the white woman from rape by the black man "presupposed her
obligation to obey” the conventions of a patriarchal society; otherwise, she “forfeited the claims to personal security” (Revolt 151-152). Anne Firor Scott describes the predicament of the southern white woman similarly in The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (1970): “[B]e a lady and you will be loved and respected and supported. If you defy the pattern and behave in ways considered unladylike you will be unsexed, rejected, unloved, and you will probably starve” (20-21).

Campbell suggests throughout Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine that Lily is particularly susceptible, as a lower-class southern white woman, to embracing the stereotypic feminine behavior that contributes significantly to her downfall. Just as Floyd adheres to an exaggerated notion of white supremacy because he lacks political, economic, and social power, Lily adheres to an exaggerated notion of ladyhood. Sociologist Susan Middleton-Keim has interviewed contemporary working-class southern women and commented on their acceptance of traditional gender roles and indifference toward feminism:

. . . [F]eminism was not a discrete or contrasting category representing a different set of ideas. Their responses reflected the social reality of their lives, namely, that feminism was not a significant or meaningful category. What they knew and what they considered important was that sex-stereotypic constellation of feminine qualities that set them apart from men and at the same time made them attractive to men. For most of the Southern respondents a woman’s place and her demeanor were not matters for examination, discussion, or change—they simply were. (152)

Lily’s behavior reflects Middleton-Keim’s observations, and her feminine role as the vulnerable white southern woman corresponds to Floyd’s role as the masculine
protector of white southern womanhood: “Lily looked through the kitchen window at her husband, and he seemed taller and stronger, a man who would take care of her and protect her. Lily thought: I got a man who’ll kill for me” (55). However, just as the Hopewell power structure that Floyd endorses actually oppresses him, the notion of ladyhood that Lily endorses actually restricts her.

Lily falls prey particularly to the notion of female subordination throughout Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine. At the time of Armstrong’s murder, she cannot even begin to imagine an identity of her own except as Floyd’s wife: “She felt frightened and weak when he was away from her. It was as though she didn’t exist when he was absent” (9). Floyd cultivates and perpetuates Lily’s dependence on him by goading her until she affirms his superiority: “No, Floyd, I sure can’t [take care of myself]. . . . I need you for everything” (12). After Floyd murders Armstrong and Hopewell’s blacks boycott the pool hall, Lily feels that she and her infant son have become particularly vulnerable. She even suppresses her sexuality so that Floyd remains in control: “Wanting her had to be his idea; he didn’t like it the other way around. Floyd said only whores acted that way” (10). When the feminist movement emerges in the 1970s, Lily cannot even begin to imagine its implications for her or for any other woman: “Women’s liberation. She mouthed the words softly to herself, but they didn’t mean anything to her. Women. Liberation. Separately, yes, but not together” (226).

Just as Campbell demonstrates that Floyd Cox’s and Clayton Pinochet’s racism derives from their relationships with their fathers, she demonstrates that Lily’s
submissiveness derives from her experiences with her mother. Neither Lily nor her mother believes that married women need an education, so Lily quits school to marry Floyd when she is sixteen years old. As a matter of fact, Lily pities her widowed English teacher, the only intelligent, hard-working white woman to whom Lily is exposed in Hopewell: “Mrs. Purdue had to work for a living, which Lily thought was a tragedy beyond belief” (14). Moreover, Lily’s mother convinces Lily that beauty is the only significant attribute a woman possesses: “Baby, all a woman has got is her looks, for a thin sliver of time. You squander your beauty, you done lost your life” (46). Yet Lily unavoidably connects her perception of women as beauties to the image of women as victims. As a teenager, Lily returns home after being crowned Magnolia Queen of Jefferson Davis High School only to discover that her mother has been beaten by her father: “Now, whenever, Lily thought about being Magnolia Queen, she thought about her mother’s swollen face.” Lily’s mother justifies her husband’s violence by telling Lily that “[h]e can’t help it” (47). After Lily marries Floyd, her mother-in-law Mamie and sister-in-law Louetta continue to indoctrinate Lily in female submission, constantly reminding her that women must remain subordinate to their husbands. Throughout Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Campbell makes clear that Lily’s extremely narrow definition of a woman’s place originates from her lack of strong female role models.

Campbell’s feminist critique of white supremacy in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine also consists of an analysis of exploitive relationships between white men and black women. As such historians as Angela Davis, Paula Giddings, and Jacquelyn
Dowd Hall have shown, the stereotype of the innately promiscuous black woman corresponds to the stereotype of the black beast rapist, for both myths attribute unnatural sexuality to African Americans. Whereas white men have historically used black men’s alleged lust for white women as an excuse to lynch them, they have historically used black women’s alleged nymphomania as an excuse to rape them. Hall observes that “[t]he association between lynching and rape emerges most clearly in their parallel use in racial subordination. . . . [R]ape reasserted white dominance and control in the private arena as lynching reasserted hierarchical arrangements in the public transactions of men” (“Mind” 331-33). In Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, the many racially mixed children who live in the Quarters offer proof of black women’s vulnerability: “These rainbow-hued children were absolute testimony that if colored women hadn’t been honored, they’d certainly been desired. Although in practical terms that meant only that they and their children had been abandoned by men of every race” (35). Indeed, blacks in Hopewell have “witnessed numerous clandestine affairs between white men and black women that ended disastrously for the women and their families” (246).

Marguerite, Clayton Pinochet’s black mistress, is Campbell’s most explicit example in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine of a black woman who is sexually exploited by a white man. Although Clayton is not a rapist in the traditional sense of the word, he upholds the racist patriarchy by taking a black mistress. Hall notes of the ante-bellum South: “[W]hether seized through outright force or voluntarily granted within the master-slave relation, the sexual access of white men to black women was a
cornerstone of patriarchal power in the South... Like other forms of deference and conspicuous consumption, it buttressed planter hegemony” (“Mind” 332). Continuing this Old South practice, Clayton’s father Stonewall maintains a black mistress, Susie, and sires Ida Long by her. Like the planter elite of the nineteenth century, and like his father before him, Clayton keeps a black woman exclusively for his sexual pleasure. Unlike the archetypal chaste southern white woman, Marguerite appeals to Clayton primarily because of her beauty and her ability to satisfy him sexually. Clayton asks Marguerite to marry him, but changes his mind because he cannot bear “the thought of his future as the husband of a black woman” (245). Although Clayton eventually realizes, after Marguerite leaves him, that he and his father have in common their shameless use of African-American women—“We both loved black women and we both dishonored them” (304)—Campbell suggests that inherently unequal relationships between white men and black women will render the creation of the Beloved Community difficult.

Even though Campbell meticulously catalogs the many race-, class-, and gender-based forces that prevent the formation of the Beloved Community in Hopewell, Mississippi, she also indicates that some of her characters can overcome those forces. On the one hand, Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine reveals that the southern socioeconomic structure gives poor whites like the Coxes significant reasons for embracing white supremacy and female subordination; on the other hand, the novel sheds light on ways in which poor whites can reject institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism.
Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine distinctly resembles Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose (1986)—a book that Campbell says she “love[s]”—in that both novels suggest that black women and white women can cultivate meaningful interracial friendships (“Hope” 195). Campbell clearly recognizes the many barriers that complicate the relationship between black women and white women, as illustrated in a vision Ida experiences on the night of Armstrong’s murder illustrates: “[Ida] was standing in a grand train station, and Lily was way at one end and Ida was at the other. They were shouting at each other, but both of them had their hands over their ears” (49). On the one hand, black women and white women struggle to communicate with each other; on the other hand, neither black women nor white women hear what the other is trying to say. Just as a wide expanse separates Ida and Lily in Ida’s vision, a great racial gap separates them in reality. Yet Campbell insists on envisioning the possibility of an interracial female friendship between Ida and Lily.

Train station imagery connotes female solidarity in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, for the Hopewell train station offers liminal space where Ida and Lily can meet and become friends. Although railroad tracks are traditionally the symbol for separating the classes, and although Ida stands on the “For Colored Only” side at the depot while Lily stands on the “For Whites Only” side, Ida and Lily attempt to bridge the divisions. On the first night that the two talk, Lily experiences a significant epiphany when Ida reveals to her that blacks move to Chicago to find work more meaningful than cotton-picking: “The discovery that colored people had dreams of a better life was the most profound and shocking life” (32). Over a two-year period of
meeting at the train station, the two women learn that they have much in common: 
“[T]hey both cried the day before their periods came on; and they both were nauseous
during the early months when they were carrying their sons. . . . [They] both thought
Evening in Paris smelled so good they wanted to sip it from a straw straight from the
bottle. They had wept together” (87). Ida and Lily’s similarities reflect Anne Firor
Scott’s contention that women have historically been more likely than men to form
interracial relationships because of their shared interests in family: “From slavery
through Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, relationships between white
and black women were quite unlike those common between white and black men,
sharing as they did many concerns about children and home life across the color line”
(199). Ida and Lily become so close through their meetings at the train station that Ida
reveals to Lily that her father is white, and Lily reveals to Ida that she had been
molested as a child by her uncle. Lily so values Ida’s friendship that she vows that her
racist husband Floyd “ain’t never gon’ find out” about it (32). Rather than separating
Ida and Lily, the segregated train station paradoxically brings them together.

Floyd’s murdering Armstrong terminates Ida and Lily’s burgeoning
relationship, but Campbell invites the reader to continue drawing parallels between the
two women and to consider the lost potential for their friendship throughout Your
Blues Ain’t Like Mine. The novel makes clear that the men in each woman’s life have
consistently disappointed her. Ida’s father, Stonewall Pinochet, never acknowledges
her as his daughter, and Clayton Pinochet reacts icily when he discovers that Ida is his
half-sister, initially refusing to divide the Pinochet estate with her. The father of Ida’s
son Sweetbabe leaves Ida while she is pregnant; similarly, during the 1960s, Dan, a
civil rights worker, becomes Ida's lover, yet he abandons her because the Movement is
more important to him than Ida is. Lily's history with men consists of experiences
that parallel Ida's: "She thought about the men who'd passed through her own life:
her daddy, with his heavy, mean hands; her two brothers, who'd gone off to Detroit
after the war and hadn't been heard from since; Uncle Charlie, fingering her private
parts and whispering nasty secrets in her ear. Floyd" (181). As lower-class women,
Ida and Lily also face exploitation at the hands of white men in positions of power.
For example, Sheriff Barnes tries to rape Ida after making unsuccessful advances
toward her. He exploits her not only sexually, but also financially by demanding a cut
from the profits that she makes from her juke joint. Likewise, Mr. Wingo, a social
worker, forces Lily to perform oral sex on him in exchange for immediate public
housing for her and her children. Because as poor women Ida and Lily face many of
the same problems, they seem likely candidates to cultivate an intimate relationship—
extcept for Lily's complicity in the murder of Armstrong Todd.

Campbell fulfills the promise of an interracial female friendship in Your Blues
Ain't Like Mine through Ida and Doreen Cox, Floyd and Lily's daughter. Unlike Lily,
Ida and Doreen are fiercely independent and hard working. Neither Ida nor Doreen
relies on a husband or the government for financial support; as poor single parents,
both women struggle to give their children opportunities that were unavailable to
them. Early in the novel, Lily admires Ida because Ida, unlike any white woman Lily
knows, including her own mother, mother-in-law, or sister-in-law, rejects the standard
of female dependence on males: "She don't hafta have no husband telling her what to do, thought Lily. The idea, audacious and unspeakable, sparkled before her as bright as a Christmas ornament" (32). Throughout Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, Ida holds a series of jobs so that she can save money and move with her son Sweetbabe to Chicago; Ida vows that "[w]hat happened to Armstrong would never be her son's fate" (129). Like Ida, Doreen is a single mother who refuses to go on welfare, even though work at New Plantation Catfish Farm and Processing Plant begins to rob her of her health. Doreen wants to be the positive role model for her daughters that Lily was not for her: "I don't want Melanie and Crystal to grow up seeing me standing in no welfare office with everybody looking down on us like we're some kind of sewer-rat trash. Cleaning catfish for the New Plantation may not be the easiest job in the world, but it beats welfare every day" (289). In fact, Doreen takes her daughter Melanie to a worker strike against New Plantation because she wants to teach the girl "to stand up for herself. 'Cause if she don't, won't nobody do it for her" (325). Campbell implies that their independence enables Ida and Doreen to surmount racial barriers and become friends.

Campbell also implies through the relationship between Doreen and Ida that white workers and black workers at New Plantation can unite effectively against the power structure that oppresses them. In a letter to the author, Campbell explains that Doreen "is able to begin the journey of transcending race by putting her economic interests before her need to sustain white supremacy." As she works under the intolerable conditions of New Plantation during the early 1980s, Doreen first begins to
realize that the Honorable Men of Hopewell exploit white workers as much as they do black workers: “They work us all like dogs.” Although Doreen has been immersed in the culture of white supremacy her entire life, she begins to question the value of distinguishing herself from other workers who happen to be black:

Mama, either I work with them or I get in the welfare line with them, and you know how I feel about that. I was raised here, and even though I went to school with them, I always felt like they was different from white people, like I was better than they were. Hell, I was raised on that feeling, and I’ll probably take it to my grave, but Mama, you know one thing: It’s getting to where I just can’t afford thinking like that no more. Them feelings ain’t practical when you work at the New Plantation. (290)

Granted, Doreen continues to harbor notions of black inferiority, yet she finally recognizes that her black co-worker at New Plantation, Ida Long, is “an all-right woman” and acknowledges that Ida is “kind of” the “leader” for her and the other workers—black or white—who plan to go on strike for higher wages and health benefits (295). Significantly, as she prepares for the strike, Doreen explicitly rejects the myth of the black rapist that her parents had invoked to justify the lynching of Armstrong Todd: “New Plantation is treating all of us like shit, Mama. I’m in the same boat as the niggers. I ain’t scared of being raped by a Willie Horton, Mama. I’m scared of not having medical benefits” (325). By rejecting the tenets of white supremacy, Doreen creates the possibility of an effective alliance with black workers.

The one force that truly unites all characters throughout Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine is human suffering, which, Campbell makes clear, transcends race, class, and gender. To call attention to this point, Campbell refers to the novel’s ironic title: “[T]n a lot of ways, your blues are like mine. We had to go through our own holocaust,
which was slavery, but human pain is still human pain” (qtd. in Graeber). In his review of the novel for the San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Review, John Harvey likewise comments on the shared human pain that afflicts all characters in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine: “There is a difference between black blues and white, between Robert Johnson and Hank Williams, but not, in Campbell’s novel, between the pain—and occasional joy—that informs the lives of poor whites and poor blacks alike.” Throughout the novel, Campbell conveys that neither blacks nor whites, women nor men, poor nor rich, are immune to suffering, even though the causes and degree of their suffering vary. Each character understands the pain that stems from poor relationships with parents, spouses, or children, and each character understands the helplessness that stems from profound discontent with flawed political, economic, and social systems.

Martin Luther King, Jr., stresses in “The Ethical Demands of Integration” (1962) that one of the demands of integration is the “recognition of the solidarity of the human family” (121). Bebe Moore Campbell establishes solidarity among the characters in Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine—black and white, female and male, poor and rich—by allowing them to recognize the humanity of one another. Even though barriers of race, class, and gender divide the characters in the novel, they all have in a common a desire to create and sustain meaningful relationships with their family members, and many ultimately choose to relate to one another despite their differences. Rather than submit to male authority—as Lily does—Doreen and Ida create independent lives for themselves. Rather than simply assume their place within
the existing power structure—as Floyd does—Doreen and Ida also forge an interracial alliance to improve their positions. Even Clayton decides, after decades of acting solely out of self-interest, to reach out to his half-sister Ida and to commit himself wholly to the struggle for racial and economic justice. By engaging contemporary readers empathetically in the lives of her characters, Campbell revives the 1960s ideal of the Beloved Community and challenges readers to re-examine the problems and the promises of racial integration in the United States.
CHAPTER 3

WILLIAM COBB’S *A WALK THROUGH FIRE*: THE ARRIVAL OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SMALL-TOWN ALABAMA, 1961

William Cobb’s *A Walk through Fire* (1992) explores the impact that the Civil Rights Movement has on residents of the small fictional town of Hammond, Alabama, in 1961. Reflecting the integrationist thrust of the Movement in the early 1960s, Cobb integrates his narrative structurally by alternating the perspectives of Eldon Long, the local black minister who introduces civil rights demonstrations to Hammond, and O. B. Brewster, a white small-business owner who resists becoming involved in the Movement. As depicted in *A Walk through Fire*, the relationship between Eldon and O. B., who were childhood friends as they grew up together on the same plantation where their parents were sharecroppers, reveals the ways in which the Movement paradoxically compels southern blacks and southern whites to confront the deep-rooted differences that divide them while also considering the common experiences and values that unite them. By analyzing the various race-based, as well as sex- and class-based, cultural forces that simultaneously bring together and keep apart his diverse characters, Cobb invites the reader of *A Walk through Fire* to consider the promises and the problems of the Beloved Community in Hammond.

William Cobb was born in 1937 in Demopolis, Alabama, the model for Hammond in *A Walk through Fire*. In a letter to the author, Cobb admits that while growing up as a white male in the small, segregated southern town in the 1950s, he adhered to accepted racial practices: “I realize now that following the Jim Crow rules
of the South I went along with consigning [black people] to second-class citizenship, and I surely knew that at the time, and I was guilty of racial jokes, everything else.”

However, Cobb “was quick to change” his racial attitudes when he attended graduate school at Vanderbilt University in the early 1960s: “I encountered people who felt passionately about the issue on both sides, and I had to make a choice. I did.” After receiving a master’s degree from Vanderbilt in 1963, Cobb decided to return to Alabama to teach at the University of Montevallo: “One of the reasons I came back to Alabama to teach was to do everything I could to bring about racial justice in my home state.” Cobb recalls that the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March particularly affected his teaching:

I went down to Selma, when everyone was gathering for the March, after Bloody Sunday. But I did not march. I went back and taught classes and tried to teach them in a way that would make a difference. Later, I taught the first two blacks, two young girls, who were freshmen at my college, and I tried again. My wife was teaching in a middle school during the years it was integrated. We tried to do in our quiet way what we could.

Cobb is currently the writer-in-residence at the University of Montevallo. In addition to A Walk through Fire, Cobb’s other novels include Coming of Age at the Y (1984), The Hermit King (1986), The Fire Eaters (1994), and Harry Reunited (1995).

A Walk through Fire is the first volume in Cobb’s projected trilogy about race relations in Hammond; the second volume, set in 1964, will be published in fall 2001.

The title of A Walk through Fire derives from Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume
you.” Isaiah 43:2 also appears as the novel’s epitaph. Because the book of Isaiah is, after all, a book of prophecy, Cobb’s selection of this verse suggests that *A Walk through Fire* will depict the Civil Rights Movement as a rite of passage through which Hammond, the South, and the United States must pass, and it foretells the numerous trials that await the novel’s characters.

When asked what motivated him to base *A Walk through Fire* on the Civil Rights Movement, Cobb responds in a letter to the author:

> When I was in my forties, I realized that the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South was probably the most powerful shaping influence in my life, though I am white and did not, on the surface, directly benefit from it. I was very much a person of my place, the town I was born and raised in, the people there. The changes that came in the few years of the movement affected me profoundly and deeply.

Reflecting the importance with which Cobb regards the Movement, *A Walk through Fire* is densely packed with allusions to actual events from the 1960s Black Freedom Struggle. Indeed, the 1961 Movement in Hammond represents the southern Movement in microcosm, for it includes a committed black leader, black activists who face the violence of rabid white racists, a weak and ineffective white civic leader, and an isolated white liberal. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer of the novel writes that Cobb “vividly details the clash of complex passions aroused by a small Alabama town’s halting mid-century march from Old South status quo toward integration.” The reviewer continues by commending Cobb’s depiction of direct-action protest in Hammond: “Deftly and movingly, Cobb conveys the courage of his terrified black characters who must walk past hundreds of hostile, jeering whites to a sit-in at a local café.” The reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* also writes that Cobb is “very, very good”
when he crafts the “taut confrontations” between blacks and whites in Hammond.

Similarly, the reviewer for *Library Journal* calls *A Walk through Fire* “powerful” and praises Cobb for creating a “palpable climate of fear and hatred” in Hammond (Falbo).

Like many of the historic civil rights campaigns in the South in the 1960s, the Hammond campaign is organized by a local black minister, Eldon Long. Eldon resembles not only the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.—obviously the most famous black minister associated with the Civil Rights Movement—but also such important leaders of local struggles as Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Alabama, and Reverend C. K. Steele of Tallahassee, Florida. Indeed, as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya document in *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (1990), the Black Freedom Struggle has had its roots in the Black Church since slavery. Revealing the profound influence of the Black Church on his conception of nonviolent direct action, Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked the Greek term agape to encourage black southerners to love their white oppressors, to hate the sin but not the sinner:

Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when one rises to love on this level, he loves men not because he likes them, not because their ways appeal to him, but he loves every man because God loves him. And he rises to the point of loving the person who does an evil deed while hating the deed that the person

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1 For an analysis of the importance of blacks ministers to the origins and development of the Civil Rights Movement, see Aldon Morris. For a thorough analysis of the importance of black ministers to the Movement through their membership in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), see Fairclough Redeem and Garrow Bearing. Initially named the Southern Leadership Conference in 1957, the organization was renamed, at Martin Luther King Jr.'s insistence, the Southern Christian Leadership Council to emphasize its ties to the Black Church and its commitment to Christian ideals. Further underscoring its ties to the Church, the SCLC adopted “To Redeem the Soul of America” as its slogan.
does. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said “love your enemies.” I’m very happy that he didn’t say like your enemies, because it is pretty difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental, and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like someone threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says love them, and love is greater than like. (“Love” 46-47)

Like King, Eldon commits himself to serving God “by putting Jesus’ message into action” (41). Since he was seventeen years old, Eldon has worked both within the church and within secular organizations to bring about social change, and he becomes so involved in the Civil Rights Movement that he vows to his wife Cora that he will “bring justice” to Hammond’s blacks “whether they know they want it or not” (44). He maintains faith that white southerners will not only acknowledge their racism, but also willingly amend their behavior toward blacks. When coaxing O. B. to run for mayor as a racial moderate who can desegregate Hammond peacefully, Eldon predicts a triumph for goodness and right: “People all over the country will look at us and say that’s the way to do it. . . . The power’ll shift, O. B. Decent people’ll have the power” (154-55). Eldon continually reminds himself throughout A Walk through Fire that white people “are victims, too. Lord, help us remember that” (248), and even after the death of his daughter Sally in a Ku Klux Klan bombing, he urges his congregation to show compassion toward the racists: “Have pity on em! Give em your compassion. Feel sorry for em, because they know hell, they are in hell! Hell is hate! . . . Return their white hate with black love. Forgive em their meanness. And we gonna win. I promise you. With everything in me, I promise you” (373-74). The efforts of white supremacists notwithstanding, Eldon insists on trying to create the Beloved
Community in Hammond through a commitment to the Christian ideals of love, forgiveness, and nonviolence.

Just as Eldon's commitment to nonviolence reflects the attitudes of many southern blacks in the early 1960s, the Ku Klux Klan's commitment to violence to uphold white supremacy in Hammond reflects much of the spirit of organized white resistance during the Movement. Cobb demonstrates that the Klan wields a great deal of power in Hammond, particularly because the white townspeople tacitly condone the terrorism conducted by Rooster Wembley, the Klan's local leader:

He was the leader of an almost invisible empire, a network of men that probably included some of the policemen . . . and certainly had the sympathies of most of the white people in the area. It was almost as though the Klan was carrying out silently and furtively in the dark of the night the thoughts and desires of the citizens of Hammond. Almost as though they were the real police force, the actual government. If Rooster took a notion, people would start to die. Vanish. There would be no trace, but everyone would know. (107)

Many of the Klan's brutal attacks on civil rights activists in *A Walk through Fire* parallel actual instances of white terrorism from the 1960s. For example, the Klan's violent response to demonstrators who march peacefully through downtown Hammond conjures images of the Klan's violent response to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) demonstrations in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964. Similarly, the Klan's kidnapping and murdering Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteer Joe Mancini in Hammond recalls the kidnapping and murdering of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner near Philadelphia, Mississippi, in 1964. The death of Sally Long as a result of the Klan's bombing Mount Sinai AME Zion Church in Hammond corresponds to the deaths of
Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley as a result of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. By drawing on these significant historic events from the Civil Rights Movement, Cobb graphically illustrates the extent to which the Klan rejects the notion of the Beloved Community.2

Although the Ku Klux Klan represents the most extreme manifestation of white resistance to the Civil Rights Movement in *A Walk through Fire*, white racism appears in other forms, too, and threatens the formation of the Beloved Community. For example, Mayor Mac McClellon and Hammond’s other leading white citizens—including the police chief, the pastor of First Baptist Church, and the principal of Hammond High School—compose the governing board of the Citizens’ Council, the chief objective of which is to resist the Supreme Court’s 1954 desegregation order. When Mac discovers that two SNCC volunteers have arrived in Hammond to organize sit-ins and voter-registration drives, he calls a special meeting of the Citizens’ Council to discuss resistance: “It ain’t no secret that we are faced with some awful bad prospects these days. . . . Our way of life is bein threatened on all sides. . . . It’s more important than ever for us white people to band together and take care of ourselves (70-71). Moreover, the county registrars in Hammond—like the notorious Theron

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Lynd in Hattiesburg, Mississippi—prevent blacks from registering to vote by demanding that they interpret the Alabama Constitution, guess how many words are in the Alabama Constitution, or answer “what side of the earth the moon’s on” (86). As the novel unfolds, Cobb also reveals that Police Chief Lester Sparks and his deputies are in cahoots with the Klan; when the two SNCC volunteers disappear, law enforcement officials refuse to conduct an official inquiry, insisting instead that the activists are “long gone” to avoid drug charges for marijuana that the police themselves have planted in the boys’ car (306). Throughout A Walk through Fire, Cobb suggests that Hammond’s whites unquestioningly accept these instances of institutional racism and support segregation as a reasonable way of life.3

Through his characterization of Mac McClellon, Cobb suggests that weak white civic leadership exacerbates racial tension as much as the Ku Klux Klan does. Indeed, Cobb seems to invite readers to examine Mac’s poor decisions alongside the varied policies of numerous other white southern officials in the early 1960s. For example, whereas Police Chief Laurie Pritchett undermined the Movement in Albany, Georgia, in 1961 by familiarizing himself with the principles of nonviolent direct action and refusing to respond violently to protestors, sending them to jail peacefully

instead, Mac remains ignorant of the Eldon’s strategies in Hammond and allows Rooster Wembley and the Klan to brutalize the protestors. Unlike Mayor Lester L. Bates of Columbia, South Carolina; Mayor William B. Hartsfield of Atlanta, Georgia; or Mayor Julian Lane of Tampa, Florida—all of whom worked closely with local black leaders to ensure peaceful desegregation—Mac rejects the “very idea” of Eldon’s demands, which cannot but strike contemporary readers as extremely modest: “We want all black people registered to vote. We want all schools, restaurants, the movie theater—everything—integrated” (60-61). Instead, Mac warns Eldon that he does not intend to protect black demonstrators from Klan violence, nor does he intend to be held accountable for any outbreak of violence: “You get out here demonstratin around, it’ll be like lightin a match in a room fulla dynamite. I can’t be responsible for that” (62). Given the vacuum of responsible leadership in Hammond, the Ku Klux Klan interprets Mac’s hands-off attitude as tacit approval. Indeed, Rooster indirectly warns Mac that the Klan will bomb the Mount Sinai AME Zion Church and kidnap the SNCC volunteers:

If [black demonstrators] keep on goin into white-only cafes and such, tryin to sit where they ain’t supposed to in the picture show, ain’t supposed to by law, then by God somethin bad’s really gonna happen to em! Somethin worse than already has... You know, churches can burn down... It’s that goddam nigger church and that nigger preacher where all this stuff’s gettin started. He’s a trouble-maker. And them little shit-asses from up North. They got no business down here. If you can’t send em packin, then maybe somebody else can! (258)

However, Mac’s inability to control the violence of Rooster Wembley and the Klan calls to mind Mayor Albert Boutwell’s inability to control the violence of Birmingham
Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Connor in 1963, or Selma Mayor Joseph Smitherman and Director of Public Safety Wilson Baker’s inability to control the violence of Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark in 1965. Because he does not deal effectively with either the black demonstrators or the Ku Klux Klan, Mac makes the formation of the Beloved Community in Hammond unlikely.4

Just as Cobb depicts the archetypal ineffective white leader in the character of Mac McClellon, he creates the archetypal “silent southerner” in the character of O. B. Brewster. George Washington Cable coined the term “Silent South” in 1885 to refer to white southerners who supported fair treatment for blacks, but were afraid to make their views public because of the fierceness with which white supremacists defended Jim Crow. Morton Sosna’s In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue (1977) traces the long line of southern liberals, from Cable in the late nineteenth to Lillian Smith in the mid-twentieth century, who insisted that they were not alone in their commitment to racial justice, that other decent whites existed too. In

4 For thorough analyses of Pritchett’s thwarting the Albany campaign, see Branch, Parting 524-61; Fairclough, Redeem 85-109; and Garrow, Bearing 173-230. For first-hand accounts of the Albany campaign, see Hampton and Fayer 97-114. For an account of Bates’s role in the desegregation of Columbia, see Paul S. Lofton, “Calm and Exemplary: Desegregation in Columbia, South Carolina,” Jacoway and Colburn 70-81. For an account of Hartfield’s role in the desegregation of Atlanta, see Alton Hornsby, Jr., “A City That Was Too Busy to Hate: Atlanta Businessmen and Desegregation,” Jacoway and Colburn 120-36. For an account of Lane’s role in the desegregation of Tampa, see Steven F. Lawson, “From Sit-In to Race Riot: Businessmen, Blacks, and the Pursuit of Moderation in Tampa, 1960-1967,” Jacoway and Colburn 257-81. For thorough analyses of the conflict among white civic leaders in Birmingham in 1963, see Fairclough, Redeem 111-39; Garrow, Bearing 231-86; and Morris 250-743. For first-hand accounts of the Birmingham struggle, see Hampton and Fayer 123-38 and Raines 139-85. For thorough analyses of the conflict among white civic leaders in Selma in 1965, see Charles Fager Selma 1965: The March That Changed the South, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1985); Fairclough, Redeem 225-51; Garrow, Bearing 357-430; and David J. Garrow, Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978). For first-hand accounts of the Selma struggle, see Hampton and Fayer 209-40 and Raines 187-226.
1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., appealed to such decent whites in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” urging them to abandon caution and take a firm stand for racial justice:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternally feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. (295)

Like King, many civil rights activists sincerely believed that a substantial number of white southerners, despite their reservations about the Movement, would eventually welcome the creation of the Beloved Community.

O. B. Brewster is one such silent southerner who initially refuses to take a public stand on the fundamental fairness of black equality. Like Duncan Harper in Elizabeth Spencer’s The Voice at the Back Door (1956), O. B. claims to be neutral regarding racial issues; yet Cobb implies, like Spencer, that neutrality regarding racial equality actually buttresses white supremacy. In fact, when Eldon Long first encourages O. B. to become involved in the Movement, O. B. defends the status quo and calls the Movement “pie in the sky”: “Nothin’s gonna ever change the way people are. You can’t just decide the way somethin ought to be and go out and
pronounce it that way” (154). Considering himself neither a segregationist nor an integrationist, nor even a racial moderate, O. B. steadfastly refuses to defend, to condemn, or even to discuss white supremacy as the Civil Rights Movement unfolds in Hammond in 1961: “All he wanted was to be left alone, to live his life the way he had planned it. He had had enough disappointments, but they had not yet made him bitter. That ought to be good enough” (219). Although O. B. is fundamentally a moral and just person, and although his local fame as a former major league baseball player for the New York Yankees would allow him to become a significant spokesperson for civil rights, he rejects Eldon’s proposal that he run for mayor of Hammond, press for social change, and become “a new kind of hero” (21). The indifference of such silent southerners as O. B. cannot but impede, Cobb suggests, the development of the Beloved Community.

The fictional characters and events in A Walk through Fire clearly resemble real people and events from the Civil Rights Movement, and this resemblance may have led the reviewer for Kirkus Reviews to write that “Cobb’s people may be players in a racial drama first, individuals second, but the battle-lines are cleanly drawn.” However, A Walk through Fire is more than a mere sociological, political, or historical rehashing of the Movement: it also tells the extraordinarily personal stories of its main characters. In a letter to the author, in fact, Cobb describes his portrayal of race relations in A Walk through Fire as “personal,” and he insists that he is “a novelist, . . . not a sociologist or a political scientist or a historian.” Cobb explains that while coming of age in Demopolis, Alabama, he grew up “in a racial situation that was very
personal. I knew nothing of the politics of racism, the economics of it, etc.” Indeed, Cobb recalls that he “had a close black friend until I was 12 or 13, then we went our separate ways. Like O. B., I accepted that, in quite a provincial way, as the way of the world. I lived in a segregated society, but always around black people.” Because of its emphasis on the personal rather than the political, *A Walk through Fire* falls squarely within a long tradition of fiction that explores the dynamics of race relations among small-town southerners, including Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* (1944), Spencer’s *The Voice at the Back Door* (1954), and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Much of William Faulkner’s and Ernest Gaines’s fiction also explores the complex interaction of blacks and whites in the South.

Although race relations in *A Walk through Fire* and its literary antecedents are largely personal, they nonetheless arise from and reflect sociological, political, and historical realities in the South. For example, the personal conflict between Eldon and O. B. for sexual access to Cora, Eldon’s wife, illuminates the social and political implications of interracial sex in the segregated South. O. B. and Cora Long have been lovers during three different periods in their lives. They become lovers first while they are teenagers living on the same plantation where their parents are sharecroppers. In 1949, they briefly become lovers again while Cora is the maid in O. B.’s house, even though both Cora and O. B. have already married others. In the novel’s present of 1961, compelled by the pressures of the Civil Rights Movement in Hammond, they have a third, short-lived affair.
Some reviewers find Cobb’s depiction of Cora and O. B.’s relationship problematic. For example, the reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* complains that “Cobb overloads his story with a torrid love-triangle involving Eldon, his wife Cora, and O. B.” The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* concedes that Cobb renders Cora and O. B.’s relationship “with considerable credibility,” yet insists that such a “romance” is “improbable in 1961 Alabama.” Through Cora and O. B.’s sexual history, however, Cobb analyzes the inherently unequal relationships that develop between white men and black women. As such historians as Angela Davis, Paula Giddings, and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall have shown, white men have historically used black women’s alleged promiscuity as an excuse to exploit them sexually. Although O. B. is not a rapist in the traditional sense of the word, he does, like Tracy Deen in Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* or Clayton Pinochet in Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* (1992), uphold the racist patriarchy by taking a black lover. Jacquelyn Hall notes of the ante-bellum South: “[W]hether seized through outright force or voluntarily granted within the master-slave relation, the sexual access of white men to black women was a cornerstone of patriarchal power in the South. . . . Like other forms of deference and conspicuous consumption, it buttressed planter hegemony” (“Mind” 332).

The scene in *A Walk through Fire* in which the teenaged O. B. ends his relationship with Cora graphically illustrates the manner in which white men use black women; indeed, it reminds readers of the scene in *Strange Fruit* in which Tracy Deen ends his relationship with black Nonnie Anderson to marry white Dot Pusey. O. B.
tells Cora that their affection for each other has been “all right as a substitute” until each finds a lover of his or her “own kind.” O. B. explains that seeing Cora has been “like a game” until he is ready to date a white woman. In fact, O. B. has already become enamored of Martha Crocker, the head cheerleader at the all-white high school and his future wife. Just as O. B. will unquestioningly accept the racial status quo as an adult, he unquestioningly accepts it as an adolescent: “There’s nothin else for us to do, Cora . . . . I can’t change the way the world is! It ain’t my fault that it’s the way it is!” (137). Yet Cobb reveals that Cora “had known what [O. B.] was going to say” (135). Cora realizes that O. B. has used her sexually: “What you mean to say . . . . is that fuckin me was just like beatin your meat . . . . You a white man . . . . I know how white people think. . . . I’m just a nigger. All right to fuck, but that’s all” (136).

Although Cora typically comports herself with dignity, O. B.’s obscene treatment of her compels her to lash out at him with equal obscenity. Decades later, in the novel’s present, Cora rebuts O. B.’s professions of love for her by reiterating that “no matter what anybody says or what happens, you’re still a white man and I’m still a nigger” (283-84).

In the first chapter of A Walk through Fire, Cobb clearly establishes that the novel will link the Civil Rights Movement’s political and social goals of eliminating white supremacy to Eldon’s personal goal of rectifying O. B.’s sexual exploitation of Cora. Eldon knows of Cora and O. B.’s first two affairs, and when he approaches O. B. to run for mayor of Hammond as a racial moderate, he explicitly situates O. B.’s sexual past with Cora within the larger cultural context of white southern men’s
routine exploitation of black women. Indeed, Eldon cannot but associate interracial sex with racial subordination because his mother was raped by her white employer when Eldon was thirteen years old. Eldon holds O. B. personally accountable for the historic legacy of white supremacy: “You’ve got a long way to go . . . before you can put things back right. . . . Before you can forget ‘ancient history,’ as you call it. A long way. . . . Yes, you are [responsible]. . . . You and all your white sisters and brothers. And mothers and fathers. From the beginning of time.” Eldon concludes that O. B. should run for mayor not only to compensate Eldon personally for sleeping with Cora, but also to help redress two centuries’ worth of white men’s sexual abuse of black women; in short, Cobb hints that a satisfactory resolution of the civil rights struggle in Hammond will depend somewhat on the resolution of Eldon’s enmity toward O. B. However, O. B. dismisses his affairs with Cora as “ancient history,” irrelevant to the larger issue of southern whites’ systematic subordination of blacks—even though his and Cora’s sexual relationship all too clearly resembles the historic exploitive relationship between white men and black women. O. B. denies his complicity in maintaining white supremacy and claims that he is “not responsible for all that” (29). Indeed, O. B.’s refusal to concede that his sexual relationship with Cora reinforces white supremacy reflects his general refusal throughout much of A Walk through Fire to take responsibility for eliminating racism and promoting justice.

Yet A Walk through Fire also reveals that white supremacy depends as much on the denial of black men access to white women as on the exploitation of black women. In his classic study Caste and Class in a Southern Town (1937), social
psychologist John Dollard argues that one reason white men have historically supported segregation is that they regard "any move toward social equality . . . as a move toward sexual equality, that is, toward full reciprocity between the castes. Social equality would mean that the white men would have to abandon their exclusive claims to women of the white caste and to admit reciprocal rights to Negro men" (170-71). An important scene in A Walk through Fire, in which the adolescent Eldon and O. B. admire an RC Cola advertisement featuring swimsuit-clad Paulette Goddard, dramatizes Dollard's observation about the racist double standard regarding appropriate sexual conduct for black southern males and white southern males. RC Cola has purposely made the advertisement erotic: "Paulette Goddard’s legs were bare, long and white, and her breasts were rounded, exaggerated by the costume."

However, O. B. feels uncomfortable gawking at the provocative advertisement in the company of a black boy, and he notices that an "empty, ungainly silence had passed between them." Later, as they play basketball, Eldon remarks that "[t]hat white lady looked good," and O. B. again feels "strange, uneasy."

Eldon becomes angry that he must deny the blatant sex appeal of Paulette Goddard because he is black and she is white; his knowledge that O. B., on the other hand, is sleeping with Cora further angers Eldon. The two boys begin to play roughly and exchange such ugly racial epithets as "asshole white son of a bitch" and "[n]igger shit-ass." When O. B. asks Eldon, "What the hell's wrong with you?," Eldon tries to articulate his anger toward O. B.'s hypocrisy regarding interracial sex: "You don't like me lookin at that white lady, do you? . . . But it's all right for you to . . . to . . .
Nigger can’t look at a white lady, can he? . . . But a white man . . .” (133).

Significantly, Eldon expresses his anger toward O. B. on a basketball court, one of the few places where a black male can confront a white male with impunity. Eldon understands that he, as a black male, must suppress any attraction to white women lest he violate the strict southern racial code forbidding interracial contact between black men and white women, whereas O. B., as a white male, can freely desire white women and black women. Not surprisingly, given the complicated relationship between race and sex in the South, O. B., Eldon, and Cora all become aware that O. B. is “white” and that Eldon and Cora are “niggers” as they enter puberty and become aware of their sexuality (134).

Cobb also illustrates throughout A Walk through Fire that class, like sex, shapes his characters’ attitudes toward race relations. In the character of Mac McClellon, Cobb explores the ways in which the white elite simultaneously marginalizes lower-class whites and instills in them a false sense of empowerment through racial solidarity. Like Floyd Cox in Bebe Moore Campbell’s Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine, Mac is clearly of poor-white origin, lacking any ties to the antebellum past in which the southern elite has its roots. Indeed, Mac remembers from his childhood “the succession of whitewashed frame houses with rusty screens and rotting stoops out in Shortleaf, a part of town that all the other young people in town made fun of” (183). Even though Mac takes all the traditional, allegedly foolproof steps to improve his socioeconomic status—putting himself through college, studying hard, marrying “into a good old family, with money,” and working hard as mayor to
"shepherd" Hammond "from a sleepy little river village of about six thousand to a
town of ten thousand" (50)—the white elite still holds all the real political, economic,
and social power in Hammond.

Throughout A Walk through Fire, the annual Shady Grove Deer Drive, which
dates back to the Civil War, epitomizes the powerful southern white men who exclude
such lower-class whites as Mac: "Senators went to the hunt, and wealthy landowners.
Even the governor came occasionally. You had to be somebody to be invited, and it
was not so much just having money. Hell, it wasn't like the country club, where you
could just buy your way in. No, the Shady Grove hunt was something else entirely."

In his classic treatise The Mind of the South (1941), W. J. Cash describes the process
by which the southern "ruling class" created, after its defeat in the Civil War, this "sort
of closed corporation to which those who had not belonged before could not ever fully
penetrate now" (129). Like Cash, Cobb implies that acceptance among the elite in
Hammond depends on intangible ties to the Old-South "aristocracy" rather than on
mere financial assets; to move about freely within the Hammond aristocracy, a white
man has to "be from an old family, to have a 'pedigree,' and live in a grand old house
with painted ceilings and a parlor with those family portraits with eyes that followed
you all over the room" (49). Such requirements necessarily bar such whites of humble
origin as Mac from admission to the upper class.

A Walk through Fire implies that Mac's insignificance within the southern
power structure corresponds to the subordinate status of blacks, and that his
determination to improve his station parallels the hopes of Hammond's black citizens.
Ironically, however, Mac fails to perceive these parallels. He assumes that his whiteness entitles him to the prerogatives of the white elite, and he passionately supports white supremacy: "[A] nigger is a nigger, and a white man is a white man, and that’s the way it’s always been and the way it always will be. You can’t change it by pretendin’ otherwise. I got nothin’ against em. But they got their place just like I got mine. And society won’t work unless you learn your place and stay in it" (400).

Mac takes pride in his racial identification with the white elite, just as after the Civil War and Reconstruction the pride of poor southern whites “attach[ed] itself to the notion of the South’s aristocratic heritage nearly as militantly as did that of any real scion of the plantation” (Cash 128). Mac hopes that the heirs to Old-South privilege will ultimately accept him, but Cobb suggests that Mac’s aspirations to the white aristocracy blind him to his own ineligibility to that elite group. Only occasionally does Mac remember that the upper white echelon to which he eagerly seeks admission has historically exploited such lower class whites as he: "They were the sons of the men who had been officers in the Civil War. . . . They’d sent his antecedents into battle to fight and die for their right to own land and slaves, and after the war they’d worked those foot soldiers, the ones who managed to survive, half to death before their time” (54). Cobb hints throughout A Walk through Fire that Mac’s blindly supporting white supremacy, an ideology that clearly contributes to his marginalization, prevents him from developing potentially beneficial alliances with similarly marginalized blacks.
Cobb also suggests that Mac perpetuates his marginalization by refusing to follow the lead of white businessmen across the South. In the introduction to *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (1982), a collection of fourteen essays that analyze the role of white business leaders in the desegregation of various southern cities, Elizabeth Jacoway argues that during the 1960s, shrewd white southern business leaders guided their communities toward promoting economic growth rather than toward resisting desegregation:

[T]he southern business leadership consciously chose to abandon traditional racial patterns, even in the full knowledge that they were abandoning the old "southern way of life." To be sure, they yielded as little as possible and they held to their traditional racial attitudes. But the important point is that they confronted the alternatives available to them, examined their values, and chose, ultimately, to place economic growth before white supremacy. (7)

Reflecting the attitudes of the business leaders whom Jacoway describes, *A Walk through Fire*’s Carleton Byrd, the representative of Gulf International Paper Company, which is considering building an $84-million paper mill in Hammond, suggests to Mac that he try "accommodating the Negroes" in Hammond to "give them something of whatever it is they want" (268). Byrd explains to Mac that for Gulf International, "only one stand . . . is publicly feasible at this time. . . . Your . . . way of life is very 'special’ shall we say. But it is a thing of the past. Our investment is in the future" (32). In fact, the company has decided not to locate in Montgomery, Alabama, "because of all the racial troubles over there" (51). Rather than taking Byrd’s advice and ensuring economic success for himself and for Hammond, Mac remains hostile to
the Civil Rights Movement until the end of the novel, choosing to ally himself with Hammond’s segregationists.

Mac’s attitude toward Lyman Wells, a prominent white Hammond lawyer whom SNCC pays to represent the SNCC workers in Hammond, indicates the extent to which Mac resents the white business elite’s willingness to align itself with civil rights advocates for the sake of appearances. Mac already detests Lyman because he believes that Lyman, a Phi Beta Kappa and graduate of Vanderbilt Law School, is “the perfect example of the kind of snob who kept [him] out of the Shady Grove Hunt Club” (185). Yet Lyman understands that desegregation is inevitable and, therefore, politically and economically desirable; he tells Mac that “things are going to change . . . whether you want them to or not.” By agreeing to serve as SNCC’s lawyer in Hammond, Lyman becomes in Mac’s eyes “a traitor to the cause” of white supremacy: “He already hated Lyman for what he was, that world he represented, and now here he was representing these niggers! Something was badly out of kilter” (260). Mac reacts so angrily to the white business elite’s abandonment of segregation that he ultimately cast his lot with the Klan, which seemingly accepts and supports him.

Just as class concerns prevent Mac from endorsing the Civil Rights Movement, they prevent Cora Long from sharing her husband’s enthusiasm. As a math teacher at the all-black U. S. Smith High School, Cora’s support for the Movement can easily result in her dismissal by Hammond’s white school board. Reflecting the reservations of many middle-class blacks during the 1960s, Cora explains to the white SNCC
volunteers that she and other, older, more conservative blacks prefer the security of the
status quo to the uncertainty of social protest:

[S]ome of us have worked hard for what we’ve got, and we’re proud of
it. I’m speakin for a number of folks back here when I say that we
don’t know if we’re ready to risk all that for whatever we might gain
from these . . . demonstrations and such as that . . . . I mean, people can
get hurt. Killed. You’re askin us to put our lives and the lives of our
children on the line . . . . (90)

Although Eldon stresses to Cora the importance of “freedom” and “justice” and
“dignity” for southern blacks, she reminds him of the harsh reality of black life in the
segregated South:

Those words don’t mean a whole lot to me Eldon . . . . They sound just
like words. I’m talkin bout survival . . . . I go to that school every day,
try to cram math into those heads. Their folks don’t even want em
there, can’t wait till they get out. They don’t see any need for addin
five and three. Five and three what? You think they care about
dignity? They care about findin some fatback and collards. Enough to
feed a child and get her through the day. That’s what I care about, too.
(44)

Cora eventually becomes involved in the Movement, but she initially resists,
preferring to maintain her middle-class status in the black community rather than seek
entrance into white society.

Yet even as Cobb illustrates throughout A Walk through Fire the various
cultural forces that cause conflict among his black characters and his white characters,
thereby preventing the formation of the Beloved Community, he also demonstrates the
ways in which black lives and white lives are closely intertwined in Hammond. When
asked to comment on the cultural forces that unite black southerners and white
southerners, Cobb responds with a “quick story” in a letter to the author:
At Bread Loaf [a writer’s conference at Middlebury College in Vermont] in 1968 there was a young black woman from Uniontown, Alabama, 15 miles from my home, who had graduated from all black Perry County Training School the same month and year I had graduated from lily white Demopolis High School. . . . She was extremely militant, dressed in African garb, and called most white people, loudly and persistently—if you will forgive me—“a bunch of goddam motherfuckin' blue eyed mind fuckers!” Anyway, all our liberal Yankee, Northern, California friends from all over these US all to a person assumed that we would hate each other. Quite to their astonishment, we became immediate fast friends. I was the only white person she would talk to and have anything to do with. They were appalled and puzzled. It was simply that she and I shared a heritage, a place, a people, really, that cut across racial lines in ways they could never understand, and that allowed us to openly communicate and like and even love each other.

By depicting the conversion of O. B. Brewster from a silent southerner to a champion of racial justice, Cobb sheds light on the “heritage” that black southerners and white southerners share, a heritage that “cut[s] across racial lines.”

Cobb consciously tries to create in O. B. a fair-minded southern white who is more complicated than such literary antecedents as Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird. In a letter to the author, Cobb laments that “so many books (and movies) in the Deep South seem to involve an ‘Atticus Figure,’ a loving Southern liberal through whose graciousness and unselfishness poor downtrodden blacks are redeemed. This always struck me as condescending and patronizing.” Before writing A Walk through Fire, Cobb envisioned a novel that explored southern race relations with more depth than novels like To Kill a Mockingbird: “I knew something was wrong with the classic Southern ‘treasure’ To Kill a Mockingbird, other than its being somewhat slight and melodramatic for my tastes—nothing in the treatment of race anything like the complexity of Faulkner, for example.” To capture the complexity of
race relations in *A Walk through Fire*, Cobb allows O. B. to evolve from an indifferent white man into a social and political activist:

Using my own experience (though the novel is not autobiographical at all) I set out to write a novel about a white man, not a liberal, who is drawn into the movement for mostly personal reasons at first, experiences several watershed moments (his plowing Buddy Ed’s field, his realization of the true nature of his relationship with Cora, for example) and finally comes down on the side of moral justice and right, on the way toward *not* redeeming Eldon and the other blacks in his town but redeeming HIMSELF.

The reviewer of *A Walk through Fire* for Kirkus Reviews describes this conversion of O. B.’s as “powerful and moving,” and indeed, during the course of his redemption, O. B. learns two things about himself that link him to Hammond’s blacks and draw him into the Civil Rights Movement: his dissociation from the white power structure in Hammond and his grounding in the Christian faith.

In *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (1985), Robert J. Norrell analyzes white Tuskegeeans who were sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s and detects that one of their distinguishing personality traits was their consciously choosing to remain “outside the town’s conservative establishment” (135). Reflecting Norrell’s observations, Cobb implies, like the Populists in the 1890s and such writers as Richard Wright and Erskine Caldwell in the 1930s, that white southerners like O. B. can begin to create the Beloved Community by rejecting the race- and class-based privileges that white supremacists represent. While growing up, O. B. interacted intimately with poor black sharecropper on the Hubbard plantation, and he remembers that Eldon’s parents “had been almost like a second set of parents for him” (274). In fact, O. B. cannot but
observe the irony of Eldon's sitting in at Maud's Café, "risking his safety for the right
to eat in a white restaurant," whereas O. B. has eaten "hundreds of meals" in the cabin
of Eldon's parents (121). Because O. B. has never been a privileged white man
reaping the benefits of an economic system based on black exploitation, Eldon
believes that O. B. will agree to run for mayor of Hammond as a racial moderate:
"O. B. was the only white man Eldon knew who could or would understand what it
was all about for the black man, because they had been like brothers. . . . O. B. had to
understand, because they had slept in the same bed, eaten the same food" (22-24).

A scene in A Walk through Fire in which O. B. encounters Buddy Ed Webb,
an old black farmer, best illustrates the potential for a tentative alliance between poor
whites and poor blacks: it is the "watershed moment" to which Cobb refers in his
letter to the author. Because Hammond's blacks are boycotting white businesses,
Buddy Ed refuses to let O. B. repair his tractor, choosing to plow instead with a mule
so that his small granddaughter "ain't gonna hafta be no nigger" when she grows up.
When the heat exhausts Buddy Ed, O. B. tills the field for him, realizing in the process
that he has more in common with such rural blacks as Buddy Ed than he has with
many whites:

This old man is my neighbor and has been my neighbor since before I
ever heard the word! Our sweat has fallen on the same soil; the same
fierce sun has beaten down on both our heads. I can plow this field; we
can plow his field together! . . . I am not too far removed from this soil
that I can't feel its message again, in my legs and in my heart. (224)
Through this revelation in Buddy Ed’s field, O. B. becomes aware that his affinity lies with poor, rural, black and white southerners rather than with the Citizens’ Council or the Ku Klux Klan.

Cobb also suggests that traditional Christian values unite black southerners and white southerners in the early 1960s. Of course, Christian theology dominates Civil Rights Movement ideology during its early years, and as mentioned earlier in this chapter, black ministers orchestrated many of the early nonviolent, direct-action protests. Even SNCC, which would eventually become the most radical civil rights organization, espoused Christian principles in its 1960 statement of purpose: “We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose... Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step toward such a society” (qtd. in Carson 23). In fact, as John Cartwright illustrates, the entire 1960s notion of a Beloved Community is essentially a “Christian social ideal” (162).

In A Walk through Fire, O. B.’s commitment to Christian ideals gives rise to his commitment to racial justice, reflecting Robert Norrell’s contention that liberal white Tuskegeeans of the early 1960s were likely to perceive “race relations in Tuskegee in the context of Christian teachings on brotherhood” (135). To emphasize the significance of Christianity to the Civil Rights Movement, Cobb repeatedly links O. B.’s emerging empathy with the civil rights demonstrators to his awareness of fundamental Christian doctrines. For example, Eldon asks O. B. early in the novel
whose side he thinks Jesus would be on if He were to come to Hammond: “Would He walk with us? Huh? Or with Rooster Wembley and Mac McClellon?” O. B. evades answering the question by saying that he does not see “what Jesus has got to do with it” (155). Jesus has got, however, everything to do with the Movement, for His teachings are manifest in its goals and strategies.

An exchange between O. B. and his father regarding the Civil Rights Movement results in a crucial epiphany for O. B., an epiphany that demonstrates to O. B. his role as a Christian vis-à-vis the Movement. After commenting offhandedly that “[t]he niggers don’t wanna be niggers anymore,” Mr. Brewster remarks that Buddy Ed Webb is “a good man” and that there “[a]in’t nothing Buddy Webb wouldn’t do for you.” Mr. Brewster’s observation compels O. B. to link the Black Freedom Struggle to Christ’s second great commandment:

[It hit him then, like a sudden, startling bolt from a cloudless sky, that it was true that there was nothing that Buddy Ed wouldn’t do for another man, black or white, and O. B. believed in that, too, had always lived his life according to that simple commandment, because it was “Love thy neighbor,” that’s what his father was saying about Buddy Ed. It was astonishingly simple. After all, wasn’t that what a man’s life was all about? Wasn’t that the basic rule that made everything else make sense? (220)

O. B. concludes that the second great commandment of Christ’s, to love one’s neighbor, is “the only reason to do anything” (224).

Cobb thus captures the complex cultural forces that unite and divide his black characters and his white characters, forces that can simultaneously create and destroy the Beloved Community. Cobb’s interest in the paradoxical amity and enmity between southern blacks and southern whites reveals itself even in the conclusion of
A Walk through Fire. Indeed, the ambivalent relationship between Eldon and O. B. at the end of the novel parallels the unresolved conflict that remains between southern blacks and southern whites in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. On the one hand, A Walk through Fire implies that blacks and whites will never reconcile their differences. After witnessing the Ku Klux Klan’s brutal attack on the black demonstrators at the Dauphin Theater, O. B. pessimistically concludes that the two races will always oppose each other: “No, it will never be over. It has gone on as long as there were men around to do it, and as long as there are men around, they will keep on doing it” (253). Nor can Eldon forget O. B.’s history of sexual indiscretions with Cora: “When we were boys, . . . I trusted him, even though I knew what had happened in the past. I trusted him, because he was my brother, and he betrayed me. He betrayed me then, and he betrayed me again” (382). The Civil Rights Movement has clearly not ameliorated the strained race relations in Hammond.

On the other hand, A Walk through Fire is cautiously optimistic by hinting that the Civil Rights Movement awakens in black southerners and white southerners an awareness of their mutual dependence on each other. That southern blacks and southern whites must live together despite their historical antagonism occurs to O. B. even as he identifies the “pent-up rage of centuries” in Eldon’s eyes: “I am your brother. We have always known that, and even when Cain slew Abel, they didn’t stop being brothers, did they? . . . I am your keeper. And you are mine. And we may hate each other, we may kill each other. But we are brothers” (336). Eldon arrives at a similar conclusion that his and O. B.’s lives are inextricably intertwined: “I hate
O. B.! I must confess that, know that in my heart. I hate him and yet I love him, too, because he is my brother. He is a part of me, like one of my hands that I cannot chop off, even if it is diseased and pains me” (371). The final pages of the novel continue to cast Eldon and O. B., paradoxically, as friends and foes. Even as he stands by his daughter Sally’s grave, Eldon’s thoughts about O. B. remain contradictory: “He is my brother. He is my mortal enemy” (411).

By concluding A Walk through Fire with the seeming contradiction that Eldon and O. B.’s relationship has worsened and improved, Cobb seems to propose that racial attitudes do not stagnate during a given era, but ebb and flow. The novel’s structure also suggests that race relations fluctuate over time, especially during the Civil Rights Movement. Cobb divides the novel into four sections that correspond to the four seasons, each section revolving around the actions and images associated with a season. In the beginning section, “Winter,” the Black Freedom Struggle in Hammond is fairly nonexistent. Eldon predicts a bleak future for blacks in Hammond unless they themselves alter the system, and he begins to plan accordingly. Nonetheless, the first sit-in at in Hammond fails, and Eldon concedes that “the town had slipped right back into its everyday patterns, totally unaffected by what they had done, ignoring it completely, as though it had not happened at all” (149). In the next section, “Spring,” the Movement begins again, culminating with the successful black boycott of Hammond’s white businesses, a boycott that compels O. B. to run for mayor. Although the “Summer” section opens with the sit-in at the Dauphin Theater, the Movement gradually slows, and a period of inactivity begins.
The final part of the novel, however, "Fall," seems to embody mixed messages. On the one hand, the main occurrences in Hammond in the fall include the bombing of Eldon's church by the Ku Klux Klan and the death of his daughter Sally. Moreover, a lassitude falls over both blacks and whites in Hammond at the end of *A Walk through Fire*. On the other hand, Cobb leads the reader to believe that significant change lies in Hammond's future in the fall. For example, Eldon predicts that Hammond's blacks will harvest the first fruits, clearly a metaphor for civil rights gains: "Remember: *Autumn is the harvest*. Have faith, and the rains will come. *The desert will bloom again*" (350). To lift Eldon's spirits after O. B. loses the mayoral election, Martin Luther King, Jr., tells Eldon to "remember that the autumn is the harvest" (341). King even promises to speak at Mount Sinai AME Zion Church in the fall. Winter and spring will follow fall in Hammond, and the cycle of death and rebirth will begin anew. Moreover, the reader can assume that O. B., who becomes the interim mayor of Hammond after Mac suffers a nervous breakdown, will undertake the peaceful desegregation of Hammond's public facilities. Beyond that, of course, the Civil Rights Movement will culminate with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

*A Walk through Fire* dramatically reveals the personal effects that the Civil Rights Movement has on such characters as Eldon and Cora Long, O. B. Brewster, and Mac McClellon. Indirectly, through the relationships among these characters, the novel also reveals the social and political ramifications that the Movement has for black southerners and white southerners. Just as bitter differences and shared
experiences divide and unite the novel’s characters, paradox characterizes the Civil Rights Movement in Hammond. Significant race-, gender-, and class-based barriers thwart the formation of the Beloved Community, yet some blacks and whites continue working toward interracial reconciliation. Indeed, by the end of *A Walk through Fire*, Eldon and O. B. have made more headway toward mending their differences than toward severing their ties. Their relationship thus suggests that blacks and whites can, despite enormous hurdles, make progress toward realizing the Beloved Community.
CHAPTER 4

VICKI COVINGTON’S THE LAST HOTEL FOR WOMEN:
THE COMING OF THE FREEDOM RIDES
TO BIRMINGHAM, 1961

On the acknowledgments page of her fourth novel The Last Hotel for Women (1996), Vicki Covington extends her “deepest gratitude” to “all the people of Birmingham [Alabama]—living and dead, good and bad.” By singling out the rank and file of Birmingham for her thanks, Covington cues the reader that The Last Hotel for Women will concern itself somehow with ordinary folk. The novel opens in Birmingham on Mother’s Day, May 14, 1961, the infamous Sunday on which the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Riders are attacked by the Ku Klux Klan at the Trailways bus terminal.1 During the course of The Last Hotel for Women, Covington explores the ways in which this violent confrontation—as well as the implications of the Civil Rights Movement in general—affects the day-to-day lives of her ordinary characters. Moreover, by choosing to narrate her story from the different points of view of black characters and white characters, Covington invites the reader to participate in a fictional Beloved Community and to reflect on the promises and problems of integration in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1961.

1 In The Last Hotel for Women, Covington slightly alters the historical circumstances surrounding the Freedom Rides. In the novel, Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Connor jails the Freedom Riders until a police escort can take them to the Alabama-Tennessee border. In reality, however, the first group of Freedom Riders had to fly to New Orleans instead of completing the ride because Greyhound refused to risk further violence. Determined not to let violence derail the protests, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized another group to ride from Nashville to Birmingham and continue the Freedom Ride; Connor arrested this group in Birmingham and then escorted them to the Tennessee border. See Branch, Parting 411-91. For first-hand accounts of the Freedom Rides, see Hampton and Fayer 73-96, and Raines 109-29. See also James Farmer. Farmer helped to found CORE in 1942 and served as its national director from 1961 to 1966.
Vicki Covington is a native of Birmingham, where she was born in 1953 and reared in the Woodlawn neighborhood. Like The Last Hotel for Women, Covington’s first three novels—Gathering Home (1988), Bird of Paradise (1990), and Night Ride Home (1992)—are all set in her hometown. Covington has also co-written a nonfiction work, Cleaving: The Story of a Marriage (1999), with her husband, the author Dennis Covington. The Covingtons currently live in Birmingham and teach writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

In Why We Can’t Wait (1964), his account of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s 1963 civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Martin Luther King, Jr., called Birmingham “the most segregated city in America” (528). In The Last Hotel for Women, Covington depicts Birmingham in 1961 as a city in which the lines are being drawn between segregationists and integrationists: “People are scurrying from this side to that side, unsure of which side they’re even on anymore” (119). The northern reporter known as Sugarfoot, who is in the city covering the Freedom Rides, likens the situation in Birmingham to a battle: “Equivalent of war in some respects, wouldn’t you say? . . . [I]n these circumstances, you never know who’s working for who, but you can count on it that everybody—in the political arena, I mean—is talking to somebody. I mean, there are sides, you know, in a war” (125-26). In May 1961, then, civil rights forces and segregationist forces are gathering in Birmingham for a showdown.

To lend immediacy to her historical drama, Covington re-creates in the first few pages of the novel a sense of “impending theater” surrounding the scheduled
arrival of the Freedom Riders in Birmingham (22). From the perspective of twelve-
year-old Gracie Fraley, Covington recalls other momentous occasions that have
already taken place in the early years of the 1960s: “Gracie feels that she has spent the
past few years on the edge, waiting for something to happen. It took a lifetime for
Alan Shepard’s rocket to go up... It took an eternity for Kennedy to be elected.
And now she is sitting here, on Mother’s Day, waiting for a bus to arrive” (29).
Gracie suspects that “something is going to happen” in Birmingham “because of all
the journalists from up North” (19), and even though their father has told them “to stay
away” from the bus station, Gracie and her seventeen-year-old brother Benny go
anyway (28).

To convey the sheer horror of the Ku Klux Klan’s attack on the Freedom
Riders, Covington effectively relates the incident through Gracie’s eyes. In her review
of The Last Hotel for Women for the New York Times Book Review, Alice Truax
describes Covington’s account of the assault on the Freedom Riders as “sickeningly
real.” The attack seems especially intense because it catches Gracie completely off
guard. She has heard the word “Klan” before, “but it means nothing to her” until she
sees its adherents in action (29). As the Freedom Riders disembark at the bus
terminal, Covington explains that Gracie “can’t get a handle on any of this.” Benny
has to remind his younger sister that the Freedom Riders are “normal people... They’re innocent” (29). She begins to cry when a Klansman destroys a broadcast
journalist’s microphone, and she cannot understand why no police officers are present
to stop the fighting. Moreover, the violence overwhelms Gracie’s senses: “She’s
never witnessed a real fight, never heard the cracking of fists on a rib cage. Skin on skin is the only noise—like a scrimmage practice—and that’s what makes it so frightening. When the screams finally begin, it is a relief” (30-31). With Gracie, the reader sees the riders’ being “thrown up against a concrete wall again and again,” “slugged,” “beaten,” “tackled and pummeled” (30-31). Twice during the melee, Gracie “feels sick,” and indeed, the confrontation has erupted so violently that she mistakenly “thinks there are guns and knives and ice picks” (31). The riot terrifies Gracie to the extent that she frantically begins to pray in the middle of the bus station: “It’s a typical prayer that makes her feel like trash, a please-get-me-out-of-here-and-I’ll-never-do-anything-wrong-again kind of prayer. An I’ll-be-a-missionary-and-marry-a-preacher-and-take-care-of-orphans kind of prayer” (31).

At first glance, Covington’s characters seem unlikely protagonists for a novel based on the Freedom Rides. Gracie and Benny Fraley are, after all, mere adolescents, and white natives of Birmingham at that. Gracie and Benny’s mother, Dinah, owns and manages the Crescent Hotel where many of the northern journalists who are covering the Freedom Rides are staying. One of the Freedom Riders, a woman of indeterminate racial origin named Angel, seeks refuge at the Crescent after the melee at the bus station. Dinah’s mother Candy managed the Crescent Hotel during the 1930s as a brothel—hence its designation as “the last hotel for women”—and her regulars included Eugene “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s notorious Commissioner of Public Safety. Connor continues to visit Dinah at the hotel to talk “about the old days, her mother, how men hungry for a girl sat smoking into newspapers” (28). Dinah’s
husband Pete, however, loathes Connor. As a supervisor of black workers at one of Birmingham’s foundries, Pete Fraley wants desperately to assuage his white guilt over racial discrimination and to establish a rapport with Nathan Stamps, an aloof black pourer who refuses to talk to him. In the midst of this social upheaval, the reporter known as Sugarfoot finds the Fraleys’ struggles touching, but he also recognizes that “there’s no story here, not the kind you’d print in the paper” (128). Eventually, though, Sugarfoot comes to understand that the high-profile Freedom Riders, the civil rights activists, and the segregationists who make the national news are “only a piece” of “his story, or at least the one he’s feeding to the newspaper.” Another story, “deeper than politics,” interests Sugarfoot more: “the Fraleys, baseball, the coloreds and the whites learning to drink the same water” (173). This is the story that Covington chooses to tell in The Last Hotel for Women.

Covington’s depiction of “ordinary people in an ordinary city living in extraordinary times” has drawn mixed reviews from critics (Jackson). A handful of reviewers finds The Last Hotel for Women tedious. For example, the reviewer for Publishers Weekly complains that the novel’s “pervasive premonitory tone is not only overstated (convincing drama never occurs) but also inhibits the narrative, creating lethargy rather than suspense.” Commenting on Covington’s decision to narrate The Last Hotel for Women from multiple points of view, the reviewer for Entertainment Weekly asserts that the novel lacks “the proper narrative vision” to record an historical event; the writer goes on to object that “the overall effect” of the “shifting points of view” is “diffuse.” Likewise, the writer for Kirkus Reviews argues that Covington’s
"narrative style" is "still waiting for some judicious pruning." Despite conceding that the characters of "Dinah, Pete, and especially Connor are complex and skillfully drawn," the reviewer laments that Covington "approaches" her story "obliquely sometimes, complicating the narrative with shifting points of view, especially when she slips into the minds of more marginal characters." Alice Truax criticizes Covington for "sacrific[ing] the grit of her story to the various romantic longings of her liberal-white characters." According to Truax, the effect is that "the emotional topology of [Birmingham]—in particular, the latent hatred that a Nathan Stamps or a Pete Fraley would have lived in fear of unleashing—remains dismayingly abstract."

A majority of reviewers agrees, however, that Covington’s emphasis on ordinary in The Last Hotel for Women adds to rather than detracts from her story about the Freedom Rides. For example, Joyce R. Slater, writing for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, asserts that readers “should rejoice” that the “gifted author” of The Last Hotel for Women “puts a human, accessible face on those turbulent days and nights.” In her review of The Last Hotel for Women for the Women’s Review of Books, Valerie Miner lauds Covington for creating “a novelistic world with as rich a sense of the collective as of the individual.” In Miner’s opinion, the points of view of “Southerners and Northerners, blacks and whites, young and old, progressive, reactionary, and timid” accurately reflect “a range of permeable communities during the Freedom Ride Era” (21). Miner concludes that The Last Hotel for Women is "tour-de-force social fiction," and she praises Covington for "her nuanced portrayal of a halting emotional-political tango, her excruciating documentation of mistrust"
between whites and blacks, misrepresentation, missed cues, and small, heroic risks” (21-22). Echoing Miner, the reviewer for Publishers Weekly admires Covington for “[h]er unusual ability to depict Southerners with discerning candor as well as sympathetic understanding.” The reviewer then goes on to comment that The Last Hotel for Women “succeeds in conveying the complex, relatively respectful relationship between blacks and guilt-ridden whites in Birmingham.”

Unsurprisingly, Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor figures prominently in this novel about the 1961 Freedom Rides. Covington remembers that Connor was “the most riveting public figure of my childhood” (qtd. in Pearsall), and as Barbara Masleffoff comments in her review of The Last Hotel for Women for Library Journal, Covington’s fictional Connor is “everything you recall” about the historical Connor: “mean, nasty, overweight, and bigoted.”² In the first chapter of the novel, Connor mentions his ties to white supremacy and openly confirms for reporters that the Ku Klux Klan is active in Birmingham. He wholeheartedly supports the racist labor practices of the foundry where Pete works: “The Negroes work where it’s hot. Whites supervise. Connor feels this is the natural order of things. Connor likes things to make sense” (80). Conversely, Connor resents the protests of southern blacks and thinks to himself: “What a great nation this was... when everybody knew their place” (188). Connor even admits the hypocrisy of his professing Christianity while violently forcing black southerners to defer to white

² For a biography of Connor that examines his career in and significance to Birmingham and Alabama politics, see William Nunnelley, Bull Connor (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1992).
supremacy. Mocking Christ's Beatitude that "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9), Connor comments to Benny Fraley: "The beatitudes are nice, . . . when they're cross-stitched and hanging in somebody's hall right beside the bathroom door, know what I mean?" (184). Connor relishes offending others with his racism, so when white couple Pete and Dinah Fraley invite black couple Nathan and Lydia Stamps back to the café at the hotel after an integrated baseball practice, he assaults the Stampses with racial slurs. Connor tells Dinah to "[p]ut them to work" frying chicken or slicing watermelon, and he even congratulates Lydia on being married to Nathan because "some Negroes aren't" (244). His racism and personal mission to prevent integration so consume Connor that he even perceives the hot fudge on vanilla ice cream that the Fraleys and Stampses are eating together as "a portrait of ugly miscegenation" (246). Like his historic counterpart, Covington's Connor remains dead set against the Beloved Community.

Reflecting the Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth's assessment of the historic Bull Connor as "the epitome of segregation" (qtd. in Raines 155), Covington's fictional Connor clearly functions in The Last Hotel for Women as a symbol for the ubiquity of white racism in Birmingham in the early 1960s: "Connor is everywhere, in every conversation, in every waking thought" (147). Connor's presence dominates the novel, and his "black city car" (49)—as foreboding as the Misfit's in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"—always indicates his whereabouts. Covington's Connor also resembles O'Connor's Misfit in that his evil deeds make redemption for Birmingham possible; indeed, President John F. Kennedy once
observed that the historic Connor had so effectively dramatized the horrors of racism that he pricked the conscience of the American public: “The civil rights movement should thank God for Bull Connor. He’s helped it as much as Abraham Lincoln” (qtd. in Sorensen 489). Like racism itself, Connor not only affects the tone of public discourse in Birmingham, but also intrudes into the private lives of characters in The Last Hotel for Women. Commenting on race, Pete observes to Sugarfoot: “Can’t escape it, can you?” (124). Reflecting on Connor, Pete knows that his family cannot escape Connor: “[T]hey can’t boot him from the place. He’s all tangled up in the past, they’d say, and we can’t just turn our backs like that” (131). Racism and Connor are inseparable, and neither is escapable in Birmingham in 1961.

Bull Connor clings to the Crescent Hotel not only because he enjoys its homey charm, but also because he sees it as the only connection between the segregationist past he has controlled and the rapidly changing Birmingham of the 1960s. Significantly, only memories of prostitutes who used to work at the hotel truly interest Connor; its 1961 flesh-and-blood denizens—the Fraley family, northern reporters, and Angel the Freedom Rider—do not concern him: “If they closed the hotel, he wouldn’t have anywhere to go. The women run the hotel. It’s not just Dinah, it’s all of them, every last ghost. It’s the last hotel for women, and if it closes, he won’t have anything left to remember” (91). The hotel serves as white supremacist Connor’s last retreat from the demands of civil rights activists, and Dinah’s evicting him at the close of the novel marks the end of the past as he knows it: “It’s the last hotel for women left in Birmingham, and Bull Connor can’t get in” (264).
In keeping with Covington's focus on ordinary people, no major historical figure from the Freedom Rides era other than Bull Connor appears in *The Last Hotel for Women*. Oddly enough, because Covington's story revolves around the everyday lives of ordinary people, it ultimately seems more "real" than the "story" of the Civil Rights Movement itself. Covington reminds readers, in fact, that the Freedom Rides and segregationist violence figure into a carefully crafted national drama that both white supremacists and civil rights activists hope will demonstrate the strength of their convictions. As they wait for the Freedom Riders to arrive at the unprotected bus station, Benny explains to Gracie the theatrical angle to civil rights protests: "No police, Gracie. You see, there is not a soul. Right? This is calculated. Mr. Connor is the big director. . . . We're in the audience . . . . Birmingham is under a microscope. . . . All of life is a stage" (28). In *The Last Hotel for Women*, ordinary folk like the Fraleys are not players on the political stage; instead, Covington clearly wants to show the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on average people who try to lead normal lives even as the world around them is changing drastically.

The Crescent Hotel reflects the transitory state in which the Fraley family, Birmingham, and the South find themselves. While the residents of Birmingham witness changes in race relations, the Fraleys are staying in the hotel only until

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*The Last Hotel for Women* does not name, for example, many of the more famous Freedom Riders: James Farmer, CORE's director; John Lewis, sit-in veteran from Nashville; James Peck, whose injuries required fifty stitches; or William Barbee, who became paralyzed for life as a result of the beating he received at the Birmingham bus station. Angel, on the other hand, is a fictional Freedom Rider. The novel refers only tangentially to such other major players in the Freedom Rides drama as Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Alabama Governor John Patterson, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and President John F. Kennedy.
construction of their new house is completed. Gracie Fraley realizes that by its very nature, the hotel is transitory: "[T]his is a public place, the hotel. It's like a bathroom or a bus terminal—people come, people go" (122). She also realizes that the Crescent Hotel reflects transition within her own life: "She hates the hotel. She wants to be back in her old house by the foundry or the new house that's not even built. It's a mere blueprint, white etching on charcoal paper. It's the future, Pete has told the family. The old is past, the new is coming. But right now they're stuck in the hotel" (122). Because social upheaval characterizes 1961, the familiarity of the past or the promise of the future seems more desirable not only to Gracie, but also to many other southerners. In The Last Hotel for Women, then, the Crescent Hotel paradoxically stands not only for transition, but also for stability.

Covington also uses the Crescent Hotel to reflect the Fraley family's paradoxical relationship to Bull Connor and Birmingham in 1961. Whereas whites like Dinah tolerate Connor and his city government for no other reason than that they are accustomed to them, they also feel embarrassed by their glaring shortcomings. The hotel evokes similar responses. Even though the northern reporters who stay in the Crescent may think that it is "a misfit" in Birmingham because "[i]t's got class, charm," they are wrong: "The hotel is the city" (38). In fact, the "sad, private history of the hotel" to which Valerie Miner refers in her review of the novel obviously parallels the sad, public history of Birmingham (22). On the one hand, Dinah "loves living at the hotel" because it serves as a familiar landmark from her childhood in Birmingham: "No matter how sordid your past, it's still yours. It's all you've got"
On the other hand, neither the hotel nor the city of Birmingham has mellowed or improved over the years, and their seaminess bothers Dinah: "You think you’ve made a decent life for yourself, you think you’ve overcome something, then you find it’s the same old dirty place" (149). Similarly, Dinah admits ambivalence toward Connor: "[T]here’s a part of me that loves him . . . . It feels like a sin. Saying the words I love Bull Connor feels like an awful, ugly, and unpardonable sin. . . . I don’t understand why I love something ugly" (217).

Throughout the novel, Covington implies that just as the Fraleys cannot reject Connor, neither can white Birmingham residents easily reject white supremacy because it is so inextricably linked to their pasts. As Pete Fraley observes, many southerners "are so steeped in segregation they can’t escape it even if they want to" (207). In fact, Pete uneasily questions his complicity, as a white resident of Birmingham and as the employee of a racist company, in maintaining the racial status quo. While looking at a newspaper photograph of the white mob’s attack on the Freedom Riders at the bus station, for instance, Pete senses that his very whiteness implicates him in the violence:

He can’t look very closely because he feels that he knows every single man in the shot—the one in the T-shirt, all smiles; the bug-eyed, clean-cut bystander; the one who looks like Clint Eastwood, staring at the colored man who’s getting beat up. Pete feels he knows them all, though he doesn’t really. It might as well be a Sunday school class, his coworkers at the plant, a family reunion portrait. He feels that he’s one of them. It is this fear that will drive him to the brink. (63)

Pete’s fellow churchgoers, coworkers, and family members—all of whom are undoubtedly white—most likely do endorse white supremacy. And even though he
struggles to resist the narrow-mindedness that characterizes other white southerners, Pete cannot but capitulate occasionally to racist attitudes. When the Freedom Rider Angel says “No” to Connor, for example, Pete automatically thinks that she should have said “No sir” because Connor is a white man. Pete thus becomes aware of and then appalled by his own latent racism: “He’s been hanging around Connor so much, he’s afraid his mind is beginning to work like Connor’s. He’s afraid he’s got Connor in his blood, and it’s a horrible thought” (67).

Like their father, the Fraley children seem aware of the profound impact that white supremacy has on their lives. Even a southerner as young as Gracie Fraley finds the concept of desegregation foreign and unsettling when she witnesses it first-hand at an integrated baseball practice: “[She] thinks of the way the colored and the white players looked on the baseball field, how curious a sight it was, like an eclipse of the moon. You’re staring at this thing that’s been predicted and is a natural part of life that people in other parts of the world have seen before, but when it happens in your own backyard, it’s eerie” (269). After Dinah bans Connor from the café at the end of the novel, Benny Fraley questions whether or not one can ever be decisively rid of so powerful a force as Connor or racism: “He wonders if Bull Connor is gone for good or if he’ll . . . [keep] reappearing to the people of Birmingham” (276). Contemporary readers will appreciate the irony of Benny’s speculation, of course, knowing that
Connor will indeed “reappear,” most notably in 1963, when Connor orders Birmingham police to repel civil rights demonstrators with police dogs and fire hoses.4 Despite their professed aversion to white supremacy, the Fraleys seem curiously uninterested in the Civil Rights Movement. The Fraley family’s attitude toward a dinner-time radio report about an arrest in connection with the Ku Klux Klan’s attack on the Freedom Riders clearly illustrates their indifference: “Pete shakes his head. Dinah cuts fat from her pork chops. Gracie pours a river of catsup on her peas. Dinah says to her, ‘That’s enough catsup, sweetheart’” (101). Even as Bull Connor maneuvers to thwart the Movement, even as segregationists denounce civil rights leaders and the Freedom Riders, and even as overworked journalists file their stories with national newspapers, the Fraleys strive to remain detached: “Pete’s tossing baseballs under the company’s lights. Benny’s drinking a chocolate soda with Ginger Fortenberry and trying to forget freedom riders. Dinah is in her bedroom sewing a summer dress for Gracie, putting in the bodice seams that mark the place where Gracie’s body is changing” (119). When Sugarfoot hears Pete refer to the Freedom Rides as “the situation,” he recognizes that such white southerners as the Fraleys are uncomfortable dealing with the Civil Rights Movement: “Sugarfoot likes words like this: the situation, the predicament, the problem. El problema they’d call it in a war-torn banana republic. People caught up in something like this refer to it in the

4 For Martin Luther King, Jr.’s account of the famous 1963 Birmingham campaign, see Why We Can’t Wait. For other first-hand accounts of the 1963 demonstrations, see Hampton and Fayer 123-38, and Raines 139-85. For detailed scholarly analyses of the Birmingham campaign, see Branch, Parting 673-802; Fairclough, Redeem 111-39; Garrow, Bearing 231-86; Morris, 250-74; and Nunnelley 129-64.
most abstract and delicate of terms as if it might—itself—overhear its real name and
rear its ugly name” (129). The Fraleys’ reluctance to deal directly with the
implications of the Civil Rights Movement suggests to the reader that Covington will
explore the reasons for their reluctance and consider ways in which whites
sympathetic to integration can, despite their tentativeness, subvert white supremacy in
1961 Birmingham.

Reflecting the convictions of Martin Luther King, Jr., Covington repeatedly
makes the point in *The Last Hotel for Women* that integration entails far more than the
mere legal desegregation of public facilities. As King argues in “The Ethical
Demands for Integration” (1962), “vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws will bring
an end to segregated public facilities which are barriers to a truly desegregated society,
but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality, which are the
barriers to a truly integrated society” (124). However, the characters in *The Last

5 Insisting that the terms “desegregation” and “integration” not be used interchangeably, King
elaborates on the distinction between the two concepts:

The word *segregation* represents a system that is prohibitive; it denies the Negro equal access
to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like. *Desegregation* is eliminative and negative, for
it simply removes these legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more
profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of
desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities.
Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. Desegregation then, rightly, is only a short-
range goal. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. Thus, as America pursues
the important task of respecting the “letter of the law,” i.e. compliance with desegregation
decisions, she must be equally concerned with the “spirit of the law,” i.e. commitment to the
democratic ideal of integration.

I can summarize all that I have been saying by affirming that the demands of desegregation are
enforceable demands while the demands of integration fall within the scope of unenforceable
demands.

The former are regulated by the codes of society and the vigorous implementation of law-
enforcement agencies. But unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of
society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of
compassion.
Hotel for Women have difficulty identifying a means to overcome the complex barriers to integration.

Pete ultimately realizes that he cannot remain detached from the Civil Rights Movement; in fact, some of the most compelling passages in The Last Hotel for Women deal with Pete's grappling to figure out what he himself can do to further the cause of integration. Pete knows that he and his family need to distance themselves from Bull Connor and his segregationist agenda, yet like many whites living in the segregated South, Pete cannot envision a way to associate with blacks outside the artificial constraints of legal segregation or outside the traditional yet tacit codes that govern interracial relationships. In a futile attempt to deny his affiliation with Connor, Pete protests to Nathan Stamps, the black pourer whom Pete oversees at the foundry: “Connor's got to go. I know I can't get him out of public office, but I sure as hell can get him out of my life, out of my hotel. Bull Connor's got to go.”

Surprisingly, Nathan—who has heretofore refused to speak to Pete—responds to his boss for the first time in the novel: “So what are you going to do about it?” (192). On the one hand, Nathan pities “the kind of impotence Pete feels, working for a racist company”; on the other hand, when Nathan imagines himself in a white person’s position, he thinks that sympathizing with the Movement and living with “the threat of burned crosses and bomb threats”—yet being able to “sleep at night”—would be a far better option than feeling helpless in the face of rampant racism (44). By speaking to

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True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations. (118-24)
Pete for the first time, Nathan challenges him to break with the white establishment. And Pete recognizes that now “[t]here is only one thing for them to talk about, and the ball is in Pete’s court. Until he has an answer for Nathan, there’s nothing to say” (193). However, Pete must overcome his white guilt, a lack of positive role models who have successfully defied segregation, and the historic imbalance of power between blacks and whites—all of which are barriers to the Beloved Community—to develop a friendship with Nathan.

Covington suggests that white guilt plays a significant role in undermining the relationship between Nathan and Pete. Although Pete wants badly to befriend Nathan, his obsession with his own whiteness and all its ramification repeatedly stops him: “He thinks of all there is to talk about if they could ever get past all this, whatever it is” (191). Covington leads the reader to believe that “it” is Pete’s white guilt, which is, after all, a self-indulgent emotion that hinders a normal relationship with Nathan: “Pete hates this feeling—the way he thinks he’s somehow responsible for whatever it is that makes colored men mute. . . . It dawns on Pete that Nathan might hate him” (41-42). When Covington shifts to Nathan’s point of view, however, readers learn that contrary to reviewer Alice Truax’s speculations about Nathan’s and Pete’s “latent hatred,” Nathan does not hate Pete. Instead, Nathan recognizes that Pete is “eaten alive with something bad—that thing that makes some white men take responsibility for the whole human race getting kicked out of the Garden” (48). Nathan does not speak to Pete, in fact, because he is more concerned about listening: “[S]ometimes it’s best to just let a white man talk. Sometimes it does him a world of good to just ramble.
on” (43). Nathan “feels sorry for Pete,” in fact, and “for all white folks like Pete who don’t understand that water will boil over if you let it get hot enough” (45).

His patience notwithstanding, Nathan also realizes that Pete’s sense of white guilt—more so than his interest in Nathan as a person—compels Pete to behave awkwardly around him and make inane small talk. Consequently, Nathan chooses not to speak to Pete until “the right moment,” when Pete will finally deal with him forthrightly and stop expecting Nathan to absolve him for his whiteness:

He’d like Pete to say, “Good job, Nate.” But instead, Pete will just stand there with his white man’s guilt, like some forlorn and jilted lover, trying to make conversation. . . . Nathan feels like gathering him up and tossing him in the pond beside the baseball diamond just to bring him to his senses, make him see that the city’s problems weren’t caused by him and don’t need to be rectified by him. (43)

Indeed, as Nathan watches Pete pitch badly during a segregated company baseball game, he seems genuinely attached to his supervisor and willing to support him:

“What Pete needs is a good catcher, like Nathan, to give him the right signal. If he were catching this game, he’d be up near the mound at this moment asking Pete, ‘Tired, Bud?’ or ‘Tell me what you need.’ . . . He’s pulling for Pete. He says, ‘Jesus, help him,’ under his breath” (55). According to Covington, the Movement offers two advantages to Nathan: “As much as he wants to be a full-class citizen, live like a white man lives—as much as any of that, Nathan wants men like Pete Fraley to get well” (206). The effects of white guilt on both blacks and whites thus render the creation of the Beloved Community difficult.

Covington suggests that another barrier to the formation of the Beloved Community is the lack of positive role models who have successfully defied
segregation. Pete does not know anyone whose lead he can follow in endorsing integration. The Freedom Rider staying at the Crescent Hotel is the only person—black or white—to whom Pete can turn to discuss strategies for improving race relations, so he asks Angel, “How is this done? . . . How is this race thing done?” Her response catches Pete off guard and strikes the reader with its simplicity: “You begin with what you’ve got . . . . Things happen when one person does one thing” (195). Angel suggests, in other words, that meaningful social change can take place on a personal level in addition to the public spectacle that tends to unfold via the national media. Yet when Angel suggests that Pete ask a black coworker over for dinner, he balks and claims that he does not even know whether or not “they [blacks] eat gumbo” (195). The irony of Pete’s comment underscores the extent to which white southerners are alienated from black southerners, for the word “gumbo” itself derives from the African word ngombo, the Bantu name for okra. Food is not, of course, the issue, as Angel points out. Pete’s decision to act on his dissatisfaction with the status quo and to work toward integration is what is significant about his gesture. Later in the novel, Covington reiterates the relative ease with which southern whites can participate in the Civil Rights Movement. When Dinah Fraley wonders aloud whether breaking segregation laws is like breaking a stick, “a mean and deliberate thing,” Lydia Stamps, Nathan’s wife, replies “softly”: “No, baby, . . . . It’s like snapping beans. . . . It’s so easy” (238).

Perhaps the most significant barrier to integration in The Last Hotel for Women is the inescapable fact that southern race relations have historically taken
place in a context of white dominance. Like Cornelia and the white narrator in Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), Dinah articulates this dilemma when she questions the seemingly amiable ties between blacks and whites who work closely together: “You have these friends who’re Negro. You don’t know what to do. What do you do with this kind of thing? Is it really friendship? Can it ever really be?” (130). Because whites have traditionally monopolized positions of influence, wealth, and authority while blacks have remained subordinate, an imbalance of power prevents many interracial friendships. Susan Tucker provides ample evidence in *Telling Memories among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (1988) that black domestics in the South have historically recognized their subordinate status in relationships with their white employers, even though the white employers have, with limited success, often tried to characterize the mistress-servant relationship as friendship. One white woman whom Tucker interviewed wonders of her relationship with her domestic “how it was possible to be so close to someone without really knowing her” (192).

Tucker’s exploration of the complex relationship between black domestics and their white employers, a relationship frequently characterized by each woman’s “awareness of past inequalities and present tensions between whites and blacks,” illuminates the cultural context in which Nathan and Pete find themselves (192). Nathan and Pete admit to each other that they do not know what to do to bring about integration. As a black man, Nathan recognizes his impotence within the southern power structure; as a white man, Pete recognizes his privileged place. Neither man is
satisfied with his position. Speaking for all his black co-workers at the foundry, Nathan tells their supervisor Pete that they themselves do not know what to do to achieve integration, nor do they know what Pete expects them to do: "We don't know what to do. You can make posters, you can go to the church meetings, you can ride buses if you don't have to work for a living, but other than that, what can you do?" He gestures to the other men. 'I'm asking you, huh? What can they do? What can I do? I'm serious, what is there for a man to do?" (210). Pete says nothing because he has no answer.

Reflecting Tucker's finding, and making the same point that Alice Childress frequently makes from the vantage of the fictional black housekeeper Mildred in *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956), Covington suggests in *The Last Hotel for Women* that some of the ostensibly friendly gestures that whites make toward blacks have the potential to generate more resentment than interracial understanding. Pete suspects, for example, that the black men with whom he wants to play baseball regard the integrated practice he has orchestrated “as some kind of comical chore they have to do because white management wants to, like dunking the superintendent of foundries in a barrel of water during the carnival” (209). Pete confesses to Nathan that he wonders “if you people feel like you have to do this because some boss man says so” (210). Moreover, Pete cannot but confirm his superiority as a white man—albeit reluctantly—when he offers the black workers food as they clock out after their shift:

> At day's end, he makes every one of them take a donut again, and they do it. They do it because he's white and they're not and he's the
foreman. They’re probably hungry, but even if they weren’t they’d
take it. They’d eat it and force it down their throats no matter what it
was or how they felt, and Pete hates this knowledge. He hates it more
than he hates Connor. (211)

As Pete realizes, working for integration is problematic in the South—indeed, in the
United States—because race relations have typically consisted of white supremacy and
black subordination.

Given the barriers to integration, both Nathan and Sugarfoot suggest to Pete
that integrating company baseball is the appropriate first step to challenge the status
quo, and Covington invites her readers to explore the ramifications of this otherwise
trivial action. The foundry for which Pete and Nathan work sponsors two baseball
teams—one for whites, one for blacks—and the black team always practices and plays
immediately after the white team. Company ball “has no gray area,” Covington notes,
for the practice sessions and games are as segregated as other areas of life in
Birmingham (56). The black foundry workers begin to picket for integrated company
ball, however, much to Bull Connor’s condescending amusement. Pete resents
Connor’s presence at the foundry, and in response to Nathan’s challenge for him to do
something, he arranges an integrated practice.

By integrating company ball, Pete essentially plots what Valerie Miner calls “a
revolution on the baseball field,” for the white players and black players will cooperate
equally as teammates, separated by neither racial nor hierarchical boundaries (22).
The practice ball that Pete throws to Nathan is, therefore, “more than cork and yarn
and rubber cement and alum-tanned leather.... [It] is worth a thousand times its
weight in gold when it’s thrown by a white man to a colored man in Birmingham,
Alabama, in 1961 and the man throwing it is the boss man and the man catching it is the one who handles fire” (232). On-lookers respond with the type of silent awe that one typically associates with momentous occasions. When the black and white players scorn Connor’s orders to re-segregate, Connor himself perceives the magnitude of an otherwise run-of-the-mill practice: “Here you have, on this field, Connor thinks, the end-all of life as we know it in America” (231). Connor’s threats notwithstanding, good-natured joking erupts among the black players and white players, and Nathan “knows it’s all right. He knows it’s just a matter of time now” (232-33). Confirming Angel’s assertion that “one person” can do “one thing” to improve race relations, Nathan and Pete have taken a significant step toward creating the Beloved Community in Birmingham.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from southern whites who feel guilty about poor race relations, or who want to improve race relations but do not know how, lie those southern whites who deliberately avoid engaging in questions of race altogether. Dinah Fraley in particular tends to ignore the significance of the Civil Rights Movement. On the morning that the Freedom Riders are scheduled to arrive in Birmingham—the day after they have been attacked by a white mob in Anniston, Alabama, and one of their buses has been burned—Covington juxtaposes the image of a “swarm” of reporters badgering Connor to comment on the previous day’s violence with the image of Dinah relaxing in a haze of domestic bliss and admiring the breakfast her children have made for her: “‘How sweet of my children,’ she says, glancing up at the journalists. ‘It’s Mother’s Day,’ she reminds them” (22).
Covington thus establishes in chapter one a pattern for Dinah’s indifference to the Movement. Moreover, Dinah sends definite signals to others that she prefers not to discuss the Movement. Whenever Pete pleads with her “to have Connor out of our life,” Dinah ignores him and steers the conversation toward such banal topics as where the driveway should be located for their new house. She even hints at her own willfulness when she cautions Angel that Birmingham whites “can change, but they don’t, won’t, if they feel like somebody’s trying to make them change” (113).

Covington suggests in The Last Hotel for Women that southern whites’ complete ignorance of their black neighbors explains much of their indifference to racial issues; in turn, because southern whites tend to distance themselves from blacks, they perpetuate their ignorance. Covington tells the reader, for example, “how ignorant [Dinah] is of Negroes”: “She conjures up cavemen, tribal dances, painted faces. She thinks of big fat colored women in artists’ drawings of cotton fields, mammites” (236). Likewise, Pete knows very little about black lives. As he watches the black foundry workers whom he supervises take their midmorning break, he “wonders what they talk about when they talk about things” (41).

Gracie’s and Benny’s ignorance of blacks matches that of their parents. While going through Angel’s wallet, Gracie realizes that she has “never seen a color photo of a colored boy,” much less interacted with one (114). Although Benny works with a black man, Skipper, at a service station and, like his father, tries to enjoy “the camaraderie of a work ethic” with his black co-worker, Benny cannot image the after-work life of an ordinary black man any more than his father can: “Benny wonders
what Skipper does when he leaves the station at dark. . . . He wonders what terms like freedom rider and integration and Bull Connor mean to Skipper.” Just as Covington tries to balance Pete’s point of view with Nathan’s, she presents Skipper’s story to complement Benny’s speculations. When Benny idly “wonders if Skipper reads the newspaper,” the author intervenes and informs the reader:

It never dawns on [Benny] that Skipper can’t read, that he is, in fact, fifteen years older than Benny, that he’s the father of five kids, that he has a wife named Lucretia, that he knows every single thing happening in Birmingham, that he sings gospel at church, has experienced Pentecost, drinks Jack Daniel’s, has a junkyard, loves his mother, and wishes Bull Connor would take a slow boat to China. (96)

These details about Skipper’s life contrast sharply with Benny’s inability to know him; indeed, one would expect Benny to know these bare essentials about a co-worker.

Throughout The Last Hotel for Women, the Fraley family remains ignorant of black life in Birmingham.

Southern whites are particularly ignorant about the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Even after bringing Angel to the Crescent Hotel for safety after the Ku Klux Klan’s scary attack on the Freedom Riders, Gracie realizes that “[m]ost of all she’s scared of Angel” (35). When Skipper slyly teases Benny that Benny may not be able to “believe” everything Angel says because she is, after all, “a outside agitator,” the irony of Skipper’s comment escapes Benny, and the white boy becomes “confused. He doesn’t understand racial politics. He can’t tell if Skipper is on the side of the outside agitators or not” (99). When Gracie and Benny’s mother Dinah talks to them about the Movement at all, she does so in reductive terms. Dinah grossly oversimplifies the Movement, for instance, when she explains to Gracie that the
Freedom Riders are “riding buses to let us know we shouldn’t keep Negroes from riding buses with us . . . . We’re in for more of this type of thing. Mr. Connor’s wrong. He’s our friend, but he’s wrong” (74). After inviting Nathan and Lydia Stamps to the hotel for dessert after the integrated baseball practice, Dinah thinks to herself that she is challenging the system only reluctantly: “She’s no more an integrationist than the man in the moon. She hates politics” (238). Of all the Fraleys, Dinah is the least likely to engage in a critical inquiry into the significance of the Civil Rights Movement.

Like a smug Flannery O’Connor character, however, Dinah is moving steadily toward a jolt that will shock her out of her complacency. When her father Tyler, a backwoods, snake-handling, Pentecostal preacher, evokes images of the Holy Ghost’s descent upon the apostles as he talks to Dinah about Birmingham, she disregards the signs of imminent change that have been appearing around her and claims that she “has no idea what Pentecost has to do with Connor or Birmingham” (219). On the evening of the integrated baseball practice, however, Dinah “feels something hovering, something nearby, something frightful, something at hand” (222). The events that take place at the hotel after the practice finally compel Dinah to react. When Connor comments to Nathan and Lydia that “it’s good you two are married” because “some Negroes aren’t,” Dinah responds shrilly: “That is a racist remark. Go home” (245). Dinah resents Connor’s bullying her guests in her home, yet only after he begins to bully Dinah herself and accuses her of having been a “child whore” who slept with him does she lash out, punching him in the face and telling him: “You can’t come
back here” (256). In her review of *The Last Hotel for Women*, Alice Truax suggests that Dinah’s rejection of Connor is an “insubstantial” gesture that is “less courageous” than one might think: “After all, turning your back on Bull Connor’s version of Birmingham in 1961 meant more than simply locking the commissioner out of your kitchen.” However, Dinah’s denial is significant, for it puts into practice the “one person does one thing” approach advocated by Angel. Moreover, Dinah’s act entails severing all ties to a figure whom she has known longer than anyone else and with whom she shares a complicated, painful past.

Dinah’s transformation reveals Covington’s preoccupation with grace throughout *The Last Hotel for Women* and, indeed, throughout all her novels. In her review of *The Last Hotel for Women*, Amy Weldon describes the impact of religion on Covington’s life and work. Covington has been a Baptist her entire life, and she describes herself as a “Christian liberal.” Moreover, Covington’s husband Dennis has written the best-selling, National Book Award-nominated *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (1995), in which he recounts his spiritual journey through snake-handling churches near Birmingham. Weldon observes that like “the preachers her husband met on Sand Mountain,” Vicki Covington’s fictional characters typically “experience moral revelations” that are “startling and fierce”: “Like buttons that hold together a warm coat, small epiphanies hold her characters’ lives together and keep them on the unsteady path to grace.” Weldon points to the last line of *The Last Hotel for Women*—“We’re always being reached for” (300)—as the “perfect echo of Covington’s personal belief, and of the
grace she extends to her characters.” Even though the atmosphere in Birmingham seems foreboding and the characters seem helpless and frustrated, Covington suggests through an elaborate series of religious allusions in *The Last Hotel for Women* that positive social change is forthcoming, that the Beloved Community may be imminent.

The Freedom Rider appropriately named “Angel” is Covington’s most explicit symbol in *The Last Hotel for Women* of the secular and spiritual salvation that the Civil Rights Movement can bring to Birmingham. Angel operates so effectively as an agent of social change that Bull Connor holds her personally responsible for the protests taking place: “It’s all her fault” (229). Whereas Connor embodies southern racism, Angel embodies Covington’s vision of a thoroughly integrated America. For instance, Angel comes from an interracial background, “dark enough to make Connor question her ancestry” (66). Yet at first glance, no one can pinpoint her exact racial identity: “She almost looks colored. It’s the kind of look you can’t stop looking at, like, is she or isn’t she? Her blond curls are like Shirley Temple’s, yet she is dark” (33). In Angel, the American wholesomeness suggested by her blond curls clashes with the embarrassing likelihood of sexual exploitation and miscegenation in her past. Covington eventually reveals that Angel is of German-Mexican descent. Angel thus represents not only the union of white people with people of color, but also the union of the Old World with the New. In addition to bestowing multiracial attributes on Angel, Covington describes Angel’s appearance and gestures as androgynous, and Sugarfoot even questions Angel’s sexual orientation. Benny accurately perceives that Angel is “[a] potpourri of mixed messages”: “Her mother is German, father Mexican.
She’s a government informant, a scared girl. A freedom rider, a runaway slave. A Yankee, a Southerner” (103). In other words, American ethnicity, regionalism, and history merge in Angel; she personifies the Beloved Community.

The Crescent Hotel also comes to represent the earthly manifestation of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, in The Last Hotel for Women. In the hotel, for example, the Fraleys, northern reporters, and Angel all coexist peacefully. Significantly, Pete and Dinah choose to bring Nathan and Lydia to the hotel after the first integrated practice of company baseball. Connor correctly fears that these amiable interracial relations in the hotel foreshadow the successful integration of other public accommodations: “He thinks of Pete and how he’s going to get him out of this Yankee mind-set he’s in. It’s the hotel, he thinks. . . . Pete’s living in a hotel, and hotels remind a person of Yankees—the unfamiliarity of a hotel, the antiques, dampness, dark hallways, keyholes, and rugs from the Orient. It all reeks of Northern ways” (189). Although Connor does not articulate the difference, the hotel is especially “Northern” in that Birmingham’s strict segregation code seems irrelevant to its occupants. Moreover, Connor finds that he and his racist ideology are rejected when he insults Dinah’s guests at the hotel: “Pete and Nathan Stamps and Sugarfoot are closing in—from the left, right, and center” (254). That is, the hotel provides a forum in which a white southerner, a black southerner, and a northern journalist can ally themselves against Bull Connor and the racism that he espouses. For one night, at least, the Beloved Community triumphs in Birmingham.
Just as the author of the Biblical book of Revelation employs allegory to dramatize ancient Rome's persecution of the early Christians and to prophesy the decline of that "great city," Covington uses various hellish tableaux to describe Birmingham in The Last Hotel for Women and to suggest its need for redemption. Because steel is Birmingham's chief industry, fire recurs as a predominant image throughout the novel; in fact, a statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, looms over the city from its perch on Red Mountain. Pete Fraley works in one of the city's foundries, which Covington depicts as such: "[S]moke rises from the cupola and blows over the warehouse . . . . [Pete's] eyes adjust to the world of fire. The screams of the tumbling mills sear his eardrums" (39). Inside the foundry, "Pete's unit is a carousel of fire . . . . The ceilings are high, the noise is awful, and the place is dark and ugly and vibrating with production" (187). At night, the sky over Birmingham glows eerily orange, and Benny Fraley observes that "Birmingham is a city on fire. Dirty, mean, hateful" (94).

As Angel points out to Sugarfoot the reporter, these fiery conditions in Birmingham suggest that Armageddon is rapidly approaching: "Birmingham is one big industry, don't you think? I mean, everywhere you go, there's fire in the sky. It makes me think of Revelation and the Armageddon, of the seven seals and tribes, of the rider on the white horse and the thousand years" (169). Angel explicitly situates Birmingham in the context of Revelation 17:1-7: "[O]ne of the seven angels comes to take the writer into a desert" where "there's this woman dressed in purple holding a golden cup, and there's a title on her forehead that says, Mystery the Mother of
Prostitutes. . . . The woman is the great city. Maybe that’s Birmingham” (169-70).

Angel probes Sugarfoot about the validity of her interpretation: “Do you think
Birmingham is the great city in Revelation? Do you think this is the apocalypse?”
Despite Sugarfoot’s dismissive reply, “Hardly,” Covington clearly suggests that the
connection between the Civil Rights Movement and the final battle of good and evil
does exist (170).

Yet even as Covington suggests in The Last Hotel for Women that
Birmingham is the setting for the end of something evil, she also suggests that the city
is the setting for the beginning of something good. As early as the first chapter,
Covington evokes the Biblical account of the Creation to emphasize a new beginning.
On the Sunday morning that the Freedom Riders are expected to arrive in
Birmingham, Dinah reads aloud from Genesis to her children about “how God called
the light day and the darkness night; the dry land, earth; the wet, sea. She reads of all
the fruit, seasons, gardens, how God broke it to the woman that she’d have sorrow and
pain in childbirth, but Adam called her Eve anyhow, because she was the mother of all
living” (22). The passage is appropriate not only because Sunday, May 13, is, after
all, Mother’s Day, but also because the Freedom Rides herald the birth of the period in
United States history during which national attention turns toward the Civil Rights
Movement in Birmingham. Moreover, the Freedom Rides take place in the spring,
traditionally the season associated with rebirth, and allow Covington, as Valerie Miner
observes, to “use seasonal change to forecast shifts in consciousness” (21). Covington
clearly believes that the Freedom Riders embody hope for improved race relations, for their arrival foreshadows a new social order in Birmingham.

Alongside the Old Testament images of creation in *The Last Hotel for Women* stand New Testament images of salvation. In particular, Covington implies that racist responses to the Civil Rights Movement parallel the Crucifixion of Christ. Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr., often likened the trials of civil rights activists to the Passion of Christ, as he did in an October 26, 1960, letter to his wife Coretta from the Reidsville State Prison in Tattnall County, Georgia: “I know this whole experience is very difficult for you to adjust to . . . , but as I said to you yesterday, this is the cross that we must bear for the freedom of our people. . . . I will adjust to whatever comes in terms of pain” (qtd. in Garrow, *Bearing* 148). Similarly, Benny Fraley explicitly links the Klan’s violent attack on the Freedom Riders at the bus station to the Crucifixion of Christ, for he tells Gracie: “This is Golgotha” (28). When Bull Connor confronts Nathan Stamps at the baseball field, Connor explains to Nathan that the Civil Rights Movement is, like the Crucifixion, a “ganglion of history”:

> A ganglion . . . is a group of nerve cells . . . . A ganglion of history means a time when there’s lots going on, and a ganglion can become a tumor. In a ganglion of history you’ll see lots of heroes, lots of martyrs and missionaries and apostles. . . . Now, Jesus isn’t dying on any cross these days, of course, not in the literal sense of the term, but we are at a ganglion. You’ll find ganglions during times of war and famine and pestilence and revolt. My point, Stamps, is that people get hurt during these times, and your Mr. Pete might be one of those martyrs who gets hurt. (205)

Whereas Connor perceives ganglia of history as potentially destructive, Nathan intuits that ganglia like the Crucifixion are redemptive, and he links direct action to achieve
integration with Christ’s sacrifice to secure salvation for the humanity. Covington suggests that symbolic crucifixions like the assault on the Freedom Riders take place not only in Birmingham in 1961, but also across the South. And as a result of their sacrifices, civil rights activists contribute to the foundation of the Beloved Community.

Covington suggests that the Civil Rights Movement offers salvation for even such abhorrent white racists as Bull Connor. Indeed, Covington creates a Connor character that challenges readers to reconsider any preconception they may have of the notorious racist and to acknowledge his essential humanity. When asked why she chose to include Bull Connor as a character in *The Last Hotel for Women* and to treat him sympathetically, Covington explains: “We will never be completely healed in Birmingham until we understand and forgive Connor . . . . We haven’t yet. But he is part of the story of who we are. If we forgive him, we forgive ourselves. Every story has a villain; the story can’t exist without it. In many ways, he is the sacrificial lamb” (qtd. in Weldon). Although the *Publishers Weekly* review of *The Last Hotel for Women* states that Covington’s Connor “is a pathetic figure, eccentrically obnoxious but never real to the reader,” Covington’s complex fictional character actually seems more believable than the “real” Bull Connor, whose flamboyant defense of white supremacy has rendered him more a symbol of southern white racism than a genuine human being. To be sure, Harold Jackson writes in his review of *The Last Hotel for Women* that Bull Connor “has become one of the superficialities of history whose role is well known, but little else.” Likewise, Valerie Miner correctly observes that
whereas “[h]istorical figures in novels typically appear as the hagiographic or
demonized representations of broad-brushed historical fiction or as the discreet
cameos of literary fiction,” Covington deserves credit for creating a character who is
“human—hardly a likable man, rather a character with vulnerabilities and a perverse
world view, someone who suffers the consequences of his own hateful behavior” (22).
Covington humanizes Connor to the extent that readers pity him because they know he
is fighting not only a morally repugnant battle, but also a battle that he is destined to
lose. Jackson observes that Covington “creates a Bull Connor who can be both
despised and pitied for wanting to hang on to a time that was already gone,” and Miner
even compares Connor to Shakespeare’s King Lear because of “his denial of the
passage of time and his ensuing loss of power” (22).

To lay the groundwork for Connor’s possible salvation—and to challenge the
reader’s preconceived notions—Covington attributes a few likable qualities to the
notorious racist. Because Connor repeatedly demonstrates a willingness to side with
the underdog in The Last Hotel for Women, readers find themselves in the
uncomfortable position of sharing many of his attitudes. Readers learn, for example,
that Connor’s racism notwithstanding, he hates the Ku Klux Klan because it killed
Dinah’s mother: “He’ll never forgive them, though they think they own him. They
think they got a right to kill whores, but they think wrong” (83). Connor also seems
genuinely devoted to and interested in the welfare of the Fraley family, and although
his racist motivation is contemptible, he seems genuinely concerned that the Civil
Rights Movement will disrupt the lives of hard-working southern white men like Pete.
The North's self-righteous attitude toward southern race relations particularly offends Connor, and he wants desperately for reporters to stop ridiculing the backwardness of the South and to know "what a truly quaint city this Birmingham is" (81). Perhaps most surprisingly, Connor worries that desegregation will bring about the demise of such venerable all-black institutions as the Negro Baseball League. Despite his fundamental disagreement with their agenda, Connor even seems genuinely interested in the motives of Angel and the other civil rights activists: "Connor wants to know the mind-set of this new movement. He's curious about foreigners—their habits, their ideas" (67). According to Covington, the redemption of Bull Connor lies within the realm of spiritual possibility.

A meeting between Connor and Dinah's father Tyler, the snake-handling preacher who hovers in the background throughout the novel, clearly illustrates Covington's belief that the Civil Rights Movement can redeem Bull Connor. At one point in the novel, Tyler anticipates Connor's failure to prevent desegregation, and he informs Dinah: "Tell Mr. Connor I'm available... to show him Jesus" (214). The spiritual salvation that Tyler offers complements the secular salvation that the Freedom Riders offer. At the end of the novel, having been banished from the Fraleys' lives, Connor travels to the country to pay a visit to Tyler. Tyler tells Connor that "he's heard they got problems down in Birmingham. He tells Connor that Jesus is going to come over Red Mountain riding a donkey and that down in the valley there'll be a big party with all the blacks and the whites dancing in the streets" (299). Tyler's beatific vision is clouded only by the reader's knowledge that two years later in 1963,
blacks and whites will not be dancing in the streets, but instead will be confronting one
other amid demonstrators, police dogs, and fire hoses. Nonetheless, Covington
suggests, the Freedom Rides have afforded Connor the opportunity for salvation:
according to Amy Weldon, the Civil Rights Movement imparts to Connor a "moral
awareness [that] comes as a painful but necessary awakening, with the hope of
redemption always one step ahead." Although Connor chooses to ignore it, the
possibility of salvation does exist in Birmingham in 1961.

Having opened with the promise for social change that the Freedom Riders
bring, *The Last Hotel for Women* thus concludes by anticipating the successful
integration of Birmingham. The desegregation of the foundry's baseball practices and
the post-practice get-together between the Stampses and the Fraleys have substantiated
Angel's assertion that "[t]hings happen when one person does one thing." Indeed,
reviewer Joyce Slater comments that "without a trace of political rhetoric, preaching or
flower-child sappiness, Covington manages to show us just how this could be true."
Despite individual reservations about and the public resistance to the Civil Rights
Movement, Covington offers a glimmer of hope in *The Last Hotel for Women* for the
eventual—albeit elusive—attainment of the Beloved Community.
CHAPTER 5

WILLIAM HEATH'S THE CHILDREN BOB MOSES LED: MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SUMMER AND ITS ORIGINS, 1961-1964

William Heath's novel The Children Bob Moses Led (1995) revolves around the massive Freedom Summer Project of 1964 that brought hundreds of white northern college students to Mississippi to register local blacks to vote. In the early 1960s during which the novel takes place, many Mississippi blacks were reluctant to attempt registering to vote because white supremacists frequently responded to their efforts with economic reprisals or physical violence. In 1962, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined forces with numerous local Mississippi and national civil rights groups to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a loosely organized umbrella group with the specific goal to register black voters in Mississippi. Because the United States federal government had demonstrated time and again that it would not intervene to protect black voter applicants or civil rights workers from white violence unless negative publicity compelled it to do so, COFO realized that it needed to expose the brutality associated with voter registration in Mississippi to provoke a national outcry. To this end, COFO decided to enlist the aid of white northern college students whose safety would be important to the American public. This is the historical context in which Heath sets The Children Bob Moses Led.¹

¹ For an invaluable resource on Freedom Summer, see Doug McAdam, Freedom Summer. McAdam illuminates the social and political backgrounds of the white Freedom Summer volunteers, their experiences during the Mississippi Summer Project, and their subsequent participation in other social movements. For another excellent account of the volunteers and the summer project, see Mary Aicken

145
At the beginning of *The Children Bob Moses Led*, during volunteer orientation at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, black scholar and activist Vincent Harding asks the predominantly white volunteers: "How will you enter into humanizing relationships with the people of Mississippi?" (34). Heath goes on to explore throughout the novel the likelihood that blacks and whites—particularly black Mississippians and white northerners—will or will not be able to enter into "humanizing relationships." Just as Alice Walker tells her story of the Civil Rights Movement in *Meridian* (1976) by providing the different perspectives of black southern activist Meridian Hill and white northern volunteer Lynne Rabinowitz, Heath tells his story of Freedom Summer by alternating the points of view of a fictionalized Bob Moses, the well-known black organizer in Mississippi during the first half of the 1960s, and Tom Morton, a fictional white Ohioan and recent graduate of Hiram Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White*. For other accounts of Freedom Summer, see Carson 66-129; Dittmer 194-271; and Payne 284-316. For first-hand accounts of Freedom Summer, see Hampton and Fayer 177-207; Raines 273-90; and Sellers 94-110. For a collection of letters that the volunteers wrote to their families during Freedom Summer, see Elizabeth Sutherland, ed., *Letters from Mississippi* (New York: McGraw, 1965). See also Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Viking, 1965). Belfrage was a northern white college student who volunteered in Mississippi in 1964.

2 The historic Vincent Harding was reared in Harlem, but worked full-time for the Civil Rights Movement in the South. He was also a professor at Spelman College in Atlanta.

3 The distinction between Bob Moses the historic figure and Bob Moses the title character of *The Children Bob Moses Led* is not always clear in the novel. In a note at the beginning of the novel, Heath explains his approach toward characterization: "This is a work of fiction. Although it was inspired by real persons and events, the characters, incidents, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and, except for appearances by some public figures, do not portray actual persons. Bob Moses and other historical characters are real people in a fictional work." This chapter will distinguish Bob Moses the historic figure from Bob Moses the title character of the novel by always designating the former as "the actual Bob Moses." For a biography of Moses, see Eric C. Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Although Burner draws most of his information from a handful of secondary sources, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them* remains the only book-length study of Moses.
College who volunteers for the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964. Significantly, Moses and Tom never actually meet each other in the novel, even though each man’s story unfolds alongside the other’s. This separation of the two narrators parallels the general separation of blacks and whites throughout The Children Bob Moses Led. In fact, as Moses walks away at the end of the novel, Tom hints at the inability of blacks and whites to connect when he laments that “all I saw was a figure growing smaller and smaller as it left me behind. . . . [H]itting and missing, we ricocheted at random through life like so many billiard balls. What was the point? I thought. Whom could you trust?” (293). Through the different perspectives of Bob Moses and Tom Morton, Heath illustrates in The Children Bob Moses Led the numerous race-, class-, and gender-based issues that thwart the formation of the Beloved Community not only within the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement, but also within American society at large.

In “Why I Wrote The Children Bob Moses Led,” William Heath explains his decision to base a novel on Freedom Summer:

I believe that the novelist should dramatize what matters. . . . Freedom Summer was the high-water mark of sixties social idealism as well as a turning point that saw the shattering of the civil rights coalition. Surely this was a subject worthy of my best efforts. I liked the challenge of portraying what it was like to struggle for social justice and the chance to explore why the American dream of interracial harmony is still a dream deferred.

Heath points out, however, that he did not participate in Freedom Summer himself. Nonetheless, in an e-mail to the author, Heath describes himself as “a sometime foot soldier” in the Civil Rights Movement: “I was in the March on Washington and I took
part in a few other demonstrations. I worked for Carl Stokes in Cleveland, I went door
to door for McCarthy in Ohio in 1968 and I was a precinct captain for McGovern in
Lexington, Kentucky, in 1972.” Heath is currently a professor of English at Mount St.
Mary’s College in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In addition to The Children Bob Moses
stories and poems have also appeared in numerous literary magazines, and he has
published essays in such journals as the Massachusetts Review, the South Carolina
Review, and the Southern Review.

The Children Bob Moses Led has received mixed reviews. On the one hand,
most reviewers regard Heath’s excessive attention to historic detail as a serious artistic
flaw. In the novel’s acknowledgments, Heath explains his strategy: “In order to
create a seamless whole, so that history has the drama of fiction and fiction the ring of
truth, I spent time doing extensive research” (312). In an e-mail to the author, Heath
explains that because he himself did not participate in Freedom Summer, he had to
conduct ten years of research for The Children Bob Moses Led to “capture what those
people who really were there actually did and said.” Heath recalls that he had to pay
particular attention to his fictionalized portrait of Bob Moses: “Much of the research I
did was to make sure I knew what Bob Moses said and did in Mississippi, so that his
sections are very accurate, more accurate, I would claim, than the history books.”

In response to Heath’s desire for historic accuracy, the Kirkus Reviews critic
complains that The Children Bob Moses Led “is so fact-laden that it seems more like a
penetrating historical text than a work of fiction.” Similarly, the Publishers Weekly
reviewer writes that Heath brings only "some" life to Freedom Summer because he "weaves a wealth of facts with rather less rich fiction... For the most part, the plot describes or parallels actual events." Indeed, Alicia Metcalf Miller, who reviews The Children Bob Moses Led for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, wonders why Heath "chose to fictionalize material that might have worked better in nonfiction... In the end, Heath's use of poetic license does not enhance what, on its own, was an immensely riveting historical movement." Hettie Jones identifies other weaknesses of The Children Bob Moses Led in her review for the Washington Post Book World: "This is Heath's first novel... and his inexperience shows in the sometimes polemical dialogues, the unvarying pace, the sudden emergence and/or disappearance of minor characters, and the fact that the voices of the narrators are too similar." Likewise, the Kirkus Reviews critic laments that Heath exhibits "a sometimes wooden and clumsy style," whereas Starr E. Smith, reviewing the novel for Library Journal, writes that The Children Bob Moses Led is "sometimes marred by clichés and seemingly interchangeable supporting characters" (120)

On the other hand, most critics concede that Heath does render, despite the shortcomings of The Children Bob Moses Led, an admirable account of Freedom Summer. For example, Starr Smith praises Heath for maintaining "an impressive level of historical accuracy" (120). Likewise, the Publishers Weekly reviewer asserts that "the large cast of characters gives voice to the complexity of the era's issues, and Heath's clear chronicle of this poignant moment in our nation's recent past is often compelling." In particular, reviewers have applauded Heath's decision to focus on
ordinary civil rights activists rather than on such famous national figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. Hettie Jones writes that “Heath is to be commended for giving Moses and others their due,” whereas the Kirkus Reviews writer comments that “Heath presents an illuminating portrait of the time, fascinating for the smaller events he uncovers, chronicling the bravery of those who didn’t capture the national spotlight. An absorbing look at one of America’s darkest and most courageous moments.” Indeed, The Children Bob Moses Led helps to counter what sociologist Charles M. Payne laments as a “top-down, normative conception of the movement,” the widespread belief that government officials and national civil rights organizations rather than everyday people were the key agents of social change (439).

Whatever the merits or shortcomings of The Children Bob Moses Led, the novel does illuminate the complicated relationships between blacks and whites during Freedom Summer. To be sure, as Heath writes in the novel’s acknowledgments, his “narrative draws upon facts and events which were complex and whose ‘truth’ may be obscure or open to argument” (312). In an e-mail to the author, Heath explains that his conception of race relations in The Children Bob Moses Led does not rest on “one set thesis”:

I do try in the novel to suggest that race relations between individuals can play out in many different ways. I think some of the characters make large strides in coming to understand and care for each other, while in other cases contact if anything makes racial understanding more difficult. And, of course, more often than not, some of both is happening. . . . Certainly, I wrote the novel with two large purposes: one was to tell the public story of how these social activists fought the good fight for civil rights, but also to tell the story of how they got along or didn’t get along with each other.
An early scene in the novel foreshadows the difficulty that blacks and whites will have relating to each other during the summer. While at volunteer orientation in Ohio, Tom Morton describes the attendees’ singing a round of Freedom Songs: “We whites tended to clap on the first and third beats, the on beats of every measure. Blacks preferred the second and fourth beats. Looking around the circle, I could see most of the white hands clapping together to the opposite beat from the black hands” (30-31). The lack of synchronization between the black volunteers’ clapping and that of the white activists prefigures the conflict that will arise between the two groups over the course of Freedom Summer.

Heath creates in Tom Morton the archetypal white Freedom Summer volunteer. As the critic for Kirkus Reviews notes, Tom’s “motivations, earnest though naive, reflect those of a whole generation of students swept up by the idealism of Camelot.” Sociologist Doug McAdam provides a profile of the Freedom Summer volunteers in his study Freedom Summer (1988):

By and large, they were the sons and daughters of American privilege. They came from comfortable, often wealthy, families, some of them patrician. They applied to the project while attending the top elite colleges or universities in the country. The volunteers had known few limits in their lives, least of all those imposed by race or class... In the eve of the summer, they remained reformers rather than revolutionaries, liberals rather than radicals. Their narrative statements, written on the project applications, reflect a generally idealistic view of America, based on the liberal imagery characteristic of the era. The United States certainly had its imperfections, but they were less the product of flaws inherent in the system than they were remedial aberrations stemming from our failure to fully realize the humane and egalitarian values on which the nation had been founded. Neither their
experiences nor their generally liberal political views prepared the volunteers for what they were to find in Mississippi. (11-12)

Like Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Heath's *The Children Bob Moses Led* explores the ways in which these ostensible advantages severely handicap the northern white volunteers in the Deep South. And through the barriers that stand between Tom and Mississippi blacks, Heath explores the barriers to the Beloved Community.

The most significant divisions between the black activists and the white volunteers in *The Children Bob Moses Led* are their drastically different levels of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In an interview with the *Cortland Review*, Heath touches on this crucial difference when he explains his decision to alternate the points of view of Bob Moses and Tom Morton:

[T]he reason I called the novel *The Children Bob Moses Led* was to dramatize [the] issue of leadership, . . . what does it mean to be a leader, what does it mean to be a follower, and what the consequences are of a certain kind of leadership and a certain kind of "followership," if that's the word. In a sense, Moses is the leader and Morton is the follower; Moses is the hero and Tom is the neophyte, and you play back their two versions of what the Civil Rights Movement meant through their two voices and their two sensibilities.

Heath elaborates on the different "sensibilities" of Bob Moses and Tom Morton in an e-mail to the author:

I hope Tom is likeable, but he certainly is not the hero. He is sensitive and bright and to his credit he does his bit for civil rights, but he in no way has Moses's depth of insight and commitment. Tom is not by nature a social activist; he is more of a commentator on the ironies of the passing scene . . . than a person who can commit himself wholeheartedly to a cause.

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*For another "typology" of the Freedom Summer volunteers, see Rothschild 31-51.*
Tom’s involvement in Freedom Summer does seem to stem as much from personal, rather selfish and shallow reasons as from ideological ones. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Tom reveals that “[n]othing had gone the way [he] wanted” in the summer of 1963 because his girlfriend Michelle had broken up with him to join the Peace Corps and because his parents had decided to separate (3). In an attempt to snap out of his depression, Tom agrees, at his friend Lenny Swift’s urging, to go to Washington, D. C., to attend the March on Washington because it will be “fun,” especially since Bob Dylan and Joan Baez will be performing (4).

Throughout The Children Bob Moses Led, the knowledge that such white volunteers as Tom—the “children” of the title—are only temporarily involved in the Civil Rights Movement and, therefore, have only a limited commitment to the Black Freedom Struggle bothers many black activists. As Mary Aicken Rothschild puts it in A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Freedom Summers, 1964-65 (1982), the black staff’s “resentment” derives from “the knowledge that the volunteers could always leave and return to northern, upper-middle-class America. Very few of the staff could count on an alternative to working in the civil rights movement” (54).

To illustrate that the black activists in The Children Bob Moses Led have far more invested in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi than the white volunteers, Heath alternates the chronological settings of Bob Moses’s and Tom Morton’s accounts in addition to their points of view. The novel opens with the first installment of Tom’s account, which takes place in summer 1963 as Tom contemplates becoming a volunteer in Mississippi in summer 1964. Indicating his temporary commitment to
voter registration before returning to school in the fall, most of Tom's segments take
place only during Freedom Summer proper: June, July, and August 1964. Although
the first installment of Bob Moses's account immediately follows Tom's in the novel,
it has actually taken place earlier, in 1961. Bob Moses earns rural black
Mississippians' complete trust by living among them indefinitely and helping them to
organize; his long-term commitment to voter registration is reflected by the three years
his sections cover: from August 1961 to May 1964. Reviewer Hettie Jones observes
of the novel's disrupted chronological order that "[a]lthough this structure is confusing
at first, it works eventually." Indeed, taken together, Tom's and Moses's narratives
encompass an intense period of grass-roots organizing in Mississippi: from August
1961, when Moses first brings SNCC volunteers to McComb to organize a voter
registration drive, to August 1964, when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
(MFDP) unsuccessfully attempts to unseat the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party
at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.5

Throughout The Children Bob Moses Led, the different tones of Bob Moses's
and Tom Morton's sections reveal the disparity of their experiences. Although the
reviewer of the novel for Publishers Weekly suggests that the first-person voice of Bob

5 For comprehensive accounts of grass-roots organizing in Mississippi before Freedom Summer, see
Dittmer 90-193 and Payne 103-283. Dittmer's Local People and Payne's I've Got the Light of
Freedom are excellent accounts of how ordinary black Mississippians themselves—rather than such
national civil rights organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
(NAACP) or such nationally renowned figures as Martin Luther King, Jr.—spearheaded the struggle
for civil rights in their state. For first-hand accounts of organizing in Mississippi between 1961 and
1963, see Hampton and Fayer 139-51, and Raines 233-72. For a thorough discussion of the formation
of the MFDP and its role at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, see Dittmer 272-302, and
Carmichael and Hamilton 86-97.
Moses is "problematic" because it "offers little of his inner world" as he witnesses and recounts the events in Mississippi in the 1960s, Alicia Metcalf Miller describes it more accurately as "the voice of sanity in the midst of chaos." Indeed, just as Heath's Tom Morton character resembles the actual Freedom Summer volunteers, Heath's reserved Bob Moses character resembles the actual Bob Moses. In the introduction to And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi (1994), for example, Eric R. Burner concedes that his study cannot be "a biography in the full sense" because identifying the essence of the actual Bob Moses is difficult:

He was so naturally self-effacing, so consumed by his work, so determined to eliminate from it his own persona that his is essentially a public life. There are no personal reminiscences, just his moving words spoken at the time of his work in Mississippi. Even the delineations of Moses by coworkers in oral histories and books, or in personal interviews with them, are curiously unrevealing. Sometimes it is as though those who worked with him closely seem scarcely to have known him at all, and even the most painstaking searching has uncovered no detailed archival evidence. Various intellectual speculations, as well as a generous amount of his own words, come closest to getting at Moses' convoluted core. (7-8)

By beginning Moses's narrative in 1961, Heath can demonstrate that Moses's solemnity results from three long years of intense civil rights work and the concomitant daily exposure to danger. When he first arrives in Mississippi in 1961, Moses is surprised that a black southerner describes white terrorism "as matter-of-fact as if he were merely stating that dogs bark in the night" (62). A local black organizer warns Moses not to "get starry-eyed . . . . Things are gonna get real ugly around here before they get pretty. I've seen how mean these white folks can be" (12). When the final installment of Moses's account begins in July 1963, Moses reveals that he, too,
has become matter-of-fact about the extent of racism, and he admits that white intransigence and the slow pace of the Civil Rights Movement during his three-year stint in Mississippi have frustrated him: “I felt like Sisyphus, shoving the stone uphill only to watch it roll back down again” (269). Even when he breaks the disturbing news at the Freedom Summer orientation in Ohio that James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner have disappeared near Philadelphia, Mississippi, Moses speaks “in a flat, inflectionless voice” (39). In The Children Bob Moses Led, the Civil Rights Movement has clearly rolled over Bob Moses by the summer of 1964.

Conversely, the white volunteers’ inexperience and youthful idealism throughout The Children Bob Moses Led contrast sharply with Bob Moses’s and other veteran black activists’ vast experience and realistic attitudes toward Mississippi racism. On the one hand, the white volunteers in The Children Bob Moses Led make “self-righteous statements” about why they are going to Mississippi during orientation: “Everybody was spouting position papers and reciting received ideas as if this were a senior seminar” (36). For example, one white volunteer, Esther Rappaport, asserts: “There’s not enough justice and not enough liberty. There’s not enough truth and not enough beauty. Who will work for these things? It’s everybody’s job” (34). On the other hand, Bob Moses, unlike the neophyte volunteers, recognizes and readily

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*Goodman arrived in Mississippi on June 21, 1964, as part of the first wave of Freedom Summer volunteers. The next day he drove with Chaney and Schwerner to investigate a church bombing near Philadelphia, Mississippi. They were arrested for speeding that afternoon, but released later that evening. They were never seen again. Their bodies were found in August, buried beneath a dam near Philadelphia. For an account of the murders and their significance to the Mississippi Summer Project, see Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The True Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).*

156

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appreciates the immediate needs of southern blacks—a dispossessed group whose immediate needs do not include “truth” or “beauty,” and whose concepts of “justice” and “liberty” vary significantly from those of the white college students. Moses encourages the white students not to expect “big results” from their efforts in Mississippi, but to focus instead on small victories: “If we all go and come back alive, that will be an important accomplishment. If we can simply talk to Negroes and stay in their homes, that will be a huge job” (37-38). Moses also tells the Freedom School teachers to “be patient” with their students and not to “expect too much”: “If you do nothing more than be friendly, if you don’t teach them anything at all, that will be still be something” (58). Despite their “passionate sincerity” for registering Mississippi blacks to vote, the white volunteers have difficulty catching up experientially with the black Movement veterans, and the gap between the two groups’ experiences remains largely unbreached during the course of The Children Bob Moses Led.

A particularly significant handicap that the white volunteers in The Children Bob Moses Led possess is their racial affiliation with the white Mississippians whom black Mississippians and veteran civil rights activists cannot but regard as the enemy. Black activist Raymond Fleetwood—otherwise known as “Feelgood”—explains this barrier to interracial cooperation to the white volunteers during their orientation: “To survive this summer, we’re gonna hafta learn to love each other. . . . But it’s gonna be a lot harder for me, you dig, because I was brought up to hate whites. Down South the people that’ve been beatin’ on me and abusin’ my people has all got white faces just like yours . . .” (41-42). Indeed, Tom discovers to his great discomfort that he and the
other white volunteers do have much in common with white Mississippians, much more, in fact, than they do with black Mississippians:

[Except for the race issue, Mississippians were friendly people who went to church, loved their children, and worked regular jobs. They drank beer, watched TV, and rooted for the home team; they worried about sore throats and runny noses and scratched where it itched; they loved to hunt and fish and swap stories. Had I come to Mississippi under different circumstances, they would have welcomed me warmly as one of their own. Had I stuck out my hand, they would have shaken it. (232)]

Tom even concedes that Tallahatchie, the first Mississippi town to which he is assigned as a volunteer, is “a very pretty town,” probably “a nice place to live” (107). Because of their racial connection to white supremacists, the northern college students find winning the trust of such black volunteers as Feelgood especially difficult. As white volunteer Esther Rappaport informs Tom when he arrives in McComb to help her with voter registration, “No matter what I do, my motives are suspect. Just wait, you’ll see” (179).

Tom’s disregard for a speech by Ledell Thomas, a black SNCC volunteer who has been to Africa as part of an exchange program, most clearly reveals Tom’s predisposition to align himself culturally with whites rather than with blacks. Ledell, who comes to the Freedom School to teach Tom’s class about African history, opens his talk by telling the class that “the white man has conspired to keep you from knowing how wonderful you are” (133). Ledell goes on to identify the ancient Egyptians and their celebrated civilization as African, pointing out the African-looking lips of the Sphinx and even suggesting that whites have “chopped off the [Sphinx’s] nose to hide the African face” (135). Ledell’s talk greatly excites the students, and
Jasmine Mays, the teenage granddaughter of Tom’s Tallahatchie host family, comments that it is “the best speech I ever heard in my whole life” (136). Tom, on the other hand, rejects the Afrocentric premises of Ledell’s speech. “[S]ounding very much like a history major headed for graduate school,” Tom questions “some of [Ledell’s] facts and interpretations”: “[I]t seems to me that you undercut rather than reinforce your point when you play fast and loose with the facts” (136). Tom suggests that “the wind and rain” rather than whites destroyed the Sphinx’s nose, and he asserts that only “a few million” Africans died during the middle passage and slavery rather than the fifty million that Ledell cites. Jasmine correctly perceives, however, that “the point” of Ledell’s talk has not been historical accuracy per se, but that “whitey . . . has robbed us of our face, our potency, and our history” (135). She calls Tom on his bias, in fact:

You actin’ just like the white man Ledell talkin’ about. You want it all neat and clean so you can store it away in yo intellect for the winter. Well, history ain’t facts, it ain’t feelin’s. I feel in my heart that what Ledell sayin’ be true. What he say is touchin’ my life. We built them pyramids; we died because of slavery; and it’s up to us to fight for our freedom. That’s what important. (137-38)

The objective of Ledell’s speech is to empower, regardless of historical accuracy, the black students who have been subjected too long to white brainwashing. By summarily rejecting Ledell’s argument and aligning himself with the historical establishment, Tom alienates Jasmine.

Upper-middle-class upbringings also handicap the white volunteers in The Children Bob Moses Led and render their formation of a Beloved Community with disadvantaged blacks unlikely. Whereas most Mississippi blacks in the novel have
experienced violence and discrimination, such northern whites as Tom Morton and Esther Rappaport have spent most of their lives in comfort. As Doug McAdam observes of the actual Freedom Summer participants, even though they may have been “intellectually aware of poverty, . . . their class advantage had insulated them from any real experiential understanding of the problem. No such comfortable distance was possible in Mississippi” (87). On the one hand, when readers meet Bob Moses in the first installation of his narrative, he describes the squalor that he finds among poor black Mississippians in Liberty and McComb during August and September 1961: “children with swollen ankles, bloated bellies, and suppurating sores; children whose one meal a day was grits and gravy; children who didn’t know the taste of milk, meat, fruits, or vegetables; children who drank contaminated water from a distant well, slept five in a bed, and didn’t have the energy to brush the flies from their faces” (11). On the other hand, when readers meet Tom Morton in the first installation of his narrative, he is working in the Adirondacks at a tennis camp for wealthy Jewish children from Long Island. During the volunteer orientation in Ohio, Esther juxtaposes her own, similarly carefree background as a native of New York City and the child of leftist parents with the brutal backgrounds of black civil rights activists: “I was told to expect violence, . . . and I certainly do expect it, but I have no concept of violence— I’ve never known any.” In response, Feelgood comments sarcastically that Esther has been “fortunate” to have avoided the troubles that face southern blacks (42). Because the privileged white world in which Tom and Esther easily move differs significantly from the reality of black life in Mississippi, Feelgood challenges the white volunteers
in McComb about their qualifications for participating in a poor people’s movement: “[W]hat do you know about the nitty-gritty of black experience? . . . What do you have to teach the black masses?” (176). The Children Bob Moses Led suggests that overcoming class barriers is as difficult as, if not more difficult than, overcoming racial barriers during Freedom Summer.

A far more serious manifestation of the white volunteers’ privileged backgrounds in The Children Bob Moses Led is their reluctance to face the fact that the sociopolitical structure in which their positions are secure contributes significantly to the exploitation of African Americans. At the beginning of the novel, Vincent Harding challenges the white volunteers during their Freedom Summer orientation to reevaluate their status in American society: “You can consider what you are doing in two ways. . . . You can see yourselves as an ‘in group’ trying to help an ‘out group’ enjoy the dubious pleasures of middle-class life, or you can see yourselves as outsiders, seeking the basic restructuring of society. Are we Ins or Outs? Do we want liberal reforms or basic change?” (34). However, privileged white volunteers like Tom and Esther have, despite their commitment to equality for southern blacks, reaped the benefits of a national white power structure that oppresses African Americans. In their classic manifesto Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (1967), Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton indict white Americans for their support of “institutional racism”:

[T]he black community has been the creation of, and dominated by, a combination of oppressive forces and special interests in the white community. The groups which have access to the necessary resources and the ability to effect change benefit politically and economically
from the continued subordinate status of the black community. This is not to say that every single white American consciously oppresses black people. He does not need to. Institutional racism has been maintained deliberately by the power structure and through indifference, inertia and lack [of] courage on the part of white masses as well as petty officials. . . . One way or another, most whites participate in economic colonialism. (22)

None of the white characters in The Children Bob Moses Led seriously examines his or her role vis-à-vis "economic colonialism," nor do any of them seem eager to identify a strategy for radically restructuring American society. On the other hand, black activists like Feelgood and Poe increasingly talk of overthrowing the existing power structure, and their revolutionary goals conflict with the white volunteers' reformist goals.

In The Children Bob Moses Led, the MFDP's unsuccessful attempt to unseat the regular, all-white Mississippi delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention reveals the enormity of institutional racism in the United States, and the character of Mr. Swift, the father of Tom's co-volunteer Lenny, epitomizes the white liberals whom SNCC veterans are increasingly coming to despise because of their alignment with the existing power structure. Mr. Swift goes to Atlantic City with the hope that his "longtime friend" Hubert Humphrey will secure the vice-presidential nomination (272). After the National Democratic Party reneges on its promise to accommodate the MFDP, Tom and Lenny rant and rave about the way government "ought" to work. Mr. Swift, on the other hand, supports only limited reforms within the existing political system: "Ought has nothing to do with it. . . . We're talking about is. It is my considered opinion that worlds that exist have more reality than
worlds that don’t. In a world where many are not good, doing good is tricky business; you have to differentiate degrees of evil and distinguish bad from worse” (282). As articulated by Mr. Swift, the National Democratic Party’s noncommittal stance toward full black participation in the political process disillusioned the veterans of the Mississippi Summer Project. Indeed, in The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC (1973), Freedom Summer participant Cleveland Sellers identifies 1964 as a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement: “Never again were we lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the ‘good’ people of America could eliminate them. We left Atlantic City with the knowledge that the movement had turned into something else. After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation” (111). Doug McAdam concurs that Atlantic City brought about the “collapse of the Beloved Community” (118).

The assertiveness and confidence of the privileged white volunteers in The Children Bob Moses Led also jeopardizes the Beloved Community. One black activist foreshadows the difficulties of the Mississippi Summer Project when he protests, as early as 1963, the inclusion of northern white students in the Mississippi movement: “These hotshot Ivy League dudes [will] simply assume they’re in charge. They’ll undermine the local leaders we’ve worked so hard to establish and try to steal SNCC away from us” (253). Doug McAdam accounts for the self-confidence of the actual volunteers in Freedom Summer: [M]uch of the self-assurance displayed by the volunteers owed to their generally privileged backgrounds. Class, as we are reminded each day,
has its privileges. The roots of these privileges may be material, but the specific advantages enjoyed by those in the upper classes transcend their material base. Among the most important byproducts of class advantage is the psychological heritage that normally accompanies it. Of special interest here is the sense of personal efficacy or felt mastery over one's environment that often characterizes those who are economically well off. This trait is not simply a matter of class differences in socialization practices, but of actual differences in people's lived experiences. Persons in the upper classes do tend to have more control over their environments than those in the lower classes. Certainly they have more resources—money, education, social contacts, etc.—with which to try to shape their environments. They are thus more apt to experience their world as malleable and themselves as master of their fate, than are those who are less well off. (13)

Heath's fictional account of Freedom Summer, like McAdam's sociological account, reveals that the white volunteers' worldview differs significantly from that of black Mississippians. To be sure, the upper-middle-class white college students in The Children Bob Moses Led bring with them to Mississippi a level of knowledge and skills that cannot but qualify them to assume leadership roles.

A confrontation between Gayl Norris, a local black SNCC worker in McComb, and white volunteer Esther Rappaport over SNCC communications best demonstrates the tensions that arise between local blacks and northern white college students when questions of leadership are at stake. Gayl resents Esther's appropriating tasks for herself. When Gayl mentions at a staff meeting that paperwork is piling up, Esther says that she will "take care of it." With "obvious hostility," Gayl challenges Esther's assuming the responsibility and asks, "Why you?" When Esther complains that "[w]e've got to have some efficiency around here," Gayl retorts, "And you're going to provide it?" Esther argues that she is "a fast typer" and that she merely wants to compose "a decent press release," but Gayl resents the implication that she and other

164
local blacks are “slow” and accuses Esther of assuming a leadership role: “You want
to control the information. You want to be spokesman for the group. You want to
take over.” Esther is indeed reluctant to relinquish responsibility, for when another
local black volunteer suggests that the white volunteers teach local blacks the required
skills to draft and type official documents, Esther rejects the idea: “It’s not that easy.
... We’re short of time. If I have to rewrite everything, I might as well do it in the
first place” (193-94). Esther’s frustration with Gayle suggests to local Mississippi
blacks that white volunteers are willing to work toward the Beloved Community only
if they can hold important leadership positions within the Movement.

As the white activists canvass in black communities in The Children Bob
Moses Led, many black Mississippians cannot but defer to them, and this tacit
confirmation of white superiority drives an additional wedge between the white
volunteers and the black activists. One black SNCC veteran remembers as “sick” the
positive response that Mississippi blacks gave to white volunteers during an earlier
manifestation of Freedom Summer, the 1963 Freedom Vote campaign: “People
smiled and filled out ballots because the person telling them to was white, not because
it was the right thing to do” (254). Indeed, interracial relationships based on equality
are highly unlikely in rural Mississippi in 1964. Although white volunteer Esther

7 In September 1963, COFO staged a mock election; the purpose of this “Freedom Vote” campaign was
to prove to Mississippi whites and the federal government that Mississippi blacks were indeed
interested in voting if given the opportunity, and to give Mississippi blacks valuable experience in the
political process. The Freedom Vote project was so successful—83,000 people cast votes in the mock
election—that COFO decided to launch the Freedom Summer project in 1964.
argues that “[p]erson-to-person contact” is important in breaking down prejudice, black activist Poe makes the valid point that interracial contact in the segregated South takes place in a specific sociohistorical context: “Only it ain’t person to person, it’s master to slave” (197). In The Children Bob Moses Led, black southerners who defer to the white northerners cannot but maintain the traditional tenets of white supremacy.

Just as many Mississippi blacks subscribe to the notion of white superiority by deferring to the white northern volunteers, many white volunteers subscribe to the notion of black inferiority by indulging in romantic racist fantasies. In fact, many of Tom’s attitudes toward the poor and the black resemble those of white northern volunteer Lynne Rabinowitz in Alice Walker’s Meridian. Before Tom joins the Civil Rights Movement, he contemplates becoming a famous writer who captures the experiences of “the down-and-out and dispossessed”: “the place to find Real Life was with the hoboes huddled around flaming trash cans and the dark-skinned folk who worked the fields and sang the blues” (4). A sense of adventure, therefore, motivates Tom to join the Movement, for he wonders to himself: “What must it be like . . . to live every day on the razor’s edge?” (33). In particular, Tom idealizes Bob Moses as a hero undertaking an important mission in Mississippi: “While I was seeking my identity, here was a person who knew what to do with his life. There was something compelling about a man named Moses walking into a town named Liberty where no one with a dark skin was free. I felt certain that what he was doing needed to be done, and I wanted to join him” (28). Tom’s unconscious racism manifests itself strikingly when he imagines a potential friendship with Bob Moses, for Tom holds “a fantasy
that maybe [Moses] would pull [Tom] aside and say, ‘Hey, Tom, I’ve got a raft on the
Mississippi; let’s you and me drift on down the Father of Waters and meditate on the
meaning of things’” (199). Tom’s image cannot but evoke images of Huck and Jim—
white boy and black slave—and the racism inherent in that particular relationship.

Amontillado Poe, a young black activist from New York who espouses separatist
views, angrily articulates the contempt of many black civil rights workers for whites
who harbor such patronizing attitudes toward blacks, especially toward the rural poor:

You think what you’re doin’ is romantic . . . . Black is what’s
happenin’. The Negro is in vogue this summer. Mississippi is the “in”
place to be. You get to write yo letters home postmarked from some
“Black Belt” hot spot and back on campus you can brag about how you
made that civil rights scene. But when something else becomes hip,
you’ll split. I’m on to you honkies. Look at you in yo bare feet,
workshirts, and blue jeans. You think it’s beautiful to be poor? Well
let me tell you, there’s no glory in bein’ poor. It’s a grind, man. And I
didn’t learn that in no sociology course; I lived it. Poor people don’t
need no bleedin’-heart liberals comin’ down to “identify with their
plight.” (196)

Like the embittered Tommy Odds in Meridian, Poe correctly perceives that the racism
of northern white liberals serves as a significant barrier to the creation of the Beloved
Community.

The complicated relationship between Tom Morton and sixteen-year-old
Jasmine Mays illuminates another, particularly divisive emotional issue during the
Mississippi Summer Project: interracial sex. In The Children Bob Moses Led, the
Freedom Summer volunteers cannot but attack interracial norms as they attack white
supremacy. Indeed, many activists believe that any interracial contact—sexual or
otherwise—between women and men will, by subverting cultural taboos, expedite the

167
formation of the Beloved Community. Doug McAdam explains that this logic affected many of the actual participants in Freedom Summer:

The project was held to be the living embodiment of that ideal; the "beloved community" that would serve as a model of what true egalitarian society was to be like. The members of that community were expected to be free; free from the restraints of racism and consequently free to truly love one another. For many volunteers, then, interracial sex became the ultimate expression of the ideology, conclusive of their right to membership in the "beloved community." (93)

Reflecting McAdam’s observations, Tom realizes that despite the personal motivations of many Freedom Summer volunteers, interracial sex among participants often conveys a political message:

The assumption was that if everybody got laid, nobody would get screwed. The black guys looked for white gals ready to go all the way for integration, and the white guys were all too willing to take advantage of the instant crushes the teenage black girls had on them. If you believed in equality, why not? The place to make the beloved community was right there on that mattress on the floor. (208)

Tom’s personal feelings for Jasmine complicate his political conception of interracial sex as a means to overthrow white supremacy. On the one hand, Tom truly seems to care for Jasmine. He denies that the relationship he develops with her is "part of that pattern" of political protest, and he tries to convince himself that he and Jasmine are not attracted to each other “merely out of some illicit urge to defy a taboo” (208). On the other hand, Tom’s relationship with Jasmine takes place within a specific sociohistoric context in which southern white supremacists have traditionally linked racial domination to sexual domination. According to Mary Aickin Rothschild, the actual Bob Moses asked the original Freedom Summer volunteers at their 1964
orientation “not to perpetuate the southern past and ‘use’ each other emotionally and
sexually”: “My summer Negro, ‘the White girl I made’ are no different from the
token Negro in the school—none are really known and experienced” (56). By the end
of The Children Bob Moses Led, Jasmine intuits that her relationship with Tom
compromises the integrity of the Beloved Community because of their age, race, and
class differences. She falls in love with black SNCC worker Ledell Simmons and tells
Tom in a letter that “I know there ain’t no point in thinking about some other life I
might have had’ (201). Tom eventually agrees with Jasmine that “deep down I had
known that this would happen, but I kept it from myself, pretending that our
relationship had a future” (201).

The Children Bob Moses Led especially dramatizes the ways in which contact
between white female volunteers and black male activists thwarts the formation of the
Beloved Community. One northern volunteer, Misty, epitomizes the forbidden white
woman, and she reminds Tom of “one of those inflammable ice goddesses Hitchcock
was so fond of: pure and cool on the outside, but a hint in the eyes that someone had
been whispering dirty secrets in her ear” (219). Historically, white men have, to
maintain white supremacy, vehemently denied black men sexual access to such white
women as Misty. In his classic analysis The Mind of the South (1941), W. J. Cash
observed that white southern men during Reconstruction developed a “rape complex”
based on their “identification” of southern white women “with the very notion of the
South itself.” By identifying the South with the southern white woman, southern
white men necessarily identified an assault on the South with an assault on the
southern white woman. Therefore, southern white men concluded “that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman” (118-19). Because of the violent emotions that contact between black men and white women evoked in the segregated Deep South, Freedom Summer organizers strongly discouraged interracial dating during the project. Despite such guidelines and Esther’s warnings “about leading men on,” Misty persistently dallies with black men. Fully aware of her allure, Misty seeks the attention of young black males who gather at the McComb Freedom House: “They went for her pale, Clearasil skin, her freckled face and straw-colored hair, her Cupid’s bow mouth, the way she posed and postured, smiled and looked sad” (192). Eventually, Misty asks Marcus Carver, a local black worker, to drive her into town to buy “her favorite brand of ‘cigs,’” and he is fired from his job when his white boss sees him with Misty (192). Heath suggests that because of her indifference to the strict southern taboo against any contact between white women and black men, Misty is, like Lynne Rabinowitz in Alice Walker’s Meridian, accountable for the retaliation that white segregationists heap on black communities in which white female volunteers live.

Just as Misty functions as a type of eroticized white female volunteer, Feelgood and Poe function as types of sexually aggressive black male activists during Freedom Summer. Such historians as Sara Evens and Mary Aicken Rothschild have amply documented the tendency of such black men to prey on white women during the Mississippi Summer Project. For example, Evans describes in Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (1979)
the “explosive” bringing together during Freedom Summer of “young, naïve, sometimes insensitive, rebellious and idealistic white women with young, angry black men, some of whom had hardly been allowed to speak to white women before” (78).

In The Children Bob Moses Led, Feelgood begins with Esther Rappaport an intimate relationship in which all the couple does is fight and have sex; consequently, both Esther and Tom Morton suspect that Feelgood sleeps with Esther only because she is white. Poe objectifies Misty similarly, commenting crudely to other black male activists that the “bitch is beggin’ for a righteous poppin’” and “ripe to give it up” (220). Heath goes on to demonstrate that such overtures by black men toward white women infuriate black female activists. When two black male workers almost come to blows over Misty, Gayl Norris intervenes angrily: “Y’all quit that now . . . . I’m sick of all this fussing. Y’all are doing the same thing we’re struggling against. This is a time of uniting, not fighting among ourselves . . . . I’m tired of all you men talking black and sleeping white” (220-21). Reflecting Sara Evans’s conclusion that “[t]he rising anger of black women would soon become a powerful force within SNCC, creating a barrier that shared womanhood could not transcend” (81), The Children Bob Moses Led demonstrates that hostility among black women, white women, and black men poses a serious threat to the Beloved Community.

Although The Children Bob Moses Led ends, like Freedom Summer, in 1964, the novel hints at a barrier to the Beloved Community that will become increasingly pronounced in 1965 and 1966: the rejection of integration as the goal of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, the novel sheds light on the gradual disintegration of the
biracial coalition and portrays SNCC in particular as moving toward the belief that all
American society is inherently racist—especially following the 1964 Atlantic City
debacle. When the original SNCC staff members agree in 1963 to recruit white
volunteers for Freedom Summer, they boldly sing the line “black and white together”
in the Movement’s anthem, “We Shall Overcome” (256). Likewise, the volunteers
sing “black and white together” with “crossed arms and gripped hands” during their
orientation at the beginning of The Children Bob Moses Led (35). However, at the
conclusion of the novel, after the dejected Freedom Summer volunteers and the MFDP
have unsuccessfully tried to unseat the regular Mississippi Democratic Party in
Atlantic City, “no one crossed arms or held hands and the SNCC veterans stopped
singing when we came to ‘black and white together’” (299).

A series of tense meetings in the McComb Freedom House in August 1964
serve as Heath’s most explicit indications in The Children Bob Moses Led of the
growing rift between blacks and whites in the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, when
asked to comment on the failures of the Movement, Heath responds in an e-mail to the
author that, ultimately, the Movement did not have “the ability to accomplish its more
idealist goal of the beloved community. By the mid-Sixties most whites had been
driven out of the civil rights movement, and many civil rights movement leaders had
gone around the bend into revolutionary fantasy.” On the one hand, the white
volunteers in The Children Bob Moses Led feel that an integrated SNCC staff is
important because “when the local people see whites working together beside them
and sharing their problems, they feel better”; moreover, “[w]hen people get to know
each other prejudice is broken down” (196-97). Even some black volunteers state that
“whites and blacks can learn to live together” (197). On the other hand, such black
militants as Feelgood articulate their distaste for integration as the Movement’s goal:
“Integration is not a revolutionary objective . . . . It assumes that stuffs gotta be done
for black folks because they got no identity or culture of their own” (198). Given the
federal government’s lack of commitment—and southern whites’ hostility—to black
demands for equal rights, Feelgood comments bitterly: “Integration may be the law of
the land, . . . but it sure ain’t the reality of the land” (224-25). Poe concurs with
Feelgood, specifically attacking the middle-class bent of the Movement: “[Black
talks] gotta be indoctrinated and shipped out to the suburbs so they can wear Bermuda
shorts and learn to play croquet. Forget it, Jack. I ain’t buyin’. Do you think a dude
in a brick house is gonna give a shit about the brother pickin’ cotton?” (198). Poe
even advocates abandoning nonviolence as a tactic against white power: “No more
sit-ins. I’m ready for a shoot-out. . . . Bring this evil system to its knees. . . . And we
gonna treat the honky white man like the war criminal he is” (226). Feelgood’s and
Poe’s attitudes toward mainstream American society reflect the growing conviction
among many black civil rights workers that increased yet limited political and social
opportunities for members of the black middle class mean very little to the black poor
who are exploited by the existing power structure. Indeed, in Black Power, Stokely
Carmichael and Charles Hamilton admonish all blacks to reject integration: “The goal
of black people must not be to assimilate into middle-class America, for that class—as
a whole—is without a viable conscience as regards humanity. . . . This class is the backbone of institutional racism in this country” (40-41).

Reviewer Hettie Jones seems pleased that “Heath . . . knows better than to tack a happy ending onto the book,” yet the absence of hope in The Children Bob Moses Led for the eventual creation of the Beloved Community after 1964 is a disappointing quality in a novel about the Civil Rights Movement. At the end of the novel, as Tom considers the significance of the National Democratic Party’s refusal to seat the MFDP, he seemingly concedes the permanence of racism in the United States: “I knew then that most of us, the children that Bob Moses led, would leave Atlantic City with an idea, terrible in its simplicity, that would haunt us through the years: America was Mississippi; Mississippi was America; from sea to shining sea” (307). Indeed, by allowing Tom to relate his Freedom Summer experiences form the vantage of 1972, eight years after the events of the novel have taken place, Heath implies that one of the unforeseen outcomes of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement has been Tom’s profound disillusionment with American society. Although the reviewer for Publishers Weekly writes that Tom’s perspective is “often wry,” that assessment seems understated: Tom’s tone throughout the novel comes dangerously close to suggesting that the only lasting impact Freedom Summer has had on him is his cynicism. At numerous points in the novel, Tom infuses his account of the Mississippi Summer Project with borderline derision for his and the other volunteers’ idealism and their commitment to their beliefs. On the very first page of the novel, in fact, Tom announces: “In those days I believed that America could be made safe for democracy, from the grassroots
up, with just a little help from me and my friends. . . . We were neophytes who thought that we could redeem our nation by holding hands and singing freedom songs." Yet by the time 1972 arrives, Tom concedes that "the world had not changed much" (1). Reflecting on their Freedom Summer orientation session, Tom implies that he and his fellow volunteers were somewhat deluded: "I think we assumed in our well-intentioned souls that our erudition and idealism would somehow save us when we went South: we were too good to kill" (36).

At the end of her review of The Children Bob Moses Led, Hettie Jones raises an interesting point that calls attention to the unsatisfactory conclusion of the novel: "It's tempting to pose questions for the fictional Tom Morton, who'd now [in 1995] be a man in his fifties headed for the next millennium—questions like this: If America is still Mississippi, how do we find a way to get people like him to stay in the struggle to change it, instead of leaving after the summer is over?" Yet Doug McAdam convincingly shows in Freedom Summer that the volunteers did stay in the struggle after 1964: "many of the volunteers continued to organize their lives around the movement long after the summer ended. Jobs were taken as a means of furthering the struggle. Marriages were conceived of as political partnerships. Decisions about where to live often turned on which cities were views as the most politically progressive" (199). Significantly, Freedom Summer volunteers went on to play important roles in the Free Speech, Antiwar, and Women's Liberation Movements of the 1960s. Tom Morton, on the other hand, distances himself from his summer of activism after leaving the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in the fall.
of 1964; he goes on to complete a doctorate in American Studies from Case Western Reserve University in 1969 and to land a teaching position at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky. As far as the reader knows, Freedom Summer has been Tom’s only foray into social activism. Reviewer Alicia Metcalf Miller identifies the inconsistency between Heath’s fictional account and McAdam’s sociological account as a “disturbing” weakness of *The Children Bob Moses Led*: “Heath’s emphasis on the ‘lasting bitterness’ of civil rights workers, black and white, seems shaky in the face of their eventual success.”

Its perhaps unnecessarily bleak conclusion notwithstanding, *The Children Bob Moses Led* is a valuable contribution to American fiction about the Civil Rights Movement because of its compelling dramatization of the many and complex cultural forces at work in Mississippi in 1964. In *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (1990), the actual Bob Moses comments on the radical premise of Freedom Summer: “What was in the offing was whether SNCC could integrate itself, as it were, and live as a sort of island of integration in a sea of separation. And SNCC was trying to work itself out as an organization which was integrated in all levels” (183). As history has shown, however, SNCC could not integrate itself as readily or as effectively as its members had once hoped. Instead, its black members increasingly endorsed black separatism after 1964 and finally expelled whites from the organization in December 1966. *The Children Bob Moses Led* illuminates the powerful forces working against the integration of SNCC during the 1960s, race-, class-, and gender-related forces that
continue to thwart interracial cooperation at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, as the novel so explicitly shows, the questions raised by the Civil Rights Movement in the South in the 1960s were not unique to that place and time, for as Tom himself realizes at the end of the novel: “America was Mississippi; Mississippi was America” (307).
Alice Walker narrates her novel *Meridian* (1976) from the shifting points of view of three civil rights activists who worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the Deep South in the mid-1960s: Meridian Hill, a native black southerner; Lynne Rabinowitz, a white northern volunteer; and Truman Held, a black northern intellectual. The relationships among these three characters allow Walker to explore the cultural forces that simultaneously united and divided blacks and whites, and women and men, during the Civil Rights Movement. In her essay “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor” (1975), Walker articulates her concern for understanding the experiences of both blacks and whites: “I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story. And the whole story is what I’m after” (49). Through the friendship of Meridian and Lynne, Walker reveals not only the gender-based experiences that black women and white women share, but also the race-based differences that complicate their relationship. Through Lynne’s marriage to Truman and her subsequent sexual liaisons with other black men, Walker explores the political ramifications of interracial sex. And through the strained interactions of

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1 Walker never mentions SNCC by name in *Meridian*, but the reader immediately deduces that it is the civil rights organization to which the student activists belong. For a complete delineation of the correlations between SNCC’s history and events in *Meridian*, see Susan Danielson.
Meridian and Truman, Walker illustrates the ways in which racism and sexism divide black women and black men. In addition to managing the complex relationships that they have with one another, Meridian, Lynne, and Truman reflect on the impact that the Movement has had on their lives. The novel implicitly criticizes both black militants who eventually reject the ideal of the Beloved Community and instead embrace separatism and black revolutionary violence, and former Movement activists who abandon their revolutionary ideals of restructuring the racist, classist American power structure and instead focus their creative talents and energies on accumulating wealth and status within the existing socioeconomic system. Although Meridian suggests that the likelihood of the Beloved Community fades after the mid-1960s, the novel nonetheless provides glimmers of hope that the characters can become reconciled to one another.

Born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, to sharecropper parents, Alice Walker was herself active in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, as many of the autobiographical essays in Part Two of her collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) attest. In one of those essays, “Choice: A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.” (1973), Walker recalls the day in 1960 when she first saw King as he was being arrested on television: “At the moment I saw his resistance I knew I would never be able to live in this country without resisting everything that sought to disinherit me, and I would never be forced away from the land of my birth without a fight” (144). In a 1973 interview with John O’Brien, Walker recounts the specific incident that propelled her into the “Southern Revolution”:

179

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When I left Eatonton, Georgia, to go off to Spelman College in Atlanta . . . , I deliberately sat in the front section of the Greyhound bus. A white woman complained to the driver. He—big and red and ugly—ordered me to move. I moved. But in those seconds of moving, everything changed. I was eager to bring an end to the South that permitted my humiliation. (194)

While a student at Spelman between 1961 and 1963, Walker attacked state-sanctioned white supremacy by participating in demonstrations and registering blacks to vote. Indeed, Walker’s recollections to John O’Brien sound like a “who’s who” of the Atlanta Movement:

During my sophomore year I stood on the grass in front of Trevor-Arnett Library at Atlanta University and I listened to the young leaders of SNCC. John Lewis was there, and so was Julian Bond—thin, well starched and ironed in light-colored jeans, he looked (with his cropped hair that still tried to curl) like a poet (which he was). Everyone was beautiful, because everyone (and I think now of Ruby Doris Robinson who since died) was conquering fear by holding the hands of the persons next to them. (195)

In the summer of her sophomore year at Spelman, Walker attended the March on Washington. After receiving her bachelor’s degree from Sarah Lawrence College in 1965, Walker moved to Mississippi and continued to work in the Civil Rights Movement, including a stint with Head Start, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not surprisingly, the Movement appears in much of Walker’s work, not only in Meridian and In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, but also in her first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970); in short stories in her collections In Love and Trouble (1973) and You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down (1981); and in poems in her collections Once: Poems (1968), Revolutionary Petunias (1973), and Good Night, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning (1979).
When asked how closely her Movement experiences parallel those of the heroine in *Meridian*, Walker responds in a 1976 *Essence* interview: “She’s altogether more courageous.” In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Walker elaborates on the differences between her and Meridian Hill: “Meridian is entirely better than I am . . . . She is an exemplary person . . . . My life has been, since I became an adult, much more middle-class than Meridian’s” (184-85). In the same interview, Walker explains that she tries to characterize Meridian as “an exemplary, flawed revolutionary”:

I think it started when I became aware that the very brave and amazing people whom I knew in the civil rights movement were often incredibly flawed . . . . I was fascinated by the way you hardly ever saw their flaws. And yet, they were there, hidden. The image you got on television showed their remarkable control, their sense of wholeness and beauty. In short, they were heroic . . . .

[I]t seems to me that the revolutionary worth following is one who is flawed. When I was talking about the flaw before I didn’t mean that it made these people less worthy of following. It made them more worthy of following. (179, 184)

Indeed, in her essay “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” (1967), Walker reflects on the Movement’s gift of black role models to African Americans:

“It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes, selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow” (129). In the *Essence* interview, Walker specifically identifies Ruby Doris Smith Robinson of SNCC as “the germ” for *Meridian*: “Meridian, however, is not at all like [Robinson] but a sort of corner of her life that I saw in passing. I didn’t know her that well but she stayed on my mind. I knew that she gave all of her energy to SNCC and was really treated shabbily. Originally I was going to dedicate the book to her.” Instead, Walker
duplicates Meridian to, among others, John Lewis, another prominent figure in the history of SNCC.

Throughout Meridian, Walker dissects the complex intersection of race and gender in the problematic relationship between Meridian Hill and Lynne Rabinowitz. In her article “Out of the Woods and into the World: A Study of Interracial Friendship between Women in American Novels” (1985), Elizabeth Schultz praises Walker for being “[u]naafraid to explore the psychological wilderness of racism, sexism, and humanity.” To Schultz, Meridian is a fiction model for “interracial friendships that endure, not in memory, but in reality; not in fantasy, but in our common lives” (82). Likewise, Suzanne W. Jones argues in “Dismantling Stereotypes: Interracial Friendships in Meridian and A Mother and Two Daughters” (1993) that Walker “push[es] further than [her] literary foremothers in imagining relationships between black and white women.” In Meridian, Walker “creates a protagonist who discovers not only some similarity but the individuality in a woman of a different race. Then, each becomes better able to understand the other’s difference” (143). To create a realistic relationship for Meridian and Lynne, however, Walker must take into account the sociohistorical forces that work against their friendship in particular and against the Beloved Community in general.

The reader does, of course, expect the relationship between Meridian and Lynne to be strained, given the history of racism in the United States. In “A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism” (1980), Diane K. Lewis explains
that black women tend to distrust white women because white women have

traditionally occupied positions of power that are unavailable to black women:

White women have not only been given deference. They have also had
some access to power and authority. While they themselves lacked
authority in the dominant society, they have had a route to power
through their kinship and marital ties with men (e.g., fathers, husbands,
and sons) who do exercise authority in the public sphere. Moreover,
white women, as members of the dominant group, formerly held both
considerable authority and power vis-à-vis the subordinate racial group.

The variance in deference and access to power and authority
between black and white women have proven to be critical factors
underlying the black woman’s perception of common group interest
with black men and distrust of white women. (530)

Moreover, Paula Giddings demonstrates compellingly in When and Where I Enter:
The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (1984) that alliances
between black feminists and white feminists have historically faltered in the United
States because white women have failed to recognize the relationship between racism
and sexism:

Because both [racism and sexism] are motivated by similar economic,
social, and psychological forces, it is only logical that those who sought
to undermine Blacks were also the most virulent antifeminists. The
means of oppression differed across race and sex lines, but the
wellspring of that oppression was the same. Black women understood
this dynamic. White women, by and large, did not. (6)

Sara Evans’s Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights
Movement and the New Left (1980) and Mary Aickin Rothschild’s A Case of Black
specifically explore the conflict between black female activists and white female
activists in the Civil Rights Movement. Like Evans and Rothschild, Walker develops
throughout Meridian an analysis of the complex reasons for conflict between black
women and white women, particularly as it arises within the Civil Rights Movement.

Walker shows that black women’s animosity toward white women begins
early, as part of their upbringing. Meridian hears three “strong opinions” about white
women from her grandmother, a former maid: “1. She had never known a white
woman she liked after the age of twelve. 2. White women were useless except as
baby machines which would continue to produce little white people who would grow
up to oppress her. 3. Without servants all of them would live in pigsties” (108).

From her mother, Meridian also receives the impression that white women are
“frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity” (108). Critic Barbara
Christian observes that such pronouncements as those made by Meridian’s
grandmother and mother constitute reverse racism: “Ironically, the black female
community appropriates to white women the stereotype that had been imposed on
them—that all they were good for was having babies” (“Novels” 228). Before
Meridian even meets a white woman, then, the black women in her life have
conditioned her to regard white women with disdain.

The white females in Meridian often confirm black females’ notions that white
women are foolish, especially in their romantically racist attitudes toward southern
blacks. When three white female exchange students from the North arrive at Saxon,
the black women’s college in Atlanta, Georgia, that Meridian attends, Meridian reports
to Truman that one of them “was taking photographs of the girls straightening their
hair and also of them coming out of the shower.” She wryly speculates that the reason
the white girls will come to a predominantly black party that night is that “[t]hey’re eager to see how the natives make out after dark” (103). The white northerners’ objectification of black southerners as “Other” earns them the scorn of the Saxon student body.

Lynne Rabinowitz stands out as the most naïve of the white northern exchange students. The “songs, the dances, the food, the speech” of rural black southerners fascinate Lynne. She romanticizes the southern black experience as she “nestle[s] in a big chair made of white oak strips, under a quilt called The Turkey Walk, from Atappulsa, Georgia, in a little wooden Mississippi sharecropper bungalow that had never known paint” (130). However, the extreme poverty and brutal white repression that foster such living conditions occupy a secondary place in Lynne’s mind. Instead, she writes poems that incorporate her belief that “black people had a unique beauty, a kind of last-gasp loveliness, which, in other races, had already become extinct” (157).

Walker even allows Lynne to acknowledge to herself that her attitudes are offensive: “To Lynne, the black people of the South were Art. . . . ‘I will pay for this,’ she often warned herself. ‘It is probably a sin to think of a people as Art’” (130). Indeed, Lynne’s idea of southern blacks as “Art” is so warped that she moves to Mississippi in 1966 because she believes that the appalling living conditions for blacks there will give rise to a rewarding aesthetic experience that she can enjoy: “If Mississippi is the worst place in America for black people, it stood to reason, she thought, that the Art that was their lives would flourish best there” (130). Even in the early 1970s, when Lynne sees that Meridian’s health is failing and that she lives in
poverty, she tells her: "[Y]ou have everything. I mean, you’re so strong, your people love you, and you can cope" (151). Because Lynne cannot, despite all evidence to the contrary, disguise her idealization of the African-American experience, she often alienates black women for whom the realities of African-American existence are hardly entertaining. The condescending attitudes of such whites as Lynne render the creation of the Beloved Community in *Meridian* unlikely.

As Lynne becomes increasingly involved in the Civil Rights Movement, black southerners begin to resent her because her presence disrupts their communities. According to Nancy Porter, Lynne "commits a number of interracial blunders—from wearing skimpy clothing on the street, to setting her foot on the porch of a black household before she is invited, to becoming involved with Truman" (254). Walker uses the image of stampeding elephants as a metaphor for the damage that unthinking, albeit well-meaning, whites can do. As perceived by *Meridian*, whites are "very stupid" because they try "to beat down everybody in their path," yet then pretend that they "know nothing about it": "She saw them sometimes as hordes of elephants, crushing everything underfoot, stolid and heavy and yet—unlike the elephant—forgetting" (112). Like an elephant, Lynne barrels into the black community and, despite her good intentions, causes trouble for black men, for black women, and ultimately for herself.

Walker challenges readers to consider the ramifications of white participation in the Civil Rights Movement by describing the shooting of Tommy Odds by anonymous white supremacists. A local activist in the black community, Tommy is a
friend to both Lynne and Truman. After Tommy is shot while leaving a mass meeting in a black church, Walker raises the question of whether Lynne is guilty of white terrorism solely by virtue of her color. Tommy himself angrily blames Lynne because “[a]ll white people are motherfuckers” (132). Even though Truman is Lynne’s husband, he reluctantly agrees with Tommy:

How could he say Lynne had nothing to do with the shooting of Tommy Odds, when there were so many levels at which she could be blamed? . . . That she is white is true. . . . By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness. . . . For bad or worse, and regardless of what this said about himself as a person, he could not—after his friend’s words—keep from thinking Lynne was, in fact, guilty. (133)

Tommy readily condemns Lynne, but Truman wonders, and Walker invites the reader to contemplate: “On what levels might Lynne . . . be guilty?” (132-33).

Within the historic context of the United States’ obsession with race and gender, Lynne is indirectly accountable as a white woman. In the chapter “Novels for Everyday Use: The Novels of Alice Walker” in Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 (1980), Barbara Christian thoroughly analyzes Lynne’s culpability in the shooting of Tommy Odds. Lynne does not, of course, perceive herself as a racist, nor does she even want to be associated, however indirectly, with other racists. However, Lynne is a white woman, and as Christian observes, any contact between white women and black men has historically threatened white men: “It is supposedly to protect her virtue that white men systematically deny black men their freedom, for the white woman in southern mythology is the white man’s most valuable possession.” Lynne’s attempted rejection of her special status as a white woman and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement notwithstanding,
Christian insists that she is somewhat accountable: "[Lynne] cannot erase her own history or the history of America by merely making a historical choice." Lynne is still perceived as a white woman not only by white society, but also by the black community, which fears her as "a member of that delicate group for whose benefit the most violent acts of racism are performed." Lynne herself slowly comes to realize that she cannot "escape her caste" as a white woman ("Novels" 230). As Walker implies, historical forces cannot but destroy a Beloved Community in which black men and white women try to coexist.²

Historical forces aside, Lynne is guilty of the shooting of Tommy Odds because, as an individual, she consciously chooses to live in the black community—even though she fully recognizes that her mere presence endangers it. Lynne is "the only white woman in town regularly seen only with black people," so she is "easily identified" by the town’s racists (134). Because of her notoriety among local white supremacists, Lynne jeopardizes any black person whose company she keeps. Black men especially realize that any indication of social equality between themselves and a white woman will likely result in their deaths at the hands of angry white men. To the black "country boys" who like to gather at the community center, Lynne "was a route to Death, pure and simple. They felt her power over them in their bones; their mothers had feared her even before they were born.... They did not even see her as a human being" (137). So powerful is the southern taboo against black men’s interacting with

² For a thorough analysis of white men’s historic violence against black men because of real or imagined contact with white women, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall.

188
white women that Lynne’s mere “speaking to them and walking up to them” can “force them back twenty yards” (137).

Lynne recognizes this power of hers, and her culpability in Tommy Odds’s shooting stems from her seeming indifference to the danger in which she places the black community. Lynne’s eager determination to overcome black men’s fear compounds her complicity in the Tommy Odds shooting. Even though she is fully aware of the reasons that black men have historically feared white women, she works hard to overcome their fear, thereby shattering their traditional defense mechanism against white violence: “She baked cookies for them, allowed them to drink wine in her house, and played basketball with them at the center. Jumping about in her shorts, tossing her long hair, she laughed and sweated and shouted and cursed. She forced them to like her” (137). Lynne focuses more on endearing herself to the black boys than on sparing them a dangerous relationship with her. Even before the shooting of Tommy, Walker alludes to a nighttime incident when Tommy, Truman, and Lynne go together to the Moonflower Café, “a greasy hole-in-the-wall that still had ‘Whites Only’ on its door” (134). Like Truman and Tommy, Lynne “had been warned against” the dangers of public association between white women and black men. She, as well as they, “should have known better” (133). After they leave the café, a car, presumably containing at least one disgusted white man, follows them until they meet up with a group of fellow black activists. Truman reevaluates the incident after Tommy’s shooting and decides that “it was Lynne’s presence that had caused the car to follow them. So she was guilty. Guilty of whiteness, as well as stupidity for having
agreed to come” (134). Throughout *Meridian*, Lynne’s thoughtlessness jeopardizes the formation of the Beloved Community.

After being shot, Tommy Odds understandably wants revenge against whites for the loss of his arm. However, neither attacking southern white men nor raping their southern white women is a feasible strategy for Tommy to pursue. Nor can he attack a white male volunteer within the black community, simply because all the white male volunteers have returned North. As the sole white female in the black community, Lynne is an easy target, so Tommy seeks revenge against whites by raping her. After assaulting Lynne, Tommy even returns to her house the next day with three other black men and tries to goad them into gang-raping her: “Crackers been raping your mamas and sisters for generations and here’s your chance to get off on a piece of their goods” (161). As Walker shows, “Tommy Odds’s logic—convoluted though it might be—was perfect” (163).

Lynne’s romantic racist notions ultimately lead to her undoing after the shooting of Tommy Odds. Lynne has always “insisted on viewing [blacks] as people who suffered without hatred; this was what intrigued her, made her like a child in awe of them.” However, when white activists become less welcome in the Civil Rights Movement and in black communities, the increasing animosity of blacks catches Lynne off guard. Because Lynne has failed to acknowledge the existence of “individual lives” within the black community, she especially fails to perceive the potential threat of “young men like Tommy Odds whose thin defense against hatred broke down under personal assault” (162). By ignoring the barely latent frustration
and rage of the black community and bullying her way into close relationships with black men, Lynne sets herself up as the perfect rape victim for Tommy Odds. Because Lynne wants to hold on to her delusions about the good nature of the black community after the incident, she tries to pretend that her friend Tommy Odds has not raped her.

In addition to Lynne’s romanticizing black southerners as “people who suffered without hatred,” she also condescends to them with pity and white guilt. Tommy Odds suspects that Lynne responds sympathetically to his raping her because she feels “sorry for me because I’m black” (164). Indeed, he lowers Lynne’s defenses initially by playing on her guilt and pitying himself as “a lonely one-arm nigger down on his luck that nobody had time for any more” (158). When Lynne first refuses his sexual advances, Tommy Odds accuses her of either being repulsed by his stump or hating blacks. So strong are Lynne’s pity and white guilt that even as Tommy Odds rapes her, she recognizes “a moment when she knew she could force him from her,” but refocuses her attention on her belief that blacks are long-suffering: “She lay instead thinking of his feelings, his hardships, of the way he was black and belonged to people who lived without hope; she thought about the loss of his arm. She felt her own guilt. And he entered her and she did not any longer resist but tried instead to think of Tommy Odds as he was when he was her friend” (159). Tommy Odds suggests to Truman that Lynne’s relationship with Truman results from similar motives of white guilt: “Black men get preferential treatment, man, to make up for all we been denied. She ain’t been fucking you, she’s been atoning for her sins” (164). Eventually, other black men begin to come to Lynne for sex, but only after their faces
“go rigid with hatred” at her refusal does Lynne “capitulate”: “For as long as they did not hate her she felt she could live” (166).

Lynne’s racism causes her to react inappropriately to Tommy Odds’s rape, for she would hardly extend her sympathy as readily to a white rapist as she does to Tommy Odds. To the reader’s horror, Lynne questions whether Tommy has, in fact, actually raped her: “Maybe this wasn’t rape. I don’t know. I think it was. It felt like it was” (153). By refusing to hold Tommy Odds responsible for rape, Lynne succumbs to a variety of the very racism that she is fighting to eliminate from American society. Lynne even tells Tommy that she “forgave” him after he raped her (160). Tommy bitterly realizes that Lynne condescends to “forgive” him because he is black: “The one thing that gives me some consolation in this stupid world, and she thinks she has to make up for it out of the bountifulness of her pussy” (164).

Lynne’s decision not to accuse Tommy Odds of rape disturbs the reader as much as it offends Tommy, yet Walker forces readers to consider seriously Lynne’s assertion that “circumstances had not permitted her to scream” (158). Lynne hesitates to accuse Tommy Odds of rape in part because she is fully aware of past “lynchings and the way white women have always lied about black men raping them” (153). In particular, Lynne recoils from filing a report with the police because she understands that southern white men have historically used the stereotype of the black rapist to oppress black men: “[S]he was more afraid of [the police] than she was of Tommy Odds, because they would attack young black men in the community indiscriminately, and the people she wanted most to see protected would suffer” (162). Nor does Lynne
feel altogether comfortable telling Truman that his best friend has raped her. Even though the very idea of absolving rapists of responsibility for their crime is reprehensible, readers cannot but concede a grain of truth in Lynne’s assessment of her predicament.3

The same historical “circumstances” that partially curb Lynne’s willingness to indict Tommy Odds also curb Meridian’s willingness to listen to Lynne’s account of the rape. Just as Lynne refuses to accuse Tommy Odds and invoke her power as a white woman, Meridian refuses to listen to a white woman’s accusation of a black man, an accusation that whites have historically used, regardless of its truth, to oppress black men. Lynne needs desperately to talk to someone about her rape, someone who will support her. Meridian seems just the person to relate to Lynne because of her own history of sexual abuse, yet she repulses Lynne’s awkward attempt to unburden herself: “I can’t listen to this . . . . I’m sorry, I just can’t . . . . Can’t you understand there are some things I don’t want to know?” Meridian even tells Lynne, “coldly,” that she will not believe any story Lynne tells her (153). Nancy Porter correctly contends that this exchange between Meridian and Lynne, “racially ugly, casts an ambiguous light over the friendship” (255). From Meridian’s point of view, Tommy’s rape of Lynne is inextricably linked to another disturbing historical fact: one white woman’s accusation can bring white violence to entire black communities. The legacy

3 For a history of the “myth of the Black rapist,” see Angela Davis, 172-201. Davis traces the process by which southern white men developed this “myth” as “a distinctly political invention” to justify suppressing African Americans during the post-Reconstruction era (184). See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall.
of lynching thus creates a wedge between black women and white women and thwarts the creation of the Beloved Community.4

Despite the considerable barriers that prevent black women and white women from developing friendships, Walker urges readers, as many critics note, to consider the unique experiences that Meridian and Lynne do share. In the section of Meridian titled “Two Women,” Walker describes the closeness that Meridian and Lynne experience when they are together in Lynne’s apartment:

They sat, companionable and still in their bathrobes, watching [television]. . . . Meridian would sometimes, in the afternoons, read poems to Lynne by Margaret Walker, and Lynne, in return, would attempt to corrow Meridian’s patchy short hair. . . . Sometimes they talked, intimately, like sisters, and when they did not they allowed the television to fill the silences. (173)

Suzanne Jones argues that Walker calls attention “not only to [Meridian’s and Lynne’s] common interests and common humanity but also to other similarities that

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4 Walker elaborates the historic impact of lynching on contemporary race relations in her the short story “Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells,” You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981) 85-104. When the black female narrator’s white friend Luna, whom she met as a volunteer in the South in 1964, confesses that a black male civil rights worker raped her, the black female resents Luna’s admission and its immediate effect on their friendship:

[T]he rape, the knowledge of the rape, out in the open, admitted, pondered over, was now between us. (And I began to think that perhaps—whether Luna had been raped or not—it had always been so; that her power over my life was exactly the power her word on rape had over the lives of black men, over all men, whether they were guilty or not, and therefore over my whole people.) (95)

Given the white woman’s power to imperil black communities, the narrator of “Advancing Luna” reluctantly concedes that amiable race relations are extraordinarily difficult to achieve. The narrator cannot even conceive of

. . . a society in which Luna’s word alone on rape can never be used to intimidate an entire people, and in which an innocent black man’s protestation of innocence of rape is unprejudicially heard. Until such a society is created, relationships of affection between black men and white women will always be poisoned—from within as from without—by historical fear and the threat of violence, and solidarity among black and white women is only rarely likely to exist. (102)

According to the narrator, the ending of “Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells” is “unresolved” because “lynching is still reserved, at least subconsciously, as a means of racial control” in the United States (98).
the South’s preoccupation with racial differences overshadowed: gender and class” (141). Similarly, Barbara Christian asserts that “[Meridian] and Lynne become sisters . . . in their desire for the freedom of, in their love for, the land and the people, of the South” (“Novels” 232). Their racial difference notwithstanding, Meridian and Lynne together understand the difficulties of being female not only in a male-dominated society, but also in a male-dominated social movement.

Although sexism is as significant a barrier to the Beloved Community as racism, Meridian and Lynne find solidarity in their oppression. As young women coming of age in the 1960s, Meridian and Lynne face overwhelming societal pressure to suppress their own ambitions and to serve others—namely to obey their parents, support their husbands, and dote on their children. Even as they try to create new roles for themselves outside patriarchal norms, Meridian and Lynne recognize that they do so only at great peril. To emphasize the magnitude of their nonconformity, Elizabeth Schultz asserts: “From the perspective of conventional American norms, both Meridian and Lynne would be called deviants” (78). Indeed, events throughout Meridian confirm that rebellious women pay dearly for their actions.

In particular, black female activists and white female activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Meridian make the same types of personal sacrifices for the Black Freedom Struggle and reject the same narrowly defined expectations of them as women. As Melissa Walker argues in Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women’s Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989 (1991): “[Meridian] is unequivocal in its presentation of young activists paying an enormous price for their actions.
public actions. Scene after scene dramatizes their physical and emotional exhaustion, rending breaks with family, and the devastating consequences of sexual politics that invaded the movement in its last years" (169). Meridian and Lynne experience similar types of suffering, and Martha McGowan even observes that “Lynne . . . suffers the sort of fate usually reserved for black women in Walker’s [fiction]” (33). Indeed, their suffering unites Meridian and Lynne.

To launch her critique of the patriarchy’s systematic oppression of women, Walker describes in the opening scene of Meridian a didactic sideshow exhibit set in Chicokema, Georgia, in the mid-1970s. The moral of the exhibit is that punishment befalls wayward women. A “red and gold circus wagon” contains the alleged corpse of Marilene O’Shay, a woman who, according to the lettering on the wagon, purportedly rejected the roles of “Obedient Daughter,” “Devoted Wife,” and “Adoring Mother” to commit adultery. Enraged that his wife lapses from being “an ideal woman” and has “Gone Wrong,” Henry O’Shay murders her and her lover (19-20). The police, the church, and even Marilene’s mother forgive Henry because the “bitch was doing him wrong” (22). Capitalizing on his crime, Henry travels around the country, distributing handbills outlining the sins of Marilene, and charging curiosity-seekers admission to view her body.

Many critics have commented on the significance of the Marilene O’Shay exhibit in Meridian as a warning to independent women. Barbara Christian interprets the story as Walker’s satire on “the lavish trademarks of the South—the white woman protected, indeed mummified, by the sanctimonious rhetoric of her society, but losing
even these questionable privileges when she exercises any sexual freedom" ("Novels" 207-208). Lynne Pifer comments similarly on the Marilene episode: “Walker portrays, with maudlin kitsch, patriarchy’s imperative that a woman accept her ‘place’” (80). Karen F. Stein argues that Meridian’s opening scene serves as “the novel’s nerve center, revealing its radiating network of thematic and imagistic concerns” (131). To be sure, echoes of Marilene O’Shay’s fate resound throughout the novel: women, black or white, who defy convention and assert their independence from parents and husbands come to no good end.

Subsequent incidents in Meridian reiterate the patriarchy’s punishment of unconventional women throughout history. Indeed, many of the scenes set at Saxon College suggest that learning the importance of conformity is an important part of the girls’ education. For example, Meridian and the other Saxon students learn the fate of Louvinie, a nineteenth-century African slave woman on the Saxon plantation. Louvinie entertains her white master’s children with “stories of blood-curdling horror,” but when she scares the youngest son so badly that he dies, the plantation owner removes her tongue as punishment (43). Likewise, when Fast Mary, a student at Saxon in the 1920s, conceals her pregnancy and kills her illegitimate child, her parents imprison her in a windowless room where she eventually hangs herself. The Wild Child is yet another example of the doomed unconventional female: a filthy, foul-talking street urchin who lacks any social graces, the Wild Child becomes mysteriously pregnant, but is killed by a speeding car before she gives birth. During the 1960s and 1970s, Meridian and Lynne themselves learn firsthand that unorthodox
feminine behavior has severe consequences. When Meridian gives up her own son to
attend college, her mother disowns her, and Truman regards her as a “savage” (142).
When Lynne marries Truman and gives birth to an interracial child, her parents
disown her. According to Walker, American society deals harshly with women who
step outside the bounds of acceptable behavior.

Given these penalties for aberrant behavior, the reader assumes that the only
role to “reward” Meridian or Lynne will be that of wife to a black man or a white man,
respectively, and mother to his children. Walker contends, however, that cultural
promises of a happy marriage and rewarding motherhood entrap women. Meridian
recoils from the drudgery that her roles as wife and mother entail. She has to drop out
of high school after becoming pregnant by her boyfriend, Eddie, yet he eventually
leaves her to rear their son, Eddie, Jr., alone. Meridian longs to continue her education
and misses the occasional “quicksilver flash of learning” she had experienced in
school (71). Furthermore, taking care of Eddie, Jr., so exhausts Meridian that she
dreams at night “of ways to murder him” (69). Indeed, Susan Willis detects in
Meridian that “childbearing is consistently linked to the images of murder and suicide”
(112). Significantly, Meridian’s earliest sexual experiences take place in a funeral
home, where the undertaker and his assistant molest her as a teenager. Nor is
Meridian an anomaly: the novel is full of black women for whom sex and motherhood
are a trap, including not only Fast Mary and the Wild Child, but also Meridian’s own
mother and Meridian’s friend Nelda, who has to drop out of school when she becomes
pregnant. As an uneducated, unemployed, single parent, Meridian recognizes too late that marriage and motherhood do not necessarily guarantee happiness.

According to Walker, the African-American community especially expects its women to embrace motherhood. Barbara Christian has written extensively about the role of motherhood in *Meridian*. In “An Angle of Seeing Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker’s *Meridian*,” Christian dissects the “Battle Fatigue” section of *Meridian* as “the core of Walker’s discussion of ideology of motherhood in the Black South” (237). As Christian explains, “freedom for black women” has historically meant “that they could keep their own children” (288). Although Meridian’s friend Delores Jones regards motherhood as a type of slavery, Meridian understands that slave mothers themselves would actually have welcomed rearing their children rather than seeing them sold. Because of her understanding of the black mother’s historic experience in the United States, Meridian feels anguish that she cannot “live up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before” (91). Meridian’s own mother comes from a long line of black matriarchs who have struggled and sacrificed since slavery to improve the lives of their children, and Mrs. Hill’s sacrifices for her family inspire “inadequacy and guilt” in Meridian, who fears that she will “never be able to match” her mother’s fortitude (122-124).

Within the context of black maternal history, Meridian’s decision to give up her son so that she can attend college compounds her feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Choosing not to rear one’s own child is, according to Christian, “the ultimate sin against black motherhood” (“Angle” 238). Mrs. Hill—“Black Motherhood
personified” in Meridian’s mind (97)—launches into a self-righteous tirade about
Meridian’s unfitness as a mother when Meridian asks her to care for Eddie, Jr.:

> It can't be right to give away your own child. . . . If the good Lord
> gives you a child he means for you to take care of it. . . . Everybody
> else that slips up like you did bears it. . . . You should want Eddie Jr.,
> . . . [u]nless you're some kind of monster. . . . I just don't see how you
> could let another woman raise your child. . . . It's just selfishness.
> You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children, . . . though
> I never wanted to have any, and I have raised every one myself. (87-
> 90)

By renouncing motherhood to join the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian violates not
only the norms of 1960s American society in general, but also those of the African-
American community and her own mother in particular.

Marriage and motherhood prove to be as disastrous for Lynne as they do for
Meridian. By marrying Truman, Lynne severs all ties with her family and forfeits the
privileges accorded to white women by the white community. Lynne distinctly
remembers her mother’s screaming “without ceasing” the day that she followed Lynne
to Truman’s house and first realized that “her only daughter” was dating a black man
(155). Bearing a black man’s child seals Lynne’s fate as an outcast among her own
people. When Truman dissolves his relationship with her, Lynne has nowhere to turn.
She moves to New York with their daughter Camara and lives on welfare. When
Camara dies, Lynne loses her last source of close human contact except for Meridian.
When Lynne calls her parents to tell them that their granddaughter has been fatally
attacked, her mother refuses to talk to her. When Lynne tells her father that her
dughter is dead, he calmly replies, “So’s our daughter” (152). Whereas Meridian
eventually creates a life for herself outside the bounds of marriage and motherhood, Lynne’s prospects for the future seem bleak at the end of Meridian.

Even as she exposes the oppressiveness of marriage and motherhood, Walker reminds readers that few other options exist for women in the 1960s. Indeed, Meridian and Lynne become close in part because they have no positive female role models to emulate. Bad role models are, however, abundant. In particular, Meridian’s and Lynne’s mothers embody all the qualities that their daughters deplore. Barbara Christian’s analysis of the similarities between Buchi Emecheta’s Nnu Ego character in The Joys of Motherhood and Walker’s Meridian applies equally to the similarities between Meridian and Lynne: “Especially poignant . . . is the way in which Nnu Ego and Meridian characterize their mothers’ history as a process that they cannot or will not repeat. Yet, because these are motherless daughters, they have few clues as how to positively change those aspects of that history that are unacceptable to them” (“Angle” 232). Similarly, Norman Harris observes: “Meridian’s problems are largely the result of her directionless upbringing” (104). Throughout Meridian, the reader learns that Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Rabinowitz hold many similar views about the proper roles of both women and blacks. Their daughters reject their views, and this rebellion against their mothers unites Meridian and Lynne.

For example, Mrs. Hill passively accepts her roles as wife and mother. Walker tells the reader that Mrs. Hill’s life is “sacrifice. A blind, enduring, stumbling . . . through life.” Mrs. Hill does not “take extreme positions on anything,” whether politics, religion, or education (77). In addition to complying with female
subordination, Mrs. Hill complies with racial subordination. She disapproves of
Meridian's involvement in the Movement because it violates the status quo: "God
separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the whites . . . . It never
bothered me to sit in the back of the bus" (85). In fact, Mrs. Hill seems desperate to
align herself with the existing white power structure. For instance, she remains
indifferent to the plight of Native Americans. Unconscious that her logic mirrors that
of white Americans who refuse to claim any responsibility for the historic oppression
of blacks, Mrs. Hill refuses to claim any responsibility for the "disappearance" of the
American Indians from their land: "I wasn't even born . . . [S]ome of them had the
nerve to fight for the South in the Civil War. That ought to make up for those few
black soldiers who rode against Indians in the Western cavalry" (55). Clearly not
activism-oriented, Mrs. Hill focuses instead on respectability and material comfort.
She is, as Norman Harris describes her, "more interested in bourgeois precedent than
in historically based social change" (101). Mrs. Hill's preoccupation with middle-
class values is manifest in the carefully laundered, starched, and ironed clothing her
children wear: "Her children were spotless wherever they went. . . . In their stiff,
almost inflexible garments, they . . . had to keep their distance to avoid providing the
soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress" (79). Mrs. Hill dresses her
children in clothes that are as rigid as her demands for strict adherence to societal
norms.

Just as Mrs. Hill embraces respectability and tries to instill that value in
Meridian, Mrs. Rabinowitz values social conformity and demands that Lynne
appreciate it too. Lynne laments that all her mother “thinks about is herself as perceived by the neighbors” (153). Mrs. Rabinowitz tries to ensure Lynne’s obedience so relentlessly that even when Lynne returns home from the South to visit her parents as an adult, she still regards her bedroom as “the hideout of a sixteen-year-old kid . . . . [I]t was in her mother’s house. Vulnerable to search and seizure, and the contemplative scrutiny of her mother’s always uneasy mind” (154-55). Like Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Rabinowitz expects her daughter to act within the boundaries of proper behavior.

By becoming involved in the Black Freedom Struggle, Meridian and Lynne step outside the bounds of ladylike behavior. Melissa Walker observes: “By joining the civil rights movement, many young people—black and white—placed a permanent barrier between themselves and their heritage, cutting themselves off from their cultural (or, in [Alice] Walker’s terms, historical) roots—the morals, customs, and habits of their families and communities” (176-77). After the death of her daughter, Lynne complains to Meridian about her profound alienation from white society: “I can’t go back home. I don’t even have a home. I wouldn’t go back if I could. I know white folks are evil and fucked up, I know they’re doomed. But where does that leave me?” (175). Like Meridian, Lynne consciously chooses to break with her oppressive past.

Alice Walker suggests that in addition to facing the difficult decision of leaving the communities of their upbringing, female civil rights activists also face the difficulty of assimilating into the male-dominated Beloved Community of the Civil
Rights Movement. Meridian and Lynne face as much resistance from their fellow male SNCC volunteers as they do from their mothers. Indeed, numerous sources document the sexism of SNCC and its male leaders. In their anonymous 1964 SNCC position paper "Women in the Movement," the landmark critique of sexism within the Beloved Community, Casey Hayden and Mary King argued that "the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumption of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro" (qtd. in Evans 234). Meridian’s first encounter with civil rights workers exposes her to the Movement’s sexism. When she goes to the Freedom House in her hometown to volunteer for a voter registration drive, the first question that the male workers ask her is “Can you type?” (80). They do not even ask Meridian her name until she prompts them.

Mistreatment by black male activist Truman Held especially unites Meridian and Lynne throughout Meridian. Karen Stein argues that Truman is "the archetypal activist" in the Civil Rights Movement by virtue of his chauvinism: “Truman Held, the ‘true man,’ . . . oppresses the women who love him as much as any white capitalist does” (135). In Truman, Stein sees Walker’s indictment of the sexism inherent in the Movement: “Truman himself, like the Civil Rights Movement he symbolizes, is tragically divided. Despite his honorable work for social justice, he persists in a patriarchal insensitivity toward women” (136). More than any other male in Meridian,
Truman Held damages Meridian and Lynne emotionally because of his sexist notions about the proper roles for women.

To call the reader's attention to Truman's domineering male persona, Walker introduces him in the section appropriately titled "The Conquering Prince." Like Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Rabinowitz, Truman resents Meridian's and Lynne's independence. In fact, strong, independent women intimidate him. After Truman rejects Meridian to date white girls, Meridian comforts herself with the knowledge that Truman does not want "a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried . . . to claim her own life" (110). Truman believes that a woman's only value lies in her capacity to serve as a wife and mother.

Although Truman tries to impose his sexist expectations on Lynne and Meridian, his demands of women are so contradictory that they are unrealistic. As a result, Truman alternates his affection from one woman to the other during the course of the novel. Truman first notes that Lynne embodies the contradictory qualities he seeks in a woman. On the one hand, he wants "a woman who had had worldly experiences . . . to match [his] own." On the other hand, he also wants "a virgin, . . . a woman who was not sexually promiscuous" (141). Meridian points out to Truman: "In Lynne you captured your ideal: a virgin who was eager for sex and well-to-do enough to have had 'worldly experiences'" (142). However, Lynne's innocence and intelligence coexist with her overconfidence, patronizing enthusiasm, and naïve curiosity regarding the Civil Rights Movement—three traits that Truman resents in the northern white volunteers. Walker tells the reader that Truman is "not prepared to
love [Lynne] over a long period, but for a short one” (140). Utterly selfish, Truman is not honest with Lynne about their incompatibility, nor does he even attempt to overcome his shallow requirements for a woman to be perfect. After divorcing Lynne, Truman continues to date young, naïve, white women. Lynne accuses him of using white women to assert his masculinity, of being a vampire who “[s]ucks the blood of young white virgins to keep him vigorous” (44).

Truman holds similarly conflicting views about Meridian. On the one hand, he initially rejects Meridian because she has already been married and had a child. Upon first meeting Truman, Meridian shrewdly does not mention her first marriage and son. Truman later justifies her reticence by admitting to himself that had he seen Meridian on the street with her child, “he would never have glanced at her. For him she would not even have existed as a woman he might love.” In Truman’s eyes, Meridian has “belonged to some other man. . . . He had wanted a woman perfect in all the eyes of the world, not a savage who bore her offspring and hid it” (142). Yet as Barbara Christian points out, “most southern black women” cannot meet Truman’s requirements that a wife “be knowledgeable although not sullied” and “romantically idealistic because she has not had to deal with reality” ("Novels" 223). Christian contrasts Lynne—“a wife who is both worldly and idealistic, a wife whose intense idealism is based on freedom and security”—with Meridian, who represents to Truman all the negative aspects of the African-American experience: “the suffering, the lack of freedom, the impotency, the promiscuity, the provinciality, the restrictions” ("Novels" 226-27). Truman’s views on women are so one-dimensional that he fails to
perceive not only that Meridian and Lynne are both complex individuals, but also that each woman’s strengths and weaknesses complement the other’s.

Eventually, Truman’s attitude toward Meridian shifts much as his attitude toward Lynne does. Whereas Truman eventually comes to regard Lynne with embarrassment and bitterness, he begins to imagine Meridian, after his marriage to Lynne fails, as a nurturing partner, sensitive to his needs: “[H]e... thought of Meridian, whom he imagined as more calm, predictable... [H]er brown strength that he imagined would not mind being a resource for someone else... In Meridian, all the things lacking in Lynne seemed apparent. Here was a woman to rest in, as a ship must have a port” (141). Yet Truman’s conception of Meridian as a “woman to rest in” is as false as his conception of her as a “savage.” Truman does finally admit to himself that he has “made up” a persona for Meridian and that he has never truly appreciated her beyond his own expectations: “Why, he had not known this woman at all!” (141). On the other hand, Truman never confronts the misconceptions he has had about Lynne.

Walker suggests that Truman chooses white women over black women for an extraordinarily shallow reason: they are a novelty to him. He rejects Meridian as a girlfriend when the white exchange students arrive in town. While Meridian and Truman are attending a party as a couple, Truman leaves the party with a white woman, presumably to have sex with her. Even though Meridian realizes that Truman dates the white girls “so obviously because their skin color made them interesting,” she feels embarrassed that he chooses them over her, “as if she were less” (106). On
one level, Truman does consider Meridian “less”: he seeks the company of white women in part because they seem more sophisticated to him than black women. When Meridian asks Truman what he sees in the white girls, he tries “to make her despise the confines of her own provincial mind” by replying that “[t]hey read The New York Times” (143). Lynne appeals to Truman because of her intelligence, sophistication, and idealism, as do the other white women Truman dates both before and after his marriage to Lynne. Despite Truman’s protests that black men’s desire for white women is an “old racist chestnut” (150), Walker suggests that perhaps some truth does lie in the assertion. Meridian feels betrayed by Truman because she has been taught all her life that “nobody wanted white girls except their empty-headed, effeminate counterparts—white boys” (107).

Another reason, more complex than the desire to try something new, causes Truman to vacillate between Meridian and Lynne: his desire to conform to prevailing political ideologies within the Civil Rights Movement. While the spirit of biracial cooperation drives the Movement, Truman gladly uses Lynne to achieve the political goal of integration in his personal life. Moreover, he uses his relationship with Lynne to register political protest against the white power structure. Meridian makes clear that just as white men have sexually exploited black women to suppress African Americans throughout American history, many black men use white women to retaliate against white men during the turbulent Civil Rights Movement era. In his autobiography Soul on Ice (1968), for example, Eldridge Cleaver gives the following rationale for the rape of white women by black men:
Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women—and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge. From the site of the act of rape, consternation spreads outwardly in concentric circles. I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race. (26)

Similarly, Tom Johnson, a black male character in Meridian who lives with a white woman whom he uses primarily for sex, tells Truman: “This is war, man, war! And all’s fair that fucks with the suckers’ minds!” (136). After their divorce, Lynne conjectures that Truman has similarly used her—through marriage, however, not rape—to send a message to the white power structure: “You only married me because you were too much of a coward to throw a bomb at all the crackers who make you sick. You’re like the rest of those nigger zombies. No life of your own at all unless it’s something against white folks. You can’t even enjoy a good fuck without hoping some cracker is somewhere grinding his teeth” (149).

Just as Truman initially makes a political statement through his relationship with Lynne, he later considers making another political statement through a potential relationship with Meridian. Truman eventually rejects Lynne because she is white and begins to reconsider Meridian because she is black; in fact, Truman’s interest in Lynne begins to wane at the same time that white involvement in the Civil Rights Movement becomes problematic and black separatism begins to gain acceptance as the dominant ideology among black activists. Truman idealizes Meridian as a beautiful “African woman” who can have his “beautiful black babies,” but she declines his advances (115-16). Norman Harris squarely blames such black men as Truman for their
problematic relationships with black women: “[T]he black man is largely culpable in the failure of such relationships because he is not clear about his romantic or political motivations in regard to the black woman. His motivations are confused, and so he is capable of hurting black women without ever knowing that he is doing so” (99). Both Meridian and Lynne perceive Truman’s motives. When Truman tells Meridian that he loves her, she counters his outpouring of affection with the rebuttal that the only real reason he loves her is “[b]ecause I’m black” (140). Likewise, Lynne accuses Truman of “[r]unning off as soon as black became beautiful” (149). In addition to Truman, Walker refers to Lamumba Katurim and Randolph Kay as examples of black men who initially marry white women, but divorce their white wives to marry black women when doing so becomes politically expedient. Both Meridian and Lynne come to understand that Truman has used them to further his political agenda.

Although the Civil Rights Movement in Meridian perpetuates the sexism institutionalized by American society at large, it at least affords female activists the opportunity to imagine themselves in roles other than daughter, wife, or mother. Elizabeth Schultz insists that Meridian’s and Lynne’s confrontation with and subsequent rejection of racial and sexual stereotypes is “testimony to the power of Walker’s artistry”: “The relationship between Meridian Hill and Lynne Rabinowitz . . . becomes a friendship because they are able to transcend the racist and sexist stereotypes imposed upon them. Their recognition of themselves and of each other as anguished, erring, struggling human beings comes slowly” (78). Through their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, women like Meridian and Lynne question
the supremacy of white, middle-class, patriarchal values. Meridian even implies that through the Civil Rights Movement, female activists learn more about themselves than they do about the world around them. By engaging themselves in political struggle, Meridian and Lynne expand their self-knowledge.5

In "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," Alice Walker concedes that the Movement, despite its shortcomings, provided her with the benefit of self-knowledge: "If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I get from a ‘freedom movement,’ it is better than unawareness, forgottenness, and hopelessness, the existence that is like the existence of a beast” (121). Likewise, Meridian gains knowledge of her condition from the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately rejecting "the temptations of conventional middle-class life, the conventional women’s roles of dutiful daughter, wife, mother, lover[... the contemporary temptations of martyrdom and false revolutionary consciousness” (Stein 140). Moreover, as Deborah Barker asserts, the Civil Rights Movement "afforded contemporary African-American women an alternative form of representation in the mass media as serious participants in a political cause” (473).

Meridian’s political participation stems from her hearing about a local voter registration drive on the television news in April 1960. At first, Meridian seizes the

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5 For a pessimistic evaluation of Meridian and Lynne’s friendship, see Nancy Porter. Porter argues that Walker qualifies the two women’s relationship: “Racism and its sexual dimension are at least allusively confronted by the women, but even an optimistic reading of the friendship would have to take into account Lynne’s on-going obsession with Truman and what the hurt of that breeds in her.” According to Porter, Walker implies that Meridian and Lynne cannot truly be friends until Lynne “understand[s] what Meridian does about sexual and racial oppression” (255).
drive as “something to think about” because it is utterly foreign to her: she has no idea what a voter registration drive is, nor has she ever seen a black person hold a press conference. Meridian becomes even more fascinated when the building that houses the workers is bombed and she realizes that the activists had anticipated violence: “Did they know something she did not know? She had lived in this town all her life, but could not have foreseen that the house would be bombed. Perhaps because nothing like this had ever happened before. Not in this town. Or had it?” The bombing thus forces Meridian to begin considering “the past and present of the larger world” (73). Throughout the novel, Meridian analyzes the historical forces behind oppression and tries to identify strategies for eliminating them.

Lynne, too, expands her self-awareness through the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Barbara Christian remarks that Lynne learns that “she is a victim as well as a part of the wheels of oppression. . . . She knows that she is no missionary, no appreciator of the art in the lives of the oppressed” (“Novels” 233). Lynne articulates her awareness as she reflects on her rocky relationship with Truman. Lynne credits him for at least having “saved” her from becoming like her mother, “a fate worse than death”: “Because of him, I can never be as dumb as my mother was. Even if I practiced not knowing what the world is like, even if I lived in Scarsdale or some other weird place, and never had to eat welfare food in my life, I’d still know” (181). Indeed, Meridian and Lynne find a different type of personal fulfillment than their mothers or Truman would have them enjoy.
Walker’s analysis of the successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement is as complex and contradictory as her depiction of Meridian and Lynne’s relationship. By composing the novel from numerous fragments told from the shifting points of view of a black woman, a white woman, and a black man, Walker deconstructs the notion that the Beloved Community is an easily attainable goal. Walker best reveals the illusory nature of the Civil Rights Movement by describing a SNCC button in the “Awakening” section of Meridian. When Meridian first comes to the Freedom House in her hometown to volunteer for a voter registration drive, she notices that one of the black workers is wearing a button: “[S]he especially liked the large one that showed a black hand and a white hand shaking, although since the colors were flat the hands did not seem, on closer inspection, to be shaking at all; they seemed to be merely touching palms, or in the act of sliding away from each other” (81). Just as Meridian initially perceives that the hands on the SNCC button are shaking, the reader’s initial perception of the Civil Rights Movement may be that the Movement actually does bring blacks and whites together successfully. Yet as readers move through Meridian—and as Meridian becomes immersed in the Movement—they realize that interracial interaction is difficult, if not superficial or altogether impossible. By the end of the novel, the reader and Meridian suspect that the Beloved Community may be as unlikely in the middle 1970s as it was in the early 1960s.

Truman and Meridian embody Walker’s conflicting views of the Civil Rights Movement: Truman dismisses the Movement as a useless exercise, whereas Meridian values many of the Movement’s ideals. Walker establishes the differences between
their two points of view in *Meridian*’s opening scene, which describes Meridian’s protesting the exclusion of poor black children from the segregated Marilene O’Shay exhibit. Karen Stein explains the inherent contradictions of Meridian’s action:

The protagonist’s march is simultaneously absurd and heroic. ... [It] is a caricature of the historic Civil Rights marches. Because the goal to which she leads the children is an object of no value to them or to her, endangering her life for the privilege of seeing a tawdry mummy seems out of proportion. Yet Meridian’s defense of their rights is nevertheless heroic. (131)

Even though Meridian no longer pursues desegregation as a goal in and of itself, she certainly does seek the self-empowerment that can come to African Americans through the act of desegregating. Meridian identifies the value of her stand-off with the Chicokema police not as giving poor black children access to an all-white attraction, but as demonstrating to them that the mummified woman is fake.

Conversely, Truman comments that Meridian’s demonstration has been “useless, ... a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere” (26). Shifting the discussion from Meridian’s present demonstration in Chicokema to their past participation in the Movement, Truman advises Meridian: “When things are finished it is best to leave ... [a]nd pretend they were never started” (27). Truman’s early pronouncement that “things are finished” signals the reader that *Meridian* is going to reflect on the successes and the failures of the Civil Rights Movement. Alice Walker invites the reader, in fact, “to see the sixties as history,” as Barbara Christian observes. *Meridian* “begins with a point of time in the seventies when the strategy of nonviolent resistance is no longer widespread, at a time when the dramatic
demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement have ended, and when most observers would say that the Movement was over" ("Novels" 207).

To be sure, Meridian graphically depicts the suffering and destruction that characterize the Movement, leading Melissa Walker to assert that "this novel is more about what was lost than what was gained" (170). As readers begin Meridian, Walker immediately confronts them with a series of macabre images that link the Civil Rights Movement to death. The epigraph to the novel is, appropriately, an excerpt from Black Elk Speaks (1932) in which Black Elk, a Sioux medicine man, mourns the decimation of his tribe:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now... I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. (11)

Black Elk's reference to "a people's dream," appearing as it does in a novel about the Civil Rights Movement, cannot but evoke Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech from the 1963 March on Washington. Furthermore, the carnage that Black Elk describes brings to mind media images of beaten, bloody civil rights activists. Just as the Sioux were willing to fight for their freedom, so too have twentieth-century southern blacks been willing to fight. However, the Sioux lost their battle with the oppressor at Wounded Knee. Given the uneasy state of race relations at the end of the
twentieth century, the reader of Meridian cannot but wonder uneasily that perhaps the dream of the Civil Rights Movement is as ill fated as Black Elk’s.⁶

A series of morbid images linked to the Civil Rights Movement runs throughout Meridian’s opening scenes. The segregated Marilene O’Shay exhibit confirms that the 1960s struggle has won only limited gains. When Truman reacts incredulously to the town’s continuing segregation of people by race or class, asserting that “the Civil Rights Movement changed all that,” an old black man dismisses Truman’s appraisal: “I seen rights come and I seen ‘em go” (19). When Meridian collapses after the demonstration, four townsfolk have to carry her home “hoisted across their shoulders exactly as they would carry a coffin, her eyes closed, barely breathing, arms folded crossed her chest, legs straight” (24). The men are, according to Meridian, “used to carrying corpses” (25).

Other symbols in the opening scene evoke the South’s history of loss and defeat in general. In the Chicokema town square, a Confederate soldier statue with a “permanently crushed” leg symbolizes the Old South and its defeat in the war to uphold slavery. An army tank that Chicokema purchased in the 1960s when “the townspeople who were white felt under attack from ‘outside agitators’” symbolizes the New South and its defeat in the war to uphold legal segregation (18). One could

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between Black Elk’s epigraph and the rest of Meridian, see Anne M. Downey, “‘A Broken and Bloody Hoop’: The Intertextuality of Black Elk Speaks and Alice Walker’s Meridian,” MELUS 19.3 (1994) 37-45. In her essay, Downey concentrates on three images in Black Elk’s epigraph that link Black Elk Speaks to Meridian: “a massacred people, the nation’s hoop, and the sacred tree.” Downey argues that both Black Elk Speaks and Meridian “deal with broken bodies and spirits, with equality, and with trees that represent growth and community.”

216
hastily conclude that the maimed southern soldier and the gaudy army tank indicate that memorials to the past are ridiculous, irrelevant to the lives of contemporary southerners, black or white. True, the Confederate soldier’s crushed leg suggests that the Old South is standing on its last leg in the 1970s. And true, the tank does not fire on Meridian as she leads her protest, suggesting that the white power structure has learned to exercise restraint when handling social protestors in the 1970s. But the fact remains that the Confederate memorial and the tank continue to symbolize the white South’s power. When the tank starts to move and approach Meridian, it seems “larger and whiter than ever,” while she seems “smaller and blacker than ever” (21). Even though the white South has lost the Civil War and the subsequent fight to maintain white supremacy de jure, it clearly intends to maintain white supremacy de facto.

The barrage of macabre images established in the epigraph and the first section of the novel continue throughout Meridian. The heading for the second section simply lists historical figures who were assassinated during the 1960s: “Medgar Evers/John F. Kennedy/Malcolm X/Martin Luther King/Robert Kennedy/Che Guevara/Patrice Lumumba/George Jackson/Cynthia Wesley/Addie Mae Collins/Denise McNair/Carole Robertson/Viola Liuzzo” (33). As this list suggests, the violence of the Movement affects blacks and whites, women and men, children and adults, everyday people and international leaders.

In addition to the political violence that takes place around them, violence touches Meridian, Truman, and Lynne personally through the murder of Truman and Lynne’s young daughter, Camara. The child of an interracial couple whom the Civil
Rights Movement brings together, Camara should be the prototype for the denizens of the Beloved Community toward which the activists are working. But as Susan Willis observes: "[T]he mulatto does not represent a hope for a nonracist future. . . . Camara's brutal murder graphically puts an end to any liberal thoughts about a new, hybridized society of the future" (124). Indeed, Melissa Walker notes that pain and suffering afflict all the characters in *Meridian*: "Interleaved with the saga of the Meridian-Truman-Lynne triangle are stories of the poor, the disenfranchised, the sick, and the uneducated, whose limited lives have hardly been affected by the social changes brought about by the movement" (172). Misery runs rampant throughout *Meridian*, and the Beloved Community seems unlikely.

In addition to the literal deaths that the novel catalogs, a series of figurative deaths in *Meridian* coincide with the death of the Movement. For example, the young activists with whom Meridian associates in the 1960s become different people in the 1970s. Rather than working toward a dramatic restructuring of the racist, classist American patriarchy, two of Meridian's fellow black activists, Anne-Marion and Truman, focus their creative talents and energies on accumulating wealth and status within the existing socioeconomic system. Anne-Marion evolves from a self-described revolutionary committed to killing for the Movement into a successful poet who owns a lake. Walker tells the reader that while a student at Saxon, "Anne-Marion wanted blacks to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people." Anne-Marion tells Meridian, "When black people can own the seashore, I want miles and miles of it. And I never want to see a face I didn't invite
walking across my sand.” Unlike Anne-Marion, Meridian cannot “enjoy owning things that others could not have.” She rejects assimilation into the capitalist power structure as a Movement goal, seeking instead “the destruction of the rich as a class and the eradication of all personal economic preserves” (118). Whereas Meridian wants to empower the impoverished black masses, Anne-Marion seems concerned only with empowering and enriching herself.

Nor does Truman want to align himself with the black masses. Susan Danielson observes that Truman has little in common with the southern black poor and that his ties to them are “tenuous”: “Driven by a concern for social justice, he has chosen to go South to work in the voter registration drive, but in truth, he prefers any community to the American Black one” (324). Also commenting on Truman’s pretension, Barbara Christian accuses him, “and many other black intellectuals like him,” of regarding “the people they sought to save” during the 1960s—that is, rural black southerners—as “too narrow, too ordinary, too provincial, for them to live with” (“Novels” 223). For example, Truman derides an old black woman as “la fanatique” because she “don’t believe in votin’,” opting to trust in God instead: “The good Lord He take care of most of my problems. You know he heal the sick and race the dead. Comfort the uncomfortable and blesses the meek” (102). Instead of immersing himself in the black community, Truman craves the acclaim of sophisticates and intellectuals. He undergoes several trendy life cycles during Meridian, leading Deborah Barker to call him “a cultural chameleon” (473). Over the course of the 1960s, Truman abandons his fondness for Western culture—especially anything
French—and eagerly embraces Afrocentrism. However, by the time the reader first encounters Truman in Chicokema in the 1970s, he has become a successful artist who lives in New York City and drives a Volvo. Nonetheless, he fancies himself a revolutionary. Meridian comments that he looks “like Che Guevara,” and “not by accident.” She also observes that he wears “a tan cotton jacket of the type worn by Chairman Mao” (24). Rather than seriously commit himself to a genuine struggle for human rights, Truman simply dons the trappings of a radical. And like Anne-Marion, he admires wealth even as he condemns white capitalists: “Although, to Truman, the rich were a cancer on the world, he would not mind being rich himself” (187-88).

Truman and Anne-Marion reflect the Civil Rights Movement’s major shortcoming: the “lack of a sustained sociopolitical critique,” as Karen Stein identifies it (131). In her article “Meridian: Alice Walker’s Critique of Revolution” (1986), Stein argues that the Movement “perpetuated the counterrevolutionary values of a destructive society” (130). Similarly, Lynn Pifer asserts that the Civil Rights Movement “merely reproduced existing power structures” (77). In particular, “the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism” infuses the Movement and stifles “spontaneous individuality” (Stein 130).

In her 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Alice Walker asserts: “I have a basic antagonism toward the system of capitalism” (185). Not surprisingly, then, the opening scene of Meridian exposes the incompatibility of the Beloved Community with patriarchal capitalism. Of Meridian’s protest to desegregate the Marlene O’Shay exhibit, Stein writes: “The scene is a poignantly ironic illustration of the Civil Rights
dilemma: The Movement sought to break down social barriers to claim equal access for all individuals, but the society which it opened up often proved to be an ugly one. (131). On the one hand, the poor black children of Chicokema realize that the alleged corpse of Marilene O'Shay is “a fake,” and they are “glad they hadn’t waited till Thursday when they would have to pay money to see her” (26). On the other hand, black activists like Truman and Anne-Marion refuse to see the ugliness of white capitalist America; instead, they want to assimilate into it.

The section “Free at Last: A Day in April, 1968” in Meridian especially illustrates the clash between the lofty ideals of the Civil Rights Movement and the crass reality of American capitalism. In this section, Walker fittingly appropriates Martin Luther King’s death and funeral in 1968 as her metaphor for the death of the Movement. Walker has commented, in fact, on the inconsistencies between King’s dream of the Beloved Community and the thrust of the Movement after his death. In her essay “Choosing to Stay Home: Ten Years after the March on Washington” (1973), Walker writes:

I think Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., would be dismayed by the lack of radicalism in the new black middle class, and discouraged to know that a majority of the black people helped most by the Movement of the sixties has abandoned itself to the pursuit of cars, expensive furniture, large houses, and the finest Scotch. That in fact the very class that owes its new affluence to the Movement now refuses to support the organizations that made its success possible, and has retreated from its concern for black people who are poor. (168)

Although Walker never mentions King by name as she describes the funeral in Meridian, the date (April 1968), the location (Atlanta), and the details of the funeral (prominent guests, the mule-drawn cart) clearly indicate that it is King’s. Walker
recounts the carnival-like atmosphere of King's funeral and confirms Truman's belief that the Movement has become faddish. Senators, clergy, and movie stars arrive at the church in limousines and pretend not to see "the pitiable crowd of nobodies," the poor blacks who have gathered to pay tribute to the fallen leader. After the funeral service, members of the crowd that follows the casket on its mule-drawn cart seem relieved that they no longer have to follow King's lead and consider the socioeconomic ramifications of the Movement's ideology seriously: "there was a feeling of relief in the air, of liberation, that was repulsive." One black woman in particular is "laughing, as if all her cares, at last, had flown away." Visible signs of the mourners' light-heartedness also appear along the casket's route: a placard worn by a white poodle reduces the significance of King's speech at the March on Washington to a jaunty "I have a dream" slogan. Rampant commercialism transforms the funeral procession into a circus parade: "And everywhere the call for Coca-Colas, for food, rang out. Popcorn appeared, and along their route hot-dog stands sprouted their broad, multicolored umbrellas" (186). Seemingly, King's vision of a Beloved Community achieved through nonviolent direct action dies with him, replaced by a consumer-oriented society.

Even though Walker suggests that the Movement has failed, that it is dead and that its survivors have trivialized its memory, she also explores alternatives that are more likely to empower African Americans than integration into the bourgeois American mainstream. Meridian implies that the Movement fails because civil rights activists begin to distance themselves from the black masses and focus instead on
empowering themselves. The poor blacks of the rural South seem more capable than any other group in *Meridian* of creating the Beloved Community. Lynne reflects that after she married Truman and had a child with him, black southerners accepted her and her interracial family more readily than did her own parents or her fellow civil rights activists:

> The only people who ever loved me . . . were the po’ folks down in the woods, the swamps. They never looked down on me. Never despised me. After I had Camara I brought her back down here one time to show her off and they loved us both. Didn’t despise us . . . Made us feel like family . . . Never made us feel like there was nobody on earth so low as to want us. (147)

As Lynne notes, the “po’ folks” embody values that bridge differences in race and class.

*Meridian* especially takes to task those black activists who choose to forget that the Movement’s roots—as well as theirs—lie in the rich folk culture of indigenous southern blacks. While listening to radicals in New York City demand that black activists “kill for the Revolution,” *Meridian* reflects on the “decidedly unrevolutionary past” of many African Americans: “They made her ashamed of that past, and yet all of them had shared it. The church, the music, the tolerance shown to different beliefs outside the community, the tolerance shown to strangers” (30-31). Ironically, the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s emerges from this “unrevolutionary” black South. Consequently, *Meridian* dissociates herself from the revolutionary group and returns to the South to be “close to the people—to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself” (31). She rebukes Truman’s advice to forget about the Movement, telling him that “that’s not possible” (27). In the South, *Meridian*
discovers that African-American folk traditions, rather than mere political rhetoric or social protest, can not only sustain and inspire black southerners, but also keep the history of the Black Freedom Struggle alive.

Folk traditions are the single biggest sources of strength available to African Americans in Meridian. Alice Walker has commented extensively on the importance of the “unrevolutionary” black past to the black present and the black future. In her essay “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” (1970), Walker analyzes the legacy of rural black southerners and concludes:

> No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (21)

Barbara Christian understands Meridian to say that Meridian and Truman must tap the black past for strategies to create a viable African-American future: “[I]n order to transform their society, they must understand their own heritage and transform themselves. And that, paradoxically, it is in the process of attempting social change that they discover their own personal and cultural paths. This discovery is itself the core of the novel, the essence of its focal idea” (“Novels” 235). Similarly, Christine Hall contends that successful social change derives from an understanding of one’s

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7 For Walker’s specific comments on the contributions of such black southern writers as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, see the essays in Part One of In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. For an analysis of the connections between Meridian and black southern literary antecedents, see Rudolph P. Byrd. Byrd demonstrates convincingly that Walker clearly links Meridian to Toomer’s Cane (1923) and Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) through their “shared orientation” of “a deep regard and appreciation for the value of African-American folk culture” (43).
cultural heritage: “Progress will come . . . from understanding, accepting and valuing Black history, locating oneself within Black culture and society and working from there” (106). The primary representations of African-American cultural history in Meridian are The Sojourner and the Black Church. The story of The Sojourner begins with Louvinie, the African slave woman on the Saxon plantation. After Mr. Saxon cuts out her tongue to punish her for scaring his young son to death, Louvinie begs her master to return her severed tongue to her. Louvinie buries her tongue beneath “a scrawny magnolia tree” because she knows “the curse of her native land: Without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s own choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig” (44). The scrawny tree grows into The Sojourner, “the largest magnolia tree in the country” (42) and an extraordinary source of inspiration for the slaves on the Saxon plantation: “[They] believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen” (44). Among future generations of Saxon students, “many tales and legends” continue to spread about The Sojourner (45).

By locating The Sojourner on the Saxon campus, Walker invites the reader to draw parallels between Louvinie’s plight and that of the Saxon students, to draw parallels between the past and the present. Just as Louvinie is taken from her home in West Africa and becomes enslaved on the Saxon plantation, young black females leave their homes and become “penned in” at Saxon College, held to the
administration’s rigid standards of “true Ladyhood” (39). Louvinie leaves behind the traditions of her African home to learn a new way of life in the United States, whereas the Saxon girls abandon their roots in the black past to don the trappings of Western civilization: “They learned to make French food, English tea, and German music” (39). And just as Mr. Saxon literally takes away Louvinie’s voice by removing her tongue, the Saxon administration tries to stifle self-assertion among the black girls. In fact, Walker tells the reader that the Saxon girls feel as though they have “two enemies: Saxon, which wanted them to become something—ladies—that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society” (95). Even though a century separates the Saxon students’ experience from Louvinie’s, the suppression of black women by authority figures, whether black or white, remains a constant.⁸

Yet Louvinie and The Sojourner stand not only for loss and oppression: Walker suggests that they also represent the richness of the black female experience. As Rudolph Byrd points out, the tree’s name especially signifies the important role of black women during slavery:

But while the fate of Louvinie recalls the fact that Black women were often victims, Walker is keenly aware of the fact that they were also often warriors and in the naming of this “ancient, sheltering music tree” she evokes for us the memory and example of one (among many) who was not diminished by slavery’s ordered brutality: Sojourner Truth. In naming the magnolia tree after the former slave, abolitionist and visionary, Sojourner Truth, Walker seeks to place Meridian Hill, as well as the other women attending this women’s college, in the heroic tradition of dissent and protest. (51)

⁸ For Walker’s classic 1974 treatise on the historic suppression of the creativity of black women, see “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” In Search 231-43.
Barbara Christian observes that Louvinie represents not only the black woman's experience in the United States, but also the black woman's experience in Africa: "Louvinie is symbolic of Meridian's original maternal ancestors" ("Angle" 230).

Describing the placement of the Wild Child's casket under The Sojourner, Walker uses language that evokes "Mother" Africa. The tree has "heavy, flower-lit leaves [that] hovered over it like the inverted peaks of a mother's half-straightened kinky hair." The Sojourner is "ever generous to her children" (48). The centerpiece of the annual "Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower" ritual, The Sojourner also infuses the Saxon students with a sense of community, bringing together "the rich and the poor, the very black-skinned (few though they were) with the very fair, the stupid and the bright" (45).

Throughout Meridian, then, Walker suggests through The Sojourner that African Americans can mine their cultural heritage for sources of strength and beauty. Christine Hall writes that The Sojourner "symbolise[s] many aspects of creativity, self-expression, security and comfort for the students [at Saxon]. It offers a tangible link with Black history" (100). Just as Louvinie transforms the object of her suffering—her severed tongue—into an object of vitality—The Sojourner—the Saxon students rally around The Sojourner to commemorate Fast Mary. Similarly, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement transforms southern blacks. Barbara Christian explicitly links The Sojourner to the Civil Rights Movement to reveal the Movement's significance to the African-American experience:

Like the mystery of the Sojourner, the Civil Rights Movement would transform the agony of black existence into a measure of its persistence.
By using the technique of nonviolent resistance, the movement changed the quality of powerlessness into a powerful weapon of protest without doing violence to the spirit. In “volunteering to suffer,” the participants of this social revolution confronted the totality of black people’s heritage—the strength, the wisdom, and the shame. (“Novels” 217)

Because of its deep roots in the black past, the Civil Rights Movement, like Louvinie and The Sojourner, flourishes in a hostile environment and inspires African Americans.

In addition to The Sojourner, the Black Church is the other meaningful repository of the black past in Meridian. Walker comments on the extraordinary evolution of Christianity among poor black southerners in “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience”:

Outcasts to be used and humiliated by the larger society, the Southern black sharecropper and poor farmer clung to his own kind and to a religion that had been given to pacify him as a slave but which he soon transformed into an antidote against bitterness. . . .

As a college student I came to reject the Christianity of my parents, and it took me years to realize that though they had been force-fed a palliative, in the form of religion, they had made it into something at once simple and noble. True, even today, they can never successfully picture a God who is not white, and that is a major cruelty, but their lives testify to a greater comprehension of the teachings of Jesus than the lives of people who sincerely believe a God must have a color and that there can be such a phenomenon as a “white” church. (16-18)

The Black Church has played a central role throughout the cultural history of African Americans, as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya illustrate in The Black Church in the African-American Experience (1990). Rather than function merely as a religious institution that caters only to the belief system of a specific denomination of black Christians, the Black Church as understood by Walker serves as a multipurpose institution whose primary goal is to foster a sense of community among all African Americans.
Americans. As Meridian defines it, "the church" does "not mean simply . . . Baptist, Methodist, or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence" (199).

Moreover, the Church is the only black institution in Meridian that responds effectively to—and, in turn, derives strength from—the changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement. Walker strongly implies that after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the fragmentation of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, the Black Church "was, after all, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously" (199). To his chapter on Meridian in Connecting Times: The Sixties in Afro-American Fiction (1988), Norman Harris gives the telling subtitle "Answers in the Black Church." Throughout the chapter, Harris contends that the Black Church significantly empowers civil rights activists: "Those characters who are positively associated with the black church are able to advance the quest for freedom . . . , whereas those lacking that association cannot" (100).

The "Camara" section of Meridian contains Walker's clearest analysis of the potential role of the Black Church as a vehicle for mobilizing black people to continue the civil rights struggle. Walker's most striking message is that civil rights activists can function as Christ-figures, their suffering leading to the redemption of their people. To make this point, Walker describes a Sunday-morning Baptist church service that incorporates a tribute to a murdered civil rights worker. As the section

229
unfolds, unmistakable parallels between the celebration of the dead black man’s life and the Easter celebration of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and subsequent resurrection emerge.

First, Walker describes the “large photograph of a slain martyr in the Civil Rights struggle” as it appears in front of the altar. Two “tall vases of lilies—white and unblemished (their green stalks waxy and succulent)”—flank the portrait, much as Easter lilies adorn an altar on Easter Sunday (194). When the martyr’s father addresses the congregation, readers learns that, at the time of his death, the “martyred son was all the family [the father] had,” just as Christ was God’s only Son (196). The ensuing description of the great love that the father had for his son—and the consequences of that love—cannot but call to the reader’s mind the great love that God the Father had for Christ the Son: “[The father’s] love—selfless, open, a kissing, touching love—had only made his son strong enough to resist everything that was not love. Strong, beloved, knowing through his father’s eyes his own great value, he had set out to change the ways of the world his father feared. And they had murdered him” (197). Like Christ, the activist dies at the hands of people who are not ready to receive—or who fear—him and his message. Moreover, the activist is Christ-like because of the solidarity he feels with the common people:

For no matter how distrustful [the] son was of white people, rich people, or people who waged wars to destroy others, he had had absolute faith in the people among whom he had grown up. People . . . who could bear the weight of any oppression or any revolution as long as they knew they were together and believed the pain they suffered would come to a righteous end. (197)
Of humble origin, beloved by the black community and hated by the white power structure, the slain black man functions as the archetypal young civil rights activist.

Walker implies that the legacy of civil rights heroes inspires African Americans as much after their deaths as during their lives. Just as Christians have incorporated the story of Christ’s death into Western cultural expressions for two thousand years, turning to it as a source of sustenance and redemption, *Meridian* repeatedly suggests that African Americans can similarly use the otherwise horrific brutalities of the Black Freedom Struggle. Christine Hall asserts that such commemorations as the one Meridian witnesses in the Baptist church “are vibrant and relevant, a means of keeping the image of [African Americans’] own dead before the living” (104). By honoring the fallen civil rights activists, the black churchgoers have, in Barbara Christian’s words, “incorporated into their ritual the history of the movement, outward signs that indicate the depth of their experience, the measure of their transformation” (“Novels” 213). Meridian herself recognizes the significance of the civil rights martyr’s death. She suspects that the black churchgoers, listening to the father of the murdered activist, tacitly reach out to him:

If you will let us weave your story and your son’s life and death into what we already know—into the songs, the sermons, the “brother and sister”—we will soon be so angry we cannot help but move. . . . [T]he music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. (199-200)

In the tradition of Louvinie, the black congregation decides to retaliate against white brutality by channeling its sorrow, anger, and frustration into powerful cultural expressions.
Just as the Black Church can propel the Civil Rights Movement forward, the Movement itself in turn can reinvigorate the Black Church, compelling it to modify its traditional approach to Christianity and incorporate the secular message of the Movement. Although Meridian “had always thought of the black church as mainly a reactionary power,” she observes that it no longer endorses passive acceptance of one’s temporal station in the hope of eternal salvation (199). Deborah McDowell refers to this updated institution as “the restored church” of the black past, “the Church of Nat Turner, of Denmark Vesey, the church rooted in the soil of protest against oppression” (272). The different sound of the “ah-mens” uttered by the congregation indicates an attitudinal shift, as Meridian recognizes: “Not muttered in resignation, not shouted in despair. . . . [T]he ‘ah-mens’ rose clearly, unsentimentally, and with a firm tone of ‘We are fed up’” (196). Another change that Meridian detects is the music. During the church service, she hears a hymn that has a “quite martial melody” and is “oddly death-defying” (195). Similarly, in an effort to keep Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream alive, the minister has adopted King’s style as his own: “he was deliberately imitating King, . . . he and all his congregation knew he was consciously keeping the voice alive. . . . [T]he preacher’s voice [was] not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak” (196).

Just as the black minister’s voice has changed in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, so too has the content of his sermons. The minister alludes only briefly to the biblical story of David and Goliath “to illustrate a point,” and he does not mention God at all “except as a reference.” Instead, the minister instructs the congregation on
secular issues, attacking President "Tricky Dick" Nixon, forbidding young black men to participate in the Vietnam War, encouraging young black women to strive toward goals other than marriage, chastising black adults for allowing their children to suffer the brunt of white racism, and scorning black teachers who do not work hard enough to teach black children (195-96). Similarly, the money collected during the morning service goes toward the church’s prison fund. For his benediction, the minister exhorts the congregation to vote for black candidates in the upcoming election. To summarize the changes that Meridian notices, Deborah Barker writes: "The music and icons of the church have been transformed from passive signs of conformity to signs of active resistance" (476).

"B. B., With Sword," a stained-glass window in the black Baptist church where Meridian witnesses the tribute to the slain civil rights activist, reflects the new attitude of black churchgoers. As Meridian looks around the church, she fully expects to find a stained-glass window showing “the traditional pale Christ with lamb.” Instead, she sees a stained-glass window depicting “a tall, broad-shouldered black man.” Presumably that of B. B. King, the image pays tribute to a black folk hero rather than to a white religious hero. With one hand, B. B. holds his guitar, while with the other hand, he holds, “raised above his head,” a sword “dripping with blood.” The stained-glass window clearly advocates activity over passivity: instead of depicting a serene white Christ figure, the window depicts an energetic black artist whose head is “thrown back, contorted in song, and sweat, like glowing diamonds, fell from his head” (198). By juxtaposing the image of a guitar with the image of a sword, the
window suggests that African Americans can participate in the Black Freedom Struggle as effectively with their creative cultural expressions as with weapons and violence. As Christine Hall notes: "[I]t is by means of art, whether it is story-telling, performance, the visual arts or music, that history can be transformed to be truly meaningful to the present, and to engender action" (104).

Meridian does not rule out the possibility of black revolutionary violence against the white power structure, however, for the "B. B., With Sword" window suggests that black revolutionaries may have to abandon nonviolence to liberate African Americans. It is significant that B. B. is raising the sword, not the guitar. And it is the sword, not the guitar, that is dripping blood. Yet even as Walker considers that "the real revolutionaries [are] those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black," she also suggests that artists' roles are as important as those of the revolutionaries. In her essay "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Writer Who Simply Works and Writes" (1971), Walker insists that the black artist's imperative is "to create and to preserve what was created before him" (135). Likewise, Meridian undergoes an epiphany after viewing "B. B., With Sword" and realizes that she can participate in the revolutionary struggle as a custodian of black cultural history: "For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all" (201). In other words,
Meridian does not, ultimately, endorse black revolutionary violence; instead, the novel encourages African Americans to empower themselves by mining the rich black past.

Meridian will disappoint readers who expect a pat fictional account of the Civil Rights Movement or an idealized representation of the Beloved Community. The relationships among Meridian, Lynne, and Truman are strained because of differences in race, class, and gender; the personal losses that they suffer throughout the Movement and then in its wake seem far to outweigh the political gains that they make for black southerners. Still, the three main characters do increase their knowledge about themselves and about the society in which they live by participating in the Movement. And even as Walker makes reconciliation available to Meridian, Lynne, and Truman, she heightens readers' understanding of the Civil Rights Movement by exploring its complexities and ongoing contribution to American culture.
Julius Lester’s novel *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994) is a complex rumination on the successes and failures of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Lester shifts the narrative among the points of view of four main characters: John Calvin “Cal” Marshall, the preeminent leader of the Civil Rights Movement until his assassination in 1969; Andrea Marshall, his widow, who becomes a national symbol of the Movement after her husband’s death; Robert “Bobby” Card, a native black southerner who organizes Mississippi communities during his youth; and Elizabeth “Lisa” Adams, Marshall’s white secretary and mistress. Within the context of *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, these four characters’ private struggles to make sense of the Civil Rights Movement are as much a part of the Movement’s story as conventional histories. In the novel’s present, Marshall speaks from the grave to reflect on the United States’ attempt to create the Beloved Community. At the same time, the novel explores the ways in which Andrea’s, Bobby’s, and Lisa’s relationships with Marshall, their relationships with one another, and their involvement in the Movement have affected them as individuals. Lester uses lower-case, sans-serif type to present Marshall’s observations, and the striking visual shifts between Marshall’s sections and those of the other characters dramatically underscore the narrative shifts between Marshall’s sections and those of the living characters. *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* clearly shows that the Beloved Community did not materialize as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, yet the novel also dramatizes the inadequacies of revolutionary
black violence and black separatism. In the end, the novel makes the startlingly
simple point that to accomplish reconciliation, black Americans and white Americans
must acknowledge each other's past and present suffering and forgive each other for
that suffering. Only in the wake of interracial reconciliation will the Beloved
Community be able to emerge.

Julius Lester is himself a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement. A 1960
graduate of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he participated in civil
rights demonstrations, Lester joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
(SNCC) in 1966. Lester describes his experiences in the Movement in his memoir All
Is Well (1976), in which he comments that "the revolutionary's only task was the
creation of a social order which made loving possible" (142). Elaborating on the goals
of the Movement in the early 1960s, Lester explains in his essay "Beyond Ideology"
(1989):

The Movement was not born from the desire to change the system. We wanted to move far beyond systems; we wanted to create
community, and in the words of one of the earliest white members of
the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Jane
Stembridge, that community was to be "the beloved community."
What made The Movement such a compelling force in its early
years was that political action was merely the vehicle for spiritual
expression... Ending segregation was not sufficient as a goal... The Movement itself had to be the paradigm of that New Community.
(31)

Your Mama!, which, along with Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's Black
Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (1967), attempted to conceptualize
Black Power during the second half of the 1960s. Lester also contributed columns to
the weekly radical newspaper *The Guardian* between October 1967 and January 1969; Lester’s collection *Revolutionary Notes* (1969) includes many of these columns. In *All Is Well*, Lester reveals his agenda as a columnist for *The Guardian*: “I assigned myself the task of being the caretaker of the ‘movement’s’ soul, criticizing its weaknesses, excesses, and sounding warnings of potential errors. I also saw myself as the bridge between the black radical movement and the white New Left” (147). Since the late 1960s, Lester has written more than two dozen works, including such fiction as *Do Lord Remember Me* (1985) and such children’s books as *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (1996). Another memoir, *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (1988), recounts Lester’s conversion to Judaism in the late 1970s. Julius Lester is currently a professor in the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The fragmented structure of *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, like that of Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), parallels the fragmentation of the Civil Rights Movement by the end of the 1960s. Most reviewers of *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* suggest that Lester provides a bleak assessment of the Movement in his novel. For example, in his review of *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* for the *African American Review*, Wilfred D. Samuels argues: “Distressingly, . . . Lester’s microscopic examination (though fictional) suggests that in the end there is no celebration, no real sense of accomplishment, benefits, or reward” (179). Samuels holds similarly pessimistic views about the fates of Lester’s four main characters: “In the end, . . . one has the disturbing feeling that each had paid too great a price. . . . We come to see each one, black and white, as truly dead men and women” (179-80). Like Samuels, the reviewer
for *Kirkus Reviews* identifies the novel’s central question, articulated by John Calvin Marshall, as whether the “costs” of the Movement have been “too high.” The *Kirkus Reviews* writer admits, however, that *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* does not and cannot provide a definitive assessment of the Movement: “The answer to John’s original question is never stated explicitly . . . . Ultimately, . . . Lester leaves John Calvin Marshall’s question unanswered because it is unanswerable.” The *Publishers Weekly* review of *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* similarly implies that Lester’s position on the Movement is ambiguous. The reviewer notes that “Lester’s emotionally wrenching novel brings the civil rights movement full circle, and few readers will finish the book without a new perspective on the racial divisiveness that plagues America today.” The reviewer does not, however, state explicitly what this “new perspective” is. Indeed, Lester avoids forcing any one perspective on the reader. Instead, the author invites readers to consider not only the successes and failures of the Movement during the 1960s, but also its legacy up to the present and into the future.

When asked about his motive for basing *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* on the Civil Rights Movement, Lester replies in an e-mail to the author that “the novel became one in which I tried to show the price that we as Americans extract of public figures by projecting onto them hopes and aspirations they cannot fulfill.” Lester obviously turns to Martin Luther King, Jr., as the model for John Calvin Marshall, the national civil rights leader in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*. In “My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.” (1970), an essay inspired by Coretta Scott King’s 1969 memoir of the same title, Lester reminisces about the two times that he saw King. Lester initially describes King disparagingly as “the risen Christ” (218), yet he begins
to wonder what King had really been like: “Who was he? I wanted to know what he was like when he wasn’t behind a rostrum, when he wasn’t leading the children to the Promised Land. I tried to imagine him in bed screwing, and couldn’t. I tried to imagine him doing any of the things I did, like picking his nose, and I couldn’t” (221).

Lester considers that after the Montgomery bus boycott, King had been, “without warning or desire, . . . projected into the role of national leader. He had lost control of events and, more important, the ability to control his own life had been taken from him” (223). Eventually Lester shows compassion toward King, a reluctant national leader who “knew that he did not exist except as an object—a ‘leader,’ a ‘public person,’ a ‘great man.’ Even to his wife it appears that he was the risen Christ and she was fortunate enough to be Mrs. Christ” (225). Lester concludes his essay by expressing relief that King no longer has to contend with his objectification:

> On Martin Luther King’s tombstone are inscribed the words: “Free At Last! Free At Last! Thank God Almighty! I’m Free At Last.” Those are strange words for an epitaph. They’re appropriate for King, though. He is free now. Myths can live more easily when there is no person who has to represent the myth. He is free now and I’m glad. He suffered long enough. (226)

Through the character of John Calvin Marshall in And All Our Wounds Forgiven, Lester explores the human side of such a public figure as King.

The many parallels between John Calvin Marshall and Martin Luther King cannot but strike the reader—especially since King is conspicuously absent from a novel that mentions every other significant historical figure from the 1960s, including Lyndon B. Johnson, Malcolm X, and J. Edgar Hoover. Lester’s clever play on the names of Protestant Reformation leaders further signals readers that the fictional
Marshall correlates with the historical King. Like King, Marshall is a black southern intellectual with a Ph.D. from a prestigious northern university. Marshall marries Andrea Williams, a northern-educated black woman who parallels Coretta Scott King in that she craves middle-class respectability, wants to live in the North rather than return to the South, and ignores her husband's extramarital affair while publicly playing the role of the supportive wife. Like King, Marshall is in his mid-twenties when the Supreme Court makes its landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. Just as King assumed leadership over the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, Marshall organizes a bus boycott in Atlanta. Marshall also plays a significant role during the sit-ins in 1960, the Freedom Rides in 1961, and the March on Washington in 1963. Nationally, Marshall witnesses President Johnson's signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Marshall's popularity begins to dwindle, however, in the second half of the 1960s, just as King's did. Proponents of Black Power condemn Marshall as an "Uncle Tom" because of his insistence on nonviolence and interracial cooperation. President Johnson withdraws his support from Marshall after Marshall begins denouncing the Vietnam War. Marshall is ultimately assassinated, and his death triggers rioting in Washington, D.C. Eventually, though, the American people honor Marshall posthumously with his own postage stamp and with a holiday that bears his name.¹

¹ For a concise King biography, see Adam Fairclough, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995). For the best, most comprehensive King biography to date, see David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross.
These many similarities notwithstanding, Wilfred Samuels admonishes readers to “remember that Dr. Marshall is not Dr. King!” (182). The most significant difference between John Calvin Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr., is that Lester humanizes the fictional hero of And All Our Wounds Forgiven in ways that the American public will not humanize King. Just as many Americans cast King as the long-suffering, Christ-like redeemer of black southerners, so do the masses in And All Our Wounds Forgiven cast Marshall. In fact, Samuels astutely notes that Marshall’s initials, JCM, “equate him with another messianic savior, Jesus the Christ” (177). Lisa compares Marshall’s appeal to Christ’s when she observes that “people believed he could make the blind see and the lame walk” (63). Moreover, many blacks actually call Marshall “‘The Savior,’ some to his face with so much hope etched in their voices you thought their hearts would break” (68). When Marshall recalls his appearance at the March on Washington, he remembers the crowd’s perception of him as Deliverer: “I had become a messiah, the one who would save them from the old life of sin and initiate them into a new tomorrow of freedom and purity” (55). As it did in the 1960s and continues to do with King, the American public deifies Marshall and loses sight of his essential humanity.

Yet Lester forces readers to focus on Marshall’s humanity by allowing Marshall to speak for himself from the grave. Indeed, in her review of And All Our Wounds Forgiven for Library Journal, Faye A. Chadwell observes that “Lester captures well the essence of a leader struggling with immense responsibility and his own human nature.” Throughout his reflections, Marshall downplays his importance to the Civil Rights Movement and rejects the Christ-like role that the public imposes
on him. In fact, on the first page of the novel, Marshall immediately dispels any
notion that he is infallible as a narrator, admitting that he does not know any more
about the Movement than the reader does: "i do not know where the story begins.
though i am integral to it, i am not sure i know even what the story is as neither my life
nor death constitutes the story" (1). Marshall goes on to insist that he knew as little
about the Movement’s direction during the 1950s and 1960s as the black masses
themselves:

i did not act as much as i made myself available to be used by forces i
desperately sought to understand. i heard hope whispering through
the needles of the southern pine trees during the late fifties and i gave
it voice. that does not mean i always knew what i was saying. that
does not mean i understood the depth and extent of the
transformations with which everyone now wants to credit me. (23-24)

Recalling his speech at the March on Washington, Marshall stresses that he was
unable to deliver black southerners by themselves: "i was only mortal. when i ate the
wrong thing my shit smelled just like theirs. why did they not know that? did they
honestly think i could save them? . . . for an instant, i think i hated them. and myself"
(55). Marshall is so angry that Americans place a disproportionately heavy burden on
him to lead the Black Freedom Struggle that when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover
threatens to expose Marshall’s affair with Lisa to discredit the Civil Rights Movement,
Marshall thrills at the mere thought of abdicating his responsibility as leader: "my
god! i thought. i would be free!" (60). Thirty years after the March on Washington,
Marshall continues to resent the burden: "people talk as if i made the civil rights
movement by myself. what did they think they were accomplishing by making a
holiday of my birthday or putting my face on a stamp? what surer way to rob my life
of value, integrity and meaning than turn me into a monument" (23). By the time an
assassin’s bullet robs Marshall of his life in 1969, the American public has already robbed him of his humanity. Moreover, as Marshall muses from the grave, contemporary Americans continue to deny his fallibility.

Lester calls attention to Marshall’s human nature not only through Marshall’s own admissions, but also through the reflections of his closest companions. As Regina Maria Dragoin argues in her study “Breaking the Ice: Representations of White Women in Civil Rights Movement Novels, 1954-1994” (1999), Andrea, Lisa, and Bobby “piece together a biography of the private life of a public figure and the private side of public events” (390). Significantly, Lisa, Bobby, and even Marshall himself all refer to Marshall as “Cal.” Whereas politicians, the press, and the public refer to him as “John Calvin Marshall,” “Dr. Marshall,” or simply “Marshall,” Cal’s intimates use his nickname almost exclusively in order, as Wilfred Samuels writes, “to differentiate the man from the myth” (178). Indeed, the narrators of And All Our Wounds Forgiven arguably know Cal better than anyone else.

Lester humanizes Marshall in particular by highlighting his sexuality. Indeed, in an e-mail to the author, Lester comments that Marshall “responds” to his “loss of self” as the national leader of the Civil Rights Movement “by immersing himself in a relationship—the one with Lisa—and there he can be a human being.” In contrast to historians who delicately discuss King’s promiscuity, Lester describes Marshall’s affair with Lisa in pornographic detail. Lisa recalls that Cal enjoyed sex because he “knew himself again as mere flesh and blood and remembered how good that was” (64). Regina Dragoin argues that whereas “Martin Luther King was perhaps ‘toned down’ to make him acceptable to the white community and was turned into a
Gandhian saint,” Lester “makes the civil rights leader a manly opponent to segregation and inequality” (395). For example, Lisa’s two-page rhapsody on Cal’s penis includes the following observation: “Cal’s penis was magnificent. If it had been a horse, it would have been an Arabian stallion. If it had been a bird, it would have been an eagle. If it had been in the sea, it would have been a whale” (180-81). By forcing the reader to visualize Marshall’s penis—“long and thick and hard as diamonds. It was black, blacker than anything else on his body”—Lester forces the reader to recognize the essential masculinity and humanity of a character who is otherwise all-too-quickly characterized as the Savior (180).²

Just as Lester illustrates the personal price that Cal pays as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, he illustrates the personal price that Cal’s wife Andrea pays too. A thinly disguised Coretta Scott King, Andrea Marshall emerges in And All Our Wounds Forgiven less an individual than a symbolic extension of her dead husband. The reader knows nothing of the former Andrea Williams’s life before she marries Cal, aside from her matriculation at Radcliffe College. As the sole black female at Radcliffe, Andrea feels that she has little choice but to marry John Calvin Marshall, who is similarly the sole black male at nearby Harvard University: “As two Americans in a foreign country become intimates because there is no one else to

² To appreciate fully the extent to which Lester highlights Marshall’s sexuality, compare the descriptions of Cal and Lisa’s affairs to the rather oblique references to King’s promiscuity in King biographies. See Fairclough, Martin 98-100; Garrow, Bearing 373-76, 586-87; and Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1982; New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) 282-84. These biographers do allude to King’s affairs, yet none provides details as graphic as those that Lester provides for Cal and Lisa. On the other hand, Ralph D. Abernathy, King’s best friend and right-hand man within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, does provide a lurid account of King’s sexual activity, particularly on the night before King’s assassination. See Ralph D. Abernathy, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
whom they can talk, so it was with her and John Calvin” (135). After marrying Cal, Andrea abdicates any personal identity whatsoever outside that of John Calvin Marshall’s wife. In fact, she is the only narrator who does not have a nickname.

Andrea’s condition in the novel’s present dramatically signifies her lack of identity: she lies comatose in a Nashville hospital, and as Wilfred Samuels comments, “she symbolizes, through her condition, the painful domestic life of terror, anguish, helplessness, and voicelessness she had known” (178). To underscore Andrea’s lack of identity, Lester contrasts her to Jackie Kennedy, who, after the death of her husband, “went on with her life and became Jacqueline Onassis” (54). Unlike Jackie Kennedy, however, Andrea chooses to define herself in history as the widow of a slain leader rather than as a new individual. Commenting on Andrea’s choice, Lisa tells Andrea that Andrea has “done very well making a career as the widow of John Calvin Marshall” (54). Ironically, the role of the widowed Mrs. John Calvin Marshall imparts an identity to Andrea that she did not enjoy while Cal was alive and leading the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Lisa observes that after Cal’s death, Andrea herself, not Cal, becomes the personification of the Movement:

People see you at a rally, a demonstration or meeting, and they are thrust back into the heroic days of the sixties. They see you and the fabric of time hiding past from present is ripped, and as you stand at the lectern, people hear German shepherd dogs snarling and snapping at black children in the streets of Birmingham. They are standing shoulder to shoulder, one among the quarter million at the Capitol, swaying from side to side, singing “Black and white together . . . We shall overcome someday.” They see you and fall into the deeper sleep of yesterday’s dead hopes and perished dreams. (53-54)

Lisa even suggests that Cal’s assassination is actually “the best thing that could have happened” to Andrea: “It gave your life a purpose, something it never had. . . . You
get invited to the White House. You are interviewed on TV when there are racial
troubles somewhere. Presidential candidates have their picture taken with you,
seeking your endorsement as if it were an imprimatur" (54). Lisa’s musings
notwithstanding, both Andrea and the reader recognize that despite the public
significance of Andrea’s role as John Calvin Marshall’s widow, that role is privately
unfulfilling.

In addition to Cal’s death and Andrea’s permanent widowhood, And All Our
Wounds Forgiven suggests, like Alice Walker’s Meridian, that the Civil Rights
Movement takes its greatest toll on the rank-and-file activists who battle white
supremacy and struggle to achieve the Beloved Community in the Deep South. When
asked about his motive for basing And All Our Wounds Forgiven on the Movement,
Lester explains in an e-mail to the author that he wanted to show the effects of
Movement participation not only on famous national figures, but also on unsung local
heroes: “In the romanticizing of the civil rights movement I saw taking place, I was
aware that not much was being written about the price paid by those of us who made
the civil rights movement. So, that was part of what motivated me. As the novel
evolved, that theme also evolved.” In And All Our Wounds Forgiven, Cal, instead of
feeling a “sense of victory” when President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964
or the Voting Rights Act of 1965, remembers the activists for whom the Movement’s
victories came at great cost:

i started to list the names of all those who had been murdered. i listed
the names of those civil rights workers we knew who had spent one
day too many in a mississippi, alabama, louisiana or georgia small
town, who were now becoming alcoholics, who abused women, who
burst into tears for no apparent reason. death had claimed their souls
but, as a cruel joke, decided to leave their bodies behind. (102)
To remind the reader of the many civil rights workers who were murdered because of their activism in the 1950s and 1960s, Lester lists the names of the dead—including Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—in several places throughout the novel (35-37, 41-42, 69-71, 188-89). Cal reflects that "the price was so high and the stakes were so low. a life for the right to cast a vote? absurd" (101). Cal even goes so far as to suggest that ordinary activists are dispensable: when Bobby feels guilty for the murder of a black Mississippi organizer, Cal remarks, "He's not going to be the last one to die . . . . You have to get used to it. The price of freedom is death" (111). Throughout And All Our Wounds Forgiven, Lester invites readers to consider whether the Civil Rights Movement's limited gains are commensurate with the vast personal costs to participants.

Bobby Card represents the archetypal battle-scarred civil rights activist in And All Our Wounds Forgiven. During the course of the novel, the gradual destruction of Bobby's idealism poignantly illustrates the devastating consequences of Movement participation. Remembering his own experiences in the Movement, Lester writes in "Beyond Ideology" that during the 1960s, "we did not know that the values we sought to embody—the values of nonviolence and the beloved community—were not the values that America wanted for itself" (32). Over the course of the 1960s, Lester eventually lost faith in the idea of the Beloved Community. In 1968, Lester himself rejected the desirability of nonviolence in Look Out, Whitey!: "Nonviolence might do something to the moral conscience of a nation, but a bullet didn't have morals and it
was beginning to occur to more and more organizers that white folks had plenty more bullets than they did conscience” (10). Similarly, Lester mocked the notion that the love of nonviolent activists could redeem violent racists:

What is love supposed to do? Wrap the bullet in a warm embrace? Caress the cattle prod? The white liberals told us to love our enemy, but they wouldn’t tell Jim Clark he should love. They wouldn’t tell Rainey in Mississippi, Wallace in Alabama, Maddox in Georgia, about that all-powerful love. Was that love only good enough for niggers to use? Wasn’t it a love that the Klan might be interested in? Wasn’t it a love Lyndon Baines Johnson could use on the Vietnamese instead of one-thousand-pound bombs and napalm? . . . If white folks want to talk about love, let ’em talk to white folks. Go to Cicero and Milwaukee and preach love. We’ve had our love affair with white America and our virginity is gone. We’re tired of whoring so you can wash your guilt in our blood. We’re tired of being raped by racism and hatred. If there’s any washing to be done in the future, it’ll be us washing ourselves in your blood. (106)

The tone of Look Out, Whitey! clearly suggests that by 1968, white resistance to the creation of the Beloved Community had severely eroded Lester’s own idealism.

Lester introduces the first section of Bobby’s narrative with Marshall’s diatribe that the Civil Rights Movement “robbed” its young participants of their “childhood and thus of integrity” (81). After his stint as a young, nonviolent activist in Mississippi in the early 1960s, Bobby evolves into a militant black separatist, then into a self-destructive substance abuser. The inconsistent names by which he is known—“Bobby,” “Robert,” or simply “Card”—reflect his fragmented personalities. Indeed, fragmentation of Bobby’s self over time reflects the fragmentation of the Movement over the 1960s. As Bobby reflects on his role in the Movement during the novel’s present, he concludes with profound grief that the Movement extracted a terrible sacrifice from him: “I was too young, Cal. You took my love for you, my eagerness,
my naivete, my idealism. You took everything about me that I loved and I’m sorry, Cal, but youth and love and eagerness and idealism are no match for evil and hatred and violence” (152). By tracing Bobby’s experiences over several decades, *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* successfully delineates the short- and long-term consequences of participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

Lester successfully dramatizes white violence in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* to illustrate the serious emotional impact that the Civil Rights Movement has on activists. In particular, the murder of Charlie Montgomery in the novel, which parallels the actual 1961 murder of Herbert Lee in Liberty, Mississippi, graphically demonstrates the toll that white racist violence takes on young activists. Just as SNCC member Bob Moses went to Liberty to enlist Lee’s aid in registering black voters in 1961, Bobby goes to Shiloh, Mississippi, to help Charlie Montgomery, a black World War II veteran, register local blacks to vote. However, just as white Mississippi state legislator E. H. Hurst murdered Lee because of Lee’s insistence on equal rights for blacks, a local white supremacist in Shiloh, Jeb Lincoln, shoots and kills Charlie in broad daylight because of Charlie’s voter registration activities. When Bobby discovers Charlie’s body, the gruesome scene affects him so profoundly that he later tries to articulate the sheer horror to Cal:

[Bobby] tried to tell him what it was like to see the brains of someone you loved spilling from the skull and into the dust and how you looked at the brains and wondered if that wrinkle was where sight had resided and had that crevice controlled the movement of the legs and arms and that patch of rosiness, was that where the dreams of freedom and dignity and respect came from? And he tried to describe what it was like to hold the brains of someone you loved in your hands, what it was like to try and put those brains back where they belonged except there was no skull anymore, only a fragment of bone out of which spilled
Lester’s description of this scene, a scene that is indescribable for Bobby, is so graphic that it forces readers to consider the horrifying effect that such firsthand experiences have on Bobby and other organizers. Charlie’s corpse is the first body that Bobby has to identify within the Movement, and he begins to wonder “what he was doing and why” (111). Bobby suspects that Charlie “would still be alive if not for me!,” and his overwhelming guilt prompts him to consider leaving Shiloh before other blacks die (110). Lester continues to draw parallels between Bobby Card and Bob Moses in that Bobby urges an eyewitness, Ezekiel Whitson, to testify against Lincoln, just as Moses encouraged Louis Allen to testify against Hurst; in both the fictional and the actual instance, the black witnesses are murdered by the white racists. Feeling utterly helpless against the powerful white supremacists, Bobby considers quitting the Movement: “Fuck civil rights! Fuck freedom! Fuck John Calvin Marshall!” (114).³

Lester creates another powerful white supremacist in Shiloh’s Sheriff Zebadiah Simpson, who is, like Sheriff Laurie Pritchett of Albany, Georgia, “more dangerous than other sheriffs because he eschewed beatings and murders.” Unlike such racists as Jeb Lincoln who use physical violence to intimidate civil rights workers, Simpson prefers to use psychological warfare against Bobby: “Where other sheriffs would have sought to destroy the bodies of those who threatened them, Zebadiah Simpson

³ For Bob Moses’s account of the Herbert Lee murder, see “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” Liberation 14 (1970): 7-17. Expressing a regret similar to Bobby’s, Moses observes: “It’s one thing to get beat up and it’s another thing to be responsible, or to participate in some way in a killing” (12). For another account of the Herbert Lee and Louis Allen murders, see Taylor Branch, Parting 509-14, 518-23.
knew he needed only to damage the soul. That was why he had left Charlie Montgomery to lie in the dust for two hours. . . . His indifference unsettled Bobby far more than rage would have” (116). To break Bobby finally, however, Simpson concocts an elaborate psychosexual strategy accompanied by a warning: “Don’t you worry none. I ain’t going to kill you. In fact, I’m not going to leave a mark on you. But I guarantee you when I get done, you’ll never forget me” (117). In the ensuing bizarre scene set in the Shiloh jail, a scene that calls to mind the disturbingly erotic lynching in James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” (1965), Simpson forces two black male prisoners to restrain Bobby while he masturbates Bobby with a pocket knife:

Robert closed his eyes as he felt the sheriff’s surprisingly soft hands take hold of his penis and tenderly stroke it until it, because it was it, became stiff and rigid and the sheriff reached in his pocket and taking out his pocket knife, opened it and began gently stroking the head of Robert’s penis with the sharp edge of the knife blade and Robert opened his eyes and stared intently at the paint peeling from the ceiling, hoping that by doing so he could subvert his body but the excitement rose in him and despite himself, his body twitched involuntarily as the sheriff continued stroking his penis with the knife blade, lightly, barely touching the skin so that the penis hungered for the next touch as the blade went from the head down the trunk of the penis, farther and farther down until it came to the base and then slowly back up, again and again and again until the orgasm came and it was more intense than any he had ever had with a woman and his will and determination not to scream his pleasure were not enough and the release was total and complete, his aspirated screams echoing off the stone walls of the jail cell . . . . (118)

Afterward, Simpson tells one of the black male prisoners to perform oral sex on Bobby until Bobby climaxes again.

Regina Dragoin and Wilfred Samuels both refer to this scene as Bobby’s symbolic castration, yet in his review of And All Our Wounds Forgiven for the Washington Post Book World, David Nicholson characterizes the incident more
accurately as Bobby’s “sexual humiliation.” Whereas white men in the segregated South have historically used castration and lynching to suppress black men, as in Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1940), Sheriff Simpson ingeniously adapts the strategy that southern white men have historically used to debase black women: rape and sexual humiliation. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has fleshed out the connection between lynching and rape: “The association between lynching and rape emerges most clearly in their parallel use in racial subordination. . . . [R]ape reasserted white dominance and control in the private arena as lynching reasserted hierarchical arrangements in the public transactions of men” (“Mind” 331-33).

Significantly, Simpson does not choose to rape Bobby by penetration, nor does he force Bobby to perform sexual acts on him. Instead, Bobby’s forced orgasms ostensibly indicate that he has “enjoyed” his sexual humiliation. Bobby’s knowledge that his degradation has been public, witnessed by the two black men who are Simpson’s unwilling accessories, heightens Bobby’s humiliation. Simpson’s ingenuity does not escape Bobby. Whereas the historical castrations of black men have typically resulted in the victim’s death, Bobby leaves the Shiloh jail unharmed physically, yet psychologically “intent on his own death” (119). Just as Lester graphically and effectively conveys Bobby’s horror in the aftermath of Charlie Montgomery’s murder, the author graphically and effectively conveys Bobby’s humiliation at the hands of Sheriff Simpson.

And All Our Wounds Forgiven clearly shows that the gradual accumulation of psychologically damaging experiences hardens Bobby and causes him eventually to renounce the nonviolent ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. Because Jeb Lincoln
has, with Sheriff Simpson’s tacit approval, brazenly murdered such black men as Charlie Montgomery and Ezekiel Whitson, Bobby, like Guitar Baines in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), enlists the aid of George Stone, one of his fellow black organizers, to murder the two white men on Christmas Eve, 1965. Lester himself grappled with the notion of retaliatory violence, and he recalls in “Beyond Ideology” that “after four little girls were murdered in the bombing of a church on a Birmingham, Alabama, Sunday morning,” he and other black Movement participants began to wonder: “Was violence the only appropriate response to violence?” (33). Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) particularly affected Lester and other black activists in the 1960s because it “told us that violence was redemptive, that it was the only means by which the colonized could cleanse themselves of the violence of the colonizers” (33). In *Look Out, Whitey!* Lester angrily attacked “White Power” in the United States and ominously asserted: “It is clear that America as it now exists must be destroyed. There is no other way... [W]e will destroy [White Power] or die in the act of destroying. That much seems inevitable. To those who fearfully wonder if America has come to the point of a race war, the answer is not certain. However, all signs would seem to say yes.” Lester went on to predict: “The race war, if it comes, will come partly from the necessity for revenge. You can’t do what has been done to blacks and not expect retribution. The very act of retribution is liberating” (137).

Yet *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* also demonstrates, like *Song of Solomon*, that the roused “evil” in blacks can be as destructive to them as to whites. Reflecting on the “hate” for the United States that the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War stirred in young activists in the 1960s, Lester argues in “Beyond Ideology” that
hatred “is one of the dangers of idealism”: “All too quickly unrequited idealism can become surly and aggressive. All too quickly, it becomes rage, bares the teeth that have been lurking behind the smile as pretty as a morning glory, and, enraged, bites itself and never feels the pain, never knows that the blood staining its teeth is its own” (33). In And All Our Wounds Forgiven, John Calvin Marshall, the leading proponent of nonviolent direct action, anticipates blacks’ rejection of nonviolence and their subsequent endorsement of retaliation against whites:

I’ve always known that to awaken the Negro to take action against the evil stifling him would also mean rousing the Negro’s own evil. . . . The stupidity of white America is terrifying. It does not require a great deal of intelligence to figure out that if you hate a people all you are doing is giving them lessons in how to hate you. And that’s what Negroes have been learning all these years. Just because they haven’t expressed it yet doesn’t mean they haven’t been taking notes and practicing in quiet. (193)

By 1966, Cal clearly detects increasing black frustration with white oppression and warns activists to reject violence: “We must be careful that we do not become the evil we have been so intent on killing. We must be careful that our desire for justice is not so ardent that it becomes a thirst for vengeance” (195). Although Bobby calls off the plan to kill Simpson and Lincoln at the last minute, the white South’s violent reaction to the Civil Rights Movement has aroused in him and other black activists an interest in retaliatory violence.

George Stone’s suicide several years after his and Bobby’s failed assassination attempt on Simpson and Lincoln illustrates dramatically the consequences of an unquenched thirst for vengeance. Bobby classifies George’s suicide as “the ultimate act of anger” and perceives the irony that he, Bobby, not white people, is the party

255
with whom George is angry. Lester suggests that George is angry with Bobby not only because Bobby fails to follow through on their plan to murder Simpson and Lincoln in 1965, but also because Bobby becomes happily involved with a white woman, Amy, in 1973. At that time, George severs his ties with Bobby by tersely condemning Bobby's relationship with Amy: "I can't keep quiet about it any longer, Card. It ain't right. It just ain't right you being with a white woman. It ain't right" (153). George believes that at best, Bobby simply cannot hate the white oppressor as thoroughly as he, George, does; at worst, Bobby actually allies himself with the white oppressor. To express his anger to Bobby powerfully, George kills himself at the same spot where he and Bobby laid in wait to ambush Simpson and Lincoln until Bobby "froze" (150). Because George cannot effectively register his anger with the white power structure, he directs it toward Bobby. Retaliatory black violence will not, according to Lester, salve the psychic wounds it purports to: in "Beyond Ideology," Lester concedes that "even if murder is justified in the name of God, freedom, socialism, revolution, or democracy, it is still murder" (37).

*And All Our Wounds Forgiven* also demonstrates that self-destructive behavior is as ineffective a mechanism as retaliatory violence for coping with white resistance to the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Bobby's frustration compels him to turn increasingly to alcohol and casual sex: "Clear-as-glass moonshine whiskey fused day into night and night into day as Card drank and fucked and slept, drank and fucked and slept" (119). Ironically, as Regina Dragoin notes, Bobby's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement causes him to evolve into "America's current stereotype of black men—an insolvent, irresponsible, dangerous and promiscuous substance abuser"
Psychiatrists Robert Coles and Alvin F. Poussaint have amply documented the severe effects of Movement participation on activists. In “Social Struggle and Weariness” (1964), for example, Coles describes the “battle fatigue” of student civil rights workers, who exhibit “exhaustion, weariness, despair, frustration and rage” (226). Ultimately, Bobby’s inability to handle the pressures of the Movement leads to his nervous breakdown and subsequent commitment to a psychiatric hospital in New York after the aborted Christmas Eve assassination attempt on Sheriff Simpson and Jeb Lincoln.

Even as Bobby internalizes his own frustration with the white power structure, he also lashes out at and directs his frustration toward those who are as helpless as he. In particular, Bobby’s rage manifests itself as rabid misogyny. Bobby especially enjoys subjecting “white bitches” to one-night stands (87). As Regina Dragoin asserts, Bobby registers his contempt for white supremacy though the sexual exploitation of white women: “Robert uses the girls . . . to recover the manhood the Mississippi sheriff extirpated . . . . He recovers his manhood in the way that would most torment the Mississippi sheriff and others like him” (397). The first section of Bobby’s narrative opens in 1974 with Bobby’s telephone ringing at four o’clock in the morning. When the teenaged white girl with whom Bobby is sleeping tells him that his telephone is ringing, his first words are, “Don’t you think that I know that . . . . If you care so damn much, answer the motherfucker your damn self! . . . Bitch!” (82). The caller is Kathy, a black woman who is, the reader learns, the mother of Bobby’s daughter Adisa. Bobby’s exchange with Kathy reveals that he is as abusive toward black women as he is toward white women. Kathy has called Bobby to tell him that
George Stone has committed suicide. Bobby’s vulgar responses to Kathy’s telephone call—“What the fuck do you want?”—to the news of George’s death—“Fuck that!”—to the mention of Bobby’s daughter—“Tell her whatever the fuck you want to!”—and to his one-night stand—“Get the fuck OUT!”—signify deep-rooted hostility (83-85).

David Nicholson identifies in Bobby’s actions the irony that “Bobby went to Mississippi to heal centuries-old wounds, but was wounded so deeply himself he has since been able only to hurt others.”

Like Cal, Andrea, and Bobby, Lisa Adams pays a tremendous price for her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. A privileged white woman like Lynne Rabinowitz in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, Lisa renounces her status and security within the existing power structure to join black southerners in their struggle for equality in the early 1960s. Bobby tells Lisa in 1960 that black activists admire her for her commitment to the Movement: “We don’t have a choice about sitting-in. . . . You do and you chose to go to jail, risk getting beat up, cursed, spit at. That’s why we love you. That’s why you’re special to us” (31). In the novel’s present, Kathy, the mother of Bobby’s daughter and a former activist herself, comments similarly on Lisa’s status within the Movement: “We, meaning the black women, always respected you. You didn’t play power games; you didn’t try to lord it over us because you were the only one who had instant access to Cal” (169). Lisa herself admits that she made sacrifices during the 1960s to maintain her integrity within the Movement: “My credibility and trustworthiness depended on not taking advantage of my whiteness and eschewing the social privileges white skin gave me. Oh, there were times I wanted to sneak off for a steak at an exclusive restaurant or check into a hotel and spend the weekend having
room service and taking bubble baths. But I didn’t” (166). By all accounts, Lisa
forsakes her privileges as a white woman to participate in the Black Freedom Struggle.

And All Our Wounds Forgiven implies that white civil rights activists like Lisa
pay an especially high price after May 1966, when black civil rights activists decide to
make SNCC an all-black organization. Although Lester does not name SNCC
specifically in And All Our Wounds Forgiven, he clearly alludes to its 1966 decision
in the scene in which black militants within Cal’s ranks make a motion to expel whites
from the Movement:

While there might have been a place for whites in the civil rights
struggle, it was now a struggle for black liberation. The ideal of
integration had failed because whites were not interested in living with
blacks on an equal basis. The only alternative was for blacks to live
with each other, to create the black economic, social and cultural
institutions that would teach African values and sustain black men and
black women. (194)

Although Cal calls the motion out of order, a significant number of black militants,
including Bobby Card, separate from Cal to start their own group, the Black
Revolutionary Liberators. Lisa listens in shock as the militants reject Cal as an “Uncle
Tom”: “I had never felt so dumb in my life. How could all this have been going on
and me not notice? I knew nothing about black people. Absolutely nothing” (194-95).
After Cal’s assassination in 1969, Lisa feels that there is “no place for her
anymore in the civil rights movement” because she is white. Like Meridian’s Lynne
Rabinowitz, Lisa asks herself, “But where to go and what to do?” (34). Lester
suggests that even in the novel’s present, Lisa still has every reason to feel sorrow:
“[B]lacks no longer cared that there had also been whites in the civil rights movement
who had inhaled and exhaled mortality with the monotonous regularity of their
heartbeats and, three decades later, had been left alone with the pain of neglected
idealism and the shame of murdered hope" (25). In the contemporary, racially divided
United States, the creation of the Beloved Community seems unlikely.⁴

By casting Lisa as the white mistress to the national black leader of the Civil
Rights Movement, Lester can also explore in And All Our Wounds Forgiven the
significant social and political ramifications of interracial sex. In fact, David
Nicholson asserts that "Lester now . . . belongs with writers like William Faulkner and
Ralph Ellison, who understood that the great American themes are to be found where
race and sex intersect." Lester was himself married to a white woman during the
1960s, and he explored interracial relationships at length in the two-part essay "White
Woman-Black Man" (1969). In And All Our Wounds Forgiven, Cal situates race and
sex specifically within the context of the Black Freedom Struggle: "I have wondered if
the real work of the civil rights movement was not interracial sex" (71). Likewise, Lisa
concedes the ironic truth of the classic southern white racist argument that black civil
rights workers and white civil rights workers sought only to promote intermarriage:
"White southerners were right. The civil rights movement was about mixing the races.
How could it have been otherwise? If keeping the races separate was the problem,
mixing them had to be the solution" (24).

⁴ For an analysis of the circumstances that led to SNCC's decision to exclude whites, see Clayborne
Carson 200-206. For first-hand accounts of SNCC's debates over the role of whites within the
organization, see James Forman 447-56; and Mary King 496-510. Forman was SNCC's Executive
Secretary at the time, and King was a white activist who had joined SNCC in 1963.
And All Our Wounds Forgiven suggests through Cal and Lisa’s relationship that sexual contact between black men and white women necessarily involves an assault on white supremacy. In his classic The Mind of the South (1941), W. J. Cash argues that white southern men during Reconstruction developed a “rape complex” based on their “identification” of the southern white woman “with the very notion of the South itself.” By identifying the South with the southern white woman, southern white men necessarily identified an assault on the South with an assault on the southern white woman. Therefore, southern white men concluded “that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman” (118-19). In And All Our Wounds Forgiven, Lisa self-identifies as the archetypal white woman. Reminiscing about her involvement in the Movement in the early 1960s, Lisa describes herself to Andrea:

Everybody thought I was special because I had sat in and gotten arrested. There weren’t many blond, blue-eyed twenty-year-old white girls willing to risk getting beat up by the police or a mob, being called “nigger lover” and spat on. I was the all-American girl. Ever since I was small, people have looked at me and seen corn fields, amber waves of grain and spacious skies. When I walked into rooms you could almost smell apple pie baking and hear “The Star-Spangled Banner” in the background. And there I was on a lunch counter stool surrounded by blacks, protesting racial segregation. Blacks loved me and whites wanted to kill me. (17)

However, Lisa seems content to ignore that her and Cal’s relationship glaringly violates America’s strict taboos against interracial sex: “It appears that many blacks (and forget whites) cannot grasp the simple fact that love is private and no one has the right to judge anyone for whom he or she loves or how” (169). Lisa’s denial notwithstanding, Cal understands that his relationship with Lisa constitutes “a social
taboo with almost as much force as the one against incest," and he wonders whether he and Lisa can successfully subvert that taboo: "could she and I act as individuals? were we strong enough to defy four centuries of history?" (73).

Lester suggests in And All Our Wounds Forgiven that the answer is no, that Cal and Lisa cannot act independently of American history. Cal himself suspects that his and other black men's "compulsion to be with a white woman" dates back as far as the colonial slave trade:

who was that African who survived the middle passage, survived the breaking-in period in the West Indies where he was acculturated to slavery and then, brought to these shores and placed on an auction block? while standing there did he look out and see for the first time a woman with skin the color of death and hair the color of pain and eyes the color of the corpse-filled sea? did he look at her and she look at him and know? (72)

Cal remembers that when he was around seven years old, he saw a white girl walking down the street in Montgomery, Alabama, and thought to himself, "I'm going to marry her one day." Cal reflects that such a daring notion in the Jim Crow South of the 1930s foreshadows the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: "that is how social change happens. a 7-year-old Alabama colored boy thinks a thought it is doubtful any other 7-year-old Alabama colored boy had ever thought" (72). During the Movement, Cal concludes that the compulsion for black men to have sex with white women is as likely to constitute political statement as personal preference:

in the sixties a lot of black men and white women tried to heal history with their bodies. I am not naive. I know many of those black men and white women abused each other. I know many black women were made to feel worthless as they saw black men walk past them to get to the nearest white woman. history extracts its price, regardless. I also know that some of history's wounds could not have been tended any other way. (73)
Throughout And All Our Wounds Forgiven, then, Lester blurs the distinctions between personal desires and political aspirations regarding sexual relationships between black men and white women.

A disturbing shower scene in the penthouse suite of an Atlanta hotel on the night before Cal’s assassination clearly suggests that Cal and Lisa cannot “defy four centuries of history.” In this scene, Lester juxtaposes images of Cal and Lisa’s lovemaking with images of physical pain and the historic suffering of blacks in the United States. As Lisa graphically describes her and Cal’s sexual intercourse, she compares Cal’s responses to the responses of blacks who have historically been brutalized by whites:

[A]s his body leaned back against my breasts my nails dragged along his flesh from his abdomen up to his chest with ever increasing pressure, harder and harder and harder until he gasped with pain and the deeper my nails clawed, the slower I pulled them along his skin and he screamed and writhed, his body pushing backward into mine and I took a washcloth, rinsed off his neck and shoulders and with the quickness of a snake, my mouth and teeth grabbed the flesh of his neck and squeezed while my nails raked his body and his scream was not a loud explosion of noise but a thin high-pitched wailing like the sound of all the Africans captured on the winds of the ocean, a keening as the souls of all the African dead came from their graves on the floor of the Atlantic, from the unmarked tombs in the mud of Mississippi rivers coldwater sunflower tallahatchie pearl mississippi strong noxubee yockanookany homochitto Big Black yalobusha tombigbee from unquiet graves with lyncher’s knotted ropes still hanging from their broken skeletons carrying the hard petrified remnants of their castrated members in their bony hands and he spun around and clung to me and his sobs reverberated with the hollow echoes of stone walls in the slave factories that had lined the coasts of Senegal Gambia Guinea sobs torn from lungs filled with ocean salt water when the sick were thrown over the sides of slave ships when the defiant leaped over sobbing sobbing the mothers and fathers of not only the slain the lost the forgotten but the sobbing of all those souls who would have been born from the slain the lost the forgotten if they had lived and his keening reached higher until it was barely audible but sustained . . . (206-207)
In this lengthy passage, Lester invites readers to consider Cal and Lisa’s experience vis-à-vis conventional lovemaking. What should be a pleasurable experience for both partners becomes a painful experience for Cal. Significantly, Lisa, the white woman, emerges from the shower unscathed. When the reader considers white women’s historical capacity for intentionally or unintentionally harming black men, physically and emotionally, Lisa’s own immunity from pain while she claws Cal seems troubling. Lester explicitly links Lisa’s actions and Marshall’s reactions in the shower to historic white brutality against blacks by referring to the African slave trade, the Middle Passage, and American lynching. The only words attributed to Cal in Lisa’s monologue are the names of Mississippi rivers in which white terrorists have historically dumped black bodies. Although Lisa and Cal truly want to share an intimate evening in a luxury hotel room, they cannot exorcise the specter of four centuries of African-American suffering. As one white woman observed in a 1969 interview with Lester, every time that she and her black husband have sex “it’s an historical event” (“White Woman” 190).

One might indeed readily conclude that And All Our Wounds Forgiven paints a dismal picture of the Civil Rights Movement and its legacy: the novel reveals the limitations not only of nonviolent direct action and integration, but also of revolutionary violence and black separatism. However, Lester hints throughout the novel that blacks and whites can work toward reconciliation and the formation of the Beloved Community simply by acknowledging the essential humanity of each other. Even though David Nicholson describes And All Our Wounds Forgiven as “a wistful elegy to the civil rights movement,” the reviewer nonetheless detects in the novel “the
muted hope that the spirit of the movement remains alive somewhere in our hearts.”

In particular, Lester extends to readers the hope that blacks and whites can each comprehend the others’ capacity to suffer. In fact, suffering is the one trait that all the novel’s characters—black and white, male and female—share.

To be sure, the notion of redemptive suffering figures prominently in the rhetoric of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. For example, in “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience” (1961), Martin Luther King, Jr., argues that a nonviolent person’s suffering is redemptive in and of itself:

The nonviolent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you willingly accept that violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the nonviolent movement and the individuals involved are able to suffer in a creative manner, feeling that unearned suffering is redemptive, and that suffering may serve to transform the social situation. (47)

Lester himself insists on the sanctity of suffering in “Beyond Ideology”: “I am convinced that unless I know and make a part of me the pain and suffering of another, I have no chance of comprehending his or her humanity. Trust between persons is established when each is receptive to the abiding sorrows of others” (37). And All Our Wounds Forgiven suggests, however, that most contemporary Americans, black or white, refuse to recognize the suffering of others. In what is perhaps Lester’s most scathing indictment of the United States, Cal laments that he and Lyndon B. Johnson were, perhaps, the last adversaries of suffering:

even though he never called me after i spoke out against the vietnam war, we understand this about the other: we had a vision of what america could be and it was not a vision of white against black and black against white. it was an ethic which had at its center a hatred of suffering.

few care about suffering anymore. they merely want to prove themselves right and everyone else wrong.
if only we knew how wrong we all are. (214-15)

Instead of trying to comprehend the suffering of others, contemporary Americans cultivate indifference. Bobby tells Andrea that white indifference to black suffering still “separates blacks and whites” in the United States: “White people don’t share our pain, don’t want to share it, don’t want to even know about it” (136). Similarly, Lisa criticizes white Americans for refusing to acknowledge the past suffering of southern blacks: “It isn’t right that white people in the South walk around as if segregation never happened. How dare they act as if they don’t need to remember what southern blacks cannot forget. That is the sin—to live as if you have no responsibility for the pain of others” (166). Yet Lester holds both whites and blacks accountable for the failure to create the Beloved Community. In And All Our Wounds Forgiven, John Calvin Marshall observes from his grave that blacks are as likely as whites to be racists:

if social change is the transformation of values, then the civil rights movement did not fulfill itself. there has not been any diminution in the ethic of white supremacy. instead racism has added legions of black adherents, making america an integrated society in a way i never dreamed. our racial suspicions and hatreds have made us one nation. (71)

In All Is Well, Lester admits his own tendency toward apathy: “Being black did not give me carte blanche to be indifferent to the pain of others. Because I suffered, I was not exempt from caring about another’s suffering” (60).

Significantly, even though Lester encourages readers to care about suffering throughout And All Our Wounds Forgiven, he does not encourage them to assign blame for suffering. Who causes suffering for whom is not important, according to Lester. What is important, the author suggests, is reconciliation as a means to alleviate
suffering. As David Nicholson sees it, Lester explores “the American conundrum: We remember at the cost of not being able to forget; what we really need to do is to be able to forgive.” Lester’s views on reconciliation derive in large part from the work of Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk and religious poet from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky. For example, Lester frequently cites the following passage from Merton’s _Disputed Questions_ (1960): “[O]ur job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can” (qtd. in _All 76; “Beyond”_ 31). The title of _And All Our Wounds Forgiven_ further reveals Lester’s preoccupation with reconciliation, as Wilfred Samuels observes: “The title foreshadows the resolution reached by the end of the novel . . . ; we envision Phoenix rising from the ashes” (177). A passive construction, the title identifies neither the wounder(s) nor the forgiver(s). Indeed, throughout the novel Lester suggests that the identity of neither party is relevant. What is relevant is the forgiveness. Moreover, by including the first-personal plural pronoun in the title, Lester engages himself and readers in the conciliatory process.

Lester intends that the interaction among Andrea, Bobby, and Lisa at Andrea’s deathbed illustrate the conciliatory power of suffering. In fact, in an e-mail to the author, Lester reveals that an “image” of a bedside vigil “spurred” him to write _And All Our Wounds Forgiven:_

One day I had a vision of an old black woman lying in bed. She has had a stroke. At her bedside is a younger white woman, her husband’s mistress. Her husband was a civil rights movement leader. The
younger woman has come to be reconciled to the black woman, and she feels comfortable doing so because the black woman is in a coma. In reality, the black woman is conscious but the young white woman does not know this.

In particular, Lisa must carry out Cal's dying wish, which she has postponed for twenty-five years. As Cal lay dying in Lisa's arms after he was shot, his last words to her were to "tell Andrea I never stopped loving her" (212). Out of jealousy, Lisa did not relay Cal's dying words to his wife. Bobby and Lisa need desperately to share their decades-old pain with Andrea as she lies in her hospital bed: Bobby needs to confess his guilt for disappointing George Stone, and Lisa needs to confess her guilt for withholding Cal's message until Andrea is incapacitated.

Lester emphasizes the connection between suffering and reconciliation by allowing Andrea to hear Bobby and Lisa. Andrea struggles desperately to share her own pain, but because she is comatose, Lester can reveal her suffering to the reader only through Andrea's inner monologues. Andrea suspects that she has, by opting to play the role of the silent, passive, long-suffering wife—and then widow—made the wrong decision: "Was she to die and never have uttered a word of truth? But how could one deprived of speech speak the truths that desperately needed saying? She doubted that she even knew her truths, and now, before it was too late, she so desperately wanted to. But how? How?" (156). As she lies helplessly in her hospital bed and listens to Bobby share his own suffering, Andrea undergoes an epiphany that reveals to her, and emphasizes to the reader, the necessity of sharing the suffering of others:

Here, waiting patiently and eagerly in Death's vestibule she understood—too late—that until we knew the pain of another, our
relationships were no more than exercises in an acting class. Until we knew the sizes and shapes of our own pains, and more, allowed someone else to glide their fingers over their misshapen contours, we were no more than shadows on the wall of a cave. (151)

Andrea’s epiphany allows her to confront her own unresolved pain as she listens to Bobby confront his: “[G]rief swelled in her, unwelcome and unwanted. Grief was not deterred, however. It had waited so long for her to acknowledge its being” (152). By waiting until death approaches to consider the redemptive possibilities of suffering, Andrea almost loses the opportunity for her reconciliation.

By sharing their suffering, Bobby, Lisa, and Andrea purge themselves of guilt and become reconciled to one another. After confiding in Andrea the tremendous burdens that the Civil Rights Movement placed on him, Bobby feels happy: “Robert felt young. He wanted to add ‘again’ but couldn’t remember when he had ever felt young. . . . Perhaps authentic youth was earned and came when one had survived the worst and knew he could survive even worse. Not only was there no more self-doubt about the quality of who he was, neither were there recriminations for all he was not” (223). Likewise, after revealing Cal’s last words to Andrea, Lisa feels “happy” (227). Andrea’s death closes a painful chapter in Lisa’s life, and Lisa asserts that Andrea’s burial will allow her to move forward: “Then, for the first time in my life, I think I will be free” (177). As for Andrea, after patiently listening to Bobby’s and, especially, Lisa’s confessions, she experiences peace and allows herself to die because “she heard what she needed to hear” (227). Bobby, Lisa, and Andrea achieve reconciliation simply by speaking and listening to one another and comprehending the others’ pain.

Lester articulates this notion through an e-mail that Lisa writes to her husband from
Nashville: “Speaking aloud is different than saying words to oneself. To speak aloud is to make the effort to couple with the other. What is important is to make the effort. Trying is its own success even if the loneliness is not bridged” (184). Sharing one’s suffering with others is, And All Our Wounds Forgiven implies, its own reward.

The final scene of And All Our Wounds Forgiven reiterates that blacks and whites can move beyond past suffering simply by confronting and acknowledging that suffering. In the afternoon after Andrea’s funeral, Bobby discovers Lisa at the cemetery and asks where she has been all day. Lisa admits that she has gone, for the first time in twenty-five years, to Nashville’s formerly whites-only Centennial Park. Because the park had been desegregated after the sit-ins of the early 1960s, Bobby asks Lisa why she has waited so long to visit it. Lisa replies:

I’ve been angry all these years because it had been segregated, and I hated it that people acted like nothing had ever happened. Well, this afternoon I went and sat on the steps of the Parthenon and felt so foolish. It was nice sitting there in the afternoon sun and I thought about all the afternoons I could have sat there and felt the sun and didn’t. (226)

And All Our Wounds Forgiven thus closes optimistically, reinforcing the novel’s theme as expressed in its title: that interracial wounds can be forgiven. As John Calvin Marshall Cal tells the masses at the March on Washington, “Freedom can come only when we forgive the wounds inflicted on us by the other—and the ones we’ve inflicted on ourselves” (56). By allowing past wounds to heal, black Americans and white Americans may, according to Lester, be able to create the Beloved Community after all.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION:
REVIVING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

The six novels discussed in this dissertation—Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992), William Cobb's *A Walk through Fire* (1994), Vicki Covington's *The Last Hotel for Women* (1996), William Heath's *The Children Bob Moses Led* (1995), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Julius Lester's *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994)—attempt to accomplish structurally what the Civil Rights Movement attempted to accomplish socially and politically during the 1950s and 1960s: the "creative" act of integration, as Martin Luther King, Jr., refers to it in "The Ethical Demands of Integration" (1962). Unlike mere desegregation, integration entails, King insists, "genuine intergroup and interpersonal living... True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations" (124). Reflecting the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement, the novels included in this study reveal that integration was and continues to be an elusive goal. However, these novels also affirm that individual blacks and individual whites can achieve meaningful relationships with another.

Like many nonfiction accounts of the Civil Rights Movement, these fictional accounts illustrate the host of forces that work against the formation of the Beloved Community in the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, each novel graphically depicts the extent to which the American power structure resists granting full social, political, and economic equality to African Americans. Opportunistic white politicians, corrupt white law-enforcement officers, and other antagonistic white powerbrokers abound in
these works. Stonewall Pinochet in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, Mayor Mac McClellon and Police Chief Lester Sparks in *A Walk through Fire*, Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor in *The Last Hotel for Women*, and Sheriff Zebadiah Simpson and Jeb Lincoln in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* all vehemently oppose desegregation after the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and aggressively seek to prevent the creation of the Beloved Community. In the extreme, these segregationists resort to physical violence and murder to stop the Movement. Death figures prominently in all the novels except *The Last Hotel for Women*: Armstrong Todd in *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine*, Sally Long and Joe Mancini in *A Walk through Fire*, and Charlie Montgomery, Ezekiel Whitson, and John Calvin Marshall in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* all become victims of racist violence. Moreover, *The Children Bob Moses Led*, *Meridian*, and *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* document the actual murders of such civil rights activists as James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. Even though *The Last Hotel for Women* does not concern itself with racially motivated murder, it does open with the Ku Klux Klan’s brutal beating of the Freedom Riders in Birmingham in 1961. These Civil Rights Movement novels imply that such modest gains as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are hardly commensurate with the vast personal costs of Movement participation.

Yet the six novels discussed in this study also suggest that the prospects for wholesale integration are as grim today as they were in the 1960s. Indeed, the fictional accounts seem to confirm legal scholar Derrick Bell’s bleak proposition in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992): “Black people
will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies” (12). Jennifer L. Hochschild reaches a similar conclusion in *The New American Dilemma: Liberal Democracy and School Desegregation* (1984), in which she refutes Gunnar Myrdal’s argument from the classic *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) that racism is a “terrible and inexplicable anomaly stuck in the middle of our liberal and democratic ethos” (xix). According to Hochschild, racism is a vital component of the United States power structure:

[R]acism is not simply an excrescence on a fundamentally healthy liberal democratic body, but is part of what shapes and energizes the body.... [L]iberal democracy and racism in the United States are historically, even inherently, reinforcing; American society as we know it exists only because of its foundation in racially based slavery, and it thrives only because racial discrimination continues. The apparent anomaly is an actual symbiosis. (5)

Such commentators as Bell and Hochschild maintain that a Beloved Community can never emerge on American soil.

Like Bell and Hochschild, each novelist whose work is included in this dissertation seems conscious of the ways in which institutional racism has historically worked against and continues to work against the formation of the Beloved Community. The integration of blacks into mainstream American society seems especially unlikely within a capitalist system. Throughout the six novels, the drastically different material conditions of black characters and white characters mirror the unequal distribution of wealth and power in the United States. In particular,
Alice Walker's *Meridian* explicitly shows that the Civil Rights Movement flounders and loses its moral imperative because it evolves within a capitalist framework and ultimately embraces bourgeois values. *Meridian* and the other novels discussed in this study hint that the creation of a genuine Beloved Community necessitates a radical restructuring of the American economic, political, and social system, but none of the six novelists seriously entertains such an eventuality.

Despite their bleak assessments of the likelihood of integration, the novels discussed in this dissertation convincingly dramatize the ways in which individual blacks and individual whites do achieve the "genuine person-to-person relations" that King envisions in "The Ethical Demands of Integration" (123). Just as Angel the Freedom Rider in *The Last Hotel for Women* asserts that "[t]hings happen when one person does one thing" (195), these novels suggest that when individual blacks and individual whites accomplish small-scale integration in their personal lives, they may be laying the groundwork for the United States to accomplish large-scale integration at the national level. For example, despite the almost overwhelming historical antagonism between black women and white women in the United States, *Meridian* demonstrates the ways in which Meridian Hill and Lynne Rabinowitz become "like sisters" as a result of their experiences in the Civil Rights Movement (173). Likewise, *A Walk through Fire* establishes a context in which Eldon Long and O. B. Brewster each regard the other as "my brother" (371, 411). The cautious but real relationship between Ida Long and Doreen Cox in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, like that between the Nathan Stamps and the Pete Fraley in *The Last Hotel for Women*, also reveals that blacks and whites can form interracial alliances. Throughout these novels, the bonds
between black characters and white characters are tentative, complicated further by
class and gender, but meaningful interaction is present nonetheless.

King stresses in “The Ethical Demands of Integration” that one of “the
pernicious effects of a desegregated society that is not integrated” is “physical
proximity without spiritual affinity,” a society in which “elbows are together and
hearts are apart” (118). On the other hand, King identifies one of the demands of
integration as the “recognition of the solidarity of the human family” (121). Bebe
Moore Campbell, William Cobb, Vicki Covington, William Heath, Alice Walker, and
Julius Lester establish solidarity among their characters—black and white, female and
male, poor and rich—by allowing them to recognize the humanity of one another.

Even though barriers of race, class, and gender divide the characters in You’re Blues
Ain’t Like Mine, A Walk through Fire, The Last Hotel for Women, The Children Bob
Moses Led, Meridian, and And All Our Wounds Forgiven, all the characters have in a
common a desire to create and sustain meaningful relationships with parents, spouses,
and children, and they ultimately begin to relate to one another despite race-, class-, and
gender-based differences. Moreover, the novelists, by shifting points of view
among a racially integrated cast of characters, force the reader to confront the
individuality of each character. By engaging contemporary readers empathetically in
the intense era of the Civil Rights Movement, the novels included in this dissertation
revive the 1960s ideal of the Beloved Community and challenge readers to re-examine
the problems and the promises of racial integration in the United States.
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278


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286


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Candidate: Paul Tewkesbury

Major Field: English

Title of Dissertation: Writing the Beloved Community: Integrated Narratives in Six Contemporary American Novels about the Civil Rights Movement

Approved:

[Signatures]

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

March 22, 2001